The Last Frontier

by Fangirlinit

Summary

Emma Swan is fresh out of the academy and unsuitably placed under the command of no-nonsense Captain Regina Mills of the U.S.S. Storybrooke. On the edge of known space, Emma, Regina, and their crew find themselves a long way from home and facing obstacles they never would have imagined.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Once Upon a Time or the various movies and television series I borrowed concepts from.
Chapter 1

Personnel vehicle ‘Aristomo’
Crew: 25
Course: docking with U.S.S. ‘Storybrooke’

“You really should tighten your harness. All it takes is one crack in the hull to unleash a vacuum suction of 145 billion pounds per square inch, and you’ll be waving goodbye from the exosphere.”

“Well, when you put it that way maybe I should start holding my breath for one kickass ride of my life.”

“I’m just worried for your safety. If you don’t want to take advantage of the chest belt that is your prerogative. Just don’t blame me when you’re floating through interplanetary space.”

Emma turned to her companion and asked with a raised brow, “Anxious much?”

“If I am it has nothing to do with this 200-year old freight shuttle and this sorry excuse for a harness.” Mary Margaret closed her eyes and exhaled. “It’s that gods damned doctor!”

“You mean that gods damned doctor that in…” she lifted her wrist chrono, “34 minutes and 56 seconds will become your superior officer?”

“It is absurd that I was passed up for a promotion!” She stopped Emma’s retort with a raised hand. “I know, I know. My experience on starships is limited and I am only two months out of residency. But my record is spotless, my recommendations are glowing, and my dissertation on the need for space vaccinations is saving lives as I speak.” She squirmed in her confining seat, trying to get comfortable with her orders. “I just don’t see why they overlooked me. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad we were assigned to the same ship, but my skills will not be put to good use under that farce Whale. I am more qualified, more sober, and –“

“You’re a woman,” Emma interrupted flatly. “Sorry, but you know it’s true. It may be 2258, but women still only make up 25% of the fleet. You can have a record made of gold and commendations that stretch as high as the New Empire State Building, but that won’t stop the Council – which might I remind you is made up of a bunch of geriatric women haters – from discriminating against their top graduate.”

“So how do you explain your instatement as first officer? I know you’re an intelligent student and have a knack for beating all the flight sim records, but you barely scraped past officer training, and your last commanding officer fought tooth and nail to veto your promotion.”

“Beats me,” Emma shrugged. She scratched her head over the orders she had received more times than there were stars in the sky. “I must have pissed off enough people that they just want me as far away from Earth as possible. I’d doubt it had anything to do with me being a woman. Just me being an asshole, probably.”

“Really, Emma. I wouldn’t go that far. What about the captain? She’s not only the youngest commander in the fleet, but the only woman of that rank.”

Emma sighed and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well I’m sure she whacked a few rivals to get to where she is now.”

There was a scandalous gasp from Mary Margaret. “You don’t believe that, do you?”
“Mary Margaret, just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean we have to side with her.”

“We? Don’t pull me into this. She’s your commanding officer now.”

“Technically she’s your boss’s boss. So yeah, you work for her too.” Emma was never one to follow the rules, and yet people still seemed to work damned hard at reminding her of her place. She grumbled the mantra drilled into every student in the academy: “Everyone works for the captain.”

“Maybe that’s why the Council assigned you to her ship. Maybe she’s the only one in the fleet who can keep a leash on you?”

Emma chuckled and patted her friend’s hand affectionately. “I thought that was your job.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t ask for it. And my patience is already growing thin. I still can’t wrap my head around getting this assignment. It’s a demotion, really.”

Emma turned to gaze out her viewport, Mary Margaret’s concerns slowly turning into white noise.

Out there was the blackness of space. Cold and inhospitable, it was the last place the human race had ever dared to venture. Emma Swan was glad that they did for this was her purpose – to discover unknown worlds and new life forms, and to be a hero to the weak and an enforcer to those that prey on the weak. It was her destiny to trek through the outer regions of space. As their appointed vessel came into view she felt content with the hand that fate dealt her.

Emma leaned forward to get a better glimpse. The plastic models and holovids hardly did the starship justice. Its sheer size was jaw dropping, its graceful curves easy on the eyes. Like many vessels of the same class, the Storybrooke was silver white in color, the contrast casting a brilliant portrait on the black canvas of space. Some of the most renowned engineers in humanoid space were responsible for its architecture. The Storybrooke was fitted with the lightest and strongest metals known to their solar system and powered by a state-of-the-art sublight drive. It flew like a thing of beauty – or so Emma had heard.

The shuttle crept closer still. Blinking lights on the ship’s hull could be seen, beckoning the shuttle to its docking station, beckoning Emma to her new home.

An automated voice came over the speakers and notified that they would be making berth shortly. The passengers chatted away, nervous but excited for this grand opportunity.

Emma sat, her eyes glazed over at the sight of this splendorous creation of man. All she could think was how in the seven hells had she gotten this lucky.

* * *

As the recruits filed out Emma hung back so her friend and seatmate, Mary Margaret, could triple check her belongings. She was a nervous flyer and always came prepared for the worst, but had been disappointed at the boarding gate when they wouldn’t let her take her carry on. “No bags, no liquids, no weapons.” Emma always thought the “no weapons” rule went without saying, though she wasn’t about to declare the vibroknife hidden in her boot. One can’t be too trusting these days, she thought.

“Oh my…” Mary Margaret gasped. Her hands flew over her seat. “My space passport! It’s not here! What am I going to…”

The passport in question casually swung before Mary Margaret’s face.

“It was in the cup holder,” Emma explained plainly as she handed it over.
The brunette placed the passport over her heart and closed her eyes in prayer.

Emma snickered and put her arms through the sleeves of her red military issue jacket. “Now can we go? I think we missed homeroom.”

It was the ship to rival all ships. Commissioned in 2230 the U.S.S. Storybrooke was a legend in its own right – she was as fast as she was beautiful, powered by the most advanced technology to date, and the first spacecraft in regulated space to be armed with photon torpedoes. As a result of its many treks through the universe it had gone through numerous repairs and upgrades, but it only seemed to get grander in style. For as expensive as it was to run maintenance on a ship of this magnitude, Cosmofleet always got a good yield. The U.S.S. Storybrooke and its crew could always be counted on to return to port upon completion of its mission. Because of its reliability and superior capabilities, it was assigned the most top secret missions which stretched far along the outskirts of known space.

Though mission details were strictly confidential, HQ allowed miniscule details to be leaked to the public in order to boost support and continue government funds. The U.S.S. Storybrooke, therefore, was familiar to all academy students, entrepreneurs, waitresses, durasteel workers, and pretty much every being on Earth with a telescreen. And everyone knew that its success was all due to its legendary captain, who Emma was hesitant to meet.

She had heard of the captain and all her accomplishments: graduating at the top of her class, the woman had made first officer by the age of 25 (beating Emma by three years), and broke all barriers when she became the first female to commandeer her own ship at 30 years of age. Emma had first heard about her when she entered her first year at the academy. To some she was a role model, a hero to all the little girls who dreamed of piloting their own craft, becoming chief engineer, or the captain of their very own starship. To others the young leader was a rival, a vain, power hungry “bitch,” as some called her, whose only prerogative was to beat everyone – male or female – under her into submission. Many had tried and failed to break her records and only a few had the honor of shaking her hand for she was always consumed by her job. Emma lay somewhere in the middle, between the fanatics who worshiped her and the competitors who wished her downfall.

Shoving her jittery hands in her pockets to calm her nerves, Emma followed Mary Margaret out of the shuttle. A senior officer led their group through the umbilical until they reached the docking station. An ordinary man in a gray uniform awaited them.

The senior officer saluted. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Granted,” replied the gray suit, with a salute of his own.

The new recruits assembled in the shuttle bay where they were instructed to form two lines facing each other. They stood at attention. Emma and Mary Margaret being the higher ranked of the team stood at the very beginning of one of the lines.

Emma looked from one green recruit to the next, rolling her eyes at every single one of their ramrod straight posture. Their arms were clasped tightly behind their backs in a sign of respect which was also a great way to hide their sweaty palms. Emma unconsciously wiped her own hands on the thighs of her fitted beige cargo pants.

“This is such a joke,” she mumbled, sticking her foot out of line in gracelessness. “I don’t belong here.”

“Shh! These are your orders. I don’t like mine but now that we’re here you don’t see me whining about it.” Mary Margaret shot a glare, snapping, “And straighten up! The captain doesn’t like a slouch.”
Just as Emma was about to give the heaviest sigh of her life there was a rush of air as the hatchway opened. Despite her discomfort caused by the move, Emma immediately thrust her shoulders back and clicked her heels together. All eyes were on the brunette who just stepped into the shuttle bay. Everyone held their breath as their captain spoke.

“I hope you all had a pleasant flight. These shuttles are not the most advanced modes of transportation. It is said Cosmofleet shuttles are the hand-me-downs of prototype yachts. But if you ask me they look like they hail from the scraps of the finest waste pile,” she quipped with a grin. A few laughs echoed throughout the hanger, successfully easing the tension. “However, I have been assured that the safety standards are tried and true.”

A quiet huff escaped Mary Margaret and Emma had to bit her tongue before a chuckle slipped. Her eyes followed the captain as she made her way slowly between the rows. Emma studied the face with her red painted lips, light makeup, and exposed neck which met a conservative cut shirt above a pair of very nice breasts. Her attention slipped down to the knees concealed just under the skirt line, the shapely calves, and to the very high heels of her slim black boots (military regulation but visually appealing to any fashion designer).

“Now that you have arrived you can leave those dated, semi-reliable vehicles behind. The Storybrooke is first in its class both in function and design. Treat it with respect and you will receive the same. No matter your rank or duty it is a privilege and an honor to serve aboard this vessel.”

The captain came to the end of the row and turned, her hair flipping perfectly with her. She examined the posture of the recruits nearest, narrowed her eyes, inhaled through her nostrils, and let it out slowly. She lifted her chin and began her walk to the other end.

“Now, if you don’t know me by my reputation: I am Captain Regina Mills, your new commanding officer. I expect each and every one of you to go above and beyond what you think you are capable of. I want to see people on time. I want to see uniforms pressed, boots polished, and minds functioning at a sober level. Above all I want you to do your jobs. You are all here for a reason. It is important to remember that this ship will expect more from you than I will. It will require your hard work, your integrity, and the skills for which you have perfected at the academy.”

The captain halted just outside Emma’s periphery and Emma had to fight not to glance her way. It took a great deal of willpower to stare straight ahead and hold her sight with one of the obscure pieces of piping against the bulkhead. She could feel the intense gaze aimed her way, a gaze that caused a shiver to run down her back (in what context she couldn’t determine). Her chest burned as she held her breath. The muscles in her arms strained from their pinned position behind her back, but she willed them to keep still. What felt like hours later the brunette figure moved on, passing by without so much as a glance in Emma’s direction.

“Above all it is paramount that you do not disobey a direct order from me or your senior officers. I do not allow dissent aboard my ship. If I so much as hear a whisper of conflict I will have you thrown in the detention center. Conflict leads to casualties and I will not have my crew risk lives by acting like buffoons.”

Emma blew out a long held in breath as her legs fidgeted in place. She felt Mary Margaret elbow her discreetly, a silent reprimand for acting like her impatient self. Emma just stared up at the hanger ceiling, praying to the gods that this charade would wrap up before the next century.

“Now that I have given you a proper introduction I will hand you off to your senior officers. Further instructions will be given by them and I encourage you all to listen and learn quickly. They will answer any questions and see you to your quarters. Then you will be put to work.”
The captain turned at the end of the line, stretched out her arms, and smiled widely. “Welcome to Storybrooke, and may we have a safe and fruitful voyage!”

When the hatch hissed closed dozens of shoulders relaxed and the hanger erupted into excited chatter.

“Somehow I get the feeling this woman’s going to be a royal pain in the ass.”

Mary Margaret almost cackled. She reminded more than asked, “What happened to reserving judgment?”

“I think that ship left dock the moment her Gucci boots struck the floor. Did you see her smile? That thing was about as fake as the 2030 Mars landing.”

“I wasn’t really looking at what she was wearing or how wide her smile was. Were you even listening to her introduction?”

“Yeah,” scoffed Emma, “of course I did.” She slouched back against a storage crate, chuckling at the occasional lost recruit buzzing by. “Kind of a lousy speech if you ask me.”

“I don’t see you leading 430 souls aboard a Regal-class starship.” She gave her a look that made Emma feel like a child who had stolen her seventh speeder bike in two months (which wasn’t a novel feeling in the slightest). Mary Margaret sighed and joined her on the crate. “She must have a lot of pressure on her. I can’t imagine the standards she has to live up to as a captain. All these people,” Mary Margaret gestured to the recruits grouping up with their officers, “are her responsibility. I mean, when it comes down to it, she would give her life for these people, these strangers. After all, it is customary for a captain to go down with their ship. It’s a barbaric notion, I know, but I have no doubt she is one to believe in that kind of old fashioned honor.”

Emma’s jaw had dropped inch by inch until her mouth formed an ‘o’ at the close of the valiant speech. “Vaporize me,” she groaned, her face contorting in disgust. “Please do not tell me you are one of those nut job fanatics who has a glass encased action figure of the great and almighty Captain Mills. Please.”

“I didn’t think the glass edition was available until next year,” Mary Margaret pondered seriously. She shouldered her wide eyed friend to assure her it was indeed a joke. “Emma, you have to give her a chance. Who knows, maybe you two will get along.”

“You haven’t even met her, Mary Margaret, and you’re already going on about setting us up.”

“Well, you haven’t met her either. So stick to the plan and reserve judgment. That’s an order!”

“Ha! Nice try, but you can’t pull rank on the first officer.” Emma poked her friend teasingly and added, “If only you had been this authoritative during your recruitment interview.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Emma laughed as Mary Margaret sulked off in the direction of Medlab.

* * *

The iron gray interior was just as immaculate as the exterior. Floors were cultured to a glossy shine, bulkheads were smooth, and not a stray wire was in sight. Even the crew held a spotless shine with their crisp uniforms and spit polished boots. All crew squared their shoulders, held their chins high, and walked like they had a Korobi stick up their ass. It was more than a little disconcerting to Emma
as she slinked on by, forehead crinkled warily.

After rounding a few corners and having a pleasant ride on the turbolift Emma pulled up at her
destination:

*Captain’s Quarters*

“This should be interesting,” she murmured.

Knowing she couldn’t postpone the moment any longer the wrinkles were patted down and her pants
were smoothed of any filth. With a deep breath she raised her fist and knocked. The door swished
open and revealed intense brown eyes which then panned down to Emma’s badge.

“You’re my first officer?”

“Hi,” Emma replied. She cringed inwardly.

Dispensing with the common courtesy of welcoming her visitor in, Regina proceeded to look Emma
over. It was blatant and incredibly unflattering. After 20 seconds, though, Emma was starting to feel
like a medium rare steak on a platter.

“I didn’t expect you to be so…”

“Young?”

Regina grinned politely.

Now it was Emma’s turn to ogle.

Up close in person Captain Mills was much shorter and less powerful in stance, but about 100 times
more attractive (*a general observation of Emma’s*). Shoulder length hair the color of expensive dark
chocolate flicked out at the sides and framed her face effortlessly. She had light bronze skin,
unblemished and sun kissed by the gentlest rays of a main sequence star. The very skin of Emma’s
body prickled at this magnificence. It was almost bewildering how immaculately beautiful the captain
was. Emma’s eyes finally lingered on the stretch of flesh above a suprasternal notch (that delicate dip
below the neck which never failed to draw an eye). Her mouth grew dry as the Tume desert.

The new first officer wasn’t even aware she was nibbling a lip at her captain and the captain was too
preoccupied with the anxious recruits bustling through the corridor.

Then Regina turned to Emma and leaned forward, a cocky grin plastered on her face. “How would
you like a tour of the grandest vessel you’ve ever seen?”

“You captain another badass ship that I’m not aware of?”

Regina took that as a sarcastic “yes.”

* * *

They made their way through the various levels starting at B deck and proceeding down. Regina led
at a brisk pace, speaking in precisely clipped sentences and making bare minimum introductions.
Emma lagged behind, utterly fascinated by the craftsmanship and taking everything in like a wide-
eyed child. She felt compelled to touch every surface and shake every crew member’s hand. She had
to know it was real – that she, a girl from a backwater town in Tallahassee, was on the ship of all
ships. The captain, however, wouldn’t stand such curiosity.
“Miss Swan, I encourage you to keep up. It would be entirely possible for someone as new as yourself to get lost in a vessel of this size.”

Ripping her gaze from a data processor, Emma dashed ahead. She cleared her throat and fell in line with her captain.

They entered the turbolift and spent an awkward 19.03 seconds in silence. Emma stole a sideways glance. The captain stared straight ahead, chin up, and oblivious to her counterpart. Emma rolled her eyes and turned back ahead, watching the light flashing from behind the double doors.

Deck K was vastly different in appearance from the other sections. The floors matched the bulkheads in their silver metallic shine and the air was laced with a strong scent of antiseptic.

Emma shivered and hugged her shoulders once she stepped out of the lift. It was also as cold as planet Khione in there.

They stopped by the medlab where Emma hardly got a chance to exchange words with her friend. Mary Margaret had already been put to work, making sure supplies were stocked, equipment was operational, and patient beds were made. The work was supposedly beneath her for the woman was shooting death glares at Dr. Whale whenever his back was turned.

Before leaving Emma was able to offer Mary Margaret an encouraging smile. The flushed doctor merely sighed through her teeth which translated as a promise that she would vent about it later.

While the upper floors were glossy, clean, and white enough to blind, below deck was gray in color and consisted mostly of rubberized durasteel and radiation shielding. Light steam rose from beneath the floor and seeped through the grating in wisps. Emma looked over the railing to determine its origin, but the depths were marked by endless columns of machinery.

The sound of clogging echoed across the catwalk and Regina frowned. Looking down and to the side she was met with the lazy pace of boots, boots that appeared too casual, too worn, and certainly not uniform protocol. Emma looked down as well and caught the disapproving arch of a brow. She simply drew an innocent expression.

The catwalk ended just inside a chamber. Regina approached the balcony, waved a hand out over what lay beyond and stated, “Welcome to the engine room.”

“Whoa,” breathed Emma.

The chamber was circular and stretched so high one had to crane their neck to witness such immeasurable heights. At the center was a beam of light surrounded by piping and rubber tubing. The violet light crackled with energy and rose to the very ceiling invisible to those at the base.

Descending the stairs, Regina brought Emma to the main floor. At a closer proximity the new recruit could see that the fusion reactor, characterized by the column of light, had a control panel looped around its base. To her right Emma’s eyes widened at the enormous oval shaped tunnel carved into the wall. The shaft of the ion generator could fit about two shuttles side by side and stretched as far as the eye could see. Rings of purple electricity crackled and hummed along its walls.

Emma’s mouth dropped open and closed a few times. She was at a serious loss for words. She could feel the power of this massive system, the glow of its reactor seeping into her skin, the millions of microscopic parts working in tandem with each other, and the massive tunnel generator thrumming so deep her bones trembled. It gave her chills, yet her cheeks were flushed with excitement.

“This is incredible.”
"It better be. I’m the one who keeps this sister runnin’.’’

“Miss Swan, meet Leroy our chief engineer.”

A stout fellow sporting a full on beard appeared from behind the control panel. With large ears and a great bulbous nose he was the spitting image of the dwarf people in the tales told in passé times. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Emma remembered from one history class she didn’t happen to skip out on.

“I can’t believe you get to work here all day. The reactor is so mesmerizing I can’t take my eyes off it!”

“Yeah,” the mechanic chuckled, “just don’t stare too long. I had a buddy of mine develop radiation retinopathy after just five minutes.”

“Mr. Leroy,” Regina scolded. She folded her arms and gave Emma a half reassuring look. “That is not what happened.”

“Sure as shit it did! Clark was my best man!”

“Best man,” she scoffed and rolled her eyes, “yet he is now semi-blind and flipping patties in some hovel of a restaurant. So reliable.”

“Hey now,” Emma interrupted what was sure to be a salty retort from Leroy, “shouldn’t we be wearing protection? That thing is the largest fusion reactor I’ve ever seen.” Emma pointed to the purple light.

“Naw, the reactor is protected by a force field that contains the fusion reactions. Without it the colliding particles would scatter and leak radiation. Deprived of a suit then and you’d suffer a painful death within minutes,” he finished casually.

“Comforting.”

Leroy wagged a finger at Emma and instructed, “Just keep your hands off it, sister. And as I said before, don’t stare too long.”

After a few more warnings from Leroy and several nervous gulps from Emma they moved on.

The tour ended when the captain and her first officer reached the main bridge. Emma had been looking forward to this ever since she heard whisperings of the open position for *Storybrooke* first officer. It was said to be grand yet tactful as only a ship of its class could be. Past officers have reported sheer awe once they took their first step onto the bridge. Great things had happened there: life altering negotiations, risky assessments, and courageous acts of leadership. You could smell the greatness, apparently. Emma couldn’t wait another minute.

“Captain on the bridge!” a female voice called as Regina entered.

Emma followed from behind. Her eyes immediately took in every single chair, computer monitor, and durasteel surface, while only half listening to the captain. At the center of the bridge was a long oval table. A panel ran along its edges, the various levers and switches that decorated it serving as a means to control the three dimensional communications, schematics, and maps that rose from the glass surface.

The command chair was at the head of the table, facing out towards the viewport. Situated a few feet from the chair was a curved console seating the pilot and the navigator.
“Everyone,” Regina addressed the crew of four, “I would like you to meet Lieutenant Commander Emma Swan, our new first officer.” With hands clasped at her back she asked her, “I understand you have served aboard a Regal-class?”

Emma tore her eyes away from the grandeur and opened her mouth hesitantly. “Um… yeah – I mean, yes. I have been assigned to several vessels in the past, though not one as magnificent as this.”

The comment garnered some laughs from the crew.

“We get that from a lot of the newbies,” a tall, handsome man spoke up.

“And the magnificence never ceases to amaze,” a bubbly woman with red streaked hair chimed in. “Trust me.”

Regina cleared her throat, signaling to get back to business. She waved a hand to the tall man. “This is our chief science officer, David Nolan.”

The chiseled face broke out into a boyish grin. “Welcome aboard,” he greeted with a casual salute.

Regina’s voice deepened somewhat. “Mr. Gold controls the helm.”

“Yes,” he shot back, “I do indeed.” The gold and green scaly pilot, a lizard species known for their quick reflexes and affinity for treaties, turned in his chair to send Emma a welcome nod. “Everyone calls me Rumple. I hope you have a nice stay, Emma. And, might I say, what a lovely name?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Regina indicated to the woman sitting at the controls beside him. “Ensign Belle French, our navigator.”

A long-haired brunette waved and smiled politely.

“Lieutenant Ruby Lucas, of communications.”

The girl sporting the bold hair style stepped forward. “Nice to meet you, Emma!”

Emma eyed the short skirt and shook the proffered hand. Hmm, she mused, red highlights and red nail polish. Neither one were regulation.

“Oh, I love your jacket! Is that real leather?”

The girly gasp paired with the ridiculous insinuation made Emma chuckle. She leaned forward and whispered, “No, but I won’t tell if you don’t.” She winked.

Ruby covered her giggling mouth and gave the shoulder a squeeze – one longer than a first encounter would call for.

“Alright, alright, the welcome tour is over,” Regina reprimanded lightly. She glided over to the center chair, the captain’s chair. “I suggest we prepare for the voyage ahead. No mistakes, people. I want this by the numbers. You know the drill. To your posts!”

There was a flurry of movement and Emma had to hand it to the captain, she certainly knew how to handle a crew. Just the sound of her voice was commanding enough. These senior officers knew her system and they followed it to a tee. Emma had only been there for a few minutes, but it was obvious the level of comfort and precision with which the crew and their captain worked together.
As Captain Mills communicated instructions to her pilot, Emma slowly made her way over to the head of the bridge. The forward viewport was a window composed of a transparent alloy, allowing those to view the vacuum of space from within the safety of the ship. The super thick glass was scrubbed clean enough that one was tempted to poke the surface in order to verify its existence. Emma saw the ghost-like appearance of her reflection and squinted at what lay beyond.

Some physicists theorize the universe as finite, but to Emma space was limitless. There were incalculable black holes scattered throughout, sucking all light and matter to the past, the future, and the undiscovered country. From the unexplained disappearances in the Bermuda Sector to the carbon dust clouds lying in the shadow of supergiant stars, much of space continued to baffle intelligent life. There were still mysteries to be solved and too many phenomena yet to be investigated.

It was not Emma’s first time trekking the cosmos, but she had yet to do so aboard such a capable, awe inspiring vessel. The anticipation of finding answers to impossible questions pumped the blood through her veins, the thrill of adventure stirred her heart, and absolute purpose touched her soul.

The *Storybrooke* was Emma Swan’s new home.

Out there was the black of space…

The last frontier…

Her destiny.
After leaving orbital drydock the *Storybrooke* went through the routine system checks. When everything was a-okay Belle imputed the coordinates per captain’s orders and Rumple took the helm, propelling them through hyperspace. Once they were safely on their way Captain Mills made the appropriate remarks and informed all crew of their mission. On this trip the assignment was simple: patrol the Fae Quadrant, assist Commonwealth citizens when the situation calls for it, and stay out of the business of those not aligned with the Commonwealth.

No matter the mission, there was a special directive of all Cosmofleet craft that held them to the search and seizure of any Freedom Raider vessels they come upon. Strict orders were to apprehend those aboard and return the criminals back to Earth headquarters by any force necessary.

The Freedom Raiders were the terrorists of outer space. A good many of those in the ranks were former Cosmofleet drop outs or agents that went rogue. It was the Raiders’ mission to wreak havoc on the Commonwealth and all citizens associated. They were hell bent on disrupting the peace, committing violent acts of savagery, and provoking brutal mass terror.

Where the Freedom Raiders made it their business to end the Commonwealth, Captain Mills made it hers to destroy the lot of them. And she had her reasons.

It was an hour into the voyage and Regina felt she needed a break. It would be another hour or so before they reached their destination, and she had a first officer to acquaint herself with.

“Miss Swan? Will you join me in my quarters?”

“Yeah,” Emma put down her datapad and wiped her palms on her thighs. “I mean, yes… it would be an honor, Captain. Thank you.”

Ruby snorted into her hand while David chuckled freely. The captain couldn’t help but roll her eyes to the ceiling. She silently asked the gods why in the galaxy this *girl* had to show up on her prized ship.

Restraining a sigh, Regina walked Emma from the main bridge to her lodgings. The trip was made by turbolift and a long corridor all the while one of them cringed to the clogging of boots and the other totally oblivious to the noise.

Regina was good at first impressions and even better at interpreting them. Emma Swan was as unrefined as she was inarticulate. Her crude dress was a blatant disregard to protocol (and so too to someone like Regina, a strict adherent to rules). Not to mention that fake leather jacket was like a slap in the face.

She had not heard of Emma Swan or her reputation (if she possessed one). It became a clear sign that the woman was of no importance whatsoever. Regina did not get much of a say in which recruits were assigned to her and even less input on the type of character she desired in future crew members. Regina may have been commanding officer of her own ship, but she was far from giving orders to 60-year-old men weighed down by medals, sedentary lifestyle, and a misguided air of superiority. It was absurd, of course. There were captains like Regina who were out on the front lines defending the Commonwealth, keeping the peace, and promoting the values of what was drilled into every student at the academy. Then there were the retired commanders, the men who still believed in the age old theory that woman belonged on Earth and not amongst the stars. Men who sat behind their 50 million dollar desks brushing uniforms that haven’t seen a good dogfight in decades.
There were times she had to swallow her pride and take orders, but once she set foot on the Storybrooke she bowed down to no one. There on her ship it was her crew that carried out her orders, and her crew that followed into the thick of battle. This was Regina’s territory and she would be damned to the fiery deserts of Tume before her knees bent to anyone.

The fleet just had to send her a curveball. Seeing this uncultured, borderline disrespectful 28-year-old waltz in did not sit well with Regina. Not well at all. She was too valued for this kind of play. It made her wonder just what Command’s angle was in sending Emma Swan.

Regina did not like questioning her purpose because she liked to think she was in control of her fate. If Command had an ulterior motive Regina would have their heads for it. She would not have people doubting her worth and would absolutely not be manipulated like a pawn in some old man’s game of chess.

“Apple cider?”

Emma’s head was in the process of shaking ‘no,’ but the decanter rim was already being tipped into a pair of heavy crystal tumblers.

“It’s my own brew. I find the galley drink much too crude for my taste.”

“Sure, I won’t mind a glass.”

Regina handed over the glass half full of her special potion and sat on the couch across from Emma.

The living room took up the most area of her quarters as she preferred to carry out most business in the confines of her quarters. Many an officer had been reamed out and torn into there on those couches. Some had the privilege of her cider before they received their beat down while others were too shamed for the honor. She held briefings there with her top officers, but most times Regina settled for the solitude. Pouring over reports and sipping on a glassful of her amber concoction, she felt as much at home there as any place on Earth (literally).

Regina made herself comfortable on the white sofa, crossing one leg over a knee and preparing a warm smile. “I would assume from the lasting expression that the Storybrooke has captured your attention.”

“I’m beyond words, Captain. It lives up to its reputation.”

“It certainly makes an impression. And do you find the first officer’s quarters to your satisfaction?”

Regina saw the glance shift to the bunk and she smirked. Captain’s quarters had amenities that other personnel lacked, but it was far from a hotel presidential suite. With the ensuite as the only separate compartment, all other furniture and personal items remained in the large apartment. Her bunk sat unabashedly in the open and against a corner under her picturesque viewport.

“It’s far more adequate than I deserve. Your hospitality is appreciated, Captain.”

“Miss Swan,” Regina’s teeth gleamed in a sort of all out glory, “when you are not on duty you may shirk formality. You seem quite uncomfortable, if I may say so.”

Pent up tension escaped with the heavy sigh and Emma smiled. Her elbows rested on now parted knees as she hunched forward casually. “Thanks,” she replied and took a gulp of cider. Smacking her lips together the liquid was savored as if it were cheap ale. Her head bobbed in approval. “Mm, it’s not bad.”
The woman then proceeded to throw back three fingers of cider that took weeks to ferment, like it was some sludge made from corn and barley. Regina held her tongue despite its desire to lash out.

“'I own an apple tree back on Earth. Crafting cider from the fruit it bears is one of my hobbies.’”

“'Wow!’” Emma nodded, impressed. She leaned back into the sofa and asked, “What else do you like to do?’”

Regina’s eyes narrowed. She suggested in as much of a pleasant tone she could muster, “'I was hoping we could talk about how you came to be assigned to the Storybrooke. I estimated Headquarters would grace me with a first officer of high standards. One who is more psychologically sound than the officer you replaced.’”

“'Why? What happened to the other guy?’”

“'He was mentally unstable,’ Regina granted, “and obsessed. It would seem his unwavering support was just too unwavering. He worshiped me like I was his queen.” Her lips emitted a devious chuckle. “'Though I expect nothing less than a loyal crew I do not expect them to kneel before me. Anyway, his obsession with me almost cost this ship its crew.’”

“'Jesus, what did he do?’”

“'What former First Officer Glass did or didn’t do is not your concern. What is your concern are the duties you will be taking over. All I ask is that you do your job.’”

“'…And not develop an unhealthy preoccupation with Your Majesty.’”

Regina’s expression remained unaffected before the dopey grin. “'It goes without saying, Miss Swan. A great deal of importance is placed on the shoulders of second-in-command. I hope I do not have to relate those expectations to someone as diligent as yourself.’”

Emma nodded, explaining, “'If you’re off-ship, incapacitated, or dead I get to sit in The Chair.’”

Her jaw worked itself into a grinding frenzy. The gall of this woman, Regina thought. Emma Swan with her boisterous footwear and despicable jacket. How dare she sit there, drinking something Regina spent months to perfect, and throwing such audacity in the face of a superior? Emma Swan with her uneven grin and her rudeness. What an intolerable excuse for a replacement!

“It was a joke,” Emma assured, cheeks flushed.

Regina bit the inside of her own cheek. “Well, I’m glad to see you have a sense of humor. It is more than I can say for the man you succeeded.”

“Should I be worried?’”

Regina was well aware of what Emma was implying. A great deal of suspicion surrounded the incidence of former First Officer Glass’ termination. Regina ordinarily used discretion when dealing with insubordination and Sydney’s was no exception. News of such an offense would have been an embarrassment to Storybrooke. She had heard the rumors: of Sidney exchanging sexual favors to get ahead, of bribery and blackmail, and the most laughable, their “love affair.” It was nonsense and something no one – especially not Emma Swan – would have to worry about.

After taking a leisurely sip of her drink all while keeping eye contact, Regina finally answered, “'You have nothing to worry about.” Her glass met the coaster. She recrossed her legs and clasped her hands in her lap. Regina frowned slightly and inquired, “'If you don’t mind me asking, how did you
arrive here? I’ve read your file, but there are certain things that do not add up. Quite a few gaps are scattered throughout your record. Your time at the academy was broken up by month long hiatuses. No explanation was given.”

If Emma was affected by the forwardness of the captain she did not let it show. Regina made a careful inspection of body language: the muscles in her face, the movement of hands, or a discernible tick, any tell-tale signal that would point towards panic or discomfort. Emma was nothing if not calm and composed. Her body language exuded candidness.

“That is correct. I had taken a few breaks over my period attending Cosmofleet Academy. I do not come from a wealthy family, so more often than not I was strapped for funds. I can assure you, though,” Emma offered a smile, “my tuition was paid legally and I graduated with no outstanding loans.”

“That is very impressive, Miss Swan, considering the rising cost in tuition these past few years.”

“I’ll say,” Emma remarked with a chuckle. “And as for how I got here I guess you could chalk it up to luck.”

“Luck,” Regina repeated, turning over the horrid word in her mouth. “Not talent and proficiency?”

“As you no doubt read in my file there have been a few… setbacks.” Emma shifted on the sofa, rubbing the back of her neck with a hand. It was the first sign of uneasiness since the captain’s ‘interrogation.’ “There have been a few incidents where I did not see eye to eye on things. I had my fair share of disagreements with superiors.”

“Should I be worried?”

“I know my place, Captain Mills.” Her chin rose. Green eyes filled with measured confidence. “If I’ve learned anything from my time at the academy it is to take orders and not ask questions.”

Regina did not like what she saw in those green eyes. It was not so much fabrication as it was unsettling. Regina saw strength, but also a hint of fear. Emma was challenging not only Regina but herself as well. It was the last thing she needed, a first officer proving herself. Instead, she wanted someone comfortable in their own shoes. Someone experienced enough to know what they were capable of.

“If you don’t trust my record, which I can understand, than you can trust –“

“Captain Mills,” squawked a female voice, “you are needed on the bridge.”

Regina addressed her personal com system. “What is it regarding, Miss Lucas?”

“We just received a distress signal, but it’s not the usual if you know what I mean, Captain.”

* * *

Regina noted from the standstill stars that they had exited hyperspace. She turned to Belle who was hovered over her panel and pressing buttons. “What are our coordinates, Ensign?”

“Captain, we are at 099.498.011 Oberon System.”

“Oberon? That is over a thousand parsecs from our mission target.”

Capable of receiving and sending subspace transmissions, the Storybrooke automatically exited
hyperspace when a distress call was picked up. As long as their primary operation was not explicitly vital to Cosmofleet and the source of the call originated from an affiliated planet with the Commonwealth, the crew had a duty to investigate.

“That’s not all,” Ruby spoke up from her workstation. “The signal was faint, but I was able to narrow down its origin. What is odd is how long the signal has been transmitting. It’s been on a continuous loop for six months. And you’re not going to like what I found out next.”

She turned to Emma, her long streaked hair whipping with her, and wiggled her brows. “Check this out.”

Ruby stepped up to the long oval table at the center of the bridge. After typing in the coordinates an image rose above the flat, transparent surface. Hovering like an apparition, the three dimensional image was that of a planet. The sphere was a rich brown in color and littered with meteors. Turbulent bands of clouds swirled in its atmosphere like milk stirred in coffee.

“Nal Korobi,” Ruby said.

“Blast.”

Ruby tipped her head, giving Regina the same bothered expression. “Yeah.”

“Of all the distress signals in the galaxy we get one from the Korobians,” muttered Regina. Her hand went to the lines in her forehead. “This is just what we need, another planet of sniveling natives begging us to corral the monsters.”

“Korobians,” Emma murmured. She frowned, trying to pull the name from memory. “They lie outside Commonwealth jurisdiction, don’t they?”

“You’re correct.” David nodded and crossed his arms. “That’s why we can’t go in and answer the call. There would be political and military repercussions if we did. If systems knew that Cosmofleet was carrying out operations on neutral worlds there would be dissent in the ranks. It would also cause unforeseen disruption on the planet.”

Gold came forward and added, “There’s also the matter of Nal Korobi’s current insurgency. For the last several months spice miners have been at odds with the monastic natives. The endless conflict has made their peace treaty fragile if not completely void. Going in would only further complicate the situation.”

Regina’s mind was already made, and it sounded like her crew had settled theirs as well. Their positions were evident from the various nods at Rumple’s and David’s input. She didn’t normally ask for unanimous consent among her top officers when faced with an important decision, but it didn’t hurt to have a few that backed her up.

She glanced at Emma to assess her allegiance. The woman’s vibrant green eyes were fixed on the holoimage, her brow furrowed and teeth worrying at her bottom lip. She was obviously in thought. Regina would venture a guess that the first officer was in disagreement with the verdict. Contemplating chances was futile. It was a fight Emma would lose.

“I know I’m new here and all, and it’s clear everyone has made up their minds, but can I suggest something?” There were some hesitant nods along with the captain’s annoyed hand wave to continue. Emma examined the hovering image of Nal Korobi for a minute before resting hands on her hips. She began, “Is it just me or does it feel a bit wrong to ignore a distress signal? I understand it’s against procedure to fraternize with neutrals, but let’s just see this from the Korobian’s
perspective. The monastic natives are a civilized group not unlike Commonwealth states. As a technologically limited people they have no means of space travel, so it’s unlikely the results of our presence could affect surrounding systems. It’s fully within our power to help, and according to this signal these people – not just a neutral planet – people are asking for it. I think we should hear what the Korobian’s have to say.”

“Thank you for your contribution, Miss Swan, but your candor is not needed on this subject.”

“I think we have a duty as a civilized, intelligent species –“

“That is quite enough, Lieutenant,” Regina asserted with razor sharp authority. She broke off the intense staring contest to affirm their primary mission. “No longer will this matter be of our concern. Belle, I want you to return us to our course –“

“With all due respect, Captain, I would like to be granted the courtesy of expressing my recommendation.” Emma addressed Regina as well as the rest of the officers there. “Now, my suggestion is simple. We send down a landing party, hear what the Korobi monks have to say, and settle any dispute if need be. We’re in and out within three hours.”

Regina mirrored the pose of hands on hips. Her head thrust forward as she gave Emma a condescending attitude. “I do not remember there being two captains on the Storybrooke. You may have the rank, Miss Swan, but you truly lack the experience and your confidence is gravely overstated. Are you willing to stake your career on this hunch? Are you ready to take responsibility for your actions and risk the lives of hundreds on this ship?”

Emma took her own risk by closing the gap further, her pulse reaching an increased tempo. They were practically toe to toe and close enough to be touching. Two pairs of eyes, one brown and the other green, searched each other for weakness. It was a test of wills and a challenge neither had faced before.

“They are in need of assistance and have nowhere to turn. As far as I know they have done no harm to any system or species.”

“Miss Swan makes a fair point,” Rumple spoke up. Spindly hands stroked his chin. “There is no record of hostile encounters with Cosmofleet or Commonwealth ambassadors.”

“That is because they chose to remain outside the Commonwealth,” Regina spat with disdain. “There isn’t a record of conflict because there is no starship stupid enough to land on its surface.”

“Are you really willing to look the other way?” The question was filled with challenge and curiosity. There also may have been a trace of disappointment, of a lost respect not just between a subordinate and her captain but between two women of integrity. “You’re okay with denying help to innocents?”

“I would,” replied Regina, like it was an ingrained response. “In the name of the principles of Cosmofleet I would. Principles which you swore to uphold when you took this assignment. Principles you are now treading on.”

“So you want to duck moral obligation for that of a government a billion parsecs away?” Emma shook her head and crossed her arms defiantly. Her jaw as well as her mind was set. “We’re here now. We can help. I say we should.”

There were immediate nods and murmurs of agreement on the bridge.

Teeth clenched behind curling red lips. Her growl was most likely heard by Emma who was close enough already. Good. She wanted Emma to hear her displeasure and to see it. She also wanted her
“Rumple,” her voice remained firm and she glared over to her helmsman, “prepare to make orbit. Miss Lucas, I want you glued to that headset in the event of another transmission. Any sound, any trill, any hint of communication and I want to be informed immediately. David, you are accompanying Miss Swan and I as the landing party. Bring Petty Officer Claude on your way to the hanger. Everyone else should be on alert. Treat this as any normal mission. I will update the rest of the crew momentarily.” Her head whipped to Emma and stalking past her purposefully Regina ordered, “With me, Miss Swan.”

* * *

Her hands swung clenched to her sides as she made quick strides down the corridor. Manicured nails bit vengefully into her palms, but the mounting anger was a sufficient numbing agent. Turning a corner, Regina took them to a vacant dead end. She whirled on Emma, not entirely prepared for what was to occur.

Emma stopped before the captain with an expression of self-righteousness. Just a year out of the academy and she was standing there before Regina defying her very existence. Emma Swan, the on-again-off-again failure and wayward child who dared to go up against a sophisticated professional.

Contrary to what Emma may believe, captain’s orders were taken as gospel. One didn’t have to like it and absolutely did not have to like him or her personally. Cosmofleet was not some friendship cruise through space. It was not an adventure or some experiment in superior/inferior relationships. It was a duty. It was a peace keeping operation that had rules and ranks. These policies were tried and true. They worked – Regina had proven them. Until Emma Swan came long.

It took everything in Regina not to grab the woman and slam her against the bulkhead. Insubordination was a capital offense, but it was Emma’s actions that verged on humiliation which Regina took as a personal attack. Punishment was the only word swirling through her head as she gave her a blank expression of indifference. She wanted Emma to hurt, to break, to bleed shame and to know fear through tear-stained eyes. She wanted to ruin Emma Swan right there and then in that corridor.

“Was my cider too strong for you or did you just go against a direct order from your captain?”

“I didn’t take you for a conformist, but maybe I misjudged.”

It was blatant, the disregard to answer a simple question from a superior officer. Regina’s eyes widen slightly at such nerve.

“Seven freakin’ hells,” Emma cursed. “I mean, I heard about you when I was in my sophomore year. The great Captain Mills, a hero and role model to all women. You made a name for yourself,” she spat, almost losing control of her saliva, “and I respected you even before I’d met you. So don’t assume to tell me how I feel or what I’m thinking. You don’t know me, lady.”

“And I hope I won’t have to,” Regina countered.

She scowled at Emma’s inability to distinguish an image from a flesh and blood person. The girl was clueless as to what they were really doing there and maybe how they got there in the first place. Their purpose – their mission – was a superfluous matter to Emma.

“This is not about getting to know each other. We don’t have to like one another, but we do have to find a way to work together. You assured me I had nothing to worry about, that your previous
inclination towards disobedience would not be an issue.” Her finger went out as if to stab, but then curled to make a fist. She shook the lethal club a few times to instill the gravity of her words. “Miss Swan, I want you to listen and I mean listen good. Once a new recruit steps aboard this ship they leave their excess baggage behind. Any crimes or insolence remain on Earth. We do not discriminate regardless of one’s personal and professional history. The Storybrooke is a fresh slate, a chance for a new start. There are many reasons why my crew has stayed loyal. The one that counts, the only one you need to remember, is that they respect what I have offered them. My crew follows orders because I know best. If you can’t handle that, if you can’t do your job then tell me now.”

“If you’re asking me to trust you…”

“Oh, I am doing nothing of the sort,” Regina shot back to the demeaning suggestion. “As my first officer you are going to follow my every command. You will accept my final word even if goes against your…” her eyes dragged over Emma from head to toe before she disgustingly ended, “…savior code.”

“You are so full of it,” Emma shook her head disbelieving, “you know that? These people must be under a spell if they bend to your every will.”

“And who would stop me? You?” Her hand went up to stifle the maniacal laugh bouncing against the bulkheads.

“You’re insane.”

The hand dropped to her hip as Regina angled her shoulder forward threateningly. “You’ll have to do better than that. I’ve been called far worse by those more foolish.”

“What makes you think I won’t remove myself? This ship can’t run without a first officer. You need me.”

“I do not need anyone, dear. And you overestimate your worth. I can run this ship on less than you might think. The last thing I need is some star chaser with a hero complex slowing me down.”

“That’s a lovely example you’re setting for your crew,” Emma stood straighter and finished with emphasis, “Captain.”

Regina had had enough. There was no time to discipline someone as stubborn as Emma Swan. Maybe something awful would befall the woman when they arrived on Nal Korobi. Perhaps she would trip and accidentally fall over a cliff or catch her death from an incurable sickness. It would certainly make the captain’s life easier.

Regina made her final words crystal clear. Tone dropping to a serious low, she said, “Don’t ever question me in front of my crew again. This is not the academy. If you screw up it’s not a mere suspension and mark on your already spoiled record.” Regina sucked in a breath and stalked closer. Her eyes hunted for a target to connect with: Emma’s nose, a cheek, her lips. Regina’s search ended in unyielding green eyes. “Do not test me, Miss Swan, or you may find yourself on the other side of an airlock.”

On that note, she pushed past the immobile Emma. Her smile was full of victory.

* * *

The landing party made it to the surface within the hour. Though experiencing some minor turbulence in atmosphere the ride was a smooth sailing. On their way to meet the Korobians Regina led her team which consisted of Emma, chief science officer Nolan, and personnel officer Claude.
Each was clothed in field uniforms and utility belts with the exception of Emma who was not willing to part with her red jacket.

They were gathered in a massive stone enclosed structure, a temple built for the Korobi gods. Littering the walls were crude etchings documenting their history. The runes told of the days when gods came into being the same time they were named, of the impossible discovery that they were not alone in the universe, and the intermittent years of war with the infidels. It was a long history stretching for miles in all directions.

Emma continued down the dimly lit tunnel, joining the others in observing the temple wing. None of them had ever been to Nal Korobi but they certainly knew of its history, especially of their notoriety.

The Korobians were known for their ability to put hammer to rock. Their planet could have held millions of acres of precious minerals, yet they did not choose to harvest those resources. Instead, they serviced their gods by building. Great temples, tunnels that went for miles underground, great stone spires as tall as the New Empire State Building… It was the crafting of these structures that mattered most to the Korobians, not the wealth waiting beneath their very feet. It was why after years of vigorous negotiations and attempts to tap Nal Korobi’s resources that the Commonwealth gave up; the monastic Korobians wished to be left alone with their gods and their temples.

Emma found it a bit barbaric and disappointing. Why would anyone dig their heels to the ground when there was technology capable of lifting one off into the sky? Why pass up an opportunity of adventure, of exploration, of the chance to get closer to the stars and perchance meet one’s maker? It would seem after years of hiding from the sun that the Korobians had a symbiotic relationship with their dry, dusty earth. An unwavering bond they would no sooner part from.

The tunnel widened to the space of a chamber. Spires rose up from the ground like the cave structures of Emma’s home planet. This place was far from homey, though. There was not a piece of furniture in sight, nor a decorative fashion to distract one from the prevalent red stone. It was simple as any monastic temple should be. The rune stations continued their path along the walls, stretching far and wide and covering the dome above their heads. Emma craned her neck, shocked at its immensity.

Already informed of their arrival, a group of Korobians approached. Regina stepped forward and began introductory remarks. It did not surprise Emma that the captain spoke fluent Korobi.

The Korobians were an easily overlooked species. Even their clothes were as plain as their ambition. Their wrinkled white skin was draped in dark burgundy robes made of itchy fabric. The cloth was frayed and torn at the edges and speckled with the red dust commonly swirling about. Each monk carried a wooden stick as long as their tallest Brother. Bent over most of the day, carrying rocks and breaking the ground, the walking sticks were both practical and symbolic of their desire to remain on the surface.

Their pale, sunken skin was a result of little sunlight. Hidden within their caves and their temples, the Korobi monks did not see much of the sky. It was easier to keep out the rest of the word when one lived out their life under rocks. Their fingers were muscular, but gentle. Nail beds were permanently encrusted with red dust, a sign that they had no qualms of getting their hands foul for a cause. Their oblong heads were devoid of hair. Oily black eyes deceived onlookers of their true souls. On the one hand it was a fearsome image – the white skin, bald heads, and onyx eyes – but an image that was quickly forgotten.

Emma, David, and Claude hung back as their captain deliberated with the Korobi leaders.

“Shouldn’t we be a part of the conversation?” Emma whispered in a hushed tone.
“Do you speak Korobi?” Claude asked, crossing his arms to show his own impatience at being left out of the loop. “Because I sure don’t.”

David eyed the diplomats with equal suspicion. “It’s just a preliminary discussion. If any vital development arises the captain will be sure to inform us.”

Her face scrunched as she asked, “You sure about that? Because you don’t sound sure.”

He shrugged and nodded at Regina’s approach. “We’re about to find out.”

Regina broke down the situation for them in a systematized manner. Starting with the distress signal she explained the origin of the call. The Korobians, though a primitive civilization, had within their possession basic technology in case of emergency. Never having to resort to such an emergency the equipment laid unused and collecting dust until the infidels showed up.

There was a long history concerning the plight of Korobi infidels. Decades ago a forward thinking monk with lofty ideas broke off from his monastic Brothers and created his own religious society. Built on the ideals of individuality and pride, this new branch became hunters that lived off beasts and roaming creatures. When the Hunters encroached on the Brothers’ temple grounds a war began that would be broken up by ceasefires and resumed with abandoned treaties. The monastic Korobians were a passive people who valued words before fists. However, they protected their holy ground with a passion and would put down any who sullied that which was built in the name of the gods.

The Korobians made it clear to Regina that they could no longer fend off the infidel Hunters. Their numbers had dwindled in the subsequent dry season when female Brothers could not carry their unborn children to term. They were on the verge of extinction and desperate enough to call upon the very people they refused to associate with.

The Korobi leaders suggested Regina and her team inspect the nearby tunnels for Hunter spies and return them for “questioning.” Regina kindly accepted the suggestion, but would do nothing of the sort. It was all a bit peculiar how after months of signaling help it just happened to be the Storybrooke that answered. The Oberon System received quite a bit of traffic and it wasn’t uncommon for private contractors within the Commonwealth to fraternize with neutrals. Regina and her crew, the Korobians said, were the first and most neighborly to respond.

Also cause for suspicion: it was not the Korobian way to go about the search and destroy of intelligent life, even if the target was an enemy of their gods. It was odd. Not prepared to show such doubts, Regina suggested they play along with the Korobian’s proposal. Maybe a search through the tunnels would uncover clues to explain the Brothers’ behavior.

Emma had her suspicions as well and surprised Regina with a nod of agreement. It amazed Emma that her vote of confidence was taken with a visible trace of surprise rather than distrust. After their heated argument on the Storybrooke the captain wouldn’t expect Emma to bend so easily to her command and probably wouldn’t care to be openly supported so soon. A stubborn woman reversing allegiance so quickly was disingenuous. The careful study by her soft brown eyes let Emma know Regina believed nothing of the sort.

* * *

Probing the maze work of tunnels was a daunting task. And the Korobians were no help. They essentially pointed them down one direction and departed with a brief prayer and well wishes. In order to cover a great distance in a short amount of time they split up: Regina and Claude down one shaft and Emma and David into another.
A half hour into the expedition and all they met was rock and sand. No signs of spies or Hunters. Strangely, they had not come across any Korobians either. The temple was a massive system of chambers and winding passageways that ended in forks to new passages. Some were lighted by torches while others needed the assistance of Emma’s flashlight. But no visitors.

With blaster pistols set on stun, Emma and David strolled down their tunnel and made easy conversation – or easy by David’s standards.

“…Caves are a great source of insulation. That’s why it’s the ideal shelter during blizzards or heat waves. If you’re prepared enough and have the necessary supplies it is entirely possible for a human to survive here. I’d venture roughly a few years.”

David went quiet for a few minutes, probably thinking up more ways to bore the wandering mind of his companion. She had already suffered through a lecture series on mineral deposits and karst topography and had half a mind to stun herself with her own pistol.

“Do you know how many species reside in underground caves? I mean, the sheer number? It’s incredible. Caves are teeming with terrestrial life. You can even find microbes in ice caverns! I remember visiting the Decorah ice caves in Iowa as a kid before they fully melted. Brought my portable microscope and everything.”

“Gods, where do you come up with this stuff?”

“I’m qualified to know this ‘stuff’ as you so elegantly describe. Chief science officer,” David said, proudly laying a hand to his chest, “remember? Also, I knew a guy.”

Emma eyed him with borderline amusement. “You knew a guy?”

“Yeah, he was an amateur cartographer. We went to academy together…” David stopped, looked down sadly and finished, “until he transferred.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“It’s alright. We were more respectful rivals than anything. He schooled me on cave structures and I taught him the correlation between nuclear density gauge readings and core density results. By the afternoon we were one upping each other in the sim.”

“Sounds like you had a good time at the academy.”

“What about you? Did you enjoy it or were you counting down the days till graduation?” David jested with a grin.

Emma bit down on her lip and rolled her shoulders back. “Somewhere in between,” she replied curtly. “So where do you think this tunnel leads?”

David peered into the darkness Emma was pointing to. “Give me a minute.”

Emma watched him pull out his remote scanner and point it in the direction of the new tunnel off to their left. He pressed a few keys until the device gave off a steady beep. She took a peek and noted, “Nice toy.”

“Well, it does the trick,” David murmured as he studied the screen’s results. “Dead end. I say we continue this way. The air flow is warmer which means there’s an exit up ahead. You see, warm outside air is less dense and therefore has lower barometric pressure. Now, to get –“
“Yeah,” Emma sighed, “something about readings and temperature and a lot of stuff I never knew could be so interesting.” She threw up her hands because her exasperation could not be shown any more obviously. “This is not my field of expertise. I shoot stuff down and fly airships through a vacuum incapable of sustaining life. You gotta give me some slack, man.” Emma ended with puppy dog eyes.

“Sorry, I guess I tend to get carried away.”

“Just a little.”

Their combined laughter echoed through the tunnel.

“So ah… what’s Regina’s deal? She seems kind of intense. I mean, it’s not just me, right?”

“Captain Mills? Yeah, she can be intense. It’s kind of a necessary quality when your captain of a starship and its 430 crewmen.” His shoulders went up and then dropped. “Can’t say any more than that.”

“You mean you can’t reveal anything that she doesn’t want you to reveal.”

“It’s complicated.”

Emma waited for more but more did not come. “That isn’t cryptic,” she scoffed. “Come on. I’m new and I need the dirty details, the dish, the ammo. I could order you to tell me. I am your superior officer.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. There’s nothing to tell. When the captain is around she does her job. She’s meticulous – systematically wired I’d say – and carries out every mission by the book. When the day is over she retreats to her quarters. We rarely see her roaming the corridors, and I don’t think she’s ever been to the mess hall.”

“Sounds like a predictable explanation wrapped up in a neat box and a bow to finish.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” David cautioned with a well-meant frown. “I can’t speak for her personally, but I can assure you she’s a decent captain. Probably the best.”

“Regina has quite the reputation,” Emma acknowledged roughly.

“She was lightyears ahead of any of us. Did you know she graduated from the academy early?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “She would.”

There was a minute of awkward silence. The stone she had been kicking since a quarter mile back lay in her path once again. She kicked at it with the toe of her boot. It went rolling into a crevice, putting an end to the game.

“I broke one of her records.”

David’s head whipped sideways. He was skeptical, but the open mouth showed his surprise. “You didn’t.”

Emma nodded, barely hiding her grin. “Flight sim D45573. The one where you had to shoot down the rogue mothership and liberate the peasants.”

“That was you?!”
“Beat her by 2.01 seconds,” she finished smugly.

“Wow,” David gasped. A hand ran over his face in disbelief. He started chuckling and said, “If she ever found out…”

“I know. Run and duck for cover,” Emma said, adding to the laughter.

Suddenly, a high pitched crackling cut in.

“What the hell?” Emma frowned down at her wrist and the comlink attached.

“Did it turn faulty?”

“I don’t know. Sounds like a bad signal.” Emma calibrated the device with a few quick turns of the dial. The static lessened and gave way to a warbled voice. If Emma’s ears were hearing right it was the voice of someone in distress.

“– cornered… everywhere. I don’t know where they’re coming… Do you read?”

“Regina?”

The voice was unmistakable. A battle between fear and authority were being waged in the tone. To Emma’s worry it also sounded like a war was raging on the other side of the line. Explosions combined with the zapping of a blaster and tumbling rocks emanated from the comlink’s speaker. It was loud and unsettling. If Emma closed her eyes she would have thought she was in the epicenter of a warzone.

“Captain Mills!” she shouted into the wrist com. Making some adjustments on the wrist device Emma glanced over at David who was biting his cheek in concern. “Captain Mills, this is Swan – Emma Swan – do you read?”

A burst of static and then a voice, clear as day, “I read you. Is Officer Nolan present?”

“I’m here, Captain,” David called into the device. “Are you alright? Where is that noise coming from?”

“I can’t explain now. Just minutes ago we were ambushed by a hoard of Korobi Hunters. I don’t know our location. My own comlink was destroyed in the ambush and I’m now using Claude’s. It’s an older model, so I’m afraid I cannot give you our coordinates.”

“I can locate your position on my com. Just sit tight. David and I are on our way.”

“Miss Swan, you do not need to state the obv – KKSHHHH.”

The line was consumed with static.

“Damn!” Emma shouted, dropping down her wrist. She ran a hand through her hair, clutching at the strands. “The one time I need to hear that woman.”

“Come on, we better follow the signal. Regina and Claude may not have much time left.”

Truth be told, Emma was scared out of her wits. She was scared for Claude, for David, and for her own skin. Most of all her heart was beating a terrifying pace for Regina. They had exchanged some not-too-amicable words the last time they were in private. Emma didn’t take any of it back, but if those were the last words Regina would remember from their time together as captain and first officer Emma would be devastated. And guilty as sin.
It’s not the time to get emotional, Emma told herself. She promised herself that if she ever laid eyes on that living breathing bitch of a captain, things would be mended. They were the two most important people on the *Storybrooke* and the crew was counting on their cooperation and on their being able to trust each other.

Gathering her wits Emma started a jog, David at a steady pace beside her. They proceeded down the tunnel using Emma’s chrono as their guide.
Chapter 3

Huffing from exertion they saw a light up ahead. According to Emma’s chrono their companions were meters away. There was a mouth at the end of the tunnel which widened into a chamber. Coming to a screeching halt they looked out and then down. About two stories below was a small scale battle.

Stagnant fog permeated the light of flickering torches. It smelled of scorched flesh and earth. From above Regina appeared as a small figure behind a fallen pillar. A blaster in each hand, she was firing a vicious onslaught against the reserve of Hunters flowing in from a tunnel. The captain seemed to have the situation under control, Emma noted, but things wouldn’t stay like that for long. More and more Hunters were pouring into the chamber. From her view Emma saw the heaving shoulders and heard the echo of labored breathing. Regina was tiring.

“We have to get down there,” David told Emma.

But without a ladder they had no way of getting to their captain and injured crewman. Emma checked the tunnel’s edges for something to grab on to. Perhaps they could climb their way down. Her hand slipped along the wall, failing to find purchase.

Emma stole a glance below. Without adequate ventilation the smoke was growing thicker by the minute and creating little visibility. She barely made out the human figure firing off her guns. Regina was still kicking ass, but gradually wearing down.

“You don’t by any chance have a turbolift hidden in that satchel of yours, do you?”

“No,” David’s grin widened, “but I do have a grapple gun.”

He aimed for the other side of the chamber wall. At a low thirty degree angle the wire allowed a steady, gliding decent to the chamber floor. Absorbing the impact with bent knees, Emma landed beside David.

Their eyes teared in the smoky haze, making it difficult to spot the enemy. Coughing on the acrid fog, the two made a mad dash for the fallen pillar.

Regina’s eyes were bloodshot from the smoke and her face and hair were dusted with red powder, but she was fine all the same. There was still a fire in her eyes and a bit of rosy to her lips. Even her hair appeared more contained than it should be amid the raining stones and near grazes of blaster fire. It was annoyingly perfect.

Emma noticed the muscles in Regina’s forearm flexing after each kickback, the way her teeth grit down, and how her chest rose and fell with each breath.

A rock crashed nearby and jerked Emma to her senses. For an observation of Regina’s appearance to come up during a pressing matter of imminent death and destruction jarred Emma. She filed that information away for later. Shoot first, ask questions of her crazed, hormonal mind later.

On instinct, Emma fired a shot over the captain’s crouched position, subsequently stunning a Hunter advancing on them.

Regina heard the thump behind her, saw the crumpled form, and shot wild eyes at Emma.

“I called you ten minutes ago! What took you so long?”
“We stopped for coffee,” Emma replied flatly. “Turns out the Korobians have an intolerance to caffeine.”

Regina shook her head and fired a few shots off with a vengeance.

Peering from over the fallen pillar Emma got a better look at the Hunters. Unlike the Brothers their skin was darker from sun exposure. Their bodies were much more superior in physicality, being limber and muscular at the same time. They came pouring out of the tunnel four at a time and not letting up. The laser bolts continued to pummel Emma and her team as the Hunters hid behind their own cover.

“They’re carrying blasters!” Emma said incredulously.

“Oh, really? I thought those were rocks they were throwing.” Regina rolled her eyes despite the itching pain it caused and shouted, “Of course they’re carrying blasters, you idiot!”

“But they’re Hunters. The only weapons they should bear are spears and the occasional bow and arrow!”

“Go and ask them if you’re so offended. I’ll wait here.”

Emma ducked before a torrent of bolts sizzled past. She winced against the stone, her trigger finger growing anxious. “Nope,” she replied, shaking her head, “not that curious.”

Claude lay on the ground between them. At first glance the only thing amiss was his unconscious state. There were no burn marks, broken bones, or severed limbs. Save for a dirty uniform Claude remained unscathed.

Emma felt for a pulse. It was slow but there.

“What happened to him?” Emma asked Regina.

“We had just found this chamber and not a minute later we were ambushed. They were raining small projectiles on us. I thought they were just small stones but Claude sustained one in the neck. I think it’s a toxic dart.”

Emma pulled down the officer’s collar to reveal a tiny puncture in his neck. The skin around the wound was inflamed.

“There’s no dart. It must have disintegrated to avoid tracing it back to the shooter.” Emma gave an apprehensive look and said, “He won’t wake up.”

“Yes, Miss Swan. That is the idea of poison.”

Emma held the gaze. Regina’s eyes were watery from the smoke. There was a trace of a tremble in the hand gripping her gun. Sweat leaked from a worried forehead and trailed down apple red cheeks. Regina wasn’t shook up just because of the firefight. She actually gave a damn about her crew.

Emma gave a nod, a simple recognition of what hadn’t been said. They went back to firing their blasters.

Out of nowhere a wailing cry had them turning to a Hunter sprinting in their direction. Regina reacted without thinking.

Emma felt a shove from behind and went sprawling on the ground with a grunt. A series of loud
blasts rang from above as Regina fired from over Emma’s body; the hand on her back stayed, warm and protective. On the third shot the Hunter earned a laser in the knee and went down hard. Blowing the hair from her face, Emma rolled over and took the proffered hand.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Regina replied, letting go of the hand quickly. “We need to create a weakness in their ranks. Then we can escape and make our way to the outside. The closer we get to the surface the better chance we have to broadcast a signal to the Storybrooke.” Regina examined the enemy forces, her brow furrowing deep in thought. Her hand waved absently as if to weigh her options. “We… we need something to batter our way out.”

Emma stared bewildered. “Are we equipped for that?”

David took in their surroundings. His eyes fell on the rising spires of the chamber and went from one peak to the next. Once the coast was clear he rose up and grabbed for one of them and pushed with all his might. It broke off with a crack. He tucked the narrow spire under his arm and braced it against his side like a knight’s lance. He nodded and answered with a half grin, “Now we are.”

He lunged after a Hunter, screaming a war cry only he deemed appropriate.

Regina slapped a hand angrily against the pillar. “I did not give the order to attack!”

“He’s using his resources.”

“Chief Officer Nolan!” Regina screamed from cover. “Please return to the pillar!”

The spire barreled into the chest of a Hunter stunning him to the floor. David brought his weapon around and over his head. Another came at him but he was quicker, letting the spire fall on the enemy’s head and knocking him unconscious. David didn’t seem to hear the request from his commanding officer.

“Chief Officer Nolan!” she tried again with more authority.

Emma rolled her eyes and shouted equally loud, “Hey, David! Get your scientific ass back here and save some for us!”

Sure enough David heard. He conked out his last opponent and went hurdling over the pillar. He propped himself against the solid rock, dust clinging to his forehead and panting.

“Whoa!” he cried. “That was a rush!”

Emma crouched down and smiled at the man. “The kind of rush when studying terrestrial microbes through a microscope?”

“It’s a tie between the two,” David responded with a breathy chuckle. “I rarely see this kind of action. Usually I’m the one analyzing escape routes from a safe distance.”

“Then welcome to the club, Officer Nolan.” She clapped him on the shoulder, sending up a cloud of grime from his shirt. “You’ll get your wings soon enough.”

“Are you two done?”

“No, in fact. Can you give us a few minutes?”

David joined in, laughing.
The scorching glare from brown eyes cut off the laughter instantly.

“There don’t you remind me why I made you chief science officer and tell me something about this chamber. Are there any vulnerable areas in the rock we can blast? Maybe create a new exit? Or a landslide to wipe out their numbers?”

“Those arches over there look pretty fragile. If we can weaken its integrity the rubble will bury those Hunter reinforcements.”

“Alright,” Regina confirmed with a nod. “Set your blasters to ‘kill.’ We’re going to blast that arch like a star gone supernova.”

“That’s the spirit!” Emma cried excitedly. She caught the disapproving brow raise and coughed. “Captain.”

When the arch crumbled they took out the rest of the Hunters and sprinted for the exit. Following the stream of light they left the darkness of cave and into the light of two blazing suns. When there was a good distance between them and the Korobi temples they hailed the Storybrooke. Regina instructed Gold to put everyone on high alert and to prepare their return.

With the shuttle waiting safe and sound nearby, Regina led Emma and David who carried a still unconscious Claude on his back.

“Fuck this planet,” Emma muttered after strapping in. She began the startup sequence to achieve orbit. “Let’s get out of here.”

Regina didn’t bother looking back on the dust covered surface looming away. “You read my mind.”

* * *

Mary Margaret was carrying out the stimulating task of inventory when the alarms went off. Nurses and technicians flitted about, moving beds, firing up the computers, and laying out equipment.

Mary Margaret stood in their midst with a gaping look of awe. It would be her first real experience of applying medicine in the field. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and heightened her senses; it was exactly how her instructors said she would feel in the thick of medical emergency.

“Little Miss Doctor!” shouted Whale “Are you going to go on staring like a cadet or will you do your job?”

She shook the absurd grin from her face. There was nothing pleasant about an injured crew member. She rushed to the standing surgical lights and rolled them over to the bed being prepped. Suddenly there was a racket followed by a curse. Whale had walked into a surgical cart, knocking it over.

“Doctor Whale, are you alright?”

“Yes,” he frowned, not meeting her eyesight, “yes I’m fine. The damn cart was in my way.”

Mary Margaret not-too-subtly tipped one of the surgical lights straight into his eyes. His pupils responded much slower than normal. The blue eyes were without a doubt glassier than the alcohol he consumed no more than an hour ago.

“Doctor Whale, are you drunk?” she gasped, closing a hand over her mouth.

“What?” He shook himself out of the spotlight and batted one of the nurses from his path. “Who are
you again?"

The stench on his breath made Mary Margaret cringe. Their noses were practically touching and the heat suddenly rose in her cheeks, matching the beet red of Whale’s entire face. She had never done this before. She had never had to deal with a drunk superior. Seven blazing suns, she hadn’t had the opportunity to deal with herself as a drunk. It just never happened. Often.

“D-doctor B-blanchard,” she stuttered, “sir.”

“Well, D-doctor B-blanchard,” he mocked with a wobble of the head, “I can assuuuure you that I am not inebriated. ‘Nuff of that, let’s get the patient prepped.” He looked to his left and then to his right. “Where is the patient?”

At that moment two medical officers entered the sickbay carrying an occupied stretcher.

“Claude Raines,” the female officer informed, “37 years of age… no known allergies… has all necessary immunizations…”

While the nurse continued with the patient’s history Mary Margaret assisted Doctor Whale with the tests while keeping a meticulous eye on him. After they had taken Claude through close to a dozen examinations his condition was still unknown. None of the staff had seen a poison like the one Claude had contracted. What made more cause for worry was the rapidly spreading rash around the puncture wound.

“Doctor Whale,” Mary Margaret’s voice shook, “what do you think it is?”

“I… I don’t know,” he replied. Sweat beaded from his brow and he swiftly wiped at the sleek forehead. “I have no idea.”

* * *

“Rumple, if we are not in hyperspace within five minutes I will make note of your incompetence in your next performance review. A large note in bold print.”

“I understand, Captain, but we cannot leave orbit unless there is power to do so. The Storybrooke is currently at standstill.”

“And why is that?”

Without turning around he replied simply, “Because the Korobians have activated their tractor beam.”

“That’s bullshit,” Emma spouted. She stalked up to Gold and studied the screen for herself. “Their religion emphasizes a ban on all technology. They shouldn’t even have an emergency distress system.”

“They shouldn’t have blasters either, but they do. I would say we gravely underestimated the Korobians.”

Regina said “we,” but what everyone heard was “Emma.” It was no secret that the first officer disagreed with the Prime Directive. Noninterference with neutrals was the most stringent of rules, yet she saw fit to ignore it. It was even Emma’s decision to answer the distress call and “save” the Korobians.

Regina continued, “There were more Hunters lurking in that temple than the Korobians let on.
Claude and I were ambushed in the exact chamber we were suggested to search.” Her eyes could have been filled with fire. She lashed out as if the accusation was directed at Emma herself. “It was by no coincidence that we were attacked at that very location.”

Every member on the bridge was looking from the captain to her first officer. Regina’s jaw tightened while Emma’s eyes narrowed in return. Tension was brewing to a boiling temperature. If no one stepped in, a battle would erupt that would rival that of the one they just escaped.

Ruby threw a worried glance at David, wondering if they should interfere. He held up a hand to her and approached the communication panel.

“I suggest we make radio contact with them. This could all be just a misunderstanding. There must be a Korobian in charge who knows what’s going on.”

“I agree,” Ruby chimed in. “No good will come of making assumptions. We need facts.”

“And if we are jumping to conclusions then how do you explain the tractor beam pulling us back to orbit?”

“One calamity at a time, Miss Swan,” Regina said. She pointed at Ruby and instructed, “Make the call.”

Just then a transmission from Sickbay was received. A three dimensional image of the sandy haired doctor arose from the communications table.

“Doctor Whale,” Regina greeted, “how is our injured crewman?”

“His vital signs are normal, BP is 120 over 86, and reflexes are responsive. He is running a slight fever and his breathing is labored but that was expected. What I am worried about is the area around his wound. It’s inflamed and likely to spread further.”

“Do you have a plan in effect? Can the infection be stopped?”

“I cannot say without further presence of side effects, which for all we know may be undetectable to our equipment.”

“Doctor Whale, are you telling me you have no idea what has poisoned my officer?”

His body slowly teetered to the side until a nurse propped him with a hand. “Hm, what? Oh. Yeeeesss, that is absolutely correct.”

Regina didn’t need to hear the sound of choking dismay to call attention to the state of her chief medical officer. Beside her Emma was giving her a most appalling expression.

Emma hissed, “Is he plastered?”

Regina echoed the question for Whale’s benefit. “Doctor, I encourage you to speak truthfully regarding my next inquiry. Are you intoxicated?” The encouragement was implied more as an “order.”

“Well,” he slurred audibly, “no sir, Captain Millzzz.”

Her nostrils flared as she inhaled and then let it out in a heated reply. “This is not how I run my ship. Not at all. Whale, you are relieved of duty. Doctor Blanchard?”

The short woman in a pixie cut scurried forth. She watched with nervousness as her superior slinked
“You are being promoted to chief medical officer.”

Mary Margaret knew very well that it wasn’t a request. Her shoulders pulled back and she lifted her chin with propriety. “Commander, yes of course.”

“Excellent. Now do what your incompetent fool of a predecessor couldn’t do and find a remedy for Officer Raines.”

“Captain!” the doctor winced at her own shout and held a finger up. “I may have a solution in determining the toxin.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Upon examining the patient’s arterial blood gases we found very low pH levels in his blood and tissues. Essentially this means his body is producing too much acid which can lead to coma and eventually death. According to my medical experience Officer Raines is suffering from metabolic acidosis. In order to prove my theory and achieve a treatment plan I will need to order an ECG to rule out cardiac complications, test his electrolyte levels, and check his urine for –”

“You do not have to explain the specifics, Miss Blanchard. You should be qualified to carry out the procedure and save my crewman without having me to hold your hand. Diagnose the problem and fix it. Carry on.”

Regina cut off Mary Margaret’s reply with an angry flip of the switch. “Ruby, I want that transmission lock on Nal Korobi. Now!”

While Ruby and David busied themselves with the communications instruments Emma and Regina deliberated.

“Listen,” Emma started quickly before all courage vanished, “I know what you’re going to say. I screwed up –”

“This is not the time or place to make light of your mistakes.” Regina remained firm and not at all sympathetic to what was sure to be an apology. “I need you to be my first officer. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, we need a contingency plan if the Korobians turn out to be less than cooperative.”

“If I were them I’d have a hard time explaining why I’m dragging a heavily armed Regal-class back to orbit without authorization. They mean to capture our ship. Our ship. I say we torpedo the sons of bitches.”

“Tactless way of putting it, Miss Swan, but I would have to agree with you on your line of strategy.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a glitch in the strategy.” Emma licked her lips and leaned in so no one else could hear. “We didn’t know they had blasters. We also didn’t know that they flushed their entire religious philosophy down the drain and armed themselves with a tractor beam. They have a tractor beam, Regina. That means we couldn’t have been the only ones to fall for their distress signal. This whole thing could be a set up. How do we know they don’t have a bigger weapon? One not revealed to us yet? One that could be capable of turning this ship to space junk if we so much as hover a palm over the fire button?”
“You make an excellent point.”

“Damn right I do!”

Regina admonished her with a look, *Tone it down, Swan*, and proceeded to make a well informed decision.

“Rumple, how are your reflexes?”

“Healthier than yours, dearie.”

“Dispense with the subtle resentment, Rumple,” she sighed. Regina motioned for Belle to put her on speaker. “Crew of the *Storybrooke*, this is your captain. You must all be wondering why we have yet to make the jump to hyperspace. To answer that question I regret to inform that our ship is locked on a course back to Nal Korobi. The Korobians have turned on us.” She paused to take a breath. A hand came around her middle in a protective manner. “I know tensions are high and we do not always agree.” She caught Emma bowing her chin down and biting her lip in regret. “We were deceived, attacked, and now our ship is on the verge of being captured. One of our own is in critical condition and that is much cause for worry. But keep your emotions in check. Getting out of this predicament will take more than your cooperation. I need my crew’s courage and professionalism. Stand with me and I promise I will get us home. This is Captain Regina Mills. Thank you.”

“Excellent speech, Captain.”

“Save it, Rumple. Are you ready to fire torpedoes upon my command?”

“Affirmative.”

“Belle, I want coordinates prepped and ready to punch in once *Storybrooke* cuts loose.

“Aye-aye, Captain Mills.”

“Miss Swan, get a status report on –“

“Captain! I have the Korobian leaders on the other line.”

“Send it through, Ruby.”

Emma, Regina, David and Ruby surrounded the oval table and waited for the transmission while Rumple and Belle watched from their seats. The transparent grid blinked a few times in preparation for the incoming image. They all beheld the flickering white light with baited breath.

The light rose and formed the image of a Korobian. His hood was pulled back to reveal his smooth head and a pair of shiny black pools staring at them. To Emma he could have been any one of the leaders Regina had spoken too. She also couldn’t discount the possibility that he was a Hunter.

“Greetings, humans,” spoke the Korobian, his words having been translated through *Storybrooke’s* communications server.

“This is Regina Mills, captain of the starship *Storybrooke*. To whom are we speaking to?”

“I am Loppak, founding leader of the Korobi Coalition. From your perplexed faces I would assume you are unfamiliar with the organization, so I will explain. This group is made up of Brothers and Hunters alike. You see, once I separated from my Brothers and established my own culture I realized we could not exist as distinct societies. We had to coexist, otherwise we would soon be extinct.” His
“By now I am sure you all are wondering why your ship is on an unscheduled flight back to Nal Korobi space.”

“We were curious,” Emma affirmed. The lines around her mouth suggested a frown as she began the rampage. “In fact, we were also wondering why peace loving monks would sell out their faith just to piss off Cosmofleet. We were also wondering how you crackpots got a hold of –”

Emma stopped when she felt a hand hold steady on her arm. The grip wasn’t harsh but surprisingly gentle. It was tender caution, one that brought on a shiver. Emma met the olive-skinned hand looped around her forearm. She met it with a look of wonder. How Regina silenced her with the pressure of her hand (and not as in a slap across the face) was astonishing. Just another thing to add to the list of questions her hormonal mind had to answer for.

“What juvenile tact,” the Korobian chuckled deeply. “I did not know Cosmofleet had children amongst their ranks.”

Regina pacified Emma with a squeeze of her hand which still had a place on the arm. “What is it that you want?”

“Not what but who. Our numbers are dwindling. The summer season grows long while the spring and fall are all but existent. Our women and unborn children perish in childbirth. The Korobians are on the verge of extinction. We do not want your credits or your galactic cooperation. To propagate our numbers the only solution is interspecies breeding. We want your women.” He paused to let his demand sink in. “The compromise is simple: send us your female crew and the rest will be spared. The starship Storybrooke will be free to carry on.” His face grew closer, enlarging his image through the transmission. He finished with a putrid smile, “Without its captain, of course.”

“This is not a negotiation,” Regina warned. Her tone was approaching dangerous depths. “If you continue on this path you will be declaring an act of war on the Commonwealth.”

“If that is your final decision than I am afraid the deal will be withdrawn. See you very soon, Captain.”

The image wavered and dissipated with a crackle. Not a minute later the Storybrooke shook like a ball being yanked from a string.

“Belle!”

“On it, Captain!”

Emma followed the captain to her chair warning, “If we’re just a meter off they will retaliate in kind. I would not put it past them if they have surface to space torpedoes.”

“I am aware of that, Miss Swan.” Regina pressed buttons on the arm of her chair, raising the alarm from yellow to red. “On my command, Rumple.” Regina took a deep breath as she watched the desert planet loom closer. No insignificant peasant of a man gave her orders. No one got a hold of her ship, especially when she was still on it. Not over her dead body. She let the long held breath out in an even passing. “Fire.”

Several seconds of pregnant silence followed before the hit was confirmed.

“Direct hit!” shouted Rumple.

“Evasive maneuvers!” Regina shouted. “Everyone hang on!” She gripped the arms of her chair until her knuckles turned white.
The Storybrooke jerked to and fro in the hands of its pilot. With the tractor beam destroyed the force pulling the ship was weakening. The controls shook in Rumple’s grip as he was able to wrench them free.

Emma, clutching at the straps of her seat, joined Ruby and David in gleeful whoops. Regina, the epitome of leadership and composure, stayed resolute.

“Belle, take us to lightspeed!”

Millions of pinprick stars grew brighter and stretched into endless lines. With a lurch the Storybrooke sling shot itself into hyperspace.

All members of the crew fell back into their chairs simultaneously and sighed. It felt like they had been to all seven hells and back again. They had just been tricked by a false distress signal, lured by a once thought peaceful species, and attacked without warning. In addition, they were given absurd and disgusting demands for ransom and their ship was almost captured.

They were exhausted.

But the day had yet to end and their duties could not be shirked. Regina supplied quick and precise instructions to her crew. Ruby and David kept close eyes on radar and communications to ensure they weren’t being tailed while Belle mapped out their next location. Leroy was giving the captain a status report on the engine room and making lofty promises that her ship was not liable for damage due to their hasty escape. Ignored and having not received a single order, Emma hung back feeling the heavy weight of accountability on her shoulders.

Rumple had been simpering in his seat ever since the Korobi broadcast. He unpeeled his hand from the accelerator and sank back in his chair. His reptilian eyes watched the zooming stars of hyperspace. He shook his head with disgust.

“Damned Korobi scum called me human.”

* * *

Regina ended the call and sunk into the chair of her quarters. They would have to exit hyperspace soon, Leroy had said. The engine couldn’t take it. When the Storybrooke escaped from the tractor beam it sustained damage to its ion generator. Damage like that took time to fix. Just one of many problems the captain was burdened with at the moment.

An unscheduled stop would be detrimental to their mission. To exit hyperspace meant a waste of power and time. Though patrolling a relatively quiet sector of space wasn’t what Regina would classify as noteworthy, it was a mission just the same. She would not make a habit out of going rogue. She had spent too much effort getting to where she was now.

Regina cursed her luck and got Ruby on the line. She instructed them to prepare a suitable spot when they reentered realspace. Details of engine problems were not shared. There was no reason to get the crew gossiping about preeminent troubles. They had gone through a lot the past few hours, more than they expected from a so-called innocent detour. They needed a hit to their morale like they needed a blaster in their side.

A crystal tumbler rested on her desk and she eyed its decrepit emptiness. She should think about stopping. It never did anything but numb the stress. Instead she thought about refilling that glass to the very top until its tart contents spilled over.

Regina saw her hand grab the decanter and tip over the glass. It was returned to the desk with a loud
clink. Her ears rang and she winced. The amber liquid swirled before her eyes, tempting her to submerge her worries. Soon the ringing stopped and was replaced by the musical sloshing of cider.

There was a knock at her door. The thumps against the hatch were hesitant but there just the same. If she sipped long enough maybe they would just go away.

The knocking continued. Of course it did. She was the captain and all business was directed to her. It was her job to open the door to unwelcome visitors.

Regina threw back her head and let out a long sigh. Her legs were wobbly under her as she made to open the door. Taking a moment, she inhaled all her troubles and let them go with a slow exhale. Hands smoothed the wrinkles of her suit. Not long after escaping Nal Korobi her field uniform had been shed for more proper attire. Despite the shower and three glasses of apple cider she still felt dingy. When the imperfections had been smoothed out she sucked in another breath, holding a hand to her forehead and let the breath out. Better. She even felt lighter and more sober, too.

The hatch release was punched and the door opened.

“Can we talk?” mumbled Emma. Awkwardness weighed her shoulders down and sagged her features. “I think we need to talk.”

So much for that lighter, more sober feeling. Without a word Regina stepped aside and closed the door behind Emma.

The captain took a seat at her desk before an unsteady gait gave her away.

“Not going to offer me a drink?”

Regina stared down and made a few meager scratches to her paperwork. Her jaw clenched and pulled at the skin of her face. It took all the willpower that could be mustered to not throw her drink at Emma. Gods, was her hand itching for it. But no. Waste of cider anyway.

The woman was still standing, hands in her back pockets and rocking back on her heels. She bid her time by looking around the office. Snooping was more like it.

“Did you come here for a reason, Miss Swan, or were you just hoping to make yourself a decoration in my cabin?”

“Decoration?” Emma snorted. “Am I really that pretty?”

“No,” she replied quickly. Regina’s hand moved quickly over her papers to hide her blush. “It is an expression. From the state of your dress I would venture it is one that you would not understand.”

“This old thing?” Emma asked, plucked at the red leather. The thing practically seared a hole in Regina’s eyes. “It’s merely sentimental. Something I’m sure even you can understand.”

Unconsciously, a hand clasped the object hanging from her neck. “Have you reached your point?”

“Getting to it.” Emma looked down at her feet, wetting her lips. Wits gathered she said, “You haven’t spoken about what happened. I got the feeling you wanted me to come to you with this. No matter what went down on Nal Korobi, whether it was a fake distress signal or not, I went against a direct order. It’s the one golden rule drilled into us from the start of academy: never defy a superior officer and always support your captain. Even if they’re meters from the blazing sun of Helios you stand by them and get burned just as bad as them. I didn’t do that. I didn’t stand by you during a crucial moment of your command. It was disrespectful. And I was insubordinate.”
Brown eyes practically rolled within their sockets. Regina went back to her paperwork and droned, “Is that all?”

“Wait, so you’re not going to punish me?”

“Do you think you need punishing, dear?”

“I violated the Prime Directive. I could be court marshaled – I should be court marshaled. It’s only fair that I be held responsible.” Emma stood a little straighter, shoulders thrust back and chin up. It could have passed for a salute but the respect did not reach her eyes. “I endangered the life of the crew, Captain, and I almost lost the ship. I went against your judgment when I should have listened to you. I – I’m sorry by the way.”

There was a grunt in reply.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Emma’s voice rose, her temper flaring. “Aren’t you going to get mad? Why aren’t you yelling at me? You should, you know,” she added weakly.

“Would you listen if I shouted? It didn’t work the first time, so why would it now?” Her pen was put down with purpose. She took her time piling her papers and returning them to their pristine splendor. When it was done she leaned back in the high backed chair, resting arms on the sides. She spoke in her ever present confident tone. “I wanted to see if you really knew the damage you caused. I wanted to hear the words coming out of your crass mouth. Miss Swan, for once since that dirt-encrusted boot stepped aboard my ship the truth has been spoken. The Prime Directive was challenged. A member of the crew was injured and is still in critical condition. Modesty was not utilized during a crucial moment with a hostile people. The principles of negotiation were disregarded for a petty insult and incorrigible behavior that muddled the fleet’s image. All of it, every single rule was broken by your hand. Every course of action you took led our whole mission – not to mention our lives – to possible ruin.”

Emma’s stature sagged through the tirade, losing all of the propriety drilled into her at the academy. She spoke in a whisper. “So what are you going to do to me?”

“What the hell were you thinking?!”

She took a step back from the woman who had risen suddenly. Emma had never seen Regina like this. In the corridor she had been angry but still under control. This woman was clearly losing her grip on the stuff.

“I treated you like I would any other crew member. I gave you a second chance the moment you arrived. Why would you throw away my trust so quickly?”

“Why do you care? Wasn’t it you who said the next time I screw up you’d throw me out an airlock? Well I screwed up! Happy now? So cut the bullshit and let’s get it over with!”

“Happy is far from how I’m feeling!” Regina roared over the desk. Her chest heaved from exertion. The liquor still swishing in her belly made her shudder. “I am your captain and I deserve an explanation!”

“Don’t pull rank on me when it’s you who’s flying off the handle, Regina.”

“Address me by –“

“Oh, shut up.”
“What did you say?” Emma appeared about as shocked as Regina at the insult. The captain would have smiled at the vacant surprise but she had an officer to chop down to size. No smiles allowed. Instead, she glowered. “Are you trying to get yourself suspended?” Regina asked because she was in all seriousness curious as to why Emma would sabotage her record.

“Maybe I made a mistake in taking this assignment. Maybe I broke all those rules on purpose because deep down I don’t like taking orders. I hate people like you. Privileged kids who grew up on the right side of the tracks and only got to where they are now because they kissed ass.” She approached the desk, eyes never leaving Regina’s, only boring deeper, hotter. “After the shit I’ve taken from you maybe I want to get suspended because it would be sweet victory to leave my precious captain without a second-in-command. We both know why you went along with the Nal Korobi plan. You only agreed to it because you were outnumbered five to one. Maybe I want to leave you weak and alone,” she ended, her teeth still bared and eyes dark and watery.

A growl sounded and Regina’s arm flew across the desk causing everything on it to sail through the air and come crashing to the floor. The decanter had not broken, but cider soaked the floor. What a waste of good liquor, she thought fleetingly.

They rounded the desk like predators and met over soiled paper and a shattered tumbler. There was a scuffle – or at least in Regina’s mind. In her thoughts she was punching wildly at the red jacket in the hopes that the color was from Emma’s own blood. Emma would have fought back like she was expected to, snarling and grabbing for a neck to squeeze. In Regina’s mind she would have won, standing over her victim with a smile on her face. Her Gucci boots would have been soaked in blood and apple cider.

Drunk on the fantasy, Regina was not wholly aware of what occurred in real time until she felt wind on her face. She blinked. It was Emma’s breath. She was talking.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

Regina smirked widely, baring her own fangs. “I can do more than suspend you. You have no idea the lengths I will go to ruin you. It would be too easy. No one would miss some white trash, academy fluke with a penchant for cheap leather.”

Emma flinched and Regina knew she found her mark. A glowing smile came to her lips when Emma leaned away. But it wasn’t in defeat. She saw the arm flex and fist clench. She wouldn’t, would she? Before Regina could answer her own question Emma pulled back her arm. Fury had blinded her and all the pretty features Regina wouldn’t admit to– her dainty nose, the flushed cheek bones, the smirk lines around her mouth, her vivacious green eyes – all of it darkened under a torrential cloud of indignation.

Though there was a slight widening of eyes, Regina held her ground. Would Emma do it? Would she really sacrifice her entire career just to let off a little steam? But it wasn’t a little steam, Regina thought. A whole lot of something was being packed in that fist. Regina must have hit quite a nerve.

The fist was pulled back to maximum capacity and then… it trembled. Emma’s whole arm practically shook until it fell uselessly to her side, each nail unsticking from her palm. Her chest rose and fell. She panted and looked perplexed at what she had done and what she had just stopped herself from doing. Her head shook from side to side, her mouth hopelessly parted.

“I must see to my injured crew,” Regina rasped out. She pushed past Emma. “Excuse me.”

The captain nearly flew from her cabin. Crew skirted out of her path as she made tracks that could have burned into the durasteel floor. Moments later the echo of running boots came from behind.
Regina sighed hotly, thinking this lieutenant picked an awful time to stick by her captain.

* * *

If the captain was upset before she was showing no signs when they reached Sickbay.

“Doctor Blanchard, how is my officer?”

“We have Mr. Raines on intravenous sodium bicarbonate and are monitoring his arterial blood gas readings. He’s holding steady. If there are any signs that his condition is worsening then we will put him on dialysis to clear the acidosis and any intoxication.”

“May I see him?”

“The inflammation was causing some pain so we gave him a sedative.” Mary Margaret noted the unblinking captain and met her persistence with a quick, “But you may see him, yes.”

“Where is Whale?”

“He’s… um.” Mary Margaret pointed to the body slumped on one of the beds. The snores carried to every end of the sickbay.

Regina just glared at the drunk and turned away.

Claude was indeed sleeping when they surrounded his bedside. To Emma he looked as right as rain. He slept like a baby. The sheets around him were clean and pressed while his pillow was fluffed comfortably under his head. A cream had been applied to his burns. The red dust and smoke that once clung to his face and arms had been wiped away with a wet cloth. Mary Margaret had taken great care of Claude and Emma showed her gratitude by smiling in her friend’s direction. The doctor was too busy shooting nervous glances at Regina and waiting for her verdict.

Regina’s eyes panned over the bed, scrutinizing the patient. She took her time examining each and every injury with a meticulous eye. She even went as far as taking his hands and turning them up for a closer examination. Her hands looked dainty over those of the burly Claude. Fingers flitted over the surface of his palms, tracing for possible injuries the doctors had missed. When she was satisfied she placed his hands gently over his body and smoothed down the places in the sheet she had wrinkled.

It completely baffled Emma. The display of gentleness and perhaps even affection turned Regina into a whole different person. Emma would even go as far as noticing the softness to her brown eyes and how relaxed her face was when not in attack mode. The flip from furious witch to kind-hearted captain nearly made Emma ill. It made her ill because when faced with this new Regina it occurred to her that she didn’t know Regina at all. They both misjudged each other and they both had sides of themselves that had yet to be revealed. Emma was witnessing one of these sides and it frightened her. But why? Why would an affectionate, caring Regina Mills frighten the unequally disinterested Emma Swan?

“You did excellent work today, Doctor Blanchard. I commend you for your efforts during a precarious situation. You held yourself with aplomb and carried out your duties with prompt diligence. You did well, all of you,” she addressed the technicians.

Everyone smiled and nodded gratefully. Emma stared open-mouthed like she was living in an alternate universe. She stood there as Regina shook a few hands and offered additional words of acclaim. And then she left like a breeze.

The captain hadn’t met her eyes the whole time they were in Sickbay. No glare, not a single curl of a
lip or clenching jaw. There were no signs of the bitterness that had moments ago leaked from her pores and stung Emma’s very skin. The insults still burned in her memory, but she didn’t say a word to Emma there in Medlab.

It then hit Emma: after the arguing, the threats, and the almost brawl over broken glass and apple cider, Regina had not actually suspended her.

* * *

Emma panned the expansive mess hall teeming with crew of every rank. The lively banter bounced around the metal bulkhead making it loud. Not a single familiar face was in sight. It reminded her of her first day at the academy. Friends were in short supply all her life, so it wasn’t disappointing if she hadn’t found an acquaintance right away. But then there Mary Margaret had been, wedged in a corner of the cafeteria and reading a book. She had smiled at Emma and offered the seat at her table. They were friends from then on and quite close to being like family.

Mary Margaret was held up at Medlab and could not meet Emma for lunch, hence why Emma was tapping her finger against the food tray before the chattering sea crewmen and women. Eyes darted every which way in search for someone to save her from this embarrassing position. No one noticed her, of course. She was the invisible nobody at a party she was reluctant to join. She was two seconds from slipping away to her private cabin when someone with long brown hair and a busty red top shot up amongst the crowd. Waving her arms about like a supersonic engine she called Emma over.

“Come sit, Emma!”

Emma took the seat across from Ruby and plopped her tray down. “This place is a zoo. They’re coming out of the bulkheads!”

Ruby chuckled. “Yep, we’re a bustling, lively bunch we are! Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it. Everyone does. Let me introduce you to some people.”

“No, that’s okay,” Emma said firmly, nerves getting the best of her. Ruby sat down dejectedly. “Sorry, it’s just… well I’m hungry and I’m not much of a talker when I’m eating. Can’t multitask to save my life.”

“No sweat.”

Using a fork she picked at her chicken marsala before taking a bite. The sauce was rich and mellow while the mushrooms gave it an earthy flavor. The chicken was a tad chewy, but tasty nonetheless. The Storybrooke spared no expense when it came to food and Emma was completely okay with the sentiment. When not training at the academy she had spent most of her time cooking in her tiny bungalow. Always a meal for one, of course, because she couldn’t trust having a roommate around – too many nosy people those days. Though not a master chef, Emma liked to think of herself as a connoisseur of the traditional Mexican taco.

Ruby took a gulp of coffee before asking, “So how’s life?”

Emma paused mid-chew. She wasn’t ready to mingle and socialize or whatever they’re calling it. Being the second most important person on the ship, it was technically her job to associate with the crew and be available to their concerns. It was the one part of being first officer that Emma resented. All through her time at the academy she avoided confrontation and friendly gatherings alike. Socializing wasn’t her strong suit. It was in the confines of her cockpit millions of miles above the ground that was her comfort zone, where the only thing she dared rely on were her instincts and the
instruments at her fingertips. People weren’t reliable. People weren’t trustworthy. Ships? They were something to place your faith in, not to mention they don’t talk back. Emma made a connection with every craft she flew. People? Not so much.

“Peachy,” Emma returned politely. “How’s yours?”

“Swell. Gran hasn’t sent me a transmission in days.” Ruby caught the frown and explained, “My granny. To be fair I was a bit short with her before going off-planet but in my defense it was either slumming it as a waitress all my life or taking my chances here.”

“You didn’t say that, did you?”

“Maybe not in those exact words…” she cringed slightly before confessing, “all right in exactly those words. But the diner is a blasted hole in the wall. Granny keeps going on about fixing the place up.” She sighed heavily, shaking her head. “I don’t know why I put up with her.”

“She’s family.”

“I guess. She is my only granny. The one and only. Hey, what about you? You have family?”

“Course,” Emma muffled around her bear claw. It was the flakiest, most buttery piece of pastry her lips ever touched and Emma adored it. “Everyone’s got family.”

“They must be so proud of you. Not just anyone is recruited and very few are assigned to a ship like this right out of the academy.”

“Oh, I never knew my parents,” Emma announced nonchalantly. “I was in the foster system.”

“Wow, I didn’t know. That must have been hard, not growing up with your real parents. I’m sure you were raised by some great people. It’s a very selfless thing to bring lost children in, give them a home and food and love.”

“Selfless?” Emma snorted. She could tell Ruby was confused. Most were when they hadn’t been the one shipped from home to home. Fostering kids was anything but selfless – or at least in Emma’s experience. Emma could have explained the horrors of neglect. She could have explained how a skinny blond haired girl of 12 frequently got beat up by her foster brother. She could have explained why to some parents she was comparable to a meal ticket and not a real human being who needed a meal herself. Emma could have explained, but it just wasn’t worth rehashing the past.

“Yeah,” Emma waving it off, “sure. But I didn’t stay in one place for long. I wasn’t what you’d call a hot commodity.”

“Oh.” Ruby tucked her head down to hide her reddening face, somehow embarrassed that just minutes ago she was whining about the only woman who bothered to look after her, feed her, and love her from a toddler to adulthood. Looking anywhere but Emma’s eyes she mumbled, “I see.”

Desperate for a change in subject Emma sat straighter on her bench. “How long have you been in service to Storybrooke?”

“It feels like forever.”

“Vaporize me, I hope not.”

Ruby chuckled. “It’s really not that bad, Emma. I will admit working aboard a high class starship is not all it’s cracked up to be. The hours are long and the pay is for shit. But there is always that sense
that we are doing good. When I get home I hug my Granny and I can sleep at night knowing she is safe. Because at the end of the day that’s why we do what we do. It’s why we travel millions of lightyears away from home, venturing into the unknown. We all have someone to protect.”

After examining the last corner of her bear claw but not really *seeing* it, Emma finally swallowed it up.

“What made you join up?”

Emma shrugged. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.” She swirled the contents of her mug around and downed it in one gulp.

“No one simply applies to the most prestigious military fleet in the galaxy because it ‘seemed like a good idea.’ There’s always a reason. What’s yours?”

“Why do you need to know so badly?”

Ruby took one look at the defensive frown and held her arms up in surrender. “Chill, I was just curious. Didn’t think it was a sore subject is all.”

Emma’s face melted to a most unreadable expression, a certain sadness mixed with resentment. Ruby knew the type: the lost ones, she called them, who had a tragic upbringing and no place to go but the seedy back alleys or the military. Emma didn’t fit the type *exactly*. Ruby only had a hunch and Granny always told her how her “hunches” had a way of getting her in trouble. Whatever emotions hid behind that face Emma was making it clear that the case was closed.

“Whatever made you join up it must have been one hell of a reason,” Ruby noted with finality.

Emma caught a few stares from passersby. She was a confident enough person that she wasn’t creeped out, but she still felt uncomfortable in the spotlight. Always had been.

“You know,” Ruby started, also noticing the curious glances, “they all really appreciate you being here. Sidney, the first officer before you, never once gave us the time of day. He either spent his time on the bridge or outside the captain’s cabin, pawing at her door like a lost puppy. Not one for crew camaraderie, that one. It’s nice to have someone like us representing the upper ranks.”

“How so?”

“Well, you seem pretty average – and don’t take that as a dig. Average is good when you’re on the most famous starship in the fleet. It keeps things in perspective, not to mention there are fewer delusions of grandeur. The captain, though, she’s a different story.”

“Dare I ask: what’s her story?” Emma asked in a way that made it seem like she could care less. David had been tight-lipped on the subject but Ruby gave the impression that her lips were loose as a cloned goose.

“The captain is… a bit of a mystery.”

“Haven’t you heard? I like mystery.”

After a quick scope of their surroundings Ruby leaned forward and gestured for Emma to come closer. Emma abided, brow raised.

“So you know how the captain is famous for her strict baddassery and no nonsense shit fuckery?”
“Umm…”

“Yeah, well that’s what she wants people to think. Once you sign on here you’re not just asking for shitty pay and long hours. No, you sign on to the lies.”

“I’m not really surprised. Most highly ranked officers – and I’d almost include myself in that category – are a bunch of cocky narcissists. I figured Captain Mills wasn’t an exception the moment I heard that introduction speech. But what about these lies you’re referring to, Ruby?” Emma looked up and down their table, her face contorting in confusion. “And why are we whispering?”

“Do you want to get in trouble for bitching on the captain?”

Emma had already got into her fair share of trouble with the captain but wasn’t about to reveal such details to the communications officer. Ruby had all the makings of a queen bee gossiper.

Gathering from the silence Ruby said, “Didn’t think so.” She leaned forward again, extra conspiratorially. “The captain has been known to break the rules – and only when it suits her. There’s sentiment around the ship of people not liking her methods. Some things have happened in the past even before I arrived. I shouldn’t give the details – I don’t want to get you in trouble – but let’s just say getting on the receiving end of that woman’s wrath is the last place in the galaxy where you’d want to be.”

A chill ran up Emma’s spine, but she was tough enough not to experience a genuine shiver. “You sure weren’t kidding about the mystery part.”

“Captain Mills is far from perfect. No one knows who she really is, not even her own crew. And that kind of scares us.”

“Regina…” Emma said flatly, “scares you? I wouldn’t have guessed with the way you dress around her.”

“Ha. You’re funny,” she grated flatly. “No, this is how I dress everywhere. Granny says I need a makeover.” Ruby snorted lightly, chuckling. “More like a makeover by Home Style Sewing Incorporated. All my Gran wears are sweaters that make humans cough up fur balls.”

Emma cleared her throat and jerked her chin across the way. “Speaking of sweaters.”

“Oh, hi Emma!” Mary Margaret approached them in an orange creamsicle-colored sweater under her lab coat and sat next to Ruby.

“Hey,” Emma returned. “Mary Margaret this is Ruby, chief communications officer. Ruby this is my good friend Mary Margaret, newly promoted chief medical officer.”

“You two went to the academy together?”

Mary Margaret nodded. “Met in our first year. And let me say, I could tell you stories about this one. Believe me.”

“Oh?” Ruby gasped mockingly in the woman’s direction. Emma squirmed in her seat and threw a threatening glare at her old and supposedly trustworthy friend. “I have to be getting back to the bridge. It was nice to meet you Mary Margaret. We should bump into each other soon. Much needs to be discussed.”

Emma practically pushed the officer off her bench. “Bye, Ruby!”
Ruby waved at Emma who was half-hiding her face. She gave Mary Margaret an enthusiastic wink before leaving.

Emma put a napkin over her mug to prevent the excess fuzz from flying in. “Do you still need that on?” she asked gently, pointing to the coat. “We’re in the mess hall. I think it’s okay to let your hair down here.”

“It’s a shame. I really like showing off all the fun sweaters I packed with me. But someone in Medlab – Dr. Whathername – told me I should always keep my med coat on at all times.”

Emma kept down the laugh threatening to unleash itself. “Did she now?”

“Rules are rules, I guess,” she replied, completely oblivious.

The next fifteen minutes consisted of Mary Margaret gushing over her new position as chief medical officer. The responsibility frightened her, but Emma knew from their years at the academy that this doctor knew her stuff; all it took was a little push to get her on her feet and running. As recent events had unfolded Regina was responsible for that push – or a rather a good shove. Mary Margaret was all too humbled by the good captain’s decision and was dead set on thanking her in person. Emma, however, was dead set against it.

Just as Mary Margaret was retelling of the hangover Doctor Whale was still sleeping off, the chief science officer walked by and greeted Emma in passing.

“Hey, David.”

He glanced at Mary Margaret and gave a nod.

The good doctor’s cheeks flushed. “Uh, h-hello.”

Emma watched it all under furrowed brows. After a good solid minute of ogling at… well, whatever, Mary Margaret turned back to the table.

“What was that?” asked Emma.

“Hm?”

Emma stared a few moments, shifting from one eye to the other. “Never mind. My life has been fine, by the way. Thanks for asking.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Mary Margaret cried out. “Here I am chattering on about medical stuff. I know you don’t like me going on about all the details.”

“Because it’s gross. No one should spend more than 15 minutes discussing the merits of using a microspoon for brain surgery.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“I was eating a lovely meal, Mary Margaret, until it came out the same way it went in.”

“Well, I think you’re exaggerating that incident. Anyway, how do you like your new position as first officer? Do you like the perks?”

“I’d hardly call a dorm-sized private cabin a perk.”

Emma paused to really think about it. Her position wasn’t a total bummer. Having clearance to any
part of the ship, she could venture where and when she wanted and had unlimited resources at her fingertips. Not to mention she had a number of deputies at her beck and call.

“Honestly?” Emma said. “I have no idea how I got here. I mean, yeah I passed my exams and graduated on time but at what cost? I pissed off every other teacher, broke a simulator once with my ‘overt heroics’ and skipped more than my fair share of ethics lectures. It doesn’t make any sense. Who in their right mind would propose someone like me for a position as first officer? And on Storybrooke no less?”

Her hand was covered by Mary Margaret’s. The doctor tipped her head affectionately and admitted, “I love you, Emma, but you can be really thick sometimes. You passed the academy because you worked for it. Unlike most people in this business you did not kiss… butt in order to reach the top. You are here, Emma, because you deserve to be here. So please give yourself more credit.”

“But this isn’t who I am. Ordering crew around, filling out paperwork, the stuffy uniforms which I will still refuse to wear…” Emma missed her friend’s smile and let out a frustrated sigh. “It’s not what I envisioned for myself. I’m a pilot not a bureaucrat.”

“Why not be both?”

Emma retorted obviously, “Because they’re completely different things. Besides, I don’t think the Almighty Captain Mills would approve.”

“Why ever not? Did you two have a disagreement? I did here whisperings about something going down on the bridge during the Nal Korobi incidence.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I was out of line. Like, majorly out of line. I almost hit her.”

“What?” Mary Margaret gasped. “And this was on the bridge? In front of the senior officers?!”

“No way,” Emma shook her head quickly. “I went to her cabin to bring up my insubordination and to offer a formal apology. It was completely private. No one heard anything.”

Actually, no matter where Regina and Emma argued they were running the risk of affecting the crew’s morale. Lately, it seemed like quite a bit had passed through Storybrooke’s grapevine.

“Emma, what could she have done to make you want to hurt her?”

“She doesn’t have to do much,” Emma scoffed. Her frown developed. “I’m in deep, Mary Margaret. I don’t know if we can work together. We’re complete opposites, and you don’t have to know her personally to believe it. This relationship is toxic and if Regina and I can’t pull it together the crew will suffer. I don’t want that on my shoulders. I already felt it after Claude got injured. I’m pretty sure Regina feels the same.”

“Have you told her this?” Emma shook her head. “If you are honest with her like you are with me now – and not with that pout Emma Swan – she will see reason. Come to an understanding. Propose a ceasefire and things might die down to below nuclear levels.”

“How do you propose I do this?”

“Spend time with her. Talk to her like you are with me.”

“She’s not exactly a talker, Mary Margaret. She’s more of an arguer.”

“Reminds me of someone I know,” she pointed out. Her coffee mug went to her lips. “Maybe that’s
the perfect place to start.”

“What, ‘Regina, we have something in common; we piss people off more than we should. Want to
make a competition out of it and see who can piss the most people off in an hour?’”

“Emma, if I can see past your sarcasm Regina will spot it from a lightyear away.” She patted
Emma’s clenched fist. “You’re scared. As much as you like going off on your own I know you don’t
like pushing people away. Face the problem and work it out. Face Regina. Start up a conversation
that will drive towards your similarities. Sooner or later she will see what I see in you.”

“Yeah,” Emma rolled her eyes, “I’m sure Regina really appreciates the stubborn charm in people.”

Emma rose grudgingly from her bench.

“Oh, and when you talk to her, Emma,” Mary Margaret eyed her scolding, “be nice.”

* * *

No one had ever defied her. Not during her service as captain and not when she was a student at the
academy. No one dared crossed paths with Regina Mills or they would get burned. Her stance as a
hardworking woman and a highly ranked captain in the fleet was all the leverage needed to put the
weaklings in their place. Power and prestige were never in short supply, but after a while it grew
boring.

There was no thrill in the verbal beat downs when the opponent didn’t put up a fight. They knew her
reputation all too well, so gave up before fear latched upon their hearts. Some did fight, but were so
unworthy of defending themselves that they were down before they knew what hit them. Emma was
not one such opponent.

Regina sat alone in her cabin. The sofa formed to her petite figure, hugging her in places that never
felt comfort from any human being in what felt like lightyears. No light touch to an elbow, no gentle
squeeze of a shoulder, and certainly no lover’s embrace. They were ghosts of a feeling long put
away in the dusty corners of her memory.

No, Emma was certainly not such an opponent. She was worthy of sparring with. She put the thrill
back into the hunt and had the stamina to keep up with someone as adept as Regina. She may
despise Emma’s unsophisticated strategy (or lack thereof) but the woman had some fight in her.
Emma could push just as hard as Regina. Emma’s words could produce a lashing as sharp as
Regina’s. She could snarl, set her jaw, and glare about as ferociously as Regina. And that excited
her.

She sank deeper into the couch, sighing at the luxury it afforded. There were times when human
comfort was missed almost to the point where she would take it in any form. A tight grasp on her
arm would have been just as acceptable as a caress, a slap across the face taken over stroking fingers,
the rock hard stamina of knuckles than a kiss. Sometimes she just wanted to grab the first poor,
unfortunate soul in her path and scream, “Make me feel something!”

But what did it matter? Regina was as alone in that cabin as she would have been stranded in the
middle of outer space. It was a preferable way of life. You repeated it like a mantra until you
believed it. Sometimes Regina believed it was her destiny to be left untouched like stardust – radiant
from afar but up close slips through the fingers.

Regina was relaxing in the sofa and the solitude when she heard a noise from outside her hatch. For
a moment she thought it was Sidney because he had the annoying habit of shuffling his feet and
gathering the courage to knock on her door several times a day. She smiled, realizing that she had finally fired the bumbling creeper.

After smoothing her skirt down she made a motion to release the hatch. Her hand stayed at the muffled sound from outside.

“Be nice… be nice…”

Frowning, Regina pushed the hatch release.

Emma, nearly startled out of her skin, wore a comical expression of surprise.

“Twice in one day,” Regina said irritably, supporting a hand to her hip. “I should pinch myself.”

“I, uhh…” she scratched her temple, not meeting the captain’s steely glare, “I come in peace?”

Surprising even herself, Regina allowed Emma in. She waved toward the sofas, noting Emma’s glance at the newly cleaned carpet that had tasted cider and broken glass not long ago.

They sat across from each other much as they did upon their first meeting. A lot had changed since then. Regina did not offer her brew and Emma had dropped the awkward formalities. Unlike only two days previous when Emma graced Regina with her worn boots and red jacket they knew what set each other off and how to get the other in a defensive stance, fist pulled back and half a mind to follow through.

“So… how long have you been captain of *Storybrooke*?”

“Excuse me?” Regina asked. Head jerked back she frowned. Regina took a moment to look the woman over. Emma was tired – haggard was more appropriate. Sleep deprivation was evidenced by dark circles under once vibrant green eyes. A smile was put on but lacked adequate sincerity. Regina also noticed how uncomfortable Emma was with making casual conversation. It was irksome just watching the attempt. Regina knew this was the last place the woman wanted to be.

“U.S.S. *Storybrooke,*” Emma repeated, “how long have you commandeered it?”

It was all too obvious how hard Emma was trying not to roll her eyes. Such a valiant effort was met with a smirk. Regina decided to humor the woman. The faster she could give whatever Emma was there for the faster she could be left alone. Alone to her single sofa and solitude.

“Contrary to many students I was accepted into the academy at a young age. I trained for four years and was awarded the rank of senior officer upon my graduation. *Storybrooke* was bestowed to me at the age of 30, so I’ve been in service as its captain for… five years,” Regina stated with an unabashed grin, “give or take a few months.”

Emma nodded.

Regina could see the wheels turning from across the couch. Emma was calculating her age. To do so right before Regina was improper and not at all appreciated.

“Five years is a long time. Do you still enjoy it?”

“Being captain is not about enjoyment. It is a duty. But if I were to answer your question – yes, it is an honor, however, I would be nowhere today without my fine crew.”

“They must really look up to you,” Emma said. The captain’s eyes narrowed as her officer went
about supplying more conversation. Emma coughed before continuing. “I mean, the crew has to think of you as a pretty standup commander if they’ve followed you this long.” There was no criticism laced in the comment.

Regina simply stared, one brow furrowed. This was a first, she thought. Her mouth opened and then closed. Regina was completely caught off her guard, considering not a single one of her crew members had ever inquired after her… well, her anything. She was their superior so they had no interest in her personal life or how she felt or what opinions she held. They just assumed she didn’t have a life, feelings, or opinions. True, she technically didn’t assert a life outside Cosmofleet and she didn’t care to share her feelings, but she definitely had her opinions. Emma Swan could not have interest in such things despite the half-assed veiled compliment. She was making fun, perhaps even pitying her. Regina scowled at either.

Emma’s head bobbed again. Her eyes wandered a second later. After a pregnant silence she spoke up. “So where are you from?”

“Where is this line of questioning going, Miss Swan? If I didn’t know better I would say you are interrogating me. For what reason, I haven’t the slightest clue. It is not I who has debased Cosmofleet regulation.”

“I’m just trying to make conversation. Is that a crime against Cosmofleet rules? If we’re going to work together I figured we should know each other better.”

“Are you suffering from excess oxygen levels? Did you lose brain cells drinking that sludge Leroy pawns off? I can say with upmost assurance, Miss Swan, that we will not be ‘knocking a few back’ whist jabbering on about Commonwealth politics. Crush this little delusion because you and I will never be friends.”

“Vapor –” Emma cut herself off before Regina’s developing scowl. “No wonder they fear you. You’re the cruelest, most arrogant… witch I’ve ever met!” Her chest rose and fell swiftly to her mounting anger. All attempts at being ‘nice’ forgotten. “I was trying to fix this! Can’t you see it’s a problem? I don’t care how chummy you were with that Sidney guy. I refuse to be your servant or your pet. I deserve your respect just as you deserve mine.”

“Deserve? You deserve respect? Excuse me for thinking the academy turns out the best and brightest. Last time I checked your résumé you failed a quarter of your classes and barely scraped by on the exams. You were a disappointment to your teachers and a danger to other students. From what I gathered they were glad to be rid of you.”

“I wasn’t a danger to others!”

To be honest she did have habit of getting in scuffles at the academy. Whether it was related to a disagreement about simulation scores or a more personal matter, Emma always had to prove herself. And no one ever bothered to stand up for her until Mary Margaret came along. Emma regretfully remembered the black eyes and bloody noses her friend had taken for her and the determination shouldered when she promised to do it again if it came to that.

“So I’m competitive,” Emma admitted. “How in seven hells can you get anywhere if you’re not?”

“Well, dear, integrity is a start,” Regina shot back. She took a deep breath and swiped her skirt down. The longer she sat there the less relief she derived from the sofa. “Just because you made first officer does not mean you deserve it. Believe me, if I had any choice in the matter we would not be here. Command assigned you to me in the hopes that I could reform your insufferable ways.”
Emma gawked. “They said that?”

“Of course not,” Regina replied, rolling her eyes. “You were incapable of taking orders and reckless in the field – the very definition of a loose cannon. They had no choice but to ship you off to the first available captain in the fleet, one with high enough standards and a spotless record.”

It was Emma’s turn to roll her eyes.

“I did not accept your admission to this ship. I did not ask for incompetence or mistrust. Command couldn’t deal with their own problem so they threw it at me. After years of service, protecting the Commonwealth and promoting peace and justice, this is what I get. I resent it, Miss Swan.”

“I resent it, too!”

“Brilliant!” Regina growled, standing up. “We are finally on the same page. All we need now is for you to admit to your sabotaging my reputation.”

Emma leapt from the sofa shouting, “I said I was sorry! I’m sorry for disobeying your orders – for disobeying Cosmofleet orders. I’m sorry for being insubordinate and embarrassing you in front of your senior officers. And I’m blasted sorry that you have to suffer for my failings. I didn’t ask to be placed here and I sure as shit didn’t want some captain’s reputation to be tarnished because of her disappointment of a first officer.”

“It’s a bit late for apologies, Miss Swan,” Regina took a step forward with only the coffee table between them, “but I have to say, it sounds good to hear them. And to see you grovel just now…” Regina’s eyes glazed Emma from head to toe before a dissatisfied scoff, “it almost makes up for your stupidity.”

There was an animalistic cry. It was halfway between a snarl and a scream. Emma had Regina pinned to the bulkhead, her fists collected in the captain’s collar and practically shaking the life from her.

“Stop making me sorry for every gods damned thing I do!” Emma screamed in Regina’s face, roughing her collar to the demand. “I screw up! I’m not perfect and neither are you! What else do you want from me?!”

Regina was silent the whole time. Chest to chest, the growl could be felt rolling in Emma’s chest, growing and threatening to escape again. Regina’s hands fell uselessly to her sides but her chin held high so as to stare the woman down. Fighting back was impractical; Regina could tell by the dogged grip on her shirt and the blazing green eyes that she would be no match for the first officer. Emma was driven by her demons. Regina could empathize, but what she wouldn’t stand for was the wrinkling of her priceless uniform.

“If you can’t finish something you started then see yourself out. If you can,” she moved her face closer in challenge, “then let’s get on with it.”

Emma didn’t back away. They were inches from each other’s noses but they seemed miles apart. She saw Emma glance down to her mouth. Regina’s breath lapsed, the first sign that maybe Emma Swan could break her. For whatever reason, Regina’s eyes did the same. She beheld the small immovable mouth emitting a breeze that made her head swim. Her mind drifted to that rare desire for human contact, any contact – the kind Emma was providing as her mind liquefied into nonsense. What was so foolish about it? Regina asked herself. A touch was a touch whether in the form of a caress or a brute grasp, whether given by a lover or an enemy.
Mere seconds later and Regina hadn’t even realized her attacker had released her. It was the moment of two foes, nose to nose, staring at places that two people who hated each other should not be staring at. It happened within a blink of an eye and neither realized how breathless they were. They couldn’t possibly know how similar their thoughts were in that moment.

Emma’s sleeve came up to brush against her nose before dropping back down. She was looking at the floor when she spoke with a raspy voice. “My intentions were to apologize for almost hitting you before. I don’t take insults well and I almost let my anger get the best of me. That’s not who I am, Regina. I am sorry. I didn’t come to hurt you. I just wanted you to know that.” Emma shifted from foot to foot, her arms hanging with fingers brushing the fabric of her pants. “If you want me to remove myself from duty then…” her breath caught, startling both women, and tears collected in the corner of eyes. She cleared her throat and began again with her gaze finding Regina’s. “If you want me to remove myself from duty then I will comply.”

Regina didn’t breathe. She didn’t speak.

Taking her silence as approval, Emma turned and made for the exit.

“Don’t…”

Emma stopped in her tracts and turned to the broken noise. “Huh?” she asked with a deep frown.

“I will not accept your resignation,” Regina declared with renewed vigor. “You will not abandon our crew, Miss Swan. I expect you to arrive on time for tomorrow’s senior officers’ meeting.”

Closing her jaw Emma gave a slow nod. She saw herself out.

Regina stood rooted on the spot, watching the hatch close and continuing to stare after it. Later, she found herself collapsed on her sofa and never getting the same comfort it once afforded her. Not after such an exchange as with Emma Swan.

* * *

As Regina was standing from the sofa and transforming herself into a more stately appearance Emma was laying on her bunk thinking about tigers.

On her back she stared at a crack in her ceiling. It was a wide crevice, three to four inches long, and had a curved edge. Emma blinked and stared at it. There was a deliberate nature to its form, curved at one end much like a tiger’s claw. It was the only flaw in the ceiling, much like it could belong to the only tiger in existence (the real animal had gone extinct and had been replaced by a cloned species of Panthera tigris). Her therapist (for she had one back in her foster care days) would have attributed such an observation to her fierce nature. Emma was a tiger herself: solitary, possessing complex relationships with others, and always hungry. On her off days she would lurk in the thicket but be ready to pounce on the first predator that dared aggravate her. Emma Swan was no swan. She was not graceful or beautiful or gentle as so many foster parents had reminded her.

Emma adjusted her head on the pillow, eyes narrowed into the carving. She wondered what Dr. Guevara would say about it. She pictured the scene in her mind’s eye: his sanctimonious eyes and sycophant suit; the Oxford shoes that would silently walk all over her without the need to leave his chair; the Rorschach cards would be in one hand while a steaming espresso in the other.

He’d look down on her (down because the patient’s couch was always lower, like they were beneath such psychopathic royalty) and ask, “Why does a tiger’s claw jump to mind? What do you think that says about you?”
Emma would pick at her nails and respond with something along the lines of, “What do you think? You’re the therapist.”

Then Dr. Guevara would grace her with his sound professional opinion of the stranger sitting on his couch by going on about her inner dominant tigress or some shit like that.

To Emma the crack in the ceiling looked like a tiger’s claw and that was all. It didn’t mean anything other than the fact that cracks existed in bulkheads. It happens. Whatever.

Emma closed her eyes sighing. She was hungry. Her hands went to her jacket pockets, patting them down and feeling for a candy bar, a piece of toffee, a dried fruit strip, anything. A puff of red dust billowed from the pockets and she sneezed.

Since returning from Nal Korobi she had forgotten to clean the jacket down. The zipper was caked with the annoying red powder and any remaining candy in its pockets was probably unsalvageable. The earthy smell tickling her nose brought her back to the chamber filled with smoke and blaster fire. So much fear and adrenaline had been clogged in that space. The smells and the sounds were so deeply lodged in her memory it was as if Emma was still there, crouched behind the pillar and lobbing back gunfire. Emma had been in some tight situations both in the simulator and in real life, but no experience had prepared her for such a near death experience as on Nal Korobi.

Emma remembered how she feared for her own life as well as for David’s and Claude’s. And Regina’s life – she had been terrified for her, too. Emma had promised herself that if they got out of there in one piece, heads attached and hearts beating in place, that she would mend things between them. Petty grudges were not worth fighting endlessly about, especially if they escaped with their lives.

But Emma had failed utterly and broken her own promise. Another error to add to the list of Emma Swan’s Disappointments.

Emma was about to sleep it off when her cabin shook. She clutched the bunk, eyes and ears open. The next jerk was more rigorous and it was not just her quarters but the entire ship that moved. A sharp shake had Emma falling off her cot and sprawled on the floor. Alarms started blaring.

She ran to open her hatch and stood in the entryway. The crew was scurrying about, their terror stricken eyes reflecting the flashing red of the alarms. The overhead lights flickered just as Storybrooke gave another quake. Emma braced herself against the hatch frame, wincing from the creaking metal that rang out. She pulled aside the first junior officer in her path.

“Want to tell me why the ship is shaking like a bucket of bolts?”

“The engine sustained severe damage from the Korobi tractor beam,” the officer replied between pants. “The ship is now floating aimlessly and being pulled into the nearest star. ETA is tee minus one hour and 52 minutes.”

“You couldn’t sugar coat it?”

“What’s the point?” the officer shrugged. “With the engine shot we might as well dig our graves.” He shrugged again and sprinted off.

“Aw, blast.”
Chapter 4

The grating creaked under heavy footfalls as Emma raced through the secondary hull. She sprinted through plumes of steam and passing columns and pieces of machinery she couldn’t remember the names of. The catwalk ended at the engine chamber and her quick pace never halted as she clambered down the balcony stairs.

There were more flashing buttons than one would see on a typical day in the engine room and fewer engineers at their posts. In fact, all nonessential personnel were ordered out of the area due to the catastrophic danger in their midst. The fusion reactor was its normal purple beam of light, but before Emma could breathe a sigh of relief her eyes fell on the long tunnel that was the ion generator. What was once a highway of pinkish purple light had gone dark. The crackle of electricity that had given the sublight drive life and the ship gravity had fizzled out into silence.

Well that doesn’t look good, Emma thought. The rising voices battling in the engine room didn’t sound too good either.

“The generator passed its inspection days before we left space port!” Leroy defended with a finger. “Yes, it is the most advanced piece of equipment in the fleet, but it wasn’t made to handle a rough getaway from a tractor beam.”

“Then you make it handle a tractor beam,” Regina shot back with hands planted to hips. “As chief engineer you should foresee such a quandary. We have been in far worse circumstances than this. I expect you to fix this ship with the best parts!”

“And Lizard Eyes could have been gentler with her! If it wasn’t for his spasmodic wheel skills we wouldn’t be in this situation!”

“Rumple may be a sly snake in the grass but he is a superb helmsman. Do not fault others for your mistakes.”

“Engine trouble was unavoidable! It happens to all ships – even yours, sister.”

Emma saw the captain stiffen and her fingers dig into her hips. Before Regina could retort her first officer made herself known.

“What are you doing here?” Regina snarled.

“I couldn’t get a decent rest with the alarms and the ship shaking like a ragdoll,” she sassed. “And as far as I know I’m still this ship’s first officer, so is anyone going to tell what in the seven freakin’ hells is going on?” Emma crossed her arms looking from Regina to the stiff jawed engineer.

“Storybrooke sustained some damage after a most careless,” Leroy spat in his captain’s direction, “escape from the Korobi tractor beam. All the lurching affected certain parts of the engine. It was like shaking an iron-clad baby crib with the baby still in it. Some pretty important innards got jostled against the radiation shielding which then caused a kind of short circuit.” He handed Emma his datapad. Several locations on the engine map flashed with yellow exclamation marks and were captioned with warnings that made Emma’s eyebrows rise. “The ion generator has failed as a result. Soon there’s going to be no way to keep the ship’s gravity intact now that the power couplings have died.”

Emma continued to frown at the offensive data. She bit her lip and ventured a glance at the engineer. “That doesn’t sound too bad,” she said half-heartedly.
Regina threw in flatly, “Tell her about the other thing.”

Emma looked at the captain worriedly.

“The only way to restart the generator is by throwing the manual switch.” A hand rubbed his short, scraggly beard. He grimly explained, “Someone’s going to have to go into that passageway. The switch is located a half a mile in.”

Emma’s mouth remained open until it had something worth sharing. “Well who the fuck designed that?!”

“Don’t look at me! It was like that when I got here!”

“But you, Chief Engineer Leroy, could have made some adjustments!”

Regina stood there watching her bickering officers. Since his promotion years ago Leroy had been extremely protective of his work. Claiming he knew the engine room like the back of his hand, he let no one including his engineers touch any part of his engine. He was proud of his alterations and always made sure his people and his captain knew it. She knew Leroy was protecting his baby just like she protected her baby. Her ship was just as much hers as the engine was Leroy’s.

And then there was Emma who had been on the ship for all of two days and seemed to treat Storybrooke as much a home as Leroy and Regina. She wondered how the two officers could be so protective of their ship and still manage to fight about her.

“Enough!” Regina held up a hand to halt their bickering. “If we do not come up with a plan within the hour this ship will be melting in the photosphere of the nearest star. Now if dying in 5,800 degree heat is on your to do list for the day then please carry on.” Regina waved her hand lazily as if she couldn’t care less.

Their hackles fell and Leroy shrugged at Emma. Emma curtly nodded to the sign of peace. Silence fell. No one dared speak up and consign anyone to their death.

“Well there’s no question,” Emma stated, chin held high. She swallowed hard. “It’s me that’s going in there.”

Regina’s head quickly turned. Her forehead wrinkled in doubt as she stared at Emma, but she did not say anything.

Leroy warned her, “If you’re stuck in there when the generator starts you’ll get zapped by the power couplings and go numb to the point of whole body paralysis. You’ll be stuck indefinitely – or until the heat of the drives fry you and blow you out of the ventilation system by your ashes.”

“Very subtle, Leroy, thanks. I think I’ve been warned sufficiently.” Emma gathered her long hair up and into a pony tail.

“Miss Swan,” Regina stepped up to Emma, putting on her best armor and speaking in her most superior tone, “I forbid you to go in there. As your commanding officer I am ordering you to rescind your bid to volunteer.”

Emma stared for a moment, her eyes quietly testing the armor. “I’m not interested in my image if that’s what you’re worried about. I don’t care about my reputation,” she explained matter-of-factly. “You can take the credit for all I care. I’m sure you’ll come out of this smelling like a rose anyway. I just want to save this ship, Captain.” Her meaning solidified with deliberate words and steadfast eye contact. Emma’s voice dropped so only Regina could hear. “I want to save my home.”
“We have engineers for this sort of thing. The last thing this ship needs is an underqualified girl with a hero complex.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I’m good with engines and I consider myself an anti-hero.” Emma flashed a smirk. “Flawless resume, wouldn’t you say?”

A few technicians helped Emma into her harness. The straps lay over her shoulders and clicked to the center of her belt, the thigh straps meeting there as well. The harness was packed with special properties that resisted the pull of electrical couplings. The tunnel was dead of power, however no chances were taken as it was possible a few lingering charges were left in the coils. Though an adequate safety precaution, the harness would yield little protection if its wearer was caught in a high powered magnetic field that initiated five minutes after the manual switch was thrown – just one of many drawbacks that iced Emma’s gut.

Regina watched from the side, stewing with narrowed eyes and digging nails that almost broke the skin. Her fury was so immense she couldn’t think straight. What gave Emma the right to put herself in a position that would kill herself – or worse, make her out to be a hero? If anyone should sacrifice their skin it should be Regina. She told herself the day Storybrooke was commissioned to her that if anything befell the ship she would go down with it. She would strap her body to that captain’s chair and go spiraling into oblivion with the one thing that she loved, the one thing she was famous for. But why was it that when the opportunity presented itself she did not throw her hat in the ring? Why did Regina not volunteer to go through the ion generator and give her ship its best chance? Did she believe Emma was that best chance? Is that why Regina was being such a good sport?

She was too paralyzed in the moment. Something inside her, a plummeting sensation or a weightless free fall, caused the words to stay before they even left her lips, before they even formed a logical sentence in her mind. She had felt this feeling. She had remembered how it felt for her blood to freeze in her veins and her breath to still. For her chest to feel the weight of a hundred g-forces bearing upon it. This paralyzing fear was a hazy memory from so long ago, but Regina still experienced it like one was met by a most familiar and unwelcome friend.

“Remember,” Leroy told Emma after handing over a flashlight, “once that switch is flipped you better high tail it back here. You’ll have five minutes before the couplings heat up and ignite. I would suggest taking it at a run if you ask me.”

Emma smiled and slapped a hand to his shoulder.

“Are you out of your blasted mind?” Regina demanded after a furious pacing. Her eyes were wide and rolling with fire. “You could get killed!”

“I’m touched by your concern. Really.”

“I’m concerned about the integrity of this ship. One graze against those power couplings and you’ll go limp as a dead fish. I don’t know what a body in that tunnel will do to the generator. For all Leroy knows the sublight drive could explode and take us all with it.”

Emma rolled her eyes, knowing Regina was referring to her fried body in the tunnel. Boy, Emma mused, someone wasn’t shy about wanting her demise.

Tinkering with his instruments Leroy perked to the sound of his name. “For all Leroy knows?” He glared at his commanding officer none too lightly as they were in his house. “Aw, well thanks for the vote of confidence, Cap’n. You know if it wasn’t for my rugged good looks and stout frame it’d be me going in there.”
“I guess it’s a good thing I’m not pretty then,” Emma retorted, looking Regina in the eyes.

And with that she hiked up her utility belt and made her way into the tunnel.

“That foolish girl,” Regina mumbled.

Leroy stood beside her, his arms also crossed on his chest. “Foolish, yeah,” he snorted. “But definitely pretty, don’t you think?”

Regina didn’t reply. She was too busy holding the fading blonde hair in her sights.

With the power couplings down there was no magenta electricity to light her path. The tunnel, curved at its sides and as wide as a whale shark’s mouth, was pitch black and eerily silent. Using her flashlight Emma aimed its beam at the floor, watching her step amid the coils and tubing.

The hair of her skin stood on end, but it was not due to hair raising fear. Just moments ago the entire tunnel was humming with energy that could power a brown dwarf star. After the rattling the ship took the coils fizzled out, thereby powering down any electricity once flowing through it. There were still traces of current in the air as evidenced by the loose hairs rising out from her pony tail. Emma smelled it, too, the smoky wisps still growing from the coils. She didn’t have to guess how hot they were; she had worked many jobs in her youth in various speeder repair shops. Much of her time was spent around couplings and generators, so she was familiar with their blistering temperature upon contact. Emma had a few scars to prove it.

Her boot suddenly got hooked under some tubing and she tripped. Her elbows broke the fall, but her palm fell on one of the coils. There was a faint sizzling, and a whiff of burning flesh tickled her nose.

“Blast!” she cried, whipping her hand back. A series of curses left her mouth and echoed down the metal tunnel.

She rose to her feet and held her injured hand out from her body. There was no time to examine the damage. If the ion generator was not fixed within the hour then Emma would have more serious burns to worry about. Eyes stained with tears, she cringed through the throbbing pain and picked up her pace.

At exactly a half mile in she came upon the circuit box Leroy told her about. It was located directly at the center of the tunnel on the floor and wedged between some coils and tubing. Without a second’s pause she unlocked the protective case, flipped it open, and reached in. She felt around for the switch. It was deep and dark, and Emma’s other hand was too incapacitated to hold up the flashlight.

“Come on…” she moaned, reaching furthering in. “Where are you damn it?!”

Her hand finally came in contact with a thick, rubber handle. She pulled hard until it made a 180 degree turn. She withdrew her hand and waited for confirmation.

A clicking of metal rang from below her, echoing and then fading to silence. Blonde hair blew softly against her neck tentatively and then more strongly. Emma heard the whirl of the ventilation system and knew she had just minutes before she was that limp fish Regina went on about.

“Five minutes until ion generator ignition,” came a robotic female voice, confirming Emma’s ETA.

Her long legs flew across the tunnel floor. By the light of her shaking flashlight Emma weaved around obstacles and hurdled the glowing couplings.
“Four minutes until ion generator ignition.”

Emma let out a growl. The massive generator surrounding her groaned through its commencing start up. Her very bones shuddered to the thrumming engine. Her skin felt the coils heating up while her hair stood on end. Soon her harness would be useless against the power coupling’s magnetic field.

“Two minutes until ion generator ignition.”

“I know! I know!” Emma shouted through labored pants. “Blast!”

Through perspiration stung eyes she could make out the light at the end of the tunnel. So blasted ironic, Emma thought. Her thighs were jelly. She thought she’d collapse at any minute. Her breath came in quick and loud for she could hear it echo in her thudding ears. Her chest burned, her hand burned, her skin was tingling against the purple glowing coils around her. She just wanted to be free of it.

“Sixty seconds until ion generator ignition.”

The ground vibrated and Emma almost lost her footing. Everything was shaking, the ground, the walls, her hands, and her heart. With a scream she dived the last few feet, arms outstretched and eyes aimed for the one waiting for her in the bright light.

* * *

Her breath caught in her throat as she watched Emma sprinting towards the opening, towards her. The woman was flushed with exhaustion, panting with a face contorted in pain. She spied the blistered, discolored right hand. Regina’s heart thudded over the system countdown.

“Ten seconds… nine seconds…”

Regina felt her foot move forward of its own volition. She felt weighed down and sluggish, as if everything around her was occurring in slow motion. Everything slowed down, but that damn woman’s voice was still counting.

“Five seconds… four seconds…”

Later she would say she was caught up in the moment… that it was a result of adrenaline… that it was because she feared the worst for her ship. But in that moment, with heart stopping mid-beat and eyes filling with saline liquid, Regina truly believed she would be alone forever. It was a feeling, like the one of a plummeting sensation or a free fall. A feeling she was experiencing more and more the past few days.

“Three seconds… two seconds…”

Regina thought it was her screaming. A hand went to her own mouth but there was no vibration.

“One… ignition.”

A flash of light reflected in brown eyes that insisted on remaining open. There was only bright white light which changed to yellow… then pink… and then a purple. Regina saw a silhouette against the backdrop of a violet sunrise. She saw a pair of green and a mane of blonde. The silhouette drew nearer until it landed in a heap at Regina’s feet. Her face felt the heat of the ebbing dawn and she remembered how to breathe.

* * *
A bellowing howl rang through Medbay. The nurses and physicians all turned their heads towards the noise. When the source of the scream was identified they chuckled and went back to work.

“Gods damn it, Doc! Are you still hungover?!”

Whale gave the woman a baleful look and continued waving the scanning device.

“OOOUCH!” cried Emma. “Fucking Jesus Jupiter, can you be a bit gentle? My hand is, like, cooked well done here.”

“If you don’t hold still and stop your cursing you’ll have more to worry about than this fried and crispy limb of yours.” Whale paused to make sure none of the nurses were eavesdropping. He spoke in a low whisper. “The new chief is a real stickler for protocol. The last time someone took some god’s name in vain she cut them down to size.”

“You don’t like her because she replaced you.”

“That, too.”

“Anything else to report?” Emma couldn’t help but ask. She was first officer, of course. “Been nipping from the swill, again?”

Another yelp sounded. Everyone turned to Emma who was cringing with tears in her eyes and Whale who was smiling cheerfully. They all went back to their work.

“Fuck, man, this is cruel and unusual punishment!” Emma tried to jerk her throbbing hand away and started looking around the medbay. “Where’s Dr. Blanchard? I want her.”

“Cut it out. Little Miss Doctor is –“

“Right here,” came a squeaky female voice from behind. “Doctor Whale, I think the surgical instruments need another polish. I can finish up here.”

Emma stared after the departing sandy haired doctor. He was muttering about something else he’d like to give a shiner to.

“The guy’s a sick masochist.”

“There’s nowhere else for him to go.” Mary Margaret took the wrist of Emma’s hand and gently applied a salve. “What would you have done?”

“Thrown him out the airlock?”

Mary Margaret gave a disapproving frown.

“Seriously,” she shrugged innocently, “we could have dropped him off at the nearest star. The guy looks like he could use a good tan.”

“Emma,” came the admonishment. The pixie-haired doctor wacked the tender flesh enough to sting.

“Damn,” Emma groaned and bit her fist. “How did you people get your doctor’s license? Talk about poor bedside manner.”

“How did I get such a stubborn, foul-mouthed patient, hm?”

“I’m your friend. I should automatically get special treatment.”
“Aw,” she cooed, “do you want those cartoon bandages? That’s a very, very special treatment only asked for by children.” The bandage roll (plain white in color Emma noticed with relief) was taken from the tray. Mary Margaret then proceeded to wrap the palm, wrist to knuckles.

“Funny,” Emma replied flatly, “but that’s not what I was implying.”

“You are kind of a child.”

When the bandage sufficiently covered her entire palm the ends were tied into a knot. Mary Margaret made sure to tighten it more than necessary.

Emma bit the side of her cheek and slammed her uninjured hand to the bed. “All I’m asking for is a little kindness.”

“Is that what you gave the captain?”

Emma froze. “Regina?”

There was laughter in reply. “Yes, Emma. Is there another captain on this ship?” Mary Margaret saw her friend’s motionless expression which quickly turned away. “Are you alright? Did something happen?”

“No,” the voice was a hoarse whisper aimed at the floor, “nothing. I’m fine.”

“You’re not usually this guarded,” the doctor pointed out suspiciously. Then her head dropped as she began picking at the bandage roll. “At least not around me.”

“Excuse me,” a young woman with red cheeks and a freakishly large smile approached. She asked the patient, “Are you First Officer Swan? The one everyone’s been talking about? Did you really save the entire ship and the crew?” Her voice rose to an excited screech by the last question.

“No.”

Mary Margaret covered a hand over her chuckle.

Ever since getting admitted to Medbay Emma had been bombarded with crewman of all age, rank, and department. Word had spread of the second-in-command’s heroic efforts in resetting the ion generator and saving them all from being melted by a blistering star. Visitors would approach her with congratulations and perfuse thanks. “Are you her?” they would ask excitedly or “Were you the one who saved us all from that hell?” and Emma would reply with a hurried, “Nope.” She neither considered herself the savior type nor liked the attention.

The woman in uniform looked from one to the other with an expression of confusion. “But…”

“No,” Emma said simply. “I think she went that way. Now scram!”

With a rattle the curtain closed on its metal rail, cutting off the stammering crewwoman from the doctor and her irritable patient.

“Emma…” Mary Margaret chided. She tried to be firm but the sight of her flustered friend put a smile to her face. It was clear Emma would do just about anything to divert the spotlight.

“Don’t these things close any more tightly?” Emma whined, fiddling with the curtain. “I feel like a specimen under a microscope.” She peeked through one of the openings. “They keep watching me…”
“Well you did save our lives. What you did down in that generator was very risky. You should feel grateful to be alive.”

“Oh, I’m grateful. I just don’t like being treated like a god. I ran a half mile in less than five minutes and burned my hand in the process. That’s not hero material. That was just some klutz who can run fast.”

“Emma,” Mary Margaret chuckled, shaking her head. She patted the bed. “Come sit down. You’re still my patient. And you didn’t tell me what happened between you and the captain after that heroic escape.”

“I didn’t? I thought I told you already.”

“No,” drawled the doctor, eyes narrowed, “you skillfully dodged my questions just like you did with that poor fan of Emma Swan’s.”

Emma shrugged, crossing her arms and carefully minding her wrapped hand. “There’s nothing to tell. Regina and I supervised the system check. When Leroy confirmed the engine was running with all pistons firing I came straight here to get my hand wrapped. Then I got stalked by a dozen or so crew, considered taking out a restraining order on a few, and I was unnecessarily abused by two doctors.”

Mary Margaret attempted to use her best motherly tone, a scolding she reserved only for her dear friend. “That sarcasm, young lady, will get you in trouble one day.”

“I think you spoke to soon,” Emma snorted haughtily. “Remember that one time…?”

“Oh, I remember all the times, Emma. I just hope you learn from them one of these days.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“You can go to your quarters, young lady,” Mary Margaret sassed right back. Emma made a face but was interrupted with a glare. “I can pull rank, too. That salve needs time to work. And stop itching! Leave the bandages alone until tomorrow morning when I can examine the skin. Get some rest. Otherwise I can stick you with a sedative when you’re not looking and you can crash right here where all your fan girls and boys can see.”

“Geez, Doc!” Emma rose from the bed quickly. “Hostile much?”

“Are you sure there was nothing else you wanted to talk about?” asked Mary Margaret gently. “Nothing about the captain?”

Emma’s face scrunched, faking recollection before she shook her head and replied, “Not that I can think of.”

“Alright. Get some sleep, then.”

Emma thanked her friend and exited the medbay. On her way to the seclusion of her quarters Emma felt the heavy weight of guilt. The truth had always been an easy thing between the two friends. They shared a lot: their secrets, possessions, similar hairstyles at one time, and the love that two best friends’ hearts warmed to. She had betrayed Mary Margaret, but felt that the truth was more damning than the lie. It was complicated, as she came to rationalize it.

What Emma didn’t tell Mary Margaret was how Regina acted when she picked herself off the floor with a mangled hand and a victorious grin. She neglected to share how Regina looked when Emma
stared back, panting and eyes wide with adrenaline. Emma couldn’t reveal how not a word was exchanged, not a whisper as they remained inches apart with heavy eyes smoldering in the dawn Emma had ignited. Dark mahogany eyes burning with something akin to need.

It happened in the blink of an eye. Her full, inviting lips opened for words that never came. They reunited to form a thin line. It happened in the blink of an eye. But Emma saw it.

* * *

“Captain Mills, the coordinates for Triton Sector have been set. Leroy says the ship’s engine is okay to go.” Ruby waited a few moments. “Captain?”

Regina broke her intense gaze of the star map and frowned. “Miss Lucas?”

“She shall we take the ship to hyperspace?”

“Yes. Rumple, proceed.”

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

The helmsman nodded and threw the lever. Bright streams filled the forward viewport and Storybrooke made the jump.

While the officers on the bridge went about their system checks, Regina stayed at the transmission table. She dialed random coordinates on the panel and the image of a jumbled mix of stars and planets that was their galaxy widened. The hologram zoomed with a rapid pace. Stars, asteroids, and planets whooshed by until the projection halted to a random system Regina didn’t recognize. The chart hung in midair above the table and displayed dozens of tiny lights. They glistened and winked as only stars could on a revolving atlas. Amid the twinkling diamonds was a yellow gold planet. It was medium-sized, tilted a few degrees on its axis, and had two small moons revolving around it. Regina guessed that it was a Class N world virtually unsustainable to human life forms due to its sulfuric properties. But she could be mistaken. There was so much that still waited, undiscovered. Vast regions of space which remained untouched by human destruction or simply life at its finest.

“Excuse me, Captain, but there seems to be a glitch in the primary sensor arrays.”

Regina sighed. “What is the problem?”

“I can’t run a full diagnostic until we return to port. I could do some alternate scans if we find a safe place to dock, but I don’t think you want to make another unscheduled stop.”

“You would be right, Mr. Nolan. However, my ship takes priority over a mere patrol mission. Inform Belle to start looking for safe port. And let’s make sure its populaces are affiliated with the Commonwealth. We do not need a repeat of the Korobi incident.”

“Agreed, Captain.”

Regina sighed again, running a hand through her hair. She went back to her study of the holochart. Her finger went out to touch the gold planet and she watched as it went right through the visual. Three dimensional maps were ideal for navigating space. There was no such thing as an unregistered planet or misplaced star when you had a three dimensional representation of the cosmos. Every square inch of known space could be located, magnified, and studied. The three dimensional map was an excellent resource, but it was also good for bidding one’s time.

A great deal had come to pass in the last 24 hours and all of it at the hands of an enemy. No, Regina
thought. Emma wasn’t her enemy. She may hate the woman to the core, but they were in this together – for the crew and for the Commonwealth. So many words had been said, so many looks shared, and yet ‘enemies’ never fit the bill. Neither did ‘friends.’ Regina sought meaning in their recent exchange, but found none. Her head, the part of her that kept her alive through tight scrapes, the logical part of her, insisted that there was no purpose. But there was another part, kept so hidden its owner had not known of its existence, the part hidden so deep from Regina and anyone else who came near that begged to differ.

Her eyes fluttered shut. Fingers rested on the panel, feeling the hum of the projector working its magic. The hum traveled through her bones just as the engine’s vibrations did the night before. Regina smirked. Whoever Emma Swan was, a hero, a fool, or just a simple girl from Earth, she risked her life for Storybrooke and its people. The officer could surprise her captain in more ways than one, and Regina was beginning to take to the random moments of enlightenment. Her first officer was challenging, instinctual, and pretty (she’ll give Leroy that). Emma was all the things that Sidney wasn’t. She was a change in the tide, a change that could be calming one minute but unleash a monstrous tempest the next.

Any commander should be grateful to have an officer willing to do what was necessary – even if it meant the ultimate sacrifice. But gratitude was not the problem; it was her damn feelings that let lose without her permission. When Emma had stared up at her with tired eyes and a cocky grin Regina didn’t know whether to take the woman in her arms or beat her bloody.

Hands closed into fists causing her knuckles to press mercilessly to the glass table.

Regina didn’t think Emma noticed. She hoped to the gods her face, in whatever shape or form it appeared in that moment, didn’t give her away. But what Regina feared more than Emma knowing her feelings was Regina knowing her own.

* * *

The lift doors parted with a hiss and Emma stepped aboard the main bridge. David and Ruby had both visited her in Medbay to offer their appreciation and wish her a swift recovery so there was no need to make small talk. Emma had several good nights’ rest (the best since arriving on Storybrooke) and was prepared to return to duty.

At the center of the bridge stood the captain who was beholding the star chart like it was the galaxy’s most precious mystery.

“What system is this?” Emma asked, gesturing towards the map. She looked on it with curiosity until the celestial sphere, its moon, and stars collapsed into the table with a whoosh.

Regina’s finger left the red button. “It’s nothing.”

Emma let it go and followed the captain to David’s station.

“So where are we headed?”

Regina didn’t look up from the figures she was scrolling through on the datapad. “The Triton Sector.”

“Huh.”

“Do you object?” Regina asked with a slight trace of annoyance.

Emma shook her head.
“Good.”

Regina didn’t look up to see Emma rolling her eyes. “Is that all?”

“Yes.” Emma heard the grunt of acknowledgement as Regina continued to stare down at the datapad lazily. “No,” she changed her mind and Regina finally met her eyes with a frown. Pulling her to the side, Emma lowered her voice to a whisper. “Is this how it’s going to be?”

“Is this how what is going to be, Miss Swan?”

“Short conversations that relate to business… the less than five word responses…”

“My last reply was ten words,” Regina shot back. “Do learn how to count.”

“The spiteful tones,” Emma continued, her hand still gripping the arm. “You even avoid looking at me. Am I that repulsive to you?”

Startled, Regina’s eyes left the bustling crewmen for the offended green ones. The tendons in Regina’s jaw tightened and the lips of her mouth parted ever so slightly. Emma braced herself for the verbal abuse, but it never came. Regina’s gaze flickered down to Emma’s right side. The furrow in her brow deepened.

“Does it hurt?”

“What?”

“Your hand,” Regina clarified, her voice unreasonably soft. “Is it serious?”

The hand in question was raised for Emma’s own inspection. Mary Margaret had already reapplied the burn salve and wrapped the palm in new dressings. There was no infection and by the end of the healing process there was expected to be minimal long-term damage to her tissues and nerves.

“It will leave a scar, but I’ll live.”

Regina nodded, still studying the bandaged limb without touching it. Her eyes then flitted to Emma’s where they stayed for a second and diverted. She cleared her throat before walking past Emma.

What in seven hells was that? Emma thought.

She continued to receive the awkward treatment that afternoon. If Regina wanted to avoid her she did a damn good job, considering they worked in the same room. The same short words were spoken while offering partial eye contact. She gave Emma no occasion to extend the conversations because Regina was carrying out her responsibilities as if the Commonwealth itself would hold her personally accountable for delay. Occasionally, Emma would catch Regina staring at her bandaged hand until the captain was found out and ended the odd checkup for a few sharp words with a crewman. It was odd behavior, though she’d take it over the quarreling that had defined their relationship.

Lounging in her chair and undertaking the enthralling process of crew evaluations Emma felt the tremor.

“Did you feel that?”

“Feel what?” Ruby asked from her communications post.

Everyone on the bridge looked to Emma in confusion. Suddenly, she felt it again.
“That! Did you feel that?”

“What are you talking about, Miss Swan?”

“A vibration. It was only for a moment and then it was gone.”

“Can you please be more specific? A vibration could mean any number of things.”

Emma’s eyes widened, her hand gripping the chair. “There it is again!”

“I felt it too!” shouted David next to her.

Just as Ruby was walking to the two shocked officers a blaring alarm sounded. Then the ship trembled enough that everyone felt its effect.

“Captain!” Rumple shouted, the controls shaking in his grip. “We are being pulled out of hyperspace!”

“Is it an engine malfunction?”

“No, if this were a result of engine failure we would not still be traveling at the speed of light. As you well know the ship exits hyperspace immediately upon engine failure. We are not being dragged out by something, but someone.”

Regina activated her chair’s comm. “Everyone to your stations! This is not a drill! I repeat: this is not a drill!” She addressed Rumple who was struggling with the ship’s controls. “I want shields up the moment we enter realspace. Belle, scan the area for any and all craft. If we are not alone I don’t care for surprises. Miss Lucas…”

“Man the transponder and notify you of the slightest burp,” the red-skirted crewman affirmed. “I’m all over it.”

Emma stood beside the captain, following her gaze out the main viewport. “Who do you think it is?”

“We’re about to find out.”

* * *

**Storybrooke** creaked to a halt in the vacuum of realspace. Save for a lone aquamarine planet there was no craft in sight and no evidence to suggest the famous *Regal*-class was dragged out of hyperspace.

“Belle, where are we?”

“I… I don’t know, Captain.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“According to my readouts here the ship has dropped into a mass shadow. Captain, I am unable to give you our location because no ship or craft affiliated with the Commonwealth has been here before. We are in uncharted space, Captain.”

David perked up at the mention of ‘mass shadow.’ He took one look at the aquamarine planet and suddenly a theory struck him.

“An interdiction field,” he murmured. He turned to Regina and explained, “A gravity well that’s
been created in the shadow of a planet – *that* planet. If strong enough it could explain why we were pulled from hyperspace.”

Emma frowned. Gravity wells were not a creation of nature. Interdiction fields were bent for many purposes. By stimulating the gravity field of any planet or celestial body one could prevent a ship from jumping to hyperspace and just as easily pull them out. Emma remembered learning about the wells at the academy. They’re primary use was for purposes of military tactics. Anyone who got their hands on a field generator had the power to pin their enemy where they so desired, thereby preventing their escape.

“Someone is using a gravity well projector,” Emma gathered. “But who?”

Ruby spoke from her post. “There are no signs of other craft. My radar is coming up with zilch. Wait…” her hand went to the headset resting to her ear. “I think I’m picking something up.”

“Patch it into the primary channel,” Regina instructed.

The senior officers and their captain surrounded the holotable. Just as Ruby transferred the signal the glass table flickered and emitted white noise. A male voice broke through the crackling, but instead of a three dimensional image the table glowed and flickered with audio. The light blinked in time with the voice as the crew tried to make sense of the transmission.

“… down so your ship… over… board immediately upon… stand down…”

“Miss Lucas –“

“Cleaning the transmission. It should just take a moment.”

“You have been seized from hyperspace. Stand down so your ship can be taken over. We will board immediately upon shield override. Stand down and you will not be harmed.”

“Vaporize me,” David mumbled.

“Given that that transmission is as clear as the Tirat sun,” Rumple began with a trace of annoyance, “did they just say they were assuming control over our ship?”

“Ruby, you said there was no other craft in the area.” Emma bit her lip, perplexed by the course of events. She surprised the communications officer and everyone else on the bridge with a stern question. “How do you explain this transmission?”

“Emma, I can’t… I don’t know why the scanner isn’t picking up a signal.”

“Then find a signal, Miss Lucas. I will not have us sitting like ducks while we are threatened by an invisible force.”

“Perhaps our presence will ease your decision.”

Startled by the unexpected broadcast, everyone blinked uneasily at the glowing glass. There was no doubt that the message’s timing brought on a chill. Their eyes shifted to the viewport to confirm the transmission. Stars twinkled on the backdrop of a black canvas. The mysterious planet generating the gravity well remained motionless and eerily serene. Seconds later the stars blacked out and were replaced with the flickering image of a spacecraft. It was half the size of *Storybrooke*, but immense enough to make an impression. But they soon realized it was no image.

“You have 60 seconds to lower your shields.”
Regina’s hands formed fists. She longed to punch something or someone, preferably the ones responsible for this mistake. Turning on her senior officers with blazing eyes and a steely jaw she demanded slowly, “Would someone tell me how our sensors neglected to pick up a cloaked ship?”

“Um, I may have mentioned today the status of our primary sensory a-array…” the stammering only got worse as the captain began her prowl towards the chief science officer, “…and that we should stop somewhere s-safe to make repairs?”

“Does this look like a safe place, Mr. Nolan? Would you care to jettison outside in a space suit and conduct your diagnostics now?”

“N-no, Captain.”

“We take your inability to comply as a hostile action. If you do not lower your shields you will be fired upon.”

“From the carbon scoring on that craft,” Emma pointed out, “it looks decades old. They might not have the kind of fire power to take a ship of our size down. How do we know they’re not bluffing?”

“Because Freedom Raiders don’t bluff.” Heads turned to Regina who almost laughed at the sight of their shocked expressions. “I could identify their craft from a lightyear away. That’s a Raider ship,” she declared, her nod emphasizing her certainty. Without missing a beat she ordered everyone back to their posts and sank within her chair. She gripped the arms mercilessly, eyes narrowed out the viewport towards her target. “Rumple, I want you to fire upon my command.”

A pair of reptilian eyes blinked at the captain in disbelief. He gave the others the same look and slowly turned to his controls.

“As are my orders, dearie.”

Regina took her time studying the ship, its contours, its engine, and all the details that give a ship its unique appearance. It was, without a doubt, the Freedom Raiders. Regina not only had a duty to Cosmofleet and the Commonwealth to apprehend the terrorist craft, but a responsibility to herself to take action against them. She made it her personal business to take down any and all people who called themselves a Raider. Even the unlucky few who found themselves mildly associated with the criminals did not escape her wrath.

Without flinching she gave the order.

“Torpedoes away,” Rumple confirmed.

Two streaks traveled towards the rogue craft and made impact. An explosion rocked the vessel sending fire and sparks of light into space which extinguished just as it entered the vacuum. When the explosion cleared a deep pocket revealed itself in the side of the ship. Its mangled decks were blackened to a crisp. Electricity popped with its last vestiges of power, ratifying the level of devastation.

“Direct hit.”

“No shit,” David mumbled at the helmsman. “Captain, should we offer them terms for surrender?”

“That will not be necessary. Rumple, fire again.”

“What?!”
“Mr. Nolan, you will refrain from speaking and take a seat.”

David looked to Emma for help but was met with a face of hesitance. Ruby was just the same. He closed his mouth and did as ordered.

The next time Rumple fired, the torpedoes found their mark towards stern. The hit to its engine severely crippled the ship. The vessel took the explosion hard and started a slow dead roll. From its manner of spin it would seem the craft’s gravity stabilizers were beyond functional.

“Hit them again.”

“Regina…”

“Do you have something to say, Miss Swan?”

Regina turned on Emma with an intensity she hadn’t seen before. Emma couldn’t imagine anyone could hold so much hate in a glare. Brown eyes were practically as dark as the void of space. A nerve twitched angrily beneath the flesh of her temple. She was as flushed as a lover in the throes of passion. Emma was capable of standing up to the most ruthless of bullies, but Regina was different. She was beyond livid. She was as irrepressible as a bomb incapable of being disarmed. Emma shrank away despite her desire to understand the cleverly disguised pain.

Regina’s glare left Emma for each and every one of her officers. Emma wasn’t the only one taken off guard by the behavior; even the senior officers had not witnessed their captain in such a relentless state. The captain was calling for the complete destruction of a ship and the life forms aboard it. She was bloodthirsty and unstoppably determined to see her cruel intentions carried out.

“Regina, we haven’t even confirmed their identity as Raiders. Cosmofleet requires all engagements with terrorists to be on record.”

“Do not lecture me on Cosmofleet regulation. I am the captain and any actions I deem necessary are automatically sanctioned by Command. And right now I say apprehend that ship.”

Emma swallowed and took a moment to calm herself. They had been down this road before and she didn’t care to make the same mistake twice. Regina had to be reined in carefully. With any luck Emma would not have to resort to insubordination to do so.

“Apprehending, yes,” she said gently, “but carrying out their complete destruction? There could be innocents aboard. Think about it, Regina.”

“Emma is right,” David chimed in. “Freedom Raiders are known to take hostages. For all we know there could be children aboard.”

“They should know the penalty for consorting with terrorists.”

“Regina, they didn’t ask to be kidnapped!”

“Then what I aim to do shall be a blessing,” Regina explained. Her words suggested compassion, the kind of sympathy a mother utilized in easing the discomfort of a child. However, the ever present fury in her eyes and the deep grooves in her forehead suggested something more villainous lie in her aims. “Many innocents suffer at the hands of those radicals. Let us set them free from such pain.”

Ruby shot up from her seat, unable to keep quiet. “This is murder!” she shouted with tears in her eyes.
“And you are insubordinate! All of you!” Regina roared, spit flying from her curling mouth. “Rumple, I order you to destroy that ship!”

The helmsman’s mouth opened. He looked to his navigator who shook her head.

“Obliterate it!”

After a moment’s hesitation he clenched his teeth and brought his hand to the weapons panel.

They shielded their eyes from the blaring flash of light streaming through the viewport. A shockwave of energy rolled outwards in brilliant white rings. The light dimmed and eventually vanished to reveal broken chunks of what was once a vessel. Engine fragments gave their last sparks of life before darkening in the vacuum of space. It took all of five seconds for the torpedoes to do their work. All that remained was floating debris and the ash of departed life twinkling in the starlight.

* * *

An eerie silence fell. Emma sat to the side and observed the bridge with a keen sense of confusion. Regina was giving instructions to prepare the ship to jump to hyperspace like nothing happened. The crew proceeded wordlessly. Emma sat in her own bubble of silence. They were all acting like zombies. Every last one of them. Just moments ago they were red-faced and fully prepared to depose their captain. Now they moved like programs in a computer, obedient and expressionless. It was baffling. It was utter bullshit.

After a while Ruby excused herself from the bridge. Emma followed her to a secluded corner in the corridor.

“That isn’t the first time something like that occurred.”

It was a statement, not a question.

Ruby inhaled shakily and shook her head.

Emma knew it to be true before Ruby even responded, but she deflated just the same. “Why?”

“Emma, I told you when you sign on here you sign on to the lies. You’re like all the rest of us. We all heard of Captain Mills before we came here. We heard of the elaborate stories of her heroism and her integrity. She is known as Cosmofleet’s rising star to every young girl who dreams of following in her footsteps. You were enamored with her from the beginning just like the rest of us. I could still see it in your eyes even after the Korobi incident. But now you know the truth. Her sterling reputation is not what it seems.” Ruby sighed heavily, the burden of truth slowly leaving her.

“When did this start? And how could this have gone on without Command’s knowledge?”

“Ever since her initiation as commander she has been scouring the universe for those even moderately aligned with the Freedom Raiders. It is not on the record because no one would go up against Captain Mills. The crew follows orders but believe what she is doing is immoral.” After a quick peak to ensure their privacy she continued. “Every time we come across the Freedom Raiders she turns into this... demon. You saw it, Emma. She goes crazy! I know they’re terrorists and our duty is to defend the principles of the Commonwealth, but she is crossing a line. She’s gone off the reservation and none of us can stop her! What she did today... It’s not right, Emma. It’s... she’s...”

Ruby ceased to make sense over her choking sobs. She was a complete mess, hair tangled and plastered to tear shrieked cheeks, and trembling hands hugging an equally shaken body.
It was a result of the secrets and lies of Regina Mills. It was a result of possessing a burden of truth capable of destroying the most powerful individual in Cosmofleet. And if the leader fell, she would make sure they all followed.

Emma stood rooted to her spot, gawking at the shaking shoulders and fitful cries. Emma pitied Ruby. She pitied Regina. She pitied the crew and fleet in its entirety. She didn’t sign on for this. She didn’t ask to be a part of some conspiracy. She also wasn’t one for comforting complete strangers.

But Emma had signed on to this. She accepted her assignment as first officer of Storybrooke. She accepted her place at the captain’s side. An agreement was made to follow orders, to oversee crew, and to become an advisor when the occasion called for it. More than that, Emma had a duty to comfort one of the only people on the ship that gave her the time of day, one of the only crew members who welcomed her with open arms and a warm heart.

“Hey, Ruby… it’s gonna be okay.”

Emma’s hand reached out to squeeze the quivering shoulder. She tried to smile but it probably came out as a cringe. Comforting people was never one of her strong suits. Weeping always seemed revolting to Emma, considering she spent half her childhood pouring tears in a bucket. It was painful to be the one crying, but just plain awkward to be the person cried to.

“Listen,” Emma said, lifting Ruby’s chin to expose her glistening eyes, “you’re not alone. No matter what happens I’m not going anywhere. I will protect you and I will protect this crew. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she croaked.

“Whatever Regina’s done, she’ll answer for it. We will figure this out.”

“No one’s ever gone up against her, Emma.”

“No one is as stubborn as me,” Emma said, flashing a smirk.

Ruby chuckled tearily and finally showed a smile.

* * *

Word spread fast on the ship. Gossip flew from one crewmember to the next, traveling across all departments and reaching every deck. There were whispers of the unidentified ship and its authorized destruction at the hands of the captain. Nods and suspicions were shared. Something had to be done to thwart the pattern of injustice. The captain was blinded by some deep seeded vendetta and was spinning out of control as a result. It was agreed by many that she was unfit to command the ship. It was spoken in soft whispers and voracious nods that the woman they called the Evil Queen must be dethroned.

* * *

After several attempts to block out the racket, Emma forwent sleep to answer the door. With a hiss the hatch released and stilled the fervent striking of David’s fist.

“You have to come to the bridge!” He pulled Emma by the arm and dragged her down the corridor. “Quickly!”

“Why, David, slow down!” Emma got pushed out of the way by some men and women in uniform. They were all rushing in the same direction. “What’s going on?”
“It’s the captain, Emma.”

She had to forcibly push the man against the bulkhead to make him stop and talk sense. Considering past events, the sight of dashing crewmen and the mention of Regina was enough to make her blood run cold. There was no point in asking. She already had a sinking gut feeling as to what the commotion was about.

“What about her?” she demanded, her good hand grabbing a fistful of his shirt.

“Some of the crew have banded together and are headed for the main bridge. They’re dead set on mutiny!”

It didn’t take long for Emma to gather her wits and make a run for it. She and David along with many other officers pushed their way through the throng of shouting crew members until Ruby and Mary Margaret came into view. Rumple and Belle were there, too, with the same look of panic. As the senior officers they all looked to Emma for guidance.

“How did this happen?” she shouted over the noise.

“I don’t know how,” Ruby replied, “but some people caught word of the rogue ship and the captain’s order to destroy it.”

Belle trembled fearfully in the arms of Rumple and exclaimed, “And now the whole crew knows!”

“I was in the medlab just ten minutes ago!” Mary Margaret shouted. She almost stumbled forward from a rowdy man shouting, “Curse the Evil Queen!” but David came up to catch her. She continued, “I heard from one of the nurses who heard it from one of the engineers who heard it from –“

Ruby interjected, “I think she gets the picture, Mary Margaret.”

It was about as chaotic as the mosh pits Emma had frequented during her teenage years. There was so much pushing and pulling in the crowd. People were shouting, a few were crying, others were frozen in shock. Emma let out a grunt as an elbow jammed into her side. Shoving at whomever the elbow came from, she collected every ounce of courage and reinforced her voice with the authority entrusted to her. “Where is Captain Mills?!” she shouted to her senior officers.

It only took a small yelp and Emma spotted her. Regina was cornered on her own bridge and subsequently shoved forcibly into a side panel by one of her own crewman. For the first time, Emma saw raw terror in her eyes. It only took seconds for Emma to weave through the rowdy crowd, elbowing and pushing the brutish and dainty alike from her path.

“Hey!” she shouted.

The crewman who had manhandled the captain into the bulkhead didn’t hear Emma’s shout over the discord. With enormous hands he reached out to finish the job. Emma launched herself at him from behind, looping her arms across his chest and twisting his body away from his victim.

“Get away from her!” she growled and shoved the guy back into the crowd.

A few men in uniform, obviously not aware of Emma’s rank, resumed the attack. Emma grabbed a wrist, ducked under his arm and twisted it behind his back and pulled up hard. The crewman cried out in pain as his hand was bent back at an unnatural angle. She pushed him into an oncoming assailant. David and another crewman took out the others while Emma created a defensive stance in front of the captain.
“Stop this!” Emma screamed over the crowd. “Enough!”

There were some shushes and demands amongst the crew to hear their second-in-command. It wasn’t until Ruby let out a resonating whistle that the conflict died down.

“Does someone want to tell me what in seven blazing hells is going on?”

“The captain broke Cosmofleet regulation!” came a reply from the crowd. “And killed innocents!”

Several shouts of agreement were voiced.

“And how could she know it was a Freedom Raider?!”

“It’s murder! That’s what it is!”

“She’s done it before and she’ll keep doing it until someone stops her!”

More “yeah’s” and “hell yeah’s” rose from the crew along with shouts for her elimination.

“Hey! Hey! Quiet down!”

Emma’s voice shook. There were so many angry faces staring back at her, so many of her crew asking for the captain’s demise – and not just asking but demanding. Emma knew she was no match for 400 plus crew and that they would have Regina’s head with or without their first officer’s permission.

Emma closed her eyes and took a deep breath to collect her thoughts. Her ears picked up the quick, sharp breaths and the clink of a ring pressing against durasteel. With nothing to rely on but intuition Emma could imagine Regina, back pressed into the computer panel and hands gripping the edge. She didn’t have to turn around to know the captain wasn’t in tears or frozen with fear. It would have taken a lot more than a mob to break down Regina.

More curses and demands for blood were thrown at Emma and she took it with defiance in front of the captain. She felt the warm presence behind her and almost wished for some kind of contact – a hand at her back, a squeeze to her shoulder, or a hand in her own. Anything that would give her the courage to face the mob. But no connection was made and Emma was left to rely solely on her own nerve.

“Listen up!” Emma shouted once more and the crowd died down. She swallowed and mentally pushed down on the anxiety threatening to curl around her throat. “I don’t know what you all heard but these are the facts. Earlier today we received a transmission after exiting hyperspace. A hostile group had used a gravity well projector to drag us into a trap. Their intentions were to unlawfully board our ship and commandeer it as their own. When Captain Mills refused to comply they threatened to fire upon Storybrooke. In so doing they branded themselves as enemies not only of the fleet but of the Commonwealth itself. We engaged the terrorists and in the conflict they were destroyed. No law has been broken. Captain Mills did nothing but protect this ship and its crew.”

“Did they even surrender?” shouted a woman in the front row.

“Of course not!” another cried, “The captain didn’t give’em a snowball’s chance in hell!”

“Her insanity is going to get us killed! She needs to be stopped!”

Emma waved her hands and called for order. “Do you know what you’re all saying? This person – this woman whom you all respected and looked up to – she is your captain. Equal opportunity for all
is the mission statement for service to Storybrooke. She took you all in and gave you a home. She absolved you of any past mistakes while treating you as one of her own. Can anyone else in the fleet say the same about their captain? No, because that kind of justice is rare these days.

“I never saw impartiality on the streets where I grew up and I sure as hell didn’t get any clean slate at the academy. And how many of you can say you never made a mistake? Haven’t you taken away someone’s happiness? Their freedom? Maybe a life? We’re not perfect and neither is our captain. Give her a chance to redeem herself. Give her the same justice she’s given you. Absolve her of her crimes like she has yours.”

To Emma’s surprise there were various nods and murmurs of agreement. It was a strange feeling, like the high one gets during a speech. All nervousness melted away as soon as she found momentum. It also helped that she believed in what she was saying. Ruby gave her a wink of praise and Mary Margaret mouthed, ‘Great job! You’re on a roll!’ Despite the support, Emma felt a prickling tension at the back of her neck.

“The captain should still be dismissed! How can we trust her again?”

“Hey, what about Officer Swan? She should replace the captain!”

There were several agreements.

“Emma Swan should be our leader! Let’s make a vote!”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s do it!”

“Vote Swan for captain!”

Emma’s high deflated just as quickly as it came into being. “Vaporize me,” she mumbled under her breath with a hand rubbing her forehead. It was not the response she was expecting. When she incited the crowd with sentiments of justice and forgiveness the last thing on her mind was the depoing of Regina and the bid for herself as replacement. She wanted to be captain about as much as she wanted to jump head first into a vat of boiling durasteel.

Amid the submissions for her promotion Emma spied a glance at Regina for the first time since entering the fray. She did not look angry yet she was not the face of contentment either. Her eyes flicked to Emma’s and held a wary enthrallment over the woman who had willingly placed herself between her and a pack of mutinous persons. Emma held the odd gaze and replied with a sheepish smile and shrug of ‘Well, what can you do?’

She turned back to the crowd and cleared her throat.

“Look, no one is going to be replacing Captain Mills – least of all me. Even if the position was open (which it’s not) I would refuse to step forward. I’m hardly experienced for the position of first officer as it is. I don’t even realize what it takes to be commander of an entire ship and neither do any of you. No offense,” she added, waving a hand indolently. “Regina is more than capable of commanding this ship and promoting the principles of CosmoFleet. She is a highly qualified officer who has served with the fleet for years with more commendations than any captain. If any of you trust me enough to advocate my promotion to captain then trust in my judgment. I believe Regina will protect us as she has done since her captaincy. My faith in her leadership is as strong as it was the day I stepped aboard this ship and will endure through her continued service to the Commonwealth.” Emma paused to let her words sink in. She looked from one crew member to the
next, silently pleading them to see reason. She watched their neutral expressions change from thoughtfulness to tolerance to eventual agreement. “What do you say?” Emma finished, raising a brow expectantly.

With the crowd thinned out of the more verdant opponents everyone seemed in joint agreement to Emma’s proposal. There were murmurs and nods to confirm that the mob mentality had dissipated and had been replaced with established calm. The threat was diminished and the chaos averted. Emma breathed an immense sigh of relief.

* * *

The first thing her hands grabbed was the decanter of cider.

“What are you, my security detail?”

Emma bit back a response. She folded her arms and remained patiently silent.

There was a snort of laughter, dark and not at all bursting with humor. “If I didn’t know better I’d say you are following in the footsteps of the man you replaced. Pathetic little man that he was,” she muttered over the clanking crystal. “Well, you should procure a sleeping bag and a few nourishment bars if you insist on keeping tabs. Sidney arrived at 8 o’clock at night and didn’t leave until I activated the corridor alarm, scaring him away so horribly I had a few days reprieve from the late night watch dog. So please, do whatever you came here to do. Save me or protect me,” she droned on between gulps of cider from a shaky hand, “all against my will of course.”

“You have a funny way of showing gratitude.”

Masked sarcasm was cast aside for petulant rage. Regina’s eyes narrowed as she stalked forward. “You think I should be thanking you?” Her voice was slow, deliberate, and carried trace amounts of acid. “I had everything under control until you came along. Thanks to you my crew thinks I am a pathetic excuse for a captain who needs protection from her second-in-command. Protection from a delinquent with a death wish whom my crew wouldn’t think twice about endorsing her bid for my job. So no,” Regina motioned with her drink hand, nearly spilling its contents, “I will not be expressing any form of gratitude. Not to you and sure as hell not to my faithful crew.”

Emma almost felt a stab of remorse at the way Regina said ‘faithful crew.’ She could see in the glistening eyes and trembling glass that the woman was hiding her pain with anger. If she thought about it Emma would not have been able to sit still either if her crew had turned on her and slung nasty slurs at her in the form of verbal and physical abuse. She had been called all manner of insults including traitor, bitch, whore, and Evil Queen. For some reason the Evil Queen moniker sounded worse than the rest. It was both a blessing and a curse. It struck fear in the heart of her enemies yet beat her down a few pegs when used against her.

Emma’s hand stretched out when she recalled Regina being shoved into the bulkhead. Fingertips barely grazed the red silk blouse when Emma thought better of it and took the hand back before the gesture was detected. Regina was not in a state to accept comfort. From the permanently stiff posture she may never have accepted the stuff and never will – at least not with Emma on the charitable end.

“Fine,” Regina spat and turned around. “You want a thank you? Here, have drink and then get out.”

The glass was shoved into Emma’s hand with enough force to splash its contents over the lip. Emma sighed, shook her head and put the glass down on the table. “I wasn’t expecting a thank you, actually. I also don’t expect an explanation, but I’m here and I’m going to ask anyway.”
“And what is your question, Miss Swan?”

“Just tell me why. Make me understand.”

“No.”

Emma huffed. What was she expecting? Did Emma really think Regina was going to make nice, throw back some cider, and reveal all the reasons why she made those mistakes – if that’s even what she’s calling them. Probably not, which is why asking for an explanation was futile.

Emma paced in the confines of the captain’s quarters. Her fingers dug into her forehead and massaged the migraine flaring beneath. Why does she have to make *everything* so difficult? Emma asked herself.

Because she’s Regina.

On the way back to where Regina still stood, slinging back her second drink, Emma’s hand trailed the back of the couch and dropped off the edge. She decided to change strategies. Whether or not Regina’s antagonism towards the Freedom Raiders was related to the burning hate detected in her eyes, the fact remained: there was a deep seeded ache in Regina. Emma couldn’t explain why or how it was possible, but she desperately wanted to know why and how the Raiders were connected with this ache. She would try anything if it meant sympathy for the devil.

“I’m not one of them,” Emma began with assurance. “Mutiny is not something I would ever condone. It’s not even a last resort. I just don’t believe in overthrowing a commanding officer – let alone *killing* one. That’s worse than what you are being accused of. It’s unacceptable.”

“I’m so glad to have someone in my corner to inform me right from wrong,” Regina said, tilting her head with forged appreciation. “It’s a bit hypocritical, wouldn’t you say, dear?”

“It wasn’t so long ago that you begged me to act honorably so that you could put your trust in me.” Her eyes amplified with renewed passion in her goal. It was all Emma had left, passion and words. “If you want to have faith in me, let me have faith in you, Regina. Give me a reason to trust you and I will make them go away.” Maybe a little desperation remained, too.

“Do I look like I need promises?” Regina stepped in so they were inches apart, so Emma could see every genuine detail etched in her face. “Is this the face of someone who needs help? You come here with your dull record and your cocky attitude and disrupt everything that I worked so hard to build. Because of you my crew doesn’t trust me. They second guess my orders, whisper behind my back, and plot for their knight in corroded armor to unseat me.” Lips red as her crimson blouse leaned in and curled around the truths and concealed lies that escaped. “Keep your promises, Miss Swan, and your vain attempts to help. I don’t need it and do not need you.”

“You don’t need to put on this show. Not for me. Not after all the confrontations we’ve engaged in. And don’t you wonder why? Don’t you ask yourself why we argue constantly? Well I have. Because when you’re millions of lightyears from a place you’ve never called home, living on a ship with complete strangers, and working with a boss who hates your guts it’s all I can damn well think about!” Chest heaving to her frantic state, Emma paused to take a breath and turn it down a notch. “We fight so much and push each other’s buttons because maybe… maybe we know how well we could understand one another. We’re too afraid to admit it, so fighting is our response. But haven’t you ever considered…” Emma wet her lips shyly, eyes squinting at her own fumbling admission as she offered softly, “maybe we weren’t meant to be this way.”

Regina stumbled back from the confession. She shook her befuddled head and recovered with a
snarl. “I shouldn’t have to explain myself to anyone, especially you. When you disobeyed my direct order I saved you from termination. You were two seconds from hopping a shuttle to the nearest fleet station. You were weak and I let you stay.”

“You are not seriously threatening me, are you? After everything I’ve done? I saved your life down on Nal Korobi. I risked my own life to save your ship from becoming melted scrap. I rescued you from a mob of mutiny!” Emma stepped back as well, astonishment plastering her face. “And now you have the gall to threaten me? After I offered to help you in exchange for the truth?” Her boot reclaimed the step, closing in on Regina. It wasn’t so much taken in antagonism as it was in sheer curiosity. “What could be so bad that you would keep it inside to rot away at your conscience?”

“As I said, you want to continue serving on this vessel you will keep your mouth shut,” her breath hitched, but the unsteady voice went on, “and never ask me about this again. What will it be, Miss Swan?”

“I don’t think I have to hear the gossip to know why Sidney Glass was let go. He asked too many questions. But then so am I. The difference is I see through you, Regina. That tough captain show you put on is just that: a show. It’s entertainment. And I’ll be damned if I’m played like a part of your damn audience. You’re a snake and I hope I never have to get close enough to find out why.”

The breeze of Emma’s departure rolled over Regina like a solar storm. It was undeniably harsh, scorching her very skin and blistering with enough intensity to reach the organs beneath.

And it left Regina burned, dried up.

A resonating clank brought Regina back. She looked down to the half-empty glass and the gold band on the finger of her right hand. Its emerald stone winked at her with every move of her wrist. The remaining cider was put down since it only tasted of promises turned to ash. A heavy sigh emitted while her hand fumbled through her brunette locks. She walked to her desk and activated her comm.

“Rumple, prepare a jump to hyperspace. We’re going home.”
“Damn it!”

Emma gave a good whack to the source of her fury before getting out of her chair. The cockpit hatch opened and she vaulted out into the fresh air of the hanger. A northeasterly breeze came in from one of the ventilation shafts and Emma breathed in deeply. After several hours in the mock starfighter the program wasn’t the only thing that stank.

“I hope you didn’t break the console screen again.”

Scuffing her boots extra good against the immaculate floor, Emma looked up to a man her age and dressed in the same wrinkled jumpsuit. August W. ‘for Wayne’ Booth was about as scruffy and mysterious as they came. Just below her level in practical courses of combat, strategy, and mechanics, August was one of those rare geniuses who looked anything but. Without the Cosmofleet insignia proudly tattooed on his shoulder one would mistake him for a grease monkey from the lowestliest of districts. His speeder bike was as reliable as his stubble (always there to get the girl) and his fashion sense could be described in terms of leather, leather, and leather. But behind that grizzly charm was a mind racing with complex quantum equations, conjugations in xenolinguistics, and interspecies protocol. Where Emma excelled in the cockpit, August outshined in the classroom.

It was a rather convenient friendship. Emma and August were close; they shared leather jackets, traded tips on hover suspensions, and sometimes August would even slip her the answers in organic chemistry class. They occasionally went out for some beers at the local dive, but it only ever got as romantic as him having to haul her on his back before she threw another punch to anyone that cheated her in a card game.

“Sooner or later they’re going to take it out on your tuition,” August warned.

“I’d like to see them try. What they’re doing is downright unfair. That simulation is unbeatable!”

“Don’t beat yourself up. You’re a first year. Some senior cadets still can’t figure out this sim. In fact, only one person has gone down in Cosmofleet history for cracking this sucker of a program.”

“August,” muttered the young cadet, “have you been sniffing vapor again? I just said this simulation is unbeatable. Check it out…” she flashed up her chrono as evidence, “… I spent a total of three hours and 42 minutes in there. That’s about as long as it takes you to write four dissertations.”

With a finger he defended, “But I’m thorough.”

“Yeah? Well, so am I. Ever since I learned how to bypass the security at Tillman’s Garage and Hover Repair at ten-years-old I’ve piloted close to every model of craft that has wings or is powered by a repulsor. I know advanced technical analysis backwards and forwards better than the grandpas who bent this curriculum!”

“You can’t break every record.”

A sweaty lock of hair fell from her tie and she blew it away like it was one of a million problems the universe thrust on her. “Watch me.”

“Well, before you break all those records know your competition. Come on, let me show you something.”
August took Emma to the ground floor lobby, a place the young woman hadn’t set foot in since her orientation day. They came to a great rising wall littered with small metal labels, each shining in gold.

With a knuckle he tapped at one gold plate in particular.

“Check this out, grasshopper.”

Emma stepped up to the wall but not before holding his stare with one of her own. This was a stellar waste of time looks. With a good roll of the eyes Emma squinted enough to see her fatigued reflection in the polished plates.

“Hm, what have we got here… top marks in military logistics, heavy weapons, boxing and jujutsu… what a soldier we’ve got here.” She feigned amazement with half-hearted gasp. Her eyes skipped a ways down because the awards didn’t seem to end. She sucked in a lip and droned on. “… Best record times in the Devil’s Slingshot sim, Kobayashi Maru sim – nice – Tholien Web sim… Perfect scores in discipline and leadership trials – major bore – and…” Emma’s nose practically touched the wall as she leaned in to read the script. “… No. Shit.”

“Yes.”

“That’s… that’s the one I just spent four hours trying to crack!”

“Yes,” August repeated with a grin that aggravated her further.

“But everyone knows it’s a no-win scenario!” exclaimed Emma. Her hand floundered in midair as her head shook violently to the fact gilded before her eyes. “There’s no conceivable way to save the peasants without damaging your ship beyond repair. The planet’s atmospheric pressure is… is… well it’s not conducive to rescuing the freakin’ peasants! It just isn’t!”

“It is if you’re Regina Mills.”

“Regina?” she scoffed and took a look at the name plate. “What kind of parent names their kid that? Wait…” The realization finally dawned with an explosion of awe. “Wait, that’s a woman! ‘Regina’ is a girl’s name, right? That’s… impossible.”

“So much faith in your own sex.”

“Come on, August. You know as well as I do that the women in Cosmofleet are taken about as seriously as a spanner dancing the waltz. And I can’t place all the blame on Command. Didn’t your last girlfriend drop out because she ‘couldn’t handle the pressure?’” Emma’s air quotes joined in enthusiasm with her cocky smile. At her friend’s glare she worded differently, “Hey, can’t stand the G’s, get out of the chair. Space isn’t for everyone.”

“Moving on,” August retorted, shoulders rolling. “This is why I brought you here. If you want to beat that sim, you have to be better than Regina Mills. She’s legendary around here.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Emma, have you been living in a cockpit?” August paused and blinked. “Okay, maybe you have, but the point is if you want to get noticed you have to follow in the footsteps of those before you. You have to be better than the people who made strides here, Emma. Watch their simulation holovids, memorize their moves, their strategies. And for the love of the gods just open a book for once so I don’t have to do it for you.”
“I thought you liked our arrangement.”

“I can’t always be there when you need a translation or can’t compute something in astrophysics. And as generous a teacher as you are, I won’t be a fair pilot in any squadron if I don’t listen to my own split-second judgments.” With a head gesturing towards the gold plaques he continued. “Love or hate this Regina Mills, worship her or gun after her job, but learn from her.”

Emma didn’t acknowledge the advice with a word or a nod. Instead, she watched as he walked away.

Hands stuffed deep in her jumpsuit pockets, Emma kicked the toe of her boot into the wall. At just a light strike against the marble the gold plates didn’t shift, shake, or move a hair. Those names and awards seemed welded in time and space. They were impervious to a little kick from Emma Swan.

If she cared at all about proving the status quo wrong she would have to bite the blaster and swallow the pill of reason. August wasn’t a total loss; he had brains, and the advice she so eloquently waved off was growing a bit sounder in her mind. And the longer she stared at the twenty-some honors the greater respect she had for the possessor of that reputation.

With a tentative grin Emma touched the name plate. The metal was cold to touch, but her fingers traced the curves of an R and an M with a reverence she couldn’t place.

Regina Mills would become her only standard and the one focus she strived to overcome.

* * *

Off-planet, Emma had the greatest dreams. Fighters streamed through space at breakneck speed and laser fire zigged and zagged, crossing paths with enemy craft. In some cases she’d find herself exploring an undiscovered world, laying eyes on the kind of astronomical rarities that dawn once in a lifetime, or flying close enough to a comet to spot its diamond studded trail. In other dreams she is kicking it back in her very own penthouse under a smog-free night sky, or sailing on her prized speeder bike fitted with top-of-the-line parts (for more indulgent than practical reasons). Even rarer but just as captivating, Emma would dream of the parents she never met.

On Earth, Emma’s dreams were anything but. All her worries, all her stress poured into a wakeless sleep and magnified by visions of the past. Like most people Emma had recurring nightmares about academy. Failed exams, failed classes, the numerous suspensions for calling an instructor out on their bullshit and telling them to “go tar themselves.” The dreams only served as a reminder as to how much growing up a young cadet had to do. It was also a warning to stand by her principles. Just because a man could pull rank doesn’t mean they owned you or your conscience. Just because someone broke a shit ton of sim records and inspired a whole gender of cadets didn’t exempt them from every single decision in the field.

While it was true, Emma broke records, it was also true that she broke rules (and some noses). Desperate to prove herself, she pushed hard to get to where she was now. She went through a lot of mandatory therapy and disciplinary seminars to know the system didn’t always protect the decent people and that Command was rife with misogynistic assholes.

That was the past that haunted Emma’s sleep. The nightmares could be so wrenching that she woke up drenched in sweat. Sometimes she flew out of bed, disoriented, heart pounding, and wondering where she last put her vibroknife. Under her pillow? In her nightstand drawer? It couldn’t be a pretty sight to wake up to, hence Emma’s need to cut sleepovers extra short. The least the gods could do for her was put an end to these nightmares. She deserved a bit of peace.
Another thing she didn’t deserve was Captain Mills’ shining personality.

Since returning Earthside Emma and Regina had been avoiding each other. It was all too easy when they had a whole planet as their hiding place and it proved a comfort for Emma to know she could walk around a corner without the risk of getting mowed down by the captain’s killer heels.

This was Emma’s first professional furlough, so she was at a loss as to what to do with her three week vacation. Summer breaks at academy where typically spent in the air where she could hone her skills. Tired of spending the sweaty midday hours in a mock craft, Emma was itching to try her moves on the real thing come hiatus. There in the sky was where the action was. There in a real cockpit she’d dream of serving the cause.

Now after a month under the employment of Cosmofleet all Emma wanted was some peace and quiet. Earth was a lot of things, but it was neither peaceful nor quiet. So from dawn to dusk the young first officer paced through her small apartment at a loss for what to do with herself. She couldn’t go to Headquarters or the academy for fear of bumping in to the captain. She couldn’t visit friends because… well she had no friends on Earth.

Where else was there to go to besides outside her stuffy flat? So Emma walked, and she walked, and she walked some more. Walking was dreadful because all her problems had nowhere to go but the surface of her mind where it could fester and taunt. There would be no peace or quite when her memory wouldn’t shut down for five freaking minutes when she was crossing the street or her mouth poured obscenities through a children’s park. In the former’s case, her solution was to slap down on the hood of a hover car and tell its driver to watch the road. In the latter’s case, some angry parent set their Doberman on her when she refused to shut her filthy trap.

Stressed, bitter, and nursing teeth marks on her boot heels, Emma settled for the harbor. Though Cosmofleet Presidio was just a mile from the Maine coast, she felt safe with the ocean view and high winds. Coming to a secluded part of the boardwalk she hopped onto one of the steel benches, setting in for some alone time.

To Emma’s dismay, recent events sought company.

So far from the comfort of outer space, Emma had taken strides to distance herself from what distressed her. Just days after being Earthside she actually felt compelled to sneak in to Headquarters after hours to drop off her standard report. She also turned down the academy’s request to mentor a cadet (a customary requirement among alumni that ‘enriched new generations’). The thought of meeting Regina at HQ or passing that gods forsaken ‘Wall of Commendation’ struck a physical pain. Truly, Emma had been suffering from a wicked migraine ever since she exchanged those heated words with the captain. With a full seven days of Earth time under her belt she would be damned if she took on the burden of fixing their relationship when Regina made no move to.

The crashing waves soothed her pulsing temples. Emma exhaled slowly and sank further into the bench.

Though she did not agree with Captain’s Orders, Emma knew Regina’s actions were motivated by what she thought was right. If anything had been surmised from a month stationed on Storybrooke it was that the commander let her emotions rule her. In Regina’s screwed up head there was no other option in apprehending the Freedom Raiders. Emma understood better than most how it felt to grow up without choices and being forced to let other people make them for her.

But in a position of power where Regina had the responsibility of making decisions that affect the crew, the massacre made her out to be a psychopath. Emotionally compromised and bitchier than usual, the woman set her own crew against her without even knowing it. Her ego was so enormous
that instead of ruling with a just hand her temper reigned instead.

Emma did not regret the words she threw in Regina’s face after the near mutiny, but something inside didn’t feel right. She called her a snake and thought of a few other things in all manner of deviousness. Yet somehow the words didn’t seem to fit. Rage, snark, and all-around-bitchiness were surface emotions. Unless one really was a psychopath, those things did not make up the core of a person. There had to be more to Regina Mills than being a captain, a snake, and an ‘Evil Queen.’

Evading the woman was a tiresome affair. Emma couldn’t run forever. In two weeks’ time she’d have to suck it up and play first officer again.

Until then, breaking down the walls of the captain didn’t seem worth it at all.

* * *

Earth’s primary deep-space exploratory and defense service was stationed in coastal Maine. So near to the Atlantic, the area was ideal for experimental flight tests and academy training grounds. Cosmofleet Command and Cosmofleet Academy were two separate installations located in what was known as the Presidio, a nucleus of embassies and government offices. Most distinguished for politicians, scholars, and prestigious recruits, this hub was frequently associated with the elite and powerful.

Striding through the Presidio, Regina entered HQ with a scowl on her lips and a chip on her shoulder. On a sunny day the open-air atrium bustled with officers of all rank. Regina recognized a few faces from academy and annual Cosmofleet symposiums, but gave no indication of a stellar memory. It wouldn’t matter as those that passed by hardly spoke of her presence. They threw glances, of course, perfectly aware that she was the famous Regina Mills, prodigious academy graduate and youngest captain in the fleet, but did not so much as acknowledge that greatness. Regina couldn’t care either way. As long as they knew her reputation and what she had done for the Commonwealth. Better they shrink in fear than show pathetic courage as she stalked by.

While inaction among personnel had not set Regina’s teeth on edge, the source of aggravation was reserved for her senior officers. Those pitiful backstabbers couldn’t even address their grievances to her face – with the exception of First Officer Swan. But no, even Emma Swan couldn’t stand toe to toe on what she truly thought of her captain, not after Regina received word from one of Cosmofleet’s Admirals (her superior), requesting her presence in his office. An ‘inconsistency’ had risen between Captain’s Log and her senior officer’s reports.

It was reason for concern. In her five years of service to the fleet Regina had never been asked to ‘expand’ upon a deep-space commission. She neither had to explain decisions made on her own ship nor had to deal with the mass insubordination of her crew. Not until that highly unattractive, foul-mouthed, ill postured, disheveled sorry excuse for a first officer came along. The nerve of that girl!

It hadn’t slipped her mind once that Emma Swan couldn’t take the heat, nor did the fact escape that the girl saw fit to turn her senior officers against her. It was dangerous retribution to betray your own commander. If Command knew how she handled the Freedom Raiders they would take the Storybrooke from her and strip her of her rank. Regina would never board her faithful ship much less set foot in the Presidio ever again. Her reputation would be ruined.

Upon entering her superior’s office Regina clicked her heels and saluted the customary, “Admiral.”

“Captain Mills! It is good of you to stop by.”

“Well, in Cosmofleet a request is usually an order.”
“Please, take a seat.”

Holding eye contact, Regina clasped her hands behind her back and squared her shoulders.

“If you wouldn’t object, sir, I would prefer to stand.”

“Of course, of course,” the auburn-haired Admiral sputtered. He smiled shyly. “I forget sometimes how you like to cut to the chase.”

Even into his fifties his jittery nature endured. An anxious thing at academy, Archie Hopper had an odd curiosity for humanoid behavior. He excelled in forensic psychology courses and became an accomplished starship psychiatrist before Command granted him the honor of Admiral.

Standing in his unfashionably subdued office, the man hardly looked the part of a senior flag officer. His casual appearance offset the rank between him and the uniformed Regina. While the captain wore slacks with the signature gold stripe down the outside seam of the trousers, shirt, and a cap all in the gray colors of Cosmofleet, the admiral had on moccasins, corduroy pants beset with dog hair, shirt, and a sweater vest. One could never mistake Admiral Hopper for taking his power too seriously.

Procuring a file from his cabinet (Archie always preferred hard records over a holo system), he opened it on his desk and sat down. His thumb and forefinger rubbed together as he skimmed through the first few pages. When his memory was adequately sated, he glanced up with spectacles fully engaged.

“As I noted in my memo there arose an inconsistency when I read through your reports and those of your senior personnel. The logs have briefed me of the proceedings of Storybrooke’s monthly commission and described some disturbing course of events.”

Regina’s back stiffened further as she felt the tell-tale point of a vibroknife in that same region.

“Yet I cannot reach an understanding unless the major party steps forward. That is why I called you here today, Regina. As commander of the Storybrooke you are, no doubt, the ultimate source for inquiry.”

“How may I enlighten your reservations, Admiral Hopper?”

“You are tasked with the safety of your crew and of Commonwealth citizens, is that correct?”

“My service to Cosmofleet and my government has gone on record as being one of steadfast integrity. I hold to the principles and regulation the academy drilled into me at a very young age – rules that to this day save lives and protect my crew members.”

Archie chuckled. “I simply yes would suffice, Captain. And there is no reason to act defensive. You are not on trial.”

“Perhaps you can grant me the specifics of your inquiry?” Or Get to the damn point so I can throttle Emma Swan for her betrayal which was more prevalent in the captain’s mind.

The admiral nodded. “Yes, well, your senior officers have nothing but glowing praise for newly instated First Officer Swan. Lieutenants Lucas, Nolan, Gold, and Ensign French speak very highly of her, and from their detailed reports it would seem warranted. If it were not for her heroic actions, the starship’s engine would have died beyond repair, leaving its crew stranded. Lieutenant Commander Swan’s volunteerism and quick decision making rescued 430 souls that day. You must be proud to have so brave a first officer.”
“It would seem so.”

Papers fluttered in his grasp as he scanned through its contents. “Yet according to your Captain’s Log that is not how you describe the event. In a five page summary you concluded that First Officer Swan was acting out of her own self-worth and not in the interest of the whole… That she was – and I quote: ‘…rash beyond measure, incapable of taking a simple order from her captain, and so blind to common sense she caused physical injury to herself.’”

He let go of the report, allowing it to settle gently back to the desk. His thumb and forefinger chafed again, a nervous tick at that point. He stared at the captain, shrugged, and asked politely, “Is there anything else you would like to add?”

“While it appears that Miss Swan has done a necessary act to preserve the lives on my ship, there is no reason to supply overt praise. Sacrifice is duty.”

“Captain Mills, any other person would think you possess an indifference towards the activities of First Officer Swan, however, if they had read these five pages they would assume that it is concern you feel, for Emma Swan and for your crew.”

“Admiral,” she ground out between clenched teeth, “anyone who reads that file will come to the conclusion that First Officer Swan is a hazard to any starship she sets foot on. And for them to assume I feel… concerned about her I would suggest a visit to an ophthalmologist, so they can read clearly.”

“Funny,” Archie fixed his spectacles further on his nose, “this is a brand new prescription.”

“I meant no offense, Admiral.”

“No,” he murmured with a smile, “none at all.” Pushing the file away he changed track. With a sigh he reclined in his chair and folded his hands together. “It is no doubt that you take your service to Cosmofleet seriously. It appears you put up a fight in protecting the Prime Directive. While I admit Lieutenant Commander Swan’s insistence in intervening on Nal Korobi was ill advised, her actions on the planet were valiant. As were yours.”

Regina’s head tilted at the madness. “A valued member of my crew was injured and my ship’s engines were disabled in the escape. I hardly think her actions can be described as valiant.”

“But her sacrifice in correcting the situation was. If she had perished in the act of saving your crew would you be more inclined to admire her? Or is it just that you feel robbed of the fame she has received?”

“How dare you make such an insinuation!” All decorum was lost in the shout. Her hands unclasped to fists at her sides and a lethal step was taken forward. “For ten years I have faithfully served this fleet. I would never betray my government or my people, and I have never so much as spoken three words to the press like so many egomaniacal commanders can’t help but do.”

“Your record is flawless,” Archie granted with a slow nod, “however it is no secret to Command that you run your ship as if it is your own private kingdom.”

“What are you, my psychiatrist?”

“Though you are captain of your own starship, while in the presence of your superior you will conduct yourself in a respectful manner.”

“Excuse me,” she corrected, biting hard on her tongue and tasting blood. “It was not my intention to
be insubordinate.”

“She was hard on herself,” Archie rose and walked to his window, “in her report. Even went as far as suggesting her suspension.”

Regina frowned. Her voice was hardly her own. “She what?”

“Indeed.” Archie turned, loafer brushing against the carpet. “Her blatant disregard for the Prime Directive is grounds for her removal from the fleet. There is a reason why the Directive is one of our most stringent rules. One small intervention on a neutral planet could cause a domino effect throughout the galaxy. A simple intrusion on a civilization could have unforeseeable effects on the foundation of our government. There is no room for heroism in Cosmofleet – only discipline.” Archie spoke his last words with gravity. “Can you think of any reason why this officer’s suspension should not be considered by Command?”

“I…” Regina’s throat closed.

What would she say? ‘No, there is no conceivable reason why Miss Swan should not be thrown off my starship.’ Or perhaps the more colorful, ‘Fire the bitch for all I care.’ This is what she wanted from the beginning, wasn’t it? Since the moment her eyes clapped on that slumped posture and dopey smile?

The only thing as steadfast as Emma’s disobedience was her resilience. The woman could quite possible bounce back from anything: a mistake, a burn, a verbal lashing. She just kept coming back stronger than before like an electromagnetic wave whose fury penetrated Regina’s very bones. It was the kind of strength any commander would want on their ship. Better to fight alongside that vengeance then meet it head on at supernova level intensity.

“I, uhm…” These stammers were a first.

Regina could admit that Emma had skills. What she could not admit to was desiring them. The woman had a history of insubordination, so there was no telling when she would slip through the captain’s iron fist. Allegiance could turn on a dime and before Regina knew it a vibroknife could find itself in her spine. There was something different about this one, though. Her apologies weighed down her allegiance, keeping it from flipping. The screams and shouts and grasping fists enforced a passion. And the vibroknife, Regina sensed, did not so much plunge than it did graze at the shivering flesh of her back.

Emma had shown that she was not out for herself. She dived into danger with the only thought that it would save someone and the only risk being her own death. Insubordination was to prevent disaster not to cause it. Emma was acting out of her own misguided sense of gallantry. What a sickening attribute, Regina thought.

The decision remained: Fire Emma or save her? The logical side of the captain screamed the former.

Yet after all those arguments Regina couldn’t find it in herself to clench her teeth at the notion. All she saw was a trigger finger that saved her life on Nal Korobi and the back of a red jacket which separated her from mutiny.

“It is in my professional opinion that Lieutenant Commander Swan remain under my leadership.” Regina found it in herself to actually breathe while speaking. “For the time being.”

“Whether you admire Emma Swan or not you must see reason to respect her station.” Archie bowed his head to his shifting loafers. “We have known each other for quite some time, Regina. I dare say
you are not an unreasonable woman."

“You have always watched over me in my years at academy and supported my command since the Storybrooke was given to me. Can I trust that you will stand by my decisions when it comes to my crew?”

“I don’t see why not. As long as you act as your conscience tells you.”

Regina flashed a smile. “Always the moral high ground, Admiral.”

His hands threw up innocently. “It is a tactical advantage.” He faced her fully and straightened into a salute.

“Admiral.”

“Captain.”

Regina fell at ease just as her superior officer offered a hand. She shook it.

“Take care, Regina, and may the stars guide you home.”

“Always. Thank you, Admiral Hopper.”

Regina left HQ in higher spirits then when she arrived. There really was nothing to be concerned about. She knew from the beginning that the request to appear before Admiral Hopper was nothing but a formality. The captain could rationalize from Earth to the furthest star system, so a matter over her first officer’s actions was a simple thing. It was in the past where it would stay.

A smile brightened her face as passersby stared in a mix of abject fear and blazing wonder. She felt light on her Gucci heels and invincible beyond comprehension. At that moment anything from the duracrete she sashayed along to the cratered surface of the moon was within her grasp. Anything could be obtained as long as she just flashed a smile and flipped her hair.

She halted in the park of the Presidio, closing her eyes, and tipping her head back in the sun. Soaking in bliss, she inhaled the salt from the sea and breathed out. After a moment of tranquility she started towards home. A crystal glass of her famous brew sprung to mind, the idea teasing her tastebuds and watering her mouth. Maybe she’d even call Graham over and have some fun for a change.

Regina Mills could never be taken for someone who enjoyed herself, but every once and while when she didn’t have the world on her shoulders ‘enjoyment’ could be appreciated as a luxury. Fun, in this case, was hers for the taking.

* * *

In the present year of 2258, the White Rabbit was a hot spot for many officers of the fleet. It was the ideal place to unwind on short leave. The contemporary designed bar boasted imported whiskey from as far away as Halcyon Prime, holoscreen televised sports, and club rooms employed with settees and attractive attendants as its side business. For a local flair, some fish netting hung from the bar railing and drinks were nicknamed for various lobster, fish, and marine jargon. The wet bar extended from the entrance to its private backroom and glowed a dull Cosmofleet yellow until some sorry customer overindulged themselves into seeing something different.

While a bar fashioned to its age, the White Rabbit spared no expense for a nostalgic touch. The walls were decorated with rusted sabers and medals from the U.S. Marine days, the first blaster prototypes of the 2100s, and every official uniform since Cosmofleet’s foundation. There was an antiquated
jukebox, dart boards, pool tables, and those flat-screen televisions no one could even remember from history class. It was vintage and it was modern, fusing the past with the present, but decor was not the reason the White Rabbit stayed in business.

Gambling had been made illegal in the Commonwealth since 2130 but civilians have since evolved in their ways of evading the law. Only in the back corners of starships and private clubs like the White Rabbit could a man or woman enter a decent game of cards or dice. Mix enough alcohol, credits, and overzealous young officers and the end result was a thriving business.

There was an unspoken rule that non-academy students and graduates were prohibited from the neon lights and gut rotting liquor of the White Rabbit. The business dragged in every cadet and officer posted across the galaxy, male or female, human or non-human, regardless of rank, religion, or temperament.

The club could count on thirsty customers just like the customers could count on their source of consumption. The White Rabbit had never lost its liquor license in the 20 years since its conception. Like clockwork, it opened its doors from the beginning of social gatherings, through the jovial happy hour, and to the peak of daylight.

A quarter after happy hour and Emma was still parked on her bar stool. With a pint in one hand and some peanuts in the other her attention was ever fixed on the holoscreen playing that night’s swoop race.

“Emma, are you listening to anything I’m saying?”

Emma chewed her snack and mumbled a distant, “Yeah” as her man just raced ahead of the pack. “Yes!” she cried when he gained another five seconds on a boost of speed.

“I feel compelled to repeat myself,” Mary Margaret insisted, folding her arms. As designated driver she waved off any drinks that came her way. Non-work related conversation took a back seat as well. “Doctor Whale is going behind my back to get reinstated. As second-in-command you should know what is going on with your crew.”

The first officer’s eyes never left the screen. “I’m off the clock.”

“Convenient. Now back to Whale.” With an exasperated huff, she turned to David who had joined them earlier. Cheeks coloring, Mary Margaret had every assurance that he would take her grievances to heart. “That doctor is a disgrace to all doctors. He is rude, conceited, a callous flirt, and wouldn’t know a protein from a –“

“Just a minute,” David interjected with a hand, leaving the doctor’s jaw open in offense. He sidled up to the first officer with a furrow in his brow. “Didn’t he drop out of the upcoming Centennial race?” David asked, eyes glued to the same holoscreen. “Something about an injury? He can’t be reliable if there’s a handicap involved.”

“I’ve got 1,000 credits on this guy, so he better be reliable.”

Emma forewent the nuts for chewing on her nail.

“As I was saying…” Mary Margaret rolled her eyes, intent on being heard this time. “Allowing him to supervise the medcenter much less aboard the Storybrooke would be detrimental –“

“Emma Swan!”

Beer glass at her lips, Emma froze mid-sip. A veritable sensation ran through her, a clawing, itching,
annoying little sensation that made her put down the pint. Discomfort displayed on a face that caved into a wince. She turned, confirming the source of such an unpleasant effect.

The slap rang loud enough to rise above the cacophony of the club. Heads turned toward the source. Emma cradled the cheek which was developing a bright red handprint. Wincing further, she worked her jaw back and forth to ensure it still worked.

“Okay,” she groaned to the blue-green humanoid who had just assaulted her. “I deserved that.”

“Three.”

“Huh?”

“That is the number of times you have left me, Emma Swan. No note, no holomessage, not a ‘Goodbye, I’ll see you in a year or two.’ Nothing.”

David and Ruby (who had been drawn over by the commotion) frowned from Emma to the stranger. Mary Margaret, all-too-familiar with the assailant’s identity, clapped a hand to her mouth. Her eyes went wide with fear at the ax that was to befall her friend.

The ‘stranger’ who had stalked up to Emma and slapped her across the face was the victim’s on-again-off-again girlfriend. Ariel was a humanoid of merfolk species with blue-green skin tone, red hair, and piercing brown eyes. Hailing from planet Proteus, merfolk had evolved from aquatic creatures to amphibious humanoids. On land they looked as humans do with the exception of their colored skin. But once they entered any body of water they regained their original features.

Ariel’s people were a minority on Earth. Though an outcast all her life, isolation strengthened her wits and spurred on her dream to become a dancer. For a highly attractive humanoid and social magnet, Ariel had brains. Her good judge of character guided her away from the handsy clients to the ones just looking for a good show. Not once did she allow herself to be cheated, humiliated, or used as an object. Dancing was her business and her talent, and she had about as much guts and integrity as any deep-space pilot. She sacrificed much to become a respected dancer. It was her toughness that attracted Emma to her. Since the cadet first laid eyes on her she recognized the persistence and tenacity. She admired Ariel’s struggle as much as she did her work.

“Yeah, about that…”

“I don’t want to hear it!” Ariel shouted, head rearing forward like a serpent. “There are no excuses for ditching your girlfriend in the middle of the night to go gallivanting off to the other side of the galaxy!”

“And you forgave me all those times,” Emma offered with a half-hearted shrug.

“And what kind of person would I be if I forgave you a third time? Hm? Does that make me desperate? A whore?”

“Whoa, whoa.” Emma’s blonde hair flew with the shaking of her head. She waved her hands erratically to negate the accusation. “Ari, you know I don’t think of you that way!”

“Do I? Because I don’t know anymore. I don’t know you, Emma. The one thing I do know, the only fact I’ve learned between those amazing and thrilling weeks when you’re actually here and the months when you’re gone is that you would prefer to sleep with the stars over me!”

Emma knew it was true; it just hurt to hear someone say it before she could believe it. In hindsight,
she acknowledged amity between her and Ariel because they both sacrificed much for the lives they now led. Ariel was a good woman and a generous partner. Emma, on the other hand, had always been the one to break off their flings. It was a knife she twisted in both of their hearts time and time again – unintentionally, of course. Emma had been a semi-hardworking cadet for five years and married to her cockpit. Ariel was a dancer, also possessing a symbiotic bond to long hours on the job. Emma was convinced she didn’t deserve someone as smart and beautiful as the redhead. The only reason why Ariel kept taking Emma back was because neither of them were gifted at relationships. Their inexperience with holding together a healthy partnership, ironically, kept them together for a time.

“How can I compete with that, Emma? How can I compete with the gods blasted universe?”

“Ari, come on…”

“No!”

“I’m really sorry I ditched you like that…”

“Three times!”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry I ditched you three times. It wasn’t fair to leave us hanging like that. You’re smart and beautiful and you deserve someone better than a scoundrel pilot like me.”

The redhead threw up her hands and let them slap down to her sides. “Now she tells me.”

“Aw,” Emma’s face fell dramatically. While she felt remorse over her actions, her soon-to-be ex-girlfriend was laying it on a bit thick. “Aw, don’t be like that.”

Ariel’s eyes narrowed to slits. She loomed forward into Emma’s personal space enough to back her into the edge of the bar. Her finger surged up fast enough to make Emma flinch.

“Don’t. Bother. Calling.”

The flaming red hair Emma had loved to stroke with her fingers moved like wipe lash. Ariel stalked out of the club and out of her girlfriend’s life forever.

“Blasted awesome,” Emma muttered. With a scowl she turned back to her stool and her pint. “Bartender! I’m gonna need to open a tab!”

“Beer is not the answer, Emma.”

“No, maybe not. But fire whiskey might do the trick.”

“Oh, no,” Mary Margaret shook her head gravely, “not fire whiskey.”

“Yup.”

“You know, not to sound like a snob, but I did try to advise you before to end that relationship – if that’s what you could call it. And when I say end it I meant in the official sense.”

“One intervention at a time, Mary Margaret.”

Emma proceeded to throw back her first of many that night.

As usual, the doctor had bypassed launch and fast-tracked to the nitty gritty of hyperspace (or in this case, Emma’s issues).
“The worst part of this is you knew I was right, but your solution was to run – and not just run across districts – run off the entire planet. Your job and your flying have always been an excuse to get away from what was honest and warm.”

“I get it,” Emma muttered. Her fingers rubbed the wrinkles and sweat of her forehead. “I run from my problems.”

“What I don’t get is how torn up you are about this.” Mary Margaret bit her lip in wonder. Though critical of her friend’s social tactics, she held concern for Emma’s well-being. “You and Ariel have been doing this dance for years. Whenever you’re together you get all grouchy, but on ‘hiatus,’” she air quoted, “you’re like a prisoner on parole and breathing the fresh air of freedom. I mean, just a few minutes ago all you could talk about was how grand life is with your foreign imported lager and how ideal the odds were on that swoop race thing… You don’t even feel bad about enjoying yourself while Ariel is oblivious to your being back on planet Earth. You knew she would blame you for it, and rightfully so.”

Emma shot her dear friend a glare.

“Hey, I’ve been your friend for five years. You know when it comes to your stubborn ways I say it like it is.”

“Unfortunately, I do know, yes.”

With each taste of whiskey Emma’s inhibitions plummeted. One eye on the game, her other resorted to checking out the skirts passing her way.

“You got a girl, David?”

The sandy-haired blonde cleared his throat and sat straighter, confirming Emma’s suspicions of a lingering eye.

“Not really, no.” He coughed again, voice growing deeper. “There’s no time for that when you’re chief science officer of the finest vessel in the fleet.”

Emma rolled her eyes.

“What about you, Rubes?” she asked, the nickname slipping from a heavy tongue. “I mean, is there a guy? Or a girl? Or a guy? Or… “

Ruby chuckled, giving a pat to the woman’s shoulder more for stability’s sake than assurance. “Neither right now. Though I have to say, that lady across the way has been giving me a wolfish eye all night.” Her own wolfish grin dissipated as her eyes drew down to her drink. “But as you proved here earlier, a relationship isn’t easy for officers of Cosmofleet.”

“Don’t tell me, the captain has a directive against dating?” Emma snorted, though in her state it came out as a wheeze. “Figures. She can’t get any so she ruins it for the rest of humanity.”

Ruby’s eyes soared to the rafters, singing, “Don’t be so sure about that.”

“What’s she like?” The words slung forth like there was no control over them, but Emma was far too gone to notice. She leaned over the bar with one arm lying flat across it in a concoction of spilt fire whiskey and nut shells. “On Earth, I mean. Does she wear the same prissy clothes and walk around with a Korobi stick up her ass or is she, like…” glassy, green eyes squinted, “… a normal human?”

David shrugged over the bar too, fist supporting his head. “Who knows? Captain Mills is a
conundrum onboard the ship as well as off it.” With a lick of his lips the officer stole a shot from Emma’s lineup, fully intent on catching up.

“If you ask me,” Ruby mused fleetingly, “the whole enigma is kind of attractive – in a dark, creepy way. But as far as I know whenever we are Earthside the captain is usually in her office. People say when she was promoted to captain she bought a townhouse in the Presidio just to be closer to her work.”

“The Presidio?” David sputtered on his drink, contaminating the community peanut bowl. “But the cost of living there is a fortune!”

“The woman brings a whole meaning to job dedication.”

“What I don’t get,” droned the first officer, reaching down the bar to make a not-so-subtle robbery of their neighbor’s peanut stash, “is why after all that talk about equality and clean slates she doesn’t slum it with the rest of us here? I mean, we’re her senior officers not a bunch of green recruits who puked through a G-force run. I mean…” Emma threw her arms around the club, taking it in all its majesty and wonder like it was the finest ballroom, “this is a lovely place!”

There was a crash of glass and several growls as a scuffle started off in the corner. A lieutenant from U.S.S. Defiant threw himself at a petty officer from U.S.S. Malinche who was trying to stuff the aces back up his sleeve.

“I think the captain would fail to see the elegance,” Mary Margaret supplied.

“Yeah, I highly doubt she would be here when she has a hot, inner city detective at her beck and call.” At David’s veiled glance Ruby shrugged. “What? A rumor is a rumor. But you could hardly call the relationship serious if she’s off-planet ten months out of the year.”

“Wait,” Emma held up an unsteady finger. “You’re telling me that Regina actually has a personal life with another life form… who she maybe has sex with?”

“Well, with the way those hips swing I doubt she’s a card carrying member of the Jehovah’s Nuns Society.”

There was a scandalous gasp from the doctor.

“But that’s just…” Emma’s mind wandered further from inebriation to an existential inter-dimension, “… interesting,” she mumbled in a daze.

The raspberry liquid in Ruby’s martini sloshed on Mary Margaret as the communications officer slammed down her drink. “Don’t even think about it, Emma. You just got done getting bitchlapped by your last ex.”

“Wh-?” Emma choked up her fire whiskey, eyes tearing from the burn. “Excuse me? Who said anything about my interest in that woman? I meant that she – as a person – is interesting. Not in the ‘I want to pursue her in the romantic arena’ interesting. She’s ghastly!” Emma paused and made a defensive face. “And I did not get bitchslapped.”

“Ha! Now I know you’re kidding yourself. She’s a beautiful woman, Emma, and don’t tell me differently. And yes, you were bitchslapped.”

Emma pointed a finger, making a move to retort, but decided to give up that argument. It certainly hurt like a bitchslap.
“She’s a beautiful woman, Emma, and that’s not just my ovaries talking.”

“She does have some attractive features,” Mary Margaret spoke up.

“Attractive…?” Emma shook her head violently to the insinuations. “She’s a blaster in my side, that’s what she is!”


“I would rather stare into a thousand suns than make eyes at that woman!”

David bopped her square in the middle of her face. “Your nose is growing!”

Emma grabbed the finger and twisted it behind his back so he was leaning half over the bar. “Try that again and you won’t get this finger back.”

David’s eyes bulged as he exhaled an impressed, “Whoa.” Apparently Emma could employ self-defense techniques even after inhaling a quarter of the White Rabbit’s fire whiskey.

She released him. “You don’t get to do that unless you know me as Mary Margaret here does.”

“Yeah,” the pixie woman slurred over her first drink, “I’m the only one who gets to touch that nose!”

“Hey, you think Regina likes her nose?” Ruby whispered to Mary Margaret. She spotted Emma’s incoming argument and raised her hands in surrender. “Joking. But Emma seriously. I’m just looking out for you. That woman may be a smoking hot, successful captain of the most charming vessel in known space, but she spells trouble.”

“Ruby’s right,” Mary Margaret declared slowly. “It’s a common trend with you, these – and don’t criticize a friend’s honesty – cowardly breakups. If you can’t accept that and stop running it’s bound to happen again. And the result would be no exception with Regina. When things go bad with her, they will go really bad.”

Ruby seemed to agree. “Don’t even think about a slap across the face. I’d worry more over a blaster shot in the gut.”

“Knowing Regina it’d be more of a photon torpedo.” Pausing in her eye roll Emma quickly minded to include, “Not that I thought about it.”

Ruby covered her mouth to mutter a stealthy, “Sure you didn’t,” and gave a brotherly nudge to the snickering David.

“Yeah,” Mary Margaret drawled, swinging around her drink hand and giving everyone a shower, “sure you didn’t – uhhhhoo!”

The stool swung back and forth, empty of its previous tenant who had fallen into a giggling fit on the floor.

* * *

Satin sky blue sheets rustled when Regina rose to answer the call. She had just been having a really good dream, too. The vision took place in a field of glossy green grass not seen on Earth in centuries. A breeze shook the trees surrounding the expansive green clearing, perfuming it with the aromas of the forest. No place on Earth could compare to this paradise. The unpolluted air, the absence of discordant public transportation in the presence of pure, unadulterated nature, and chirps of non-
endangered bird species as they swooped across a cloudless blue sky.

A fixture of the dream, the mare horse took on a color of the darkest brown of Regina’s own hair. In the countless times she spent there Regina dreamed of riding atop the saddled beast, sharing in the breeze and the whipping of hair. The beauty one could wring from this one vision could set free a thousand slave miners. It could obliterate the most malevolent asteroid and spur the lonesome stars to grieve for life bearing planets of their own. If endured long enough it perhaps could have deluded the dreamer into a past she deserved, a past with a family and friends and animals she could care for. Love would never be in short supply. It was blissful and then it was interrupted.

“What?” Regina grated into the receiver.

The other end of the line screeched with music and voices. The man’s voice could hardly be heard over the ruckus.

“You Captain Mills?”

“Yes.” Regina frowned in her sleepy state. “It is three o’clock in the morning. What is the meaning of this?”

“Excuse me for the time, Captain, but your first officer here busted up a customer of mine – a frequently paying customer. It would be nice if you could pick her up. I don’t make a habit of calling the authorities on fleet officers.”

She sat further up in bed, shaking her head like her dream had taken a nightmarish turn. Who was she kidding? It already did. “Excuse me?”

“I broke up the fight, but she was still railing on the guy so I had to kick her to the curb. I would call an air cab, but she’s not in any condition to give directions. You know where she lives, right?”

While her immediate answer would have been “In hell,” the music on the other line prevented the glowing opportunity.

“Hello? Captain Mills? Are you there?”

“I am,” she grunted. Her hand scrubbed at the grogginess.

“It’s not too safe this time of night and I can’t let her back in. Just thought you might want your first officer back on the job in one piece.”

“You would think,” Regina sassed. She sighed heavily. “What happened to her entourage?”

“The friends she came in with? They called it a night long before. Her division was noted on her identification card. That’s how I got your name. Say, is that ‘Storybrooke’ for the U.S.S. Storybrooke?”

Too furious to answer the bar owner’s curiosity, Regina just worked her jaw in response. How did that girl get into such dangerous pitfalls all by herself? Somehow, getting two sheets to the wind and instigating a scuffle far outranked other previous annoyances. It was like Emma was doing it on purpose, threatening authority before the senior officers, frightening her captain by nearly dismantling the engine and getting hurt in the process, and protecting a leadership that was by right Regina’s to protect. Least she forget the most infuriating: dragging her superior from a pleasant dream and warm sheets to deal with her stupid, drunk self.

Emma probably had a list going at her bedside of all the things that could annoy her captain into a
black hole. Regina could make a list of her own. Oh, yes she could. At that singular moment as the bar owner called her name over the distant music Regina was coming up with numerous reasons why not to be Emma Swan’s savior. The growing list ranged from “I don’t care,” to “Well, if she’s murdered in the streets, my crew and I get a cash bonus as grieving victims of the deceased.”

A smile grew wide and wicked across her lips. Her dream of a horse and the countryside moved aside for the endless and pleasing possibilities that ended with Emma Swan’s demise.

“She said your name.”

The testimony broke through Regina’s thoughts like a vibroknife through freeze-dried butter. Her grip on the phone squeezed tighter, bracing it to her ear so hard it hurt.

“She said your name,” he repeated, “but the girl was mumbling a lot of shit that didn’t make sense. Don’t know if that meant something or not.”

Regina held her breath for a moment, weighing the words that were spoken. The last thing she wanted in the universe was to be responsible for this woman. When her mouth finally moved to speak she received the details and hung up.

The bed creaked under her as she shifted. Her hand went out to brush the matted curls from Graham’s forehead. He always slept on his back and kept to the safety of his side of the bed. Besides the occasional snoring jag, the man slept like the grave. When Regina was satisfied that his slumber went undisturbed she left.

* * *

Nose wrinkled to the stench of three o’clock, Captain Mills pulled her black trench coat tighter. She stalked into the White Rabbit, forgoing appreciation to the young officer who opened the door for her. Regina had been to her fair share of clubs in her early years. Granted, she was always the designated driver and her presence tended to attract an ogling crowd of fan girls and boys wherever she went. From the tacky décor and raucous patrons it would seem these dives hadn’t changed much since her days at the academy.

According to one of the employees who tended to Emma’s thirst, the woman wanted to catch the rest of the swoop race and stayed after her friends left. Her bet paid off; the suspected injured player came out in second place which only set her back a few twenties. Though gambling was illegal, the establishment turned a blind eye, leaving Emma’s gleeful cheers overlooked. When she attempted to collect her winnings the guy refused to pay up because the player she put money on won second place on a technicality. Emma got angry. The other guy got loud. It was hard to tell who threw the first punch.

“Where is she?” Regina demanded after presenting the necessary identification.

The owner jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Out back.”

Her glare alone carved a path through the clientele of high rollers, half-drunk grads, and stoned dropouts. She refused to recognize any of them for she had no patience to apprehend another one of her crew for breaking one of a myriad crimes that were sure to being broken there.

The back door led to a dubious looking alleyway. Heels navigated around sludgy puddles and clacked their way to the lump slouched against the brick wall.

“Well, isn’t this precious.”
A snarly blonde head rose between a pair of knees. The expression, flushed and dazed from battle with who knows what, squinted through the shadow of the alley. “What the hell are you doing here?” she moaned.

“Apparently, saving you from yourself.”

“What did Yoshi tell you?”

“The owner?” Regina took the blank stare as a ‘yes’ and explained with a primness not seen in that alley since never. “Your friends were so – and these are his words – ‘gods damned blitzed’ that they shared a cab home. Then you insisted on watching some hologame until a man two times your size upset your delicate personality into a brawl. Or the other way around, knowing your propensity for taking offense where none exists.”

“How do you know I lost?”

“The bruise on your cheek and the sore attitude,” her head tipped for consideration’s sake and she shrugged, “which could just be a permanent attribute.”

Emma sulked her chin to her chest, muttering, “You didn’t see the other guy.”

After a moment of harsh silence Regina’s hand flourished out and planted to her hip. “Miss Swan, is it possible you can stand up unassisted or do I have to call an ambulance?”

Emma just held out a hand and when none was offered she exhaled roughly and rolled her eyes. She was upright in about 60 whole seconds. Regina clocked it with annoyance and a smidge pleasure.

“I’m not drunk,” Emma grunted, “just mad.”

Brunette lashes fluttered. “I did not say anything.”

“You don’t have to, Captain. Your half-assed veiled smirk did it for you.”

Regina replied with a noncommittal grunt.

“You know, this wasn’t the first fight I got in tonight.”

“Why do I not feel the electrifying sensation of surprise?”

“I sort of bowed out of the first one before it got ugly, but I definitely won the second. Yoshi had three of his guys come break us up.” Her face cracked a smirk and she chuckled gleefully. “I may not have acquired my winnings, but I had that creep in a good chokehold so he very well could have coughed up something. Blasted awesome move if you ask me.”

Still chatting the captain’s ears off enough to bleed, Emma had led them down the alleyway where a rusted yellow speeder sat. It was a kind of banana yellow that stuck out like a sore, bleeding, bent, and twisted thumb. The once waxed surface coverings were beset with carbon scoring and showed evidence of several paint jobs only its minimum wage owner could afford. Off-line, it stood waist high and when engaged the bike rose a good two feet off the ground. It essentially had the look of an Old World crotch rocket sans wheels. Though an outdated model, there was evidence to suggest several modifications and Emma was pleased with every last one of them.

The captain’s words were slow, deliberate, and thickly laced with poison. “What in the galaxy is that?”
“My ride,” Emma answered proudly, but not before she was shot down.

“Absolutely not. You are not only half-way to incapacitated, but this… thing looks like it belongs in a garbage compacter.”

“Hey! That’s my Bug you’re talking about!”

Regina looked like she just swallowed one. “Your what?”

“Bug,” Emma pronounced matter-of-factly. “That’s what I call her. She might not look like much but she’s got an engine that purrs like a genetically modified bumble bee.”

“I did not know bugs could purr.”

“Purr, buzz, tomato, tom-ah-to. Hop on. I’ll take you for a spin on her.”

“I will not be taking a ‘spin’ on anything or anyone.”

Emma chuckled over her snort. “It will be fun, Captain. Promise.”

“No.”

“Huh?”

“Miss Swan,” Regina enunciated with a severity that could penetrate durasteel, “are you so far over the limit that you not only find it wise to drive in your state and on a piece of rusted metal, but do not understand what ‘no’ means?”

Already starting to teeter like a skyscraper in a hurricane, Emma was too exhausted to blink. “What?”

“‘No’ is a response utilized in conversation to express –“

“Yeah, I get that.” A hand waved it off. Emma’s lip curved out in a pout. “You don’t want to ride with me?”

Regina could have taken that in a number of contexts, but the only one that sprung to mind was of the two of them in a saddle while Emma reined her brown mare through a glossy green field. Regina bristled in the flames of her fury. Emma couldn’t leave it at stealing her sleep, she had to take it to the next level and take away her dream, too. At this point in Emma’s immaturity, Regina wished the girl was a child. At least then she could hand the meddlesome thing off to some 24-hour daycare.

“I have to insist you refrain from setting any drunken part of yourself on that thing. As the adult, I find myself tormented with the burden of your safety.” For as livid and sleep-deprived as the captain was, it shocked her that she could restrain the urge to commit murder. “Come along.”

Emma rolled her eyes and carefully dismounted Bug. “Why don’t you just file a complaint with HR? I’m sure they already know how to deal with your harassment suits.”

Regina tasted copper, yet her teeth still bit down. Not seconds later there was a ruckus of metal and curses. She didn’t have to turn around to know it was a body that had tripped into some garbage cans. Add ‘dismounting while intoxicated’ to the exhaustive list of Emma Swan’s crimes against humanity (or just against one captain in particular).

“Damn, how do you walk so fast? It’s 3 am!”
“Is it?” Looking at Emma from across the hood of her hover car, the captain feigned consideration with a twist of her mouth and a furrow of her brow. “Maybe if I hadn’t been woken up before the crack of dawn I wouldn’t have to walk at all!”

“Why are you all pissy? I’m the one who lost money tonight.”

“I was sleeping!” And having a wonderful dream! Regina’s thought screeched.

The image put a flush in Emma’s cheeks, but not one of guilt so much as arousal. She always did have a crush on the hologram version of Captain Mills, but then every other cadet at academy did too. Up close it was a little more complicated; the captain possessed quite a temper and a colossal ego to boot. Ruby was absolutely right, though. Regina was a ‘smoking hot, successful captain of the most charming vessel in known space.’ Emma bit her lip as a niggling wonder continued to test her resolve. She wondered with intrigue if the captain left her boy toy detective to come save her subordinate’s ass.

“Sleeping,” the captain emphasized again, “until you started trouble!”

“You don’t say?”

The captain considered if there actually was such a thing as 24-hour daycare service, but gave up in the presence of a woozy smile. She just clenched her teeth over the growl before ripping her driver-side door open, getting in, and slamming it closed with as much force possible.

Emma climbed in with as much grace as could be expected. It took three official orders and a rather alarming blare of the car horn in persuading her to get a seat belt engaged.

“Wow, nice ride.” Emma’s hand smoothed over the dashboard surface unapologetically. “Benz, right?”

“And here I thought you couldn’t even read while sober.”

Emma would insist later that her lavishing drew over the Mercedes logo after-the-fact (hence her proficiency in hover craft), yet still claiming she could read sober, drunk, or in a fighter jet at a deep spiral downwards.

After Regina put the craft in gear they rose steadily and drifted ahead. With as little interest as possible she asked for their destination.

“You live quite a distance from Cosmofleet Headquarters,” the captain established.

“Yeah? What’s it to you?”

Regina backed off even before she knew she was on. The Mercedes BenzHover drove on, assisted by small corrections from its driver’s wheel grip. White round lights from the street’s lamp posts peeked into the hover car’s windows. As their vehicle increased speed the lamp light streamed in sporadically, causing a strobe-like effect. The flickering became too much for sensitive green eyes and Emma was forced to survey the interior car and throw bold, sidelong glances at the driver.

“So you wanna hear about the fight?”

The effort to make the drive a little more bearable was returned with zero effort on Regina’s part.

“Just thought you might want to know why you were called out so early in the morning.”
She gave a shrug and slouched more comfortably in the expensive leather. Her hand brushed the upholstery, loving how it cradled every inch of her like a swaddled newborn baby. Opportunities like this didn’t present very often. Even in her pre-academy days working at Tillman’s Garage, the grandest craft she ever got to handle or tinker on was a thrice refurbished CamaroHover.

“The first fight wasn’t as exciting as the second,” Emma pondered aloud. “Though the opponent was much prettier.”

The road could have burst into flames from the driver’s scorching glare.

“My girlfriend – scratch that, ex-girlfriend…”

“Miss Swan, does my scowl give you any indication that I desire even the minutest explanation of your night’s exploits?”

“Yeah,” Emma squinted and leaned over to catch the scowl deepen, “yeah, actually your face does.” She laughed when the driver’s grip practically strangled the wheel. “Relax. Just making conversation.”

“And what work is this… ex-girlfriend in? Hm?”

Emma grinned, burrowing further into the cradled warmth. She tilted her head, her voice dripping languorously. “She’s a dancer, and a great one, too.”

Regina rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, I met her at this club and we started talking. And then I met her again… and again… and again –“

“I think I’ve heard quite enough.”

The outburst of laughter had Regina’s foot itching to slam the breaks so she could throw the tramp right out onto the streets. The slums could have more creative ways of dealing with her than Regina could possibly think up. Instead her foot pressed harder on the accelerator while the giggling echoed in her BenzHover.

Eventually the gleeful cackles died down and silence resumed. A scraping sounded from Emma’s nail which was scratching against the jean material of her leg. The hover craft’s wheel caved under pressure of Regina’s white knuckles. Neither dared break the ice for fear that their enduring issues spilled over into conversation. There were so many questions, so many allegations, and not enough patience to keep a lid on their tempers that it wouldn’t do to rehash in such cramped quarters. Each wore battle worn armor that, if met in clashing argument, would have the same results as nuclear lightning in a durasteel bottle. They had thus far avoided each other for days and couldn’t wait to get out of the BenzHover and resume their labors. If any good came out of the silence it was Emma’s growing sobriety and Regina’s tested skills in night driving.

Regina coasted to a stop before a modest 10-story apartment complex. Upon closer examination she found that the red brick was far less quaint. It was shocking that the building didn’t reek of mold or bring about the tell-tale skittering of vermin. The interior looked like an improvement from the exterior in its freshly painted walls, lacquered stairway, and hanging chandelier. For a 20-year-old building Regina was colored surprised.

“No lift?” she asked with a frown.

“You don’t have to babysit me,” Emma pressed. Her sigh and loosely folded arms barely
strengthened her argument. The hours weighed on her enough that the eye roll lost steam halfway through. “I’m fully capable of climbing stairs.”

“I am still responsible for your well-being, Miss Swan. As far as I am concerned you are still my first officer and we leave port in a few weeks. You do not want to get left behind to recuperate from a broken neck just because pride stood in the way of safety.”

“Well, it’s not necessary, but really thoughtful. I guess… thank you?”

“Nonsense.” Regina waved her hand for the woman to proceed. “I do so at great inconvenience.”

“Just promise me you won’t ask for a drink or anything when we get there. I’d like to be robbed of your sparkling personality as soon as possible.”

Weary stomps made way for another exhalation. Emma ran her hand up the bannister like she did every trip up the stairway.

Regina took one look at the clumsy ascent and followed against her better judgment. Every time she looked up there was that swinging jean-covered ass. By the second floor an informal study was made of the pocket stitches and subtle tears. At floor number five the skin tight material swaying above started affecting her cheeks which did not usually carry on so unseemly a blush (it never occurred that the cause might originate from climbing stairs). To make up for the pain of diverting her eyes, she made sure to stomp just as loudly in her heeled boots.

“Do you even realize how you tarnished Cosmofleet’s image with your conduct?” Regina asked, breathily. The proud captain eventually took advantage of the balustrade. “As a senior officer you took an oath to uphold principles of truth, justice, and integrity. Do you even care about honor?”

“If you’re so disappointed just get rid of me. It’s what any captain would do in your position.”

“You are quite glib for someone who was given the exceptional opportunity to serve on a Regal-class and under the command of a decorated captain.”

“Really?” Emma mocked, throwing up her hands as she climbed. “The least they could do was outline that on my recruitment papers.”

“Don’t you have any respect for the position?”

“About as much as you have for me, Captain.”

Admiral Hopper’s fidgety voice rose to mind before the insult could slip. Regina’s jaw subsequently clicked shut and her heels resumed their petite stomp.

With thighs burning and cheeks flushed they arrived. Emma unlocked her old fashioned door with a quick swipe of a card and a press of her thumb on the biometric authentication pad. Clearly forgetting her savior’s presence, Emma walked right in, throwing her wallet and jacket on the kitchen counter. Without invitation Regina found her feet moving. The door clicked shut before it occurred to her she had just willingly entered Emma Swan’s home. Cause for further shock was the patter of little feet that succeeded.

“Momma!” came the high-pitched squeal.

Regina’s eyes widened and panned down to the young boy sucking his thumb. She shrunk away slightly like he had a blaster pointed at her. “Whose child is this?” she asked, despite his clear address to Emma.
“Hey, kiddo, what are you still doing up? It’s lightyears past your bedtime!” Emma punctuated the statement by sweeping the child up and swinging him safely in midair. He squealed with joy, waving his arms about as she continued the motion.

“You’re home!”

Emma smiled widely at the shout. “Yes, I am. Now it’s time for bed.”

“But you just got heeeere.”

“What did I say about whining?”

The boy’s bottom lip protruded into a pout (true to his apparent mother’s fashion). He popped his head over Emma’s shoulder to get a look at the strange visitor. Despite the shock, Regina couldn’t help but return the little smile with a shy one of her own.

Mother and son went for bedtime leaving a stark and still Regina to gape open-mouthed at what she witnessed.

It almost took a war and a battle to get her there. The last place the captain wanted to spend what night hours were left was in her first officer’s home. She hadn’t wanted to lay eyes on a messy apartment that lacked the kind of order its tenant misplaced on the job. She hadn’t wanted to climb a heart attack inducing stairway. She sure as seven blazing hells hadn’t wanted to be offered a cheap night cap and inappropriate conversation about ex-girlfriends.

But Regina had not fought a war and hardly had to cross a battlefield (unless you count driving through the slums) to arrive there. She passed the threshold of her own free will and with a sound mind. And unlike popular expectation the lieutenant commander’s apartment was not the haphazard flight hanger she thought it would be. On the contrary, it was a lovely home. There were photographs, a few toys peeking from beneath a sofa, a lightly used fireplace, and a dusty chest hidden in the corner and hidden with (Regina would guess) a few medals and accommodations. It was hardly the impeccable white surfaced townhouse the captain owned, but it had character. It possessed a lived-in quality, evidence that a family lived, loved, and played there.

Regina had not wanted to be there, standing in that apartment amongst Emma’s possessions and feeling her heels sink into the soft carpeting. She had not wanted to be there, but after what she had heard Regina wanted to stay. Regina Mills was curious out of her damn mind.

“I think it’s time for you to go.”

Emma was standing there like an obstacle to that curiosity. Jaw firmly set and frighteningly sober, she crossed her arms over her chest. She repeated herself a second time.

Regina flinched at the firm order, not because it was from an officer below her but because of what she had just seen. Not minutes before Emma was smiling and laughing with her son. Her son. Now it seemed as if a wall was built up, which was absurd because Emma Swan didn’t own a wall much less retain the skills at building one. Regina didn’t expect it. She didn’t expect any of this.

“Excuse me?”

“This is my house, so it’s my rules. I’m the captain around here not you. So, please, leave.”

Regina stood up straight and lifted her chin. “No.”
With lightning fast reflexes the captain was spun around by the arm and plowed through the open door. Once divested from the firm grip, Regina stood in the hallway, bristling and mouth agape at the gall.

“How dare you handle me like that! I am your—“

“You’re my nothing on inactive duty,” Emma said with little mercy. Her brow furrowed a bit to her mounting… anger? “You have no authority when you’re on my property.”

“That is rich coming from someone who required her commanding officer to drive her home because she was too drunk and deprived of friends.”

“Goodnight, Regina.”

“Miss Sw –!”

The door swung shut in her face.
They didn’t see each other again for a few days. Since the night Regina drove Emma home neither had any plans to resume anything close to a conversation. Yes, Regina had her curiosities what with the child she had for a first officer not to mention that said child had… a child? It threw her off her axis that she couldn’t see it before. After all, she scored high on exams of psychology and forensic investigation at the academy; the hints should have been obvious. However, as captain she had priorities higher on her list than fleeting oddities. She spent much of her days sitting in her office at Headquarters, rifling through paperwork and casually gazing at star charts. Yet the more they avoided one another the harder it became to dodge curiosity.

Emma herself had some questions that needed answering, like “Why does someone just invite themselves into a stranger’s home without asking?” Frankly, she was a stranger to her first officer for how else could Regina hide her shock when little Henry came scurrying from his bedroom. It was not at all the night she anticipated in addition to getting cheated out of 1,000 credits and dumped for the third and last time by Ariel. With luck like that Emma could have won the award for Most Tragic Humanoid in the Galaxy. Since her first of many foster homes, expectations were tailored to this kind of letdown, but when she had a kid of her own it all changed. When Emma looked on her sleeping boy all wrapped in his starship designed bed her heart swelled full to the brim. When Henry burrowed in his pillow dreaming of space adventures and sleeping without burden Emma felt like she won Luckiest Mother in the Galaxy.

As much as she could have pulled along without an education, a job, or a home, Henry needed those things. That was why Emma never gambled with more than she owned, never brought her dates home for her son to get attached to before they moved on, nor intentionally invited her boss to her private residence. The latter was a failure eating away at Emma ever since.

It was days later and paperwork could not be shrugged off any longer. Failure had to be stared in the face and, if she knew well enough, failure would be staring back with equal vengeance; the source of that letdown with its perfect teeth, olive complexion, and flipped-just-right hair. If Emma didn’t know any better failure captured an appealing visual.

“Captain Mills.”

“First Officer Swan,” Regina addressed to her files rather than the salute. “I was wondering when you would strut by.”

Of all the workplaces Emma had “strutted” by at Headquarters, the captain’s came across with more grandeur. It was furnished, painted, and draped in Regina’s sort of superior style. The lounge area of couches and a roaring fireplace suggested the captain hosted the occasional guests, however Emma didn’t see any creases in the cushions which would suggest the opposite. The glossy surface of the floor reflected her astounded face like a mirror. Ebony and ivory would seem neutral ground until one set foot before Her Majesty. Immaculate legs crossed in her high-backed chair, Regina worked from her desk like it was vital to the Commonwealth’s survival.

“What I have to do paperwork is really cause for worry,” Emma complained to her setting. She stuffed the file further under her arm as her gaze spied the still impeccable cushions. “I mean, the fleet is rife with political corruption, but the least they could do is leave the first officer out of it.”

“It is all part of the job.”

“If I knew Cosmofleet required this much paperwork I wouldn’t have bothered joining up.”
“Indeed?” Chin raised, Regina finally made eye contact. Her smirk blazing triumphant. “I’m sure it is not too late. If you feel that strongly I can direct you to HR.”

Anticipating the response, Emma matched the smirk with a winning one of her own. “Thanks,” she said, slipping her hand inside her pockets and rocking back on her heels, “but I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction. I think I’ll stick around a little longer.”

Regina’s grin held strong, but the eyes lost a bit of the victory. “Contrary to popular belief, Miss Swan, serving the Commonwealth is more than jetting around space and throwing one’s inhibitions to the wind come furlough.”

“Really? Because that’s why most people join up – me included. Why? What’s your excuse?”

“Well, I’m glad you asked –“

“Here we go…” Emma’s scratched her head as her eye-level panned to the heavens.

“ – because you could use an example in this area. Unlike ‘most people,’” her air quotes dripped with condescension, “those recruited to Cosmofleet serve a higher purpose than themselves and their stomachs.”

As if on cue, the first officer’s own stomach protested to her missed afternoon snack of bear claws.

“Joining Cosmofleet means a suspension of belief in the self. Your crew is your community and your ship is your home. Responsibility for the whole outweighs that of the one. We look out for each other no matter what planet we hail from or what idol we kneel before. We, Miss Swan, serve to protect the Commonwealth which in turn protects Earth and all the worlds under its purview. We are sent lightyears across the galaxy to keep the peace and represent the finest values of our government.” The captain’s delicate hands rested one over the other atop her desk as she finished, “That is our purpose and that is why I am here.”

Just realizing the speech had closed, Emma panned back. She cleared her throat, self-conscious that it hadn’t been used in ages.

“Did my predecessor – or any others, for that matter – mention you sound like a broken record?”

“Not while they use due diligence in completing their paperwork,” her chin dipped, voice glowering, “on time.”

“Speaking of…”

Emma brandished the files. The captain’s irksome stare held the contents, protruding and crinkled from its underarm confines, before she took them. A grating roll of her eyes was her only response.

Emma’s gaze lowered to the legs recrossing themselves, their heels grazing the floor, ankles locking under the chair. Such a smooth transition spoke of experience, meticulousness, and perhaps a bit of vanity. Recognizing one’s abilities and applying them without thought was praiseworthy in itself. To undertake the same motion Emma would have just come across as oafish.

“Your personnel reviews leave much to be desired.”

Emma blinked and her view changed from legs to a stony face of abhorrence. “You didn’t even read through them all,” she asserted.

“I have an eye for incompetence.”
For so cruel a remark, Emma had to hand it to her; it was emphasized with just the right amount of hair flourish, bat of the eyes, and purse of those unyielding lips. Bothersome allure, indeed.

“Trust me, they’re up to code.”

“Trust,” Regina repeated, “you.”

The word, spoken with vague recognition, caused both women to waver. Emma didn’t think the situation would rise again – at least not this soon. She wasn’t exactly ready to rehash an argument dusted with unforgiveable accusations and near violence.

“Miss Swan,” she began slowly, “since you stepped on my starship I have not been able to trust my own crew. Or have you already forgotten how you turned them all against me?”

Cringing inwardly, Emma scratched at her neck, muttering, “That was a minor setback.”

“Whore,” she shot back like a blaster bolt to a flinching face, “traitor, Evil Queen… Were those minor setbacks as well? Or, rather, planted thoughts from a disgruntled employee?”

“If I was the source of those horrible – yes, horrible – slurs do you think I’d still be here?” Emma crossed her arms, schooling her growing impatience. “Don’t you think the bright idea would be to include every detail of that short-lived mutiny in my report and convince your senior officers to put just as much detail in theirs?”

“Well, you’ve never been accused of being bright.”

“Because if we did it would be me in that chair right now and you dismissed from ever setting foot on Cosmofleet grounds. I don’t think I have to lecture you on the rules of engagement when it comes to suspected Freedom Raiders, and the consequences of those rules evaporating to star dust.”

“So you’re protecting me?” A fine brow rose in challenge. “How sweet.”

“I’m keeping my promise,” Emma retorted, frowning at the captain’s forgetfulness. “You needed me to trust you from the moment I became first officer and I screwed up and fell back into my same old default: disobedience. It is my job to stand by my captain and I wanted to do better. I did do better – or at least I thought so.”

“I can take care of myself. Unlike you, I don’t need someone to save me.”

Emma cocked her head enough to show her suffering. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“So I’m not even going to get a ‘thank you?’”

“For what? Turning in an incomplete report?” Regina turned her head mockingly. “The only thing you’ve proved is your incompetence.”

“You’re not immune to court martial, Regina. The consequences could have been serious.”

“At this point, Miss Swan, your persistent loyalty as you so call it is grounds for suspicion. What on Earth do you get out of this?”

“Why can’t you just believe that people are capable of a good deed every once and a while? Not everyone has an ulterior motive!” Emma threw up her arms, sighing out, “Just take it for what it is and stop overanalyzing!”
That seemed to have the opposite reaction because Regina was stalling with a furrowed brow and clearly evaluating every syllable uttered.

But at least she shut up, Emma thought gladly.

“Look,” Emm unhooked her arms so they hung at her sides and gestured with a hand occasionally to (what hoped to be) the end of the issue, “I’m not condoning what action you took in destroying that Raider vessel, however, I can understand that you felt there was no other option under the circumstances – whatever they may be. I’d eventually like to know what those circumstances are and why you are gunning so ruthlessly for the Raiders, but I’m not going to push. Just understand that captains have a second-in-command for a reason and that as long as I’m posted to the Storybrooke I will respect your authority and uphold your orders to the best of my ability.”

Chin turned up, Regina looked Emma over with a keen eye. Finally she spoke up. “It seems you are not hopeless after all.” Her words spiked with sarcasm and elicited an eye roll from her underling. “Though you have a lot to learn.”

“Maybe we can both learn from each other.”

“That would imply I need instruction…”

Emma just cocked her head, enjoying the perplexed expression. Though she may have graduated at the top of her class and exceeded history’s expectations, the captain had need of the occasional lesson in humanity.

“I’ve got your back, Regina, whether you like it or not.”

“And I’m sure you do not require my acquiescence to do so.”

“You would be correct.”

Regina sighed heavily, letting Emma take the small victory. She could have bequeathed her BenzHover to that beaming smile, so natural and generous as her disposition. Soon the gravity of that statement came whip-lashing back to have her mentally berating herself. She chalked her charity up to being truly content. Finally, they had put the issue to rest. It had nothing to do with Emma Swan’s lopsided smile.

Grinding her teeth together Regina focused on her first officer’s paperwork. When satisfied that all heat had drained from her face she closed the file and put it aside.

“I would like to meet him.” Regina continued to busy herself with desk organization. She clarified primly, “Your son.”

Emma shook her head, taken aback by the change of topic. “You’ve known me for a month and you jump to the conclusion that the kid living in my apartment is my son?”

“I’m sorry, is he not your son?”

“Well, yeah… he is.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“It just strikes me as odd that after I suggest we learn from each other you come out with an offer to get to know me.” Emma’s frown deepened, brain catching up with her own thoughts. “It’s not really something I expected.”
"As commander I make it a point to cultivate a rapport with my crew when the occasion calls for it."

"Do you know what rapport means?" Emma asked incredulously, trying to picture the captain playing cards and knocking a few back with her underlings.

Regina quipped back, "Do you?"

"What gives me the feeling that this is just some personal code you thought up on the fly?" Emma asked when all she really wanted to know was What's your gods blasted angle?

"I said, 'when the occasion calls for it' didn't I?"

"I suppose I just didn't think the 'occasion' would arise this soon. Give a girl some time to adjust."

So she had, even if it was for sport. Regina waited. After setting her pen down with a click, she examined her nails, brushing a thumb over them, and then reclasping them on her desk. After a sufficient amount of time was given her eyebrows rose to prompt a response.

"What?"

"The offer to meet your son, Miss Swan." Regina's heel tapped a tune of impatience under her desk. "Please keep up."

"Yeah, that. Erhm… I guess?"

"Your ability to articulate overwhelms me."

"Yes, it's a yes."

"At least it is not in the form of a question." With one last suffering look, Regina went back to her paperwork. "My assistant will contact you with the details of our conference." She made a shooing motion with a flick of her wrist.

"Conference?" Emma's head jerked back on her neck. Her eyes then widened to the first half of the statement. "Wait, how come I don't have an assistant?"

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When Regina expressed her desire to meet Henry more formally, Emma did not think it would be a 'conference' much less held in one of the interrogation rooms of Headquarters. If she had any doubt Regina was friendless, it went flying out the window now. It was no wonder Regina had trouble making connections with people. Only shut-in workaholics called an informal social engagement a 'conference.'

One thing was for sure, Emma wouldn't subject her own kid to those hostile interrogation rooms. They didn't even serve food.

"I don't know how you convinced my assistant to change the venue," Regina remarked on her side of the booth. "These diners have a reputation for horrendous customer service."

"Well, the waitress would have been nicer if you didn't have that permanent scowl on your face."

Regina leaned over the table practically hissing, "She tore the menu out of my hand before I could order."

"They get a lot of regulars here," Emma defended with a shrug. "I'm sure she thought you knew
what you wanted to order already.”

“I like pancakes!” exclaimed their third party.

“Yes, you do, little pilot.” Emma ruffled the shortly cropped brown hair and nudged her son’s chin up with her finger. “But did we learn from our last breakfast here? Don’t inhale the delicious, delectable, expensive pancakes too fast?”

Henry grinned, grabbing the toes of his tennis shoes and teetered back. “They’re delicious and delectable,” he whispered like it was a conspiracy he was all-too-willing to consume.

“And expensive,” muttered Emma, though she wasn’t about to spoil that barely hidden hyper excitement. “Easy does it.”

Henry just snickered and kicked his legs from the booster seat he was enthroned upon.

The unexceptionally named ‘Classic Diner’ served as a hot spot for the Swan family. It rated high on their list because they could order breakfast at any time of day without being denied the signature dish of pancakes into the late hours of the night. The restaurant was located outside the Presidio in a quaint suburban town of Maine. Affectionately known to the Swans as ‘The Classic,’ its design was unique to the old diners of the 20th century. Red upholstered booths, metal napkin holders and sugar dispensers, a juke box, a vintage bar with stools, and all the trimmings one could enjoy if they time traveled back to the retro diner period.

A tapping brought Regina’s attention to the boy. Finger sliding across a datapad screen, Henry seemed in the grips of a conundrum. A puzzle piece disappeared off the screen with each flick of a hand just as another appeared in the set. It was a garish, campy game, (one identical to a toy from her own childhood) but Regina had every indication that the difficulty exceeded that of the average age of this child.

“Do children still play with those?” Regina asked, indicating to the pad Henry ruminated over.

“It’s an older model.”

Emma flushed to the tips of her ears. Such a rare occasion in having to defend the existence of a son, not to mention her methods in mothering, was not lost on the captain. Eyes quickly dodged from hers and Regina realized how new the behavior presented. Never since meeting Emma had she known her to have been any less than confident or determined. Exempting a slouching posture, the first officer stood up for her ideals even if it meant sacrifice or suspension. It would appear from the blush and clear indication of a lip biting habit that Emma could self-scold. Any mother would be embarrassed to admit they couldn’t afford the top-of-the-line, next best thing in toys.

A discouraging jingle sounded from the game, causing the crinkle of a brow. Henry’s features scrunched in confusion at the sudden flurry of puzzle pieces before he pushed on. The tip of his tongue stuck out and curled around his top lip as he concentrated.

It occurred to Regina that Emma chose the game with the intention not to divert a hyperactive attention span, but to enrich it. Its cheapness shouldn’t have mattered, yet the shame still permeating the mother’s features begged to differ. Despite Regina’s pattern in demeaning her, a petty feeling held her back this time.

“I still don’t understand why we couldn’t have done this at Headquarters,” Regina pressed, one eye lingering on the little bundle of absorption.
Emma sighed. “It’s nine in the morning and we haven’t had our pancakes yet. Just try to enjoy it.”

“That is highly unlikely.”

A hacking sounded from behind as a customer coughed recklessly on anything but his hand. Regina’s back leveled off the booth cushion. Her lip curled in disdain. If that man had to cough within three feet of her one more time she would leave immediately, no matter how delightful her new acquaintance was.

There was a bang as a tiny palm slapped square on the datapad’s surface. “I did it!” he sang to Emma and Regina and every customer in the diner. A few of the waitresses waved to his success because it happened to be a regular thing. Henry then nursed his sippy cup for added hydration and dived back into a new game.

“He’s determined,” Regina remarked, trying and failing to suppress a smile. “I would never have thought.”

“I’m flattered by your brutal honesty.”

The captain started a bit. She had been so captivated by the boy that her dig went uncensored. Her mouth parted to apologize, but something in Emma’s eyes told her it wasn’t necessary. “He’s four?” she asked, letting curiosity run its course.

“Yeah, and a handful.” Emma’s cradled the side of her face in a palm and gazed at Henry with an affection Regina was witnessing for the first time. “He’s pretty shy in public places and around strangers, but when we’re at home or at the park this guy is a bundle of entertainment. There’s about as much energy in this little body as there is in Storybrooke’s sublight drive.”

Regina chuckled along fondly. It pleased her that this boy had something in common with one of her most prized possessions. Somehow it filled her heart and melted it all at the same time.

Henry was no babbling, bumbling four-year-old. Rather, he exhibited as a very happy, unburdened character. He always smiled and was quick to giggle at the slightest thing. He did not speak often, though when he had something to say it was carefully articulated (a quality he had not acquired from his mother’s genes).

He was a sweet boy, but Regina had a difficult time reconciling where he came from. While biology and resemblance left no room for doubt, there still remained an inconsistency. Emma, the stubborn, cocky woman she knew as her first officer, never struck her as the motherly type. It proved just how unacquainted she was with her first officer and how little Command knew of her as well because there had been no mention of a son in her permanent file. Questions racked at Regina’s mind, questions surrounding Henry’s home life and how he dealt with Emma being off-planet, questions of how an academy student juggled academics and a toddler while still managing to graduate, and about Henry’s father who didn’t seem to be in the picture. There was so much left up to imagination that Regina feared her own growing interest in Emma, the one person she assumed to despise.

Breakfast arrived much to everyone’s relief. While Regina put away her new found fears, the other two gladly tore into their fluffy stacks of pancakes. It was a silent affair punctuated by “mms” and “aaahs” and “pass the sywup, pwease.” The captain’s oatmeal and fruit salad were enjoyed well enough save for a lazy presentation and the complimentary stink eye from their waitress.

“Slow down, kid. You’re eating a lightyear a minute.”

Henry, lips puckering around a mouthful of chocolate chip pancakes, ducked his head down like a
turtle reverting into its shell. His next monstrous bite clearly showed how unashamed his appetite was. The boy loved pancakes and he loved sugar. It seemed that he couldn’t get enough.

“If you don’t take smaller bites, Henry, you can’t enjoy every one.” Regina cleared her throat before continuing. “Don’t you want to savor it?”

Unacquainted with receiving instructions from anyone other than his mother, Henry looked from Regina to Emma whose mouth opened and closed like a monger fish. It sounded a lot like parental advice to the three pairs of ears at that table which had the adults backpedaling and the child steadily warming up to it. To everyone’s surprise, Henry’s next forkful was half the size and weight of his previous shovelfuls.

“More sywup?” Henry dragged on just to sweeten the deal. “Pweese?”

“I don’t think so,” Emma replied as she cut into the last quarter of her meal. “Or else I’m the one who has to deal with the consequences later.”

She didn’t want to even consider how many stories she’d have to read through to get the kid to settle down for a nap later. Just a single meal of pancakes and extra syrup on the side for this child had the effects of a gallon of coffee on an adult. He wouldn’t conk out until several hundred jumps on the bed.

Henry whined a little, kicking the heels of his tennis shoes against his booster seat. Not getting anywhere with his mom, he then looked to Regina. With a downturned chin, he set his blue eyes on her as if in challenge. Regina stared back, licking her lips before patting them dry with her napkin. It was quite clear where the boy got his persistence. Lips pursing closed a smirk, Regina lifted a brow before sliding the valued condiment over.

Henry clapped his hands and smiled in triumph.

“Really?” Emma cocked her head at the captain.

Regina shrugged and grinned wickedly. “Well, I don’t have to deal with the aftermath.”

“You’re truly evil, you know that?” Emma turned to her son, prompting, “What do you say to Captain Mills?”

“Thank you, Cap’n!”

Emma brushed his bangs back and caressed the edge of his ear before addressing Regina again. “Indulging him with sugar and handing him off to me… You’d make a horrible babysitter.”

“I suppose that is why I am a starship captain.”

“If you ask me they’re one in the same,” Emma commented with a haughtily smirk. “I’m just glad as second-in-command I don’t have to deal with the consequences of going down with the ship.”

“Miss Swan, you succeed rather well in the art of darkening a conversation.”

“Hey, you keep stuffing my kid with artificial sweeteners and I’ll keep making babysitter/captain jokes.”

“You can try, but you will fail.”

“I’ll do more than try. Just remember I have the upper hand.”
“Oh? How is that?”

“Regina,” Emma sighed, schooling her eyes up and over like she owned every answer to the mysteries of the universe, “only one of us here has experience with kids in addition to being a first-hand witness to the shortcomings of being captain. If anyone is at risk of failure it’s you.”

“You are being awfully cavalier with your experience. How many years was it that you spent aboard a Regal-class vessel? Oh,” a small gasp and a smile took the place of false contemplation, “that’s right: 30 days. At least I can boast more experience in the fleet than you can in mothering.”

“I’m being cavalier?!” Emma squeaked, jabbing an incredulous finger to her chest. “Are you serious? Try taking a look in the m –”

A loud clanking rendered Emma’s voice irrelevant as Henry banged his fork to an empty plate. Whether it was to gain attention or just shut the two up no one knew (though the customer one booth over did as he tried to tune out the bickering).

Henry grinned bashfully, declaring, “Ah done.”

It seemed to do the trick because the two women were smiling warmly at the boy, their argument nothing but a passing memory. Emma watched between the two as a blushing Henry pulled his feet into the chair to cross under him (a nervous habit of his since as long as she could remember) while the captain tipped her head in odd fascination. They were studying each other, Emma gathered. It was kind of cute and definitely weird.

It was perhaps an otherworldly experience for the captain – for Henry just as well. Regina gave off a shy, indifferent attitude from the beginning of their introduction while the boy shook the hand with equal disinterest. It was clear that both took their time in warming up to new acquaintances. Emma always knew Henry to be the suspicious type around a new kid at the playground or a tad clingy to her leg when some old lady came up to him, reaching out for a cheek grab. Regina was the same, only the playground interpreted as the Storybrooke and the old ladies were… well, any of her fans that desired her hand in greeting. Both shrank away from overt human contact. Both shrunk away from overt human contact.

But as the ‘conference’ went on Henry and Regina seemed to shed their suspicions. Their efforts made in adapting to one another threw Emma for a loop. By the way Henry buddied up with the captain and vice versa, she could have been sure they had entered some alternative dimension.

Which made Emma doubt this could be the captain’s first experience with children. Regina was as calm as a cloned cucumber. Not once had she resorted to that sharp tongue so many of her crew were accustomed to. She hadn’t interrupted (that much), she conversed easily, asked questions when appropriate and answered them just as adequately. She even proved that a scowl could be put away for the day. Regina was relaxed, quick to smile at Henry’s eagerness, and indulged the boy on maple syrup when his mother wouldn’t.

“Emma! Henry!” called a young woman from afar. She had just entered the diner and was making her way to their booth.

Emma nudged her son with an elbow and nodded toward their visitor. They both waved in her direction, big smiles across their faces.

“You must be Captain Mills.” The woman looked Regina over before offering a hand. “Emma mentioned you were joining them for breakfast. Glad to meet you!”

The woman wore comfortable, casual clothes, and a backpack slung on one shoulder. Based on her
smooth face and energetic mood she looked no older than Emma. Her hair was long, straight, and black as a starless night. Regina took the hand, speculating over who this stranger was and how Emma’s and Henry’s beaming expressions related.

“Regina, this is Henry’s babysitter, Mulan. She looks after him while I’m off-planet. I asked her to take him for the afternoon,” Emma tipped her head to the young girl, “which should be fun for you. The kid had a whole stack of pancakes with extra syrup thanks to the captain.”

“Did you now?” Mulan narrowed her eyes questioningly at the boy. “Well, I suppose we’ll have to burn off all that energy at the park.”

Regina watched her with a keen eye. “How long have you known the Swans?”

“Since Henry was very young. I spend a lot of time at the Presidio and that’s how I met Emma. The babysitting agencies these days are a bit skeptical, so I’m glad we found each other. I attend the Research Institute of Maine and have been dividing my time between studying and babysitting.”

“The Institute? What area of work?”

“Xenobiology,” Mulan replied, bobbing on the balls of her feet.

“Yeah,” Emma rubbed the back of her neck, remembering a past run in with an Edosian slug and a vibroscalpel, “I wish I had that enthusiasm back in my academy days. Dissections were the worst,” she muttered from behind a hand.

Commending the new acquaintance with a smile, Regina supplied, “That’s quite ambitious. Your parents must be proud.”

“Well,” she dragged out, casting an innocent look to her boss, “they would be extra proud if I got a raise one of these days…”

“Not today,” was as specific as Emma got.

The young woman’s shoulders drooped slightly. Before she could insist further her charge began squirming in his seat.

“Looks like the sugar high is kicking in.” Mulan gave an evil eye to Emma who pointed to the guilty party. Regina folded her arms, content and almost too oblivious. The babysitter turned to Henry and asked, “Okay, mister. Time to hit the playground. You ready to ignite those engines?”

Henry nodded, kicking his feet happily and more than ready to get started. Mulan’s outstretched arms and he scrambled into them with little forethought.

At the twinge in her chest, it occurred to Emma that all the times she had to watch her son go with Mulan it never got any easier. Her hand still twitched to latch onto the boy and pull him close. The pang at seeing him go, though, had been nothing compared to the near heart attack she suffered on the shuttle ride to Storybrooke. That had been their first separation that lasted longer than just a few days. Henry had been without his mother for a whole month and once she returned the last thing either of them wanted was to be away from each other. But Emma had a duty to bring home the credits so her son could continue in school, wear clothes, eat, and sleep in his starship bed. And if Henry didn’t enjoy spending time with Mulan Emma would have scanned high and low for a babysitter that would suit his needs. But in the years they’ve known Mulan a replacement had never been necessary.

“Drive safely,” instructed Emma.
“Always do.”

“No more snacks for him unless it’s from the non-sugar group.”

“Definitely.”

“And if there are bigger kids around make sure he takes it easy on the slide. He has a tendency to be a bit overzealous in proving himself.”

“Sure thing, Emma.” Mulan chuckled, more than familiar with this cross-examination and happy to oblige. She bounced Henry on her hip, encouraging the giggles. “Say bye-bye!”

“Bye-bye, Momma!”

Emma laughed at the exuberance of her child whose fists waved and tongue roved mindlessly over syrup tainted lips. “Have fun, little pilot!”

“Goodbye, Henry,” Regina called.

The bashful boy concealed his face into Mulan’s neck with a single eye peeking, but flapped his fingers in farewell just the same.

The diner sounds filled the growing silence between them. Utensils clanked on plates and scraped along bowls, the air filtering system hummed, waitresses dictated orders to the short order androids who prepared eggs, toast, bacon, and grits to exact specifications. It smelled of grease and stale air and Emma breathed it all in with nostalgia. Regina stared at a fixed spot behind her table companion. Her nose wrinkled in distaste, having given up at holding her breath.

“So…”

“Pardon?”

“I was just about to ask if you were satisfied.”

A blank stare scrunched to confusion. “To what are you referring to?”

“The ‘conference’ between you and my kid. Does it measure up to your standards?”

“Between the dry oatmeal, the barking customers, and less than passable cleanliness,” Regina listed off with an elevated chin, “I would have to chalk this meeting up to ‘needs improvement.’”

“Is the setting the only thing that bothered you? I’m shocked that you were being so patient with Henry. He’s kind of a stubborn thing, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“No, of course I did. He is your son after all.”

Emma allowed it with a nod.

Regina added, “But I am not easily worn down in case you have not noticed. I lead a crew of over 400 which is unfortunately marred with a few children if I may be perfectly blunt.” With precise diligence she took up a clean napkin, folded it once, twice and then cleaned her side of the table’s spotless surface with a merciless swipe. She could finally breathe again. “A little sentient of four is not a challenge, but I sense he can be quite unyielding.”

“Well, he makes up for it in smiles and boyish charm.”
“Certainly.”

“Which he gets from me.”

“The charm? Doubtful.”

Emma’s smile warred with her own narrowed eyes. “It’s okay to like me,” she said slowly. Her finger tapped at the end of her fork so that it teetered on the edge of the plate. Leftover syrup puddled around the tines on each uneventful impact as she continued the balancing act. “I mean, just because I’m your subordinate doesn’t mean we can’t be friends. There’s no rule against it.”

Shock widened Regina’s eyes. Her first thought was not Why would I be friends with her? but Why would Miss Swan want to be my friend? Had she given any indication that she desired a companion? Had some quality been exhibited that stirred Emma’s curiosity enough to latch on to it and use it as some poor excuse for a basis of friendship? Equal to her astonishment was her distrust. It had to be a joke or a game at her expense. People like Emma Swan did not just become friends with accomplished, principle-oriented citizens like Regina Mills. Unheard of. It would disrupt the balance of time and space itself. Regina was absolutely sure of it.

“Or not,” Emma said, turning away and crossing her arms on the table.

“Miss Swan, one of the many benefits of acting as your superior is having the freedom to disregard anything you have to say and dispatch orders you cannot wave a blaster at.” With a satisfied small she leaned forward to deliver, “So forgive me if I enjoy our present state of association.”

Emma’s shoulders rose up and fell in a shrug. “You think way too highly of yourself. Admit it, you’d still see fit to boss me around as a friend.”

“That I have no doubt of.”

Emma laughed despite the predictable response. There was no gratification like the sight of a twitching scowl that desperately wanted to become a grin.

“Could it be that we are actually getting along?”

“Unheard of,” came the monotone reply. Regina suddenly remembered her surroundings. She experienced a prickling frustration at a loss to explain how her attention had been captured for so long. “I should leave.”

“Wait, you’re serious? Just when we started making progress without child supervision?”

“I do have to go. Unlike you there are people in the galaxy who work for a living.”

“Because paperwork saves lives?”

“It does if it is filed appropriately.”

Emma’s exasperation was punctuated by a sigh. “Fine. Go forth and do what captains do. And I got this.” She swiped the check before Regina could get her hands on it. The slip crinkled to her clammy, syrup sticky hands which contaminated the thing enough for Regina to relinquish. “You can pay at the next conference redo.” Emma riffled through her wallet for her credits and a tip for the waitress. She added as an afterthought, “If there is one.”

“Careful, Miss Swan,” Regina chided before turning her back. “Your promises may come back to haunt you.”
With a lingering eye, Emma watched her captain sashay out the door. “Sarcastic blaster in my side,” she muttered. Instead of a scowl, she wore a seemingly insignificant smile.

* * *

In the cramped flight shuttle Emma and Mary Margaret wrought their way through the simulator course. It was a little shell of a pod, its interior designed to the exact specifications of older model shuttle craft. The concaved ceiling of the hull stretched only a few meters above their heads while the flanks left them feeling a tad claustrophobic. With the large control panel and bow facing window, the remaining space was occupied by two chairs (pilot and co-pilot) suspended at a slight angle back. Cabins from the early fleet era were not meant to fit a pilot for luxury. Shuttles flew short distances from Point A to Point B and its cargo dimensions could fit only necessary payloads. It was evident from these flight sims that Cosmofleet was not in the business of pampering their students but exercising them in discipline.

Tension did not stem from close bulkheads alone. Each officer had their own strategy in completing the sim course – Mary Margaret through diplomacy and Emma through instinct. Rational means and calculable equations made up the principle points of the doctor’s plan. Ethics and rules were all she knew as they were instilled in her work and everyday life. Emma, on the other hand, settled for ejecting from a vessel without a parachute or a back-up plan. Her strategy typically ran on caffeine fumes and sheer instinct.

It was inevitable that when it came down to getting the job done that the friends clashed, hence the constant need to switch chairs.

“It’s my turn!” Mary Margaret huffed. “We already crashed and burned twice! I don’t think your strategy of ‘let’s see what happens when I do this’ is working for us.”

Emma rolled her eyes, throwing her shoulder harnesses off with an air of fatigue. “At least when I have the controls we don’t go spinning into a wormhole.”

“How was I supposed to know?! It came out of nowhere!”

Yeah, that’s kind of what wormholes do.”

“But this isn’t reality, Emma. These controls may cause movement, but this dented trap of a pod doesn’t go anywhere. So don’t blame me for the space-time bridge incident when it couldn’t possibly have happened.”

“It’s a recreation of a scenario,” Emma said as she slunk into the co-pilot chair, “ergo it is a simulation of reality.”

“Well, whoever designed this particular sim knows nothing of real life.” Hitching herself into the seat, Mary Margaret’s fingers settled on the console. She tapped them minutely, eyes roving over the flashing beacons of light and buttons and switches. “I don’t even know why I have to be here. This is absurd. I don’t even know what this key is for or what that switch will do when I dial it up. This is insanity! I’m a doctor not a shuttle pilot!”

“Cool those engines, Doc. It’s not like we’re breaking any records here. Continual training is a requirement for all officers of the fleet. Just because you’re a doctor doesn’t mean you can cut out of flight sims. You’re not that special,” Emma finished with a smirk.

“I guess that’s why I’m stuck with you,” the doctor retorted before commencing shuttle ignition.

Emma shook her head, laughing. She already planned on claiming victory later by finishing the sim.
Her previous blunders while childish were actually intentional. As an academy student, flight simulators served as a second home to her. She spent her waking hours and a few sleepless nights in these cramped shuttle pods pouring over the navi-computer to find a loophole. Emma knew all the ways to evade procedure and avoid the usual mistakes students made. Now as a graduate and newly instated officer the simulations were child’s play. For Emma they became a testing ground for new tactics. Her skills at crashing their mock shuttle also became a game to see how much hair Mary Margaret lost in head-clutching anxiety. The entertainment lasted until they had to switch chairs.

Knuckles cracking, Emma flexed her hands in preparation. It wasn’t unusual that she had to take the co-pilot controls and correct their course. Mary Margaret had a tendency to get distracted, not to mention overwrought by trauma at the slightest creak in the ancient shuttle craft.

“Keep it steady,” Emma advised, hands settled on her arm rests. “Remember, small corrections.”

The doctor ground her teeth in frustration. She swore to the gods why Cosmofleet didn’t require continuous medical training in addition to flight drills. Emma would get her comeuppance between the point of a vibroscalpel and a non-sentient autopsy. Mary Margaret imagined the retribution.

“I don’t know why people just can’t keep their feet on solid duracrete.”

Emma cackled. “Then they can’t fall head over heels for chief science officers.”

A brown pixie head spun so fast the gasp could have reverberated off every hull surface.

“Hands on the controls!” Emma exclaimed as the shuttle veered downwards.

“Oh my! Stop shouting at me!”

The co-pilot corrected their progress with a subtle inching down on the controls. “Easy…”

“I am not head over heels for David.”

“Your burning red face says differently.”

“Th-that’s… I…” Mary Margaret’s free hand patted her cheeks, “… It’s just warm in here.”

A lone shoulder shrugged as Emma pointed out, “A likely story.”

Zipping her lips shut, the doctor glared out the darkened viewport. The glare alone could have spiked the temperature in that cramped cabin. “And you and Captain Mills…?”

“Wow,” Emma deadpanned, suspicion raising a brow, “nice segue?”

“You two had quite the argument after she was nearly overthrown by her own crew. Have you seen her since we arrived Earthside?”

“Yeah. Several times, in fact, and not arranged under duress.”

“You’re not serious,” Mary Margaret said doubtfully.

Emma nodded. “Serious as the edge of a vibroknife.”

“I figured after the failed mutiny and her refusal to have you stand up for her…” Mary Margaret sighed, tipping her head thoughtfully, “I figured any hope of salvaging a cooperative relationship was slim.”
“It’s a casual, accidental sort of friendship.”

“I think you’re missing an adjective, Emma.”

“Which one?”

“‘One-sided’? You can’t honestly claim that Regina approves of this.”

Mouth open in defense, Emma suddenly paused. “Well… I do have my doubts. I still can’t get her to explain why she has a lead trigger finger for the Freedom Raiders.”

“Listen, Emma. I would be the first to admit how much I respect Captain Mills for all she has done for Cosmofleet. She paved the road for women like you and I. I don’t even think we would have been promoted to such high ranking if it were not for her perseverance. The status quo is very hard to shatter, especially when it’s concerning fleet regulation.” Nibbling her bottom lip, she then came down to the heart of her point. “But the captain is as complex and layered as the fabric of space. Offering your hand in friendship may not be enough to understand her ways. It might never be enough.”

Emma knew it. She had a feeling Regina knew it, too. After their breakfast at The Classic they had met up two additional times. Emma wasn’t sure how it came about and couldn’t remember who suggested their continued gatherings. Despite their constantly butting heads, Henry was always there to ease the tension and act as a buffer. There meet-ups ran relatively smoothly without hitch or argument. However, there arose one dispute that Emma remembered with clarity.

The three of them had just finished an afternoon snack at one of the corner ice cream parlors, mother and son sharing a mammoth brownie caramel sundae and Regina declining every menu item with an indignant sniff. Mulan had just picked Henry up to take him to the park when Regina got on the offensive.

Despite Emma’s assertion of how trustworthy and honorable the babysitter was, Regina publicized her concern. Mulan hailed from the female warrior planet of Jīnxīng, so, although humanoid, she and her race were not fully tolerated by the people of Earth. She was among many minorities residing on the planet who did not have the kind of privileges of native born, therefore the nomad peoples of Jīnxīng and elsewhere were distrusted.

A nomad in her own right, Emma had maintained her conviction in Mulan. Trust between them was solid from the day she started caring for the boy. And Henry was nuts about his babysitter, so there was really no reason to pull extensive background checks. Regina made her concern known, accusing Emma of under protecting her own son and placing her faith in a foreigner.

And boy did Emma not take that well. Stewing in the co-pilot chair, she remembered her appall at the hypocritical bull coming out of the captain’s trap. She, in turn, accused Regina of being discriminatory, and Regina shot back with a blow-by-blow of her track record with non-humanoids and migrants and how she employed the most diverse crew members in the fleet… etcetera… etcetera. In view of Commonwealth’s growing intolerance to outsiders Emma was ‘advised’ to be more careful about who she put her trust in.

After that little snit they still saw fit to plan another ‘outing’ with Henry or whatever it was called. And still Emma defended her attempts at a ceasefire with the captain, putting as much faith in Regina as she did with Mulan. Even Mary Margaret would frown at such odd behavior.

Making yet another course correction in the doctor’s flying, Emma sighed. Mary Margaret didn’t know that story and would never know. No one knew the young first officer had a son, the secret
she kept for four long years.

“You may be right,” Emma said. “Being Regina’s friend may not be enough to figure out why she does the things she does. But she’s not exactly a grand anomaly of the universe. She harbors secrets like everyone else.” Picking at the sleeve of her flight jacket, Emma murmured, “Sometimes we know people when we really don’t. That’s just life.”

“Well, aren’t you just a ray of filtered sunshine?”

“Weren’t you the one who told me to ‘be nice,’” she air quoted with a humorless smile. “I’m trying to do the right thing here. Regina and I should be able to get along for the crew’s sake at least. Another mutiny would tear the ship’s allegiance apart piece by piece.”

“It’s just surprising to me that you’re doing the right thing for once.”

Emma blinked. “Excuse me?”

Hand coming off the controls to gesticulate, the shuttle careened unsteadily until its pilot returned the hand in distress. “I-I mean, you’re not exactly a great example of how to hold a relationship together. Look at you and Ariel…”

“What about our friendship?”

“Let’s be honest here, Emma. No one is as patient with you as I am. No one.” Mary Margaret frowned at something blinking on the nav-com and went to press a few keys. “That’s the only reason why our friendship works…” she finished distractedly.

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Emma, what is this warning flashing at me?”

“I don’t know,” Emma mumbled, crossing her arms and looking away. “You’re patient. Figure it out.”

An incensed tongue clicked. Mary Margaret eventually did as she was told.

“Haven’t you taken into account the possibility that I’m not the only one who wants to salvage the relationship?” Emma asked. She continued with a pompous finger. “I can be pursued, too, you know. Maybe it’s Regina who wants to be friends.”

It was actually a fair point. Henry couldn’t be the only reason why the captain approved of their gatherings. Moreover, the whole ‘cultivation of rapport with crew’ was bullshit of the highest quality, so Emma had to wonder what was up the captain’s cleanly pressed uniform sleeve.

“I don’t even think you have taken that into account,” Mary Margaret pointed out. They had been friends for years and picking up on each other’s anxieties was as second nature as picking up chicks at the gym (as Emma would say).

“You’re right, I haven’t. But that doesn’t negate the fact that we… well, we hang out.”Despite the truth of those words it did nothing to deter the scrunched face.

Mary Margaret shared in the expression. “Just what do you two do together that constitutes as ‘hanging out?”’

“We eat food,” she answered weakly, “I guess.”
Mary Margaret returned a disappointing frown.

“Baby steps. Come on, this is Regina we’re talking about. And we do talk about work stuff.”

“I don’t know,” the doctor shrugged innocently, shaking her head, “it seems like all you and the captain have in common is work. But if that’s what matters then maybe you should bring her to these simulations instead of me.”

Nearly collapsing out of her chair, Emma leaned forward and twisted to fully face her friend. “Regina in a flight sim?!” she practically choked. “Scratch that. Regina and me in a flight sim?!”

“I’m just saying… the best way to get to know someone is when they’re dropped in a high-stress situation. People are seen for who they really are.”

“Tried that,” Emma grumbled and ran a tired hand through her hair. “I saved her from a mutiny and hostile Korobians and received no gratitude for it.”

“Both of those occurred on a commission miles from Earth. Working a simulation is quite unlike the hassles of being on-duty.”

“You know what that would be like?”

“A valuable opportunity to learn from one of the most skilled officers in the fleet?”

“Okay, Doc.” Elbows planted to her knees, Emma hunkered forward with hands out in preparation. “Imagine two photon torpedoes in a gravity flux compensator, spinning aimlessly and bumping against one another enough to throw each other off balance and cause a spark that blows the compensator into space garbage. Ka-pow!”

The wild hand gestures and animated storytelling skills of Emma spurred the doctor’s eye roll. “That’s a bit dramatic.”


“You don’t know that. If academy records show for anything, the two of you are almost equal in flying aptitude. With the talents of a captain and a lieutenant commander the only outcome can be mutual understanding. You both can learn from each other and grow into more advanced strategists.”

“Doubt it.”

“So you think food and chatting over paperwork will be any different?”

How about with a four-year-old buffer? Emma turned her head and thought of the way Regina’s mouth turned up at the corners whenever Henry went into spasms of giggling. She was engaged by the question at once and took it into careful consideration.

Things had been changing because of her son. There was still a bickering quality to her relationship with Regina and punctuated by snooty advice and over-exaggerated eye rolling, but no longer did Emma fear getting suspended because of it. Regina was harmless – as long as Henry was around.

It came as a surprise that Regina conversed easily with the child. When they were together Emma sometimes forgot about the homicidal Evil Queen of Storybrooke. It had been awkward a few times, bearing witness to the woman’s smile. Her warmth was carefully guarded until the moment Henry wouldn’t have it hidden anymore. She opened herself (if only slightly) to the boy as he did the same. Henry had always been a shy child and hesitant to make friends, but this stranger whom he had only
known for a few days became a welcome preference. Regina was like a new toy, a source of mystery and never-ending enjoyment. Emma felt the brush offs like sandpaper across her heart. Even when it was just the two of them at home the “Cap’n” was all he could babble on about – the way the pins on her uniform shined, her good taste in maple syrup, and (of course) how pretty she was. Henry Swan was blazingly enchanted by Regina.

Emma should have been happy for him. She was happy. Regina and Henry had struck up a very natural friendship – one that couldn’t be fully explained, but a natural bond nonetheless. Having the captain around was a novel experience because he didn’t have many adults in his life. There was no father, no uncles or aunts, no grandparents to speak of. Regina made an impression on him, and it didn’t escape his mother’s attention that this new friend had an effect on his emotional development.

Yet the question remained: Were those occurrences enough to encourage transparency between a captain and her first officer?

“Maybe,” Emma replied, her voice carrying a faraway quality.

A blaring alarm from the nav-com jerked Mary Margaret from their conversation. Mouth open, she froze before the strobing buttons and raised her hands above her head like the console was brandishing a foot-long vibroknife. “What did I do now?! See? This just proves my point. Regina would be a better sim partner for you than me.”

“I don’t think she’d be down with that.”

“You’ll never know unless you ask.”

Emma grunted in reply and stored the advice away for later. Taking pity on her friend, Emma had them switch chairs and subsequently finished the course in under a record breaking five minutes.

* * *

Regina wouldn’t be caught dead in the suburbs, but here she was. It was a place she had been finding herself more and more, walking the sidewalks, peering through shop windows, and raising her nose to the cuisine. Admittedly, these municipalities had some shred of charm, but they did not have the air of hustle and bustle as larger cities nor the sophistication. Regina never had reason to venture through these towns because her work was at Cosmofleet Headquarters and nowhere outside it. She couldn’t complain. She preferred the Presidio with its razor skyscrapers and streaking transportation, its high class citizens and low rate of crime. Buildings soared towards the atmosphere like silver lances yet there was so much room to breathe, so many open spaces to stretch the mind and all its possibilities.

The suburbs were smaller, more claustrophobic. An array of Old World brick and new world architecture clustered alongside each other and were bisected by narrow alleyways you wouldn’t chance finding yourself alone in. The tallest structure in the largest town reached only a quarter height of an average Presido high-rise. The streets were not entirely dangerous as the slums, but at night when the only sounds were of the hum of speeders and hover cars you wouldn’t want to be the one person walking streetlamp to streetlamp.

Older citizens set up shop in these small cities because the cost of running a business was about half as much if they were to stay in affluent Presidio. Locals supported these cafés and antique shops, bakeries and butcheries, and hole-to-nook bookstores with pride. It was the only way to keep out commercial industries and their ‘revenue over service’ reputation. It was a place populated by the middle-class family, the nine-to-five manual laborer, the single mom working two jobs. It was a place where everyone lived as neighbors and knew what play your child was performing in and could
strike up conversation in a grocery store without hesitation. And, unlike the Presidio, citizens of the suburbs never stared. Outsiders were not treated as display pieces or whispered down to behind their back. They were treated with an apathetic eye and passed by without a second’s mutter.

Maybe that was why Regina had been frequenting this town more often. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the attention or the subtle glances for she had always been conscious of her attractive qualities both physical and practical. A well-known commander like Regina would be spared a wide-eyed glance on Presidio grounds and she wouldn’t have it any other way. But sometimes on the very rare occasion a life in the spotlight needed to be retired. It was a temporary solution to a very miniscule annoyance. Sometimes she just required a change of scenery. That was all. It wasn’t like Regina preferred life outside the Presidio.

Heels clacking to a halt, Regina put a hand to a store glass window to observe the display. The panels of the octagonal sphere caught the mid-day sun as it transformed into a kaleidoscopic flutter across its plates. It was a memory puzzle, one her father had been known to toy with into the days when the hair at his temples turned silver. Henry Mills would tease that it kept his mind engaged and insisted that it lowered the risk of dementia. He wanted to live long enough, he had said. Long enough to recognize his grandchildren.

The light of variegated blues, reds, yellows, and beyond sparkled in her liquid brown eyes. Regina wasn’t necessarily materialistic or sentimental; her constant traveling didn’t allow for possessions. Brushing the desire off, her eyes drew away from the octagon sphere. Regina ground her teeth and scolded herself for the moment of weakness. Look, don’t touch, she thought. And for gods’ sakes don’t fall for cheap trinkets.

Some familiar cracks in the pavement led her to veer around a corner. As she walked, a scene from across the street came into view. Standing hand in hand was a woman and child (a fussy one, at that) Regina couldn’t claim to recognize anyone in the suburbs, but these two were an exception.

“Lookie! It’s the Cap’n!”

Skipping across the street Regina smiled back at the child with uncharacteristic delight. It was a kind of contentment she couldn’t put her finger on, one that only came about around this singular person. Whether in the form of happiness, anger, or sadness, outward emotion was not lightly doled out without the guarantee of getting something in return. With Henry Regina felt so selfless and genuine in her gestures. Though she could never see herself gaining some profit, she would be remiss to say she didn’t enjoy the smiles and giggles the boy returned at the mere sight of her. Her former first officer and so-called admirers could not hold a candle to this kind of worship.

“Hello, Henry.”

Regina fell silent then, a bit tongue-tied as to what to say further. After all, she hardly knew him that well.

He shared in the uncertainty for all that was said was a meek, “Hi” in return.

She looked to the woman, peering into her eyes and hit with the realization that her knowledge of the other party was limited, too. “Miss…” she prompted kindly. Formality upheld in duty would not be shirked before two near strangers on a street corner.

“’Mulan’ is fine. It’s nice to see you again, Captain Mills.”

“A pleasure.” Regina panned down to Henry and her stiffness abated. “And what might you two being doing today on this fine afternoon?”
Pouting face all but scrunching into a prune, Henry cut straight to the point. “Mulan won’t take me to the park.”

“Oh?” A tongue click later and her next question directed to the babysitter. “And why is that?”

“It’s a new park on the outskirts of the Presidio. I would be glad to take him there, but Emma likes to scout out any new destinations before I take him there. Our stomping grounds are usually in familiar areas like this.”

“I see. And where is Miss Swan?”

“Not here,” the boy spoke up as he swung Mulan’s hand dejectedly. Lately, he had come to understand that ‘Miss Swan’ meant ‘Momma’ to him.

“You’ll see her soon,” Mulan said soothingly. “She just had some errands to take care of.” Black hair cascading, her head tipped to the captain. “She’s picking him up in a half hour, but this one here has been growing antsy. I think he’s bored.”

Hand still clutched to Mulan’s, Henry bent down on his little legs to pick at something on his shoes before standing up again and looking around. His brow bunched at the passing hovercars until their shining exteriors and perpetual drone ceased to impress. Soon his attention fell on Regina and, realizing that he was being watched, his frown ceased.

Struck with an idea, Regina held the curious stare a moment longer before addressing Mulan.

“You must have quite a bit of studying to do in your line of work.”

“Yeah…” Mulan’s brow rose. “Yeah, in xenobiology that is certainly the case.”

“I’m sure these jaunts with Henry serve as nice distraction, though, sooner or later that sense of duty crops up and begs to be satisfied.”

“Well, my superior has me on this project right now and its really very significant to opening a doorway into learning more about cytoplasmic life forms, but…” The budding scientist’s excitement wavered at the hand swinging in hers. “… I promised Emma I would watch Henry for a few hours. I take my job very seriously, Captain, even if I could get paid better elsewhere. I’m dependable.”

“I don’t doubt it.” With a brief flourish, she brushed dust of an undetermined origin from her jacket. “I would be willing to take Henry off your hands so you can go about your very important work. You can go on with the continued sense of loyalty to your employer, society will benefit from your eager approach to xenobiology, and Henry and I can catch up.” Shoulders shrugged and a mouth curved upwards like it was the answer to all the galaxy’s problems.

“I don’t know…”

“I am to meet Miss Swan later for a pre-mission briefing anyway, so it works out perfectly.” The captain’s widening smile was as victorious as a spider catching its victim in a web. “Don’t you think?”

Mulan’s inner deliberation eventually ended in agreement. After strict instructions on babysitting basics and Emma’s rules (to which were sniffed at) the young woman left them with a wave.

Suddenly, the captain found herself alone on a street in the suburbs with a four-year-old boy. Anyone familiar with the ‘Evil Queen’ and bitch-on-wheels captain of Storybrooke would have thought it an insane fairy tale. It should have been maddening to Regina and had her flying to the
Henry beamed up at her with a baby-toothed smile. The sight was oddly comforting and her clammy fists unfurled finger by finger.

After taking a glance at their surroundings and ensured that no fingers were pointing and no charges of kidnapping were pressing, Regina clasped her hands in front of her and cleared her throat. From the height of her knees Henry shifted from sneaker to sneaker, head tilted up at her.

Now what?

Considering what she had been accused of not long ago there was a seed of doubt. What did she know about children? Regina was capable of impressive feats but care for a little boy? What if he ends up not liking me? she thought. What if he finds out what I’ve done and hates me?

True to his babysitter’s assertion, the hours were growing long and his body became anxious with feet rocking, arms swinging to his sides, and lips humming idly. Henry’s eyes brightened in intensity. He thought he was getting his way and being taken to the new park, which Regina thought adorable. She grinned wickedly. This was almost as fun as putting her first officer down, if not more so because the boy was far better company.

“I know you’re excited about this new park, Henry.”

“Yeah!”

“Yes, but parks can be too loud and boisterous for little children such as yourself.”

She felt an instant pang of remorse at Henry’s falling smile (which was new because she prided herself on going through life without experiencing guilt over her actions). Despite lacking the vocabulary to understand the word “boisterous,” he certainly knew when an adult was saying “no.” Placing her hands on her knees she leaned down a bit to deliver the news. A smirk rising effortlessly, Regina let her eyes narrow to a possibly fantastic proposition.

“But I have a better idea…”
Chapter 7

It only took a few blocks to reach the Presidio and mere minutes for a wary frown to turn upside down. At four o’clock the Cosmofleet Academy lobby was nearly empty, leaving Henry’s gleeful shouts to echo unhindered. Only a few passing students and the occasional instructor witnessed the overexcited boy dragging the commander along by the hand.

Regina laughed, almost stumbling across the glossy floor of the atrium to keep up. Henry’s enthusiasm could easily be compared to a younger version of herself as a new academy pupil. Although her excitement had been subdued in her mother’s presence back then, that same sense of wonder had still been waiting to burst forth. In a way, she envied Henry’s upbringing and the freedom blowing through his hair in this moment.

First and only of its kind, the academy attracted the boldest and the brightest in the galaxy, so it was only fair that its grounds had similar taste. Polished ivory pillars supported high-rise ceilings, windowed walls lined the entrance and either sides of the structure while the back led to lecture halls and several training hangers and gymnasiums. Suspended in midair ran a motivational holoprogram on the academy’s achievements. It included student testimonies on the importance of serving the Commonwealth as well as personal spiels on why they signed up. Banners hung on either side of the holo in the gold and gray colors of Cosmofleet. An upper balcony lined the walls and overlooked the entire atrium.

An inhuman squeal reverberated as Henry scrambled towards the center fountain and what soared above it. Regina would have thought a son of a space pilot would be acquainted with such sights, but the boy’s jaw dropped at the spectacle like it was the grandest thing in the universe. Past doubts shrunk to miniscule things because it appeared that her idea was indeed better than the park.

A small forefinger pierced the air, reaching for the full-scale fighter hanging from suspended cables. There were, in fact, several craft decorating the lobby, each a different model and class. One red and dusty gray fighter craft being pointed to had caught the particular attention of the boy.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, his whole body vibrating like an ion engine. The excitement cascaded off him in waves.

She wanted to say “Settle down. It’s just a starship,” but something in those vibrant green eyes held her tongue.

“What do you know what it is?” Regina asked, watching him watch the ship.

Finger still reaching, he jumped as high as he could (which hardly reached a few standard inches). “A starship!”

“That’s right. It is a retired model. Very, very old. The last time it saw the stars was years before you were born.”

“It doesn’t fly?”

“Not anymore. Much more advanced ships have replaced it though – ships with better traveling capabilities. A craft like this could only reach a small fraction of the distance a craft today is able to reach.” Looking to the other ships, one stood out among the others. It had an elongated cockpit like an upside down teardrop and held together its long wings which scissored in an ‘x’ shape. She pointed to it and said, “That one there is a prototype. Do you know what that means?”
Henry shook his head.

“It is a model for experimentation purposes. Once tests have been run and it has been cleared for space flight then more of them are made.” In her spotless pantsuit, Regina kneeled down to his height. Close enough to whisper in his ear, she said, “There are only two in the known galaxy. This one is the *Valiance*.”

“Where is the other one?”

Raising her chin in authority, she fluttered her eyes and replied, “That is classified information.”

Beside himself with giggles, he tried his hardest to pull a straight face while saying, “Pweeeease?”

“Perhaps you’ll find out when you join Cosmofleet. Would you like that?”

“Momma calls me ‘little pilot.’ That’s what I’ve *always* want to be when I grow up!”

“Well, if you work very hard and do not compromise your principles then that’s what you’ll be.”

“Cooool!”

Regina looked on as Henry continued to gaze up at his future, legs jiggling in preparation for his first flight simulation. It would be a long time, but her words were delivered with such surety that anything could be possible for the ‘little pilot.’ The beaming expression, alone, demanded it.

She would be willing to bet the future written over the boy’s face had not been as gleeful in his mother’s at one time. Having done her research, Regina knew Emma grew up in foster care and possessed few, if any, examples of good parenting. Unlike her son, Emma was not raised with someone on her side to encourage her dreams and caution her of the dangers in taking the easy road.

Regina could have imaged that if mother and son boasted of similar, healthy upbringings their shouts of “Cool!” and looks of star blinding marvel would be symmetrical. Henry was his mother in virtually every way, every detail she could not admit to liking in Emma, but on the boy it became another matter entirely. They shared the same nose and chin, the same mannerisms, and equal excitement whenever they were in grabbing distance of a powered vehicle. According to Emma, her son had a habit of lunging for the controls of Mulan’s hover car when it was borrowed to her, but to the captain’s relief the mini co-pilot was forbidden from steering anything that moved until he was 30-years-old.

It was the eyes, though, that drew Regina to Henry most of all. They were kind in a way her past used to steal her away from Mother. Kind in an exhilarating sense of possibility and future. The pair of small blue windows opened up to her (of all people) and allowed her to be wrapped up in the innocence of his soul, a one-of-a-kind soul that was lightyears from the likelihood of being warped into a snarled one of her own.

Where in the galaxy did he get that soul from? Regina had asked herself time and again. How on Earth did he get those beautiful eyes?

That kindness could probably be detected in any other. Many children his age had not yet reached a maturity that impressed corruption. But Regina could not admit to knowing many children, so it felt right that Henry *had* to be special to her. She felt *compelled* to treat him differently than anyone else.

In a small voice, but not lacking in curiosity, Henry asked Regina about another dangling starship. Narrowing her eyes at the markings, she determined its model and class with the confidence of a seasoned commander. Henry listened intently to her speech on YX-1300 transports while his eyes
only yawned wider.

Henry was not one to hide his curiosity, a quality Regina found enchanting. He asked as many questions as any adventurous starship pilot, much like the one Regina had been in her youth (and she would assume in Emma’s). He absorbed everything with an intuitive eye. He didn’t touch, but beheld with his mind like a wide-eyed, budding scientist. Regina observed much in her time spent around the Swans. Every time he had a question about something, without fail, he climbed up into his mother’s arms and whispered his inquiry to her ear. Sometimes it was asked with a smile, other times with a tentative frown, but always below a whisper like it remained a secret between a son and his mother. And though Regina would not admit to doing so, she watched Emma who would take the question with a wide, adoring smile before turning her own lips to the boy’s ear and whisper back with equal secrecy. Emma would then make some undisclosed joke and they would go on in a fit of giggles and kisses and it made Regina’s heart ache for what was lacking in her own life.

There were times just standing a few feet from this intimate snapshot that she felt an intruder on their time together. An intruder on family. Sometimes Regina would look inward and remember she forfeited her chance the minute she became a fleet commander. She chose one life over another and was left to watch this parent/child bonding from a distance as an outsider and inquisitive spectator. Like Henry, Regina observed with a keen eye – looking, never touching (or trying very hard not to).

“What’s that?”

Before the captain could answer her hand received a good tug and they were off on another sprint across the atrium. A squeaking accompanied the small pair of sneakers while staccato clicks hurried from behind. They stopped just before an enormous wall the length and height of the entire atrium. Its surface was smooth to touch and polished to a marble shine. Upon the charcoal colored wall hung hundreds of gold plates, each individually labeled in the frame.

Henry stuck his finger out, but hesitated when he was within a centimeter from touching. Looking up tentatively, he received the okay before tapping on one of the metal plates.

“This is the Wall of Commendation,” Regina explained.

“It’s shiny.”

“Each one represents a particular honor awarded to an academy student. There are over a hundred honors here, stretching all the way back to Cosmofleet’s beginning.”

“That’s a lot!”

Regina chuckled at his gasp and the way his head craned all the way back in order to take in the magnitude of the Wall. Curious herself, she slipped from his grasp to walk a short length along the wall. When she found what she was looking for she wriggled her fingers for Henry to join her. Once there he was pointed to a plaque with several dozen honors underneath.

“This is me,” Regina said, her smile as proud as the day she graduated.

Seeing it for the first time brought on a nervous tickle beneath her skin. She was beset with questions: Have I changed since my academy days? Am I the captain I worked so hard to become? The gold plates ranged from honors in simulation to sparring to advanced courses. Many could not be called upon to remember; it had been ten years and Regina had been through so much. As a captain she experienced things in uncharted space, things both strange and wondrous. Her crew numbered in the hundreds, the missions were many, and her orders had been just as numerous. After ten long years in the fleet how could she remember such insignificant accommodations? Maybe I
have changed, Regina thought.

“Where’s Momma?”

“Well, let’s see if we can find her.” When Regina spotted Emma’s name plate she hoisted the boy into her arms so he was at eye level with the plaque. “There she is,” she said, lips to his ear. He was so light she could use her free hand to point under the label *Emma Swan*.

“Cooool.”

She chuckled, her breath tickling his hair. His frequent use of the word “cool” always brought a smile from her. Though it would strike any refined individual as annoying, Henry said it so adorably he could quite possibly never wear it out around her.

With Henry in her arms Regina joined in reading each shiny gold plate. One in particular came to her attention, sending a furious rush of heat to her face.

“She beat me,” the captain muttered incredulously. Her teeth clicked shut, making her look just as menacing. “She beat my score, that little –“

“Lookie!” Henry’s legs flapped so excitedly Regina had to tighten her grip under him. “Didn’t Momma do a good job?!“

Smiling blue eyes met brown before the latter took in the wall again. While Emma indeed broke her most famous record Regina had to admit that she was a trailblazer in the area of flight sims and strategy. Emma broke almost as many barriers as her competition as evidenced by the shining plates that hung below her name. Regina would always be the one who carved a path for those after her, but it was Emma who challenged that standard and overcame it (if only by one honor).

“Yes,” Regina replied softly, “she did.”

His legs wiggled happily in response.

In the midst of explaining each of the simulations and trials his mother excelled at, Regina turned to a shout.

“What the hell, Regina?!“

“Momma!” Henry’s little feet were running before the captain could put him down. “Momma, Momma!”

Emma cupped a hand to the head of brown hair braced to her knees. She stroked it a few times before setting her teeth. As if shielding him from a wicked witch, she pulling him onto her hip and clutched him safe and sound to her breast.

“What the hell are you doing with my kid? Where’s Mulan?”

If Regina cared, she would have felt hurt at the distrust in Emma’s eyes. Numb from such pain since early adulthood, she would claim on the record that the prick went undetected.

“Mulan had an errand,” she said, almost flippantly. “I offered to take him off her hands. It was no trouble.”

Distrust flashed to anger which rolled like thunder in her stormy green eyes. “Try again.”

Regina pursed her lips. “I am not a liar, Miss Swan. You should be grateful I was available at all.”
Emma’s grip on the boy eased, but anger had clearly made its home. Her jaw tightened further before it opened to spit forth, “I know what you were doing and I won’t stand for it. You sweet-talked Mulan into ditching my kid. Mulan always calls me if something comes up. How was I supposed to know where my son was? What if something happened to him?”

Regina’s eyes immediately flitted down to Henry and softened. She returned to Emma and the softness turned to stone. It was like night and day. “I would not have let that happen.”

“You’re a captain, not a babysitter,” Emma hissed, “as you insisted before.”

“And I am off-duty. Unlike you, Miss Swan…” The woman’s haggard appearance spoke of hours spent in a flight sim. Her zippered jacket and fitted cargos contained wrinkles, her hair was a mess of curls tied in a loose ponytail, and a sheen of sweet stood out under the atrium lighting. She even seemed to tire under the weight of her four-year-old whom Regina confirmed just minutes ago as a lightweight. She raised a brow at the unkemptness of her first officer. “You look like you came out of the wrong end of a wormhole.”

You have no idea, Emma thought with a huff. “Don’t change the subject,” she said instead. “I’m off-duty, so you can go away now. And don’t ever pull that stunt again. Not with my kid.”

The stern look almost convinced Regina, but it was the flame in her eyes that did the trick. She had never seen her first officer like this, so distrustful, so reddened with ire. It was a different kind of temper than the one Regina nearly had to defend herself against when a fist pulled back in her own quarters on the Storybrooke. Is that what I look like? Regina thought briefly. The anger and the resentment… the twitching nerve at a temple and the curl of a punishing lip…?

Nevertheless, Henry was lucky to be held under such protection. Bright as the Tirat sun and hot enough to scorch her very skin, it was a kind of flame of love that never snuffed out. Regina found that it was one of many things about Emma Swan she was forced to respect.

“Regina.”

The captain bit down on her tongue and gave as close to a nod of consent as was lent.

Emma started towards the exit, heaving her son higher on her hip as he played with the tangled curls from her ponytail.

Not at all agreeable to the figurative door in her face again, Regina called out, “We have a pre-mission briefing, Miss Swan!”

Without turning Emma retorted, “Then we’ll take it to the playground!”

* * *

Pre-mission briefing took longer than it needed to be. Details were drawn out to the specifications of the captain who had the mind of a sponge and could go on for an extended amount of time. It was quite obvious that Regina took pride in her work. Emma just wished her crew didn’t have to suffer from weekly uniform check-ups.

When actually the briefing counted as only 15 minutes, Regina saw fit to monopolize Emma’s afternoon by giving a speech on appropriate behavior aboard the Storybrooke (which were really Regina’s rules, not Cosmofleet’s). Emma slouched back and held her head up during the riveting monologue. She tried her hardest not to doze off. Inspection included a boot check for a suitable waxed shine and a review on the crispness of all sleeves and collars. And lest they forget all shirt tails must be tucked in at all times.
“Interstellar travel should not allow us to evade the base principles of hygiene,” the captain had said. “Space and anything that fills it up should be clean and dignified.”

There were a lot of things Emma didn’t know going into this job. If she had known about all the paperwork, the stuffy regulations, and emotionally compromised captains… Well, she wasn’t exactly at the point to entertain an answer to that, but she sure as hell didn’t expect what was being asked of her, not to mention someone was putting her in a position to enforce these rules of hygiene and productivity. Me in a position of power, Emma thought shaking her head. Who in their right head would think up something so irrational?

Though a long, arduous meeting, Emma suffered through it with fewer than normal eye rolls. There was no reason to make a fuss if Henry was having a grand old time at the new park. Evading the monstrous monkey bars as usual, the boy had ridden the slide a dozen times before losing interest and moving on to something new. As the captain rambled on about corridor conduct Emma watched her son wind down the slide and land on the mat at journey’s end.

“Are you even listening?”

“Yeah.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to take a bit more pride in your job. Millions of cadets would kill for it.”

“I think you ensure enough pride for the both of us,” Emma said, with a humorous smirk. At the sound of a low growl she held up her hands. “Kidding.”

Her laugh was not to demean, rather to lighten the mood. The captain was about as petulant as Henry when he didn’t get his way. If only there was a new park she could take Regina to in order to calm her down. Sitting on the park bench with Regina was not a sure-fire way of cooling her ion jets, but somehow it did the trick. Between the smoky vocals and the white noise of regulations and uniform code she was nearly lulled to sleep like a baby.

“What were you doing with Henry at the academy?” Emma finally asked. The strained quality of her voice left it known how much it had troubled her. “Why did you take him there of all places?”

Regina shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I? He is old enough to know the importance of his mother’s profession.”

“That’s my call to make.” Emma’s jaw set again before she remembered parks were peaceful places, not grounds for a fist fight between captains and their first officers. She stiffened against the bench’s cold, metal back. “Cosmofleet is no place for a kid.”

Shifting on the bench, Regina wet her lips before speaking. “But he is your child. Shouldn’t he know about his parent’s accomplishments?” She wouldn’t go as far as proposing that Henry be proud of his mother. According to academy records, Emma’s fail rate was just about equal to her success rate. It was astounding that she even graduated. “Most children are surrounded by the culture. That is why recruitment in the fleet is a family affair. Fathers encourage their sons into Cosmofleet based on their own line of work. It is natural for any child – son or daughter – to follow in their parent’s footsteps.

“No. That’s not the life I want for him. If it weren’t for the stellar pay I wouldn’t be doing it.”

“That’s hard to believe.” A mixture of doubt and regard narrowed Regina’s eyes. “With your penchant for leaping headfirst into unstable ion engines…”

“There’s a reason why Cosmofleet doesn’t recruit people with kids. They’re a distraction on the job, not to mention you can’t just let them onboard and hand them over to a babysitter. As far as I know
the Storybrooke doesn’t have a daycare service.” Emma rubbed down the uneven pleat in her jeans. Her fingers smoothed over it before picking at it again and starting the whole process over. “It’s an unspoken rule, one I can understand. It’s hard to feed and clothe a child when you’re lightyears away.”

Emma’s focus on the crease became so intense it drew the attention of the captain.

“Raising a child is more than that.”

“Don’t you think I know that?! Do you know how hard it is to love someone and support them when you can’t be there every day? It’s not fucking easy. I’ve been a mom for all of four years and I’m still wondering when the time comes when I can stop trying so blasted hard to look out for him. I lay awake at night feeling my chest cave in because I don’t know if my own son is still alive. I keep wondering and staring up at the ceiling while he’s left to plan out the three weeks a year we’ll have together.” There were tears filling her eyes, but she refused to let the hot sting exert power over her. “I don’t have anyone but Mulan to take care of him if I don’t come back. I can’t trust anyone else with Henry. Do you understand that? That’s why I haven’t told anyone about him. It’s too much pressure – on me, on him…” Her throat closed over a sob. “Fuck…”

The whimper of a curse barely reached Regina’s ear just as Emma turned to bury her wet face in a hand. Having the courtesy to look away, Regina fed her stare to the brown-haired boy on the playground. If Emma’s agenda involved getting the captain to feel sorry for her it went unsuccessful. The galaxy was a dangerous place peopled with blaster carrying idiots. Earth was no exception. From childhood Regina had been instilled with an awareness of inner pain. She had a good head on her shoulders and knew harmony in oneself was just as much a flight of fancy as it was in the universe. Bad things happened to good people; you could not escape the foulness of sentient beings and the inevitability of heartbreak. Life could be a tragedy and, yes, it exerted an outrageous amount of pressure. You just had to push back hard enough in order to have some control over it. For Regina, it was simple physics.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“What, you thought I planned on saying all that? That I had it on my checklist for today? Well… I guess I can scratch that one off, the one that precedes getting bitched out for making my superior officer uncomfortable.”

“If you think a meager sob story is enough to shake me, Miss Swan, you are gravely underestimating my patience.”

Emma stared ahead, muttering, “You’re a horrible person.” It was evident from the dry glance how little punch the remark packed.

“And you are deplorable.”

“Glad we straightened that out.”

Suddenly the pieces began to fall into place. Every bit of this puzzle of a first officer clicked, leaving Regina to wonder. Her eyes widened to a discovery she neither expected nor particularly wished to confront.

“That’s why you had trouble at the academy,” she murmured. “Henry.”

Resenting the insinuation, Emma fully confronted Regina. Her arm propped on the back of their bench, she dipped her chin. “I had no trouble passing my courses. But if you are referring to my
legendary skills at getting suspended then I am afraid that is all due to my ego – and not because I am a mother. I wasn’t around much at home because I had to make up for all the instructors I pissed off. My days were divided up between the flight sim and a few stolen minutes with my kid.” Following an assurance that Henry was still within view, Emma glanced at Regina and added, “You have no idea how much at the end of the day I looked forward to reading *Mr. Frog and Spaceman Joe’s Wild Cosmic Adventures.*”

“What could you have done to aggravate your instructors?”

Emma gave a pointed look.

“I suppose I hardly have to ask,” Regina said, rolling her eyes. “It’s a miracle they accepted your graduation from academy. I could also impress the phenomenon that Command even let you on my ship.”

“Why do you put up with me then? Why not just replace me like you did my predecessor?”

“Because Sidney Glass was a different matter,” Regina replied swiftly as if it was not up for debate. “And suspending you would be an admission of defeat. I never lose, Miss Swan.”

“You think you can change me?”

“It appears I have no choice in the matter.”

“Hm, seems like you were right.”

“Oh?”

“I may have underestimated your patience after all.”

Regina smirked. “You are not the first, dear. Many are unable to comprehend what I am capable of until it is too late.”

“Do I want to know what that means?”

Emma received a grin and a flip of her hair as the captain turned back towards the playground.

“Count yourself lucky, Miss Swan.” Dark brown eyes squinted into the distance as if they could see the future. “For now.”

The subtle threat was taken to heart. Though she had born witness to the softer side of the captain these past few days, Emma knew full well how much she would not like to be on the wrong end of a blaster in the hands of Regina.

With a flick of her wrist Emma read her chrono. It was getting late and based on the sluggish gait of her son, Henry would be asking for dinner and a bedtime story soon. She leaned forward, propping her elbows on her knees. Emma bit her lip, wondering what was in store for her this time if she were to ask. After a few seconds of scrubbing her palms together she finally did.

“Are you going to tell me why you hate the Freedom Raiders so much?”

“No.”

Emma sighed heavily and looked down at the grass at her feet. “Will you ever tell me? Like… using words other than ‘no’?”
“It depends.”

Eyebrows perking up, Emma inquired, “On what?”

Regina thought about it, and not for the first time. “On how long my first officer stays in one place.”


“Miss Swan, must you always be so dogged in your pursuit of trivial matters?”

“I can stick it out. Ten years is nothing.”

“Yes, well, that permanent line between your eyes begs to differ.”

“Huh?” Emma’s head jerked back. “What line?” She started patted her face down in search of it.

“It appears you son has lost interest in the playground’s facilities,” observed Regina. She stood up with little warning. “I must be off.” Emma’s blank expression at so swift an exit had Regina smirking in secret. “Please give Henry my farewell.”

True to form, Emma still lagged at the crux of their talk. “I can be patient!”

Regina kept walking. “We shall see.”

* * *

Regina tore down the hall and into her office without a second’s glance to her secretary. She had just finished a meeting with the admirals and every time it left her irate and frustrated. Chief responsibility for the upsurge of hostility rested with Command. They were everything she hated about the fleet, including their crisp uniforms. Command was rife with sexism, discrimination against foreign sentients and outsiders, and always caught up in the latest political scandal. It was not the kind of leadership she wielded on her starship. Her principles were held to a higher standard.

Regina snarled at the files she thrust down on her desk. The admirals with their expensive suits and air of superiority… They probably couldn’t pass a flight sim to save their lives. All they knew was strategy – strategy that benefited their payroll and their political networks. They knew nothing of sacrifice, of having to make split-second decisions that could cost the lives of your crew. They didn’t know the kind of pressure a captain dealt with on a daily basis.

But she had been in command of her own ship for five years, so she was well versed in the ways in which to rein in the urge to strangle. There was no other option but to sit through these meetings with teeth marks on her tongue. Regina did not handle authority well – male authority even less. Times like this when she had to put on her game face called for special appearances. Usual dress comprised a long pencil skirt, blouse, and heels, although meeting before the admirals was not comparable to delegating in front of her crew. It wasn’t just about encouraging her wrath and power over underlings, but sending a message that she meant business. No matter what Command had on her she was there to stay.

To enforce that memo a skirt and heels would not do. It called for a more basic outfit. For Regina, basic meant full uniform. Walking into the conference room dressed to the nines in gray trousers, a formal military issue jacket buttoned up to the neck, medals pined modestly to her collar and breast pocket, and a short-visored cap to finish. Wearing that uniform, crisp and fitting since graduation day, always sent a dose of courage through Regina. Buffed to a shine, her black boots could have walked right over her superiors and she wouldn’t have batted an eye. In fact, she would have smiled and done it again, and again, and again.
It was a strategic wardrobe that gave off a masculinity few women could get away with. Yet there could be no shortage of sexuality when Regina donned that uniform. It showed just how much power was contained in her gaze, the clench of her fist, or simply her gait. The uniform allowed the captain the upper hand; she could be at their same level and still get their eyes to wander. Distractions like that were all too easily manipulated into opportunity. Men could be so easily dominated if a woman knew how to control her body just as well as her mind. Wearing a paper sack could get their attention but it wouldn’t get you far unless you had the brains to turn those precious seconds into something more, something that tipped the balance of power in your favor.

Regina had been at this for five years – ten if she counted her stint as a first officer. It was a dance she knew and had mastered until she was blue in the face. Times like this she wished she never had to return to Earth. Given the choice, Regina would have taken the *Storybrooke* and her crew and flew across the galaxy never to return. Her domain was amongst the stars. There she could promote her own principles and rule over her own people as she pleased. That kind of freedom sent a thrill through her veins. She had tasted it, repeatedly, until it came time to return to Earth and resume fleet protocol and attend these ridiculous meetings with Command.

Sinking onto her couch with a sigh she unzipped her boots and threw them to the side. A distraction was needed, so with a remote she flipped on the holonews. A three dimensional image projected from the coffee table and morphed into the afternoon news. Regina sighed again, easing the tension out breath by breath. She propped an elbow up on the arm of the sofa and rested her hand against a morose face.

Having just wrapped up the sports segment the reporter turned it over to the anchorwoman. The reports included new galactic sanctions on terrorists, deliberations over the seating of a new world, the status of a terra-forming planet project in the Nafghani System, and possibly shocking new data received from the SETI Institute.

Regina rolled her eyes, wondering how a bunch of nonprofit scientists were still in the business of finding extraterrestrial life. Wasn’t their own galaxy a big enough petri dish for them? All they had to do was walk to the nearest grocery store to find a non-humanoid life form. But no, that wasn’t enough. They had to spend billions upon billions of funds to ‘look outside the box’ (so to speak). Better their money than mine, she thought.

The fingers of her hand scrubbed at the surface of a migraine. She frowned through the pain, forehead bunching and mouth grimacing. It never got easier. None of it.

Hand shielded from the soft glow of the holo, Regina did not see the next report. Instead she heard it.

“A startling announcement has just come to our attention…” There was a tapping in the background as the anchorwoman brought the highlights up on her datapad. “It appears that there has been a terrorist attack. Just a few minutes ago a ground explosion detonated outside the Presidio. Several buildings have been flattened by the blast in addition to a portion of a school. The guilty party has stepped forward and named themselves as Raiders…”

Regina hand fell away so she could see it with her own eyes. Blood boiled and ears burned to every word that came from the holo.

“… I repeat: the Raiders have stepped forward claiming responsibility for this attack. According to our sources, rescue operations are underway. At this stage it is uncertain whether there are any survivors. The devastation is… shocking, they say. We will all keep the victims and those children in our thoughts. Stay with us as we receive more information. I will now hand it over to our reporter outside the blast zone who –“
Regina switched off the holo with little sympathy. For as much malice she had towards the Raiders, Earth was not her purview. And, to be perfectly accurate, any and all attacks planetside were usually the work of fanatics trying to get noticed and thereby recruited into Raider factions. The real enemy was beyond, buried in the farthest reaches of unknown space and voyaging in unregistered, usually stolen vessels that had been scraped and refitted with illegal munitions.

The news was a simple tragedy. Earth had been hit with Raider attacks on a monthly basis for several years. A bombing could hardly be described as big news no matter how many ‘shocked’ faces the newscaster put on. The poor children would be prayed for and life for the living would resume.

But seconds after she ended the hologram with a dismissive wave something struck her. It came with so little warning someone could have merely prodded her collapse to the floor. Regina stilled, her blood frozen over. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t speak or blink. It occurred to her at warp speed, the rush making her dizzy. She remembered the name of one of the buildings in the explosion – the school’s name. It sounded familiar before when the newscaster mentioned it, but its significance hadn’t hit her until now. She remembered and the tragedy ceased to become just a simple tragedy. It was a personal one.

Mouth open in horror, Regina’s voice broke for the little boy being prayed for. “Oh…”

* * *

Strangely enough it had not occurred to Regina to comm Emma. When she arrived at the blast site everything was in disarray. Citizens came and went without authorization. Some were families – mothers, fathers, brothers, or sisters searching for hope below the rubble. There were medical officers, but not enough to cover the disaster area. They were not arriving fast enough. Soon it wouldn’t matter who came or how many. This was the time, Regina thought. This was the time when lives hung in the balance, the break between the lucky ones and the not so lucky ones.

Regina stumbled through. The scale of devastation could be felt more than seen. A chill fought the integrity of her synthetic insulated jacket she substituted with her uniform. Yet it did not stop there; the cold battled past the lining of her jacket penetrating the many levels of tissue, blood, and bone. She felt the cold and devastation treat her like one of its many victims.

The wreckage resembled an overgrown metal jungle. She had to be mindful of her step otherwise she’d find herself impaled on any number of sharp objects. She moved purposefully, but with swiftness. The jungle was twisted by durasteel, broken glass, concrete blocks ground to jagged pebbles, and flames licking at smoke. Hovercams zoomed overhead, capturing the devastation in time for the nightly news. She was a part of it all. Dust clung to her jacket, ruining it before it could be scowled at. Smoke enveloped her like a bubble, preventing her from a healthy breath and clear vision. Regina coughed on black plumes and gods knew what else. She brought up a soot dusted hand to her eyes. They itched and burned, but rubbing only seemed to worsen the symptoms. The heels of her boot crunched over debris. She cringed, wondering if she walked upon the bones of the dead. It was a graveyard of glass, steel, and death. She was at the epicenter of tragedy, and Regina hated it.

She hated the people who did this. The Freedom Raiders were responsible for everything she worked so hard to prevent: fear, the usurpation of power, and the most precious of all, life. They never played by the rules, not once. Children had been abducted. Women and their children, robbed from their homes and taken across the galaxy to who knows where. Innocent sentient were tortured, murdered. They didn’t use rules, they made up their own. Regina had realized the hard way. It was why she had broken regulation and dealt with injustice with rules she created. Fire had to be fought
with fire. Broken rules had to be met by rules equally broken.

She would not be so relentless if they had not constantly given her reason to hunt them. In her plan to scour the galaxy of Raiders her methods had been questioned only once. And that had only happened because she was met with someone brave (or stupid) enough to do so.

“Henry!”

Regina had been calling out for him with no response. She couldn’t get his name out any louder for the air filled with the hum of rescue machinery. Her lungs burned, yet she couldn’t imagine admitting defeat. Captain Mills never surrendered or lost a fight. While the academy afforded her skills to survive, she trained herself not to experience a time when survival was necessary. She trained herself not to fail, not to waver before fear.

“Henry Swan!”

But she was already failing. Raised bumps covered the skin beneath her jacket. Her body shook from the cold. She was tearing up, at a loss for whether the source came from smoke or sorrow. Either way, her worst nightmare consumed her.

A faraway sob echoed through the blast site. It could have come from anyone, but it was the first response Regina had gotten to her shouts. The sound repeated, vibrating through the metal buried in the ground. With a frantic gasp she flung herself in its direction regardless of her footing.

“Henry?”

She slipped through the opening without a thought for the dirt marring her clothes. She ducked beneath a metal girder, squinting into darkness.

“Is anyone there?”

She crawled on hands and knees, careful not to bump up against anything and prompt a cave in. The heel of her hand bit into something sharp and solid. Regina muttered a curse, feeling quite disappointed in her haste to come without a flashlight or rope or a medpack. The captain, always one step ahead of everyone, hadn’t been thinking.

“Impulsive, stupid…” she spat to herself.

“H-hellooo?”

It was the voice of a child’s, small and familiar. Regina’s heart almost jumped out of her chest.

“Henry Swan?”

A meager squeak confirmed.

“It’s Captain Mills,” she identified herself. Her knees dug into dirt as she wiggled further in. “Are you hurt?”

“Nooo.”

It wasn’t as confident as Regina would have liked, but she would take it over the alternative. “Is there anyone with you?”

“J-just me. It’s really, really dark…”
“I know, Henry. Just stay where you are and do not move. Is that understood?”

“Mm-hm.”

“I’m coming down to you…”

Regina felt her way towards the small voice that had called to her. It was so dark… just a few more feet and she thought Henry could reach out for her. She would pull him to her and drag them both out unscathed. She would call for help and demand the fastest, quality medical attention on planet Earth. Or at least that was the plan.

There had been no time to foresee the events beyond getting an emergency medical team because the hollow began rumbling around her. Regina barely computed what was happening before the ground fell out beneath her.

Her scream ended at a tiled, cracking floor. Dirt coated her back as she struggled to her knees. She coughed up more smoke and earth. By the time she got out of there (if she got out) she’d have a black lung. The captain cursed her awkward landing.

Grimacing past the pain, Regina crawled toward the whimper. There in the dark was the outline of a boy sitting with his back against a half-crumbled wall. His arms clung madly around his knees and chalky duracrete matted his hair like snow. A soft white glow emanated from his backpack. It was a flashlight keychain. The glow stick was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand but large enough to cast its life on their faces.

“Are you injured?”

Finally able to use her own judgment, Regina patted down his head, shoulders, arms, and legs. She was gentle, ready to stop her progress if he cried out or gave some sign of discomfort. After the check it appeared that Henry was one lucky boy.

“Henry?” She prodded softly, rubbing the blue sweatshirt covering his arms. “I need to check your face for any scratches.”

The snow dusted head lifted to reveal a face not marred by tears but dry as the Tume desert. Besides the wide, searching eyes he looked alright.

“There you are.” Regina smiled.

The corner of his mouth curved into a grin. It was his cautious way of showing he was okay. Always a shy and hesitant boy, Henry was still wary of her, but Regina would take would she could get.

“You’re alright now. I’m going to stay with you the whole time.”

She sat next him and propped herself against the wall. Sliding Henry’s pack over, her hands began searching through it for anything that would help their predicament. She highly doubted Henry had a comm unit, but it was worth an exploration. How she could forget her own comlink was a disappointment she didn’t want to deal with now.

“Your mother is a very bright woman,” muttered Regina, the words sounding alien to her ears.

Pinned to the inside the backpack flap was a tracking device the size of a thumbnail. Tracers like this were always active and started to light up when it received an unnecessarily jostle. Its steady blinking light let her know help was on the way.
“Help will come in no time. Soon we’ll be able to see the sky.”

Her hand went out to brush the bangs from his forehead. She swept them to the side just as she had seen Emma do the same. The gesture made her eyes burn more, reddening them round a luminous pool. She couldn’t understand why she felt responsible for him. He was a stranger to her up until a week ago. How could she spend years protecting herself when it only took a matter of days to put someone else’s life before her own and without a second’s thought?

“Are you scare-ed?” he asked meekly, sounding out the last word as two.

“I am,” she whispered back, feeling the truth of it in the depths of her. “A little. Are you scared, too?”

Henry didn’t answer. Instead he sat up and, to Regina’s wide-eyed surprise, crawled into her lap. He settled his side into her and laid his head so his nose was inches from her neck. She could feel the soft puffs of breath on her, giving her warmth and an odd sense of security. Frozen in the stillness, her hands finally moved, one on his head and the other at his back.

He was so small like this. His fragility frightened her and melted her all at the same time. She couldn’t understand, couldn’t rationalize, how anyone would want to harm this child. Why would someone do this? she asked herself. Her breath hitched before it became a sigh. Who hated this much to harm something this beautiful?

“You are such a brave boy,” she murmured into his hair. His little body curled up tighter and her arms just cradled him closer. “I don’t think I’ve met any pilot as brave as you are.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hm. And do you know what?”

“How?”

His nose was running. She wiped it up with the sleeve of her jacket.

“Many pilots – when they accomplish a great feat in the face of danger – are rewarded for their courage. When they confront their fears or face impossible odds those actions are recognized. And some,” Regina embellished with a smile, “receive an award.”

His eyebrows rose slightly. “Like those shiny things on the wall?”

Regina breathed easier in the light of his smile. She knew now that whether Henry’s name appeared on a marble wall or scribed onto paper that his fears were slowly abating.

Her head tipped and she smirked teasingly. “Something like that, darling.”

Regina couldn’t claim to understand children or their habits. She couldn’t even know what made them laugh or cry or sleep when they were cranky or take their medicine when they were sick. She couldn’t calm a fussy baby or convince them that the only monsters under their bed were pesky dusty bunnies. She didn’t have those instincts any more than she had a single motherly bone in her body. It was hard enough to carry hope for the both of them let alone provide for it twenty-four hours and seven days a week. In the minutes she was left to contemplate down there, Regina was beginning to realize just how tough Emma really was and how wrong her initial assessment of her first officer had been. As the minutes ticked by Admiral Hopper’s notion of respect had truly begun to sink in.

* * *
The minutes ticked by with occasional commentary from Henry. He talked about his dream of being a space pilot, the worlds he wanted his mother to show him, and the possibility of reaching the edge of space. While Regina would have corrected any other person over the foolish notion that the universe dropped off like the ancient theory of a flat Earth, she let him ramble on without interruption. His quiet, slowly articulated speech (peppered with a few misplaced words only a child of his age could mistake) seemed to calm her more than him. Snuggling into the captain, Henry also chattered on about the abrupt yet paramount need for pancakes to which even Regina would admit to desiring at that point.

Before they knew it, the rescue team had arrived. Both were shocked to hear the lead rescuer’s voice as Emma who exhibited surprise to find Regina with her son. Once secured by a harness, she rappelled down the steep incline. Her boots hardly met the floor before she opened her arms to the boy leaping into them.

“Hey, my little pilot,” she gasped into the shoulder of his hoodie. She sniffed and set about clipping a belt around him with trembling hands. When she was finished he was fastened tightly to her chest.

“There’s not much time.” Despite Emma’s dead focus on the harness Regina gathered that it was not her son being spoken to. “Several other areas have already caved in. This ground is not stable anymore.” She then patted Henry’s back to get his attention. “It’s really important that you hang on to me and not let go.” He nodded before wrapping his arms around her as far as they would go. “Good boy,” she said and kissed the top of his head.

Regina swallowed, forcing down any iota of frailty. “You are coming back, right?”

“Yeah,” came the obvious reply.

Emma signaled the rescue team with a sharp tug on the line and she and her son were pulled to safety. They left, taking the warmth and hope with them. Regina was left to wait alone.

The small alcove was high enough to stand and long enough to pace, so from crumbled wall to crumbled wall that was what she did. One hand perched at her hip, the other rubbing the back of her neck, Regina paced like she had never paced before. She wondered, and wanted, and worried, and prayed like it would save her from that prison. The chill closed around her, tighter and tighter, making her chest heave under unending, inexistent pressure. The splinter of light Henry had left her, the glow stick, flickered. The plastic crackled under her sweaty grip. She held onto that light like it was as her last hope, like it was the only hero in the room battling the darkness on her behalf. And if it went out, maybe so would she.

“Oh, hey. You’re still here!”

A light cut through the opening and struck Regina’s harried expression. She shielded her eyes.

“Of course I am, Miss Swan. Where else would I be?”

Emma smiled crookedly. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

“Your sense of priorities worries me.”

“You’re not claustrophobic, are you?”

“Just drop me the harness!”

“Alright, Your Majesty.”
Ascending from the pit with few scrapes and bruises Regina finally saw the light of day. When rescue personnel divested the harness and belts from her she took in her surroundings. Some feet away she saw them. Emma was knelt down before Henry, her harness still attached like an afterthought. Emma’s relief sailed on the breeze along with her son’s enthusiasm for his first real adventure. From afar Regina caught the murmur of happiness and demands to “never scare me like that again.”

Brushing off the medical staff’s examination, Regina watched with rapt attention. There were tearful (on Emma’s part) hugs, and plenty of kisses and “I love yous.” It all stirred something in the pit of her stomach. A wave of vertigo hit her so suddenly one of the EMTs had to offer their arm in stabilizing her. Refusing medical treatment, Regina escaped the blast site. She had done enough. She was no longer wanted. 

* * *

Henry wasn’t hers to lose.

Then why do I feel like I lost him? Regina thought. Why does my heart feel ripped from my chest? He is not mine.

The Regina that was trapped a dozen feet under the ground, the Regina that soothed and cradled Henry had not been her. She didn’t recognize that person. Mother wouldn’t address that weak-willed girl who let her knees get filthy and who could only be calmed by the likes of a four-year-old.

The sinking sensation she had felt in her gut had subsided. With rest and an early morning dose of paperwork it all became history. What could have prompted such a radical turnabout? Regina slowly realized that almost losing someone was more painful than actually losing them. She had felt it before like an old friend knocking on her door. She swore it would never visit a second time. Steps were taken to ensure it would not. To keep that promise the door had to be slammed shut, closing out any more ‘old friends,’ welcome or not.

It rationalized why Regina ignored the clumsy footfalls scuffing her office floor. The invisible wall that rose between her and the voice that followed proved the additional lengths taken.

“Regina? Hellooo?”

The captain’s pen carved a vicious signature. “I do not speak to people who barge into my office regardless of invitation.”

Emma shrugged, the dig rolling off her like an object in zero-g. “That’s too bad for those people because you’re such a joy to talk to."

“Please state your business, Miss Swan, or depart from my office and with less clomping than you are capable of.” Condescension dipped her chin. “That is why you came here – business?”

“Not… exactly. Why? Do you have something against social calls?”

“I’d hardly call your presence in my office or anywhere else in my vicinity a social call. I’m sure you have friends for that sort of thing. Why not take yourself down to the nearest hole-in-the-wall cantina and leave the business to people who work for a living?”

“Cranky,” Emma muttered. She covered it with a lazy turn of the head. Sensing she was being ignored again Emma shoved her hands within her pants pockets and played a tapping rhythm against her thigh. “So,” she drawled, eyes wandering anywhere, “I guess the reason I’m here is to sort of thank you…”
“How does that work exactly?” Regina cocked her head to the side, eyes narrowed perceptively. “A ‘sort of’ gratitude. Is that an expression of your people?”

“It’s all relative. I’m thanking you for what you did. I’m glad you were there with Henry. He told me what happened.”

“He told you what?”

“That… well, that you were scared. Not that that’s anything to be ashamed of. If it had been me down there I don’t think I would have handled it spectacularly.” Emma watched the point of her boot scuff the floor before she heard the click of a tongue and stopped. She tugged at the bottom of her lip. “Henry said you made him feel safe. That’s kind of a miracle because I’ve never been able to get my kid to trust anyone else or take to someone other than me.”

The strain in the voice chipped away at Regina. It caused her shoulders to sag and the pity to become animated that much more. Regina may have harbored some small shred of respect for Emma and quite readily pitied a mother’s burden, but she would not let herself feel guilty for making Henry want her.

“Besides Mulan.” Emma’s eyes shifted hesitantly. “I really don’t expect anything from you, Regina. When it comes to my son you shouldn’t feel obligated to account for his safety or his happiness. As his mother that’s my job. It’s a curse as well as a blessing. I know that may sound wrong and I guess it is, but I didn’t come from the kind of family you probably had. I would hardly call myself a kid who grew up with a great model of parenting.” She shrugged, the corner of her mouth knotting. “I try to get by. I take care of Henry the best way I know how.”

“Miss Swan…”

“So I need you to know how grateful I am for the bravery you showed in keeping it together in front of my kid. If it hadn’t been for you… I – I don’t know if he’d still be here.” Emma swallowed, still refusing to meet Regina’s gaze, unknowingly caressing. “Thanks, for finding Henry and staying. Thank you.”

Never blinking, Regina accepted with a slow, single nod.

“Though I can’t thank you for forgetting your comlink,” Emma snarked. The teasing reprimand was paired with a half grin and a brow raise. “That was very un-captainly of you.”

“A minor setback,” Regina asserted when she knew it was anything but. “And ‘un-captainly’ is not a word in any language.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Look it up, dear.”

“I will,” Emma glowered drolly, “later. In the meantime I’m taking you to lunch. You seriously need to get out of this office in the next century.”

“I am going no such place with you. I have work to do.”

Pulling up to one of the chairs in front of Regina’s desk, Emma slumped into it. The sigh almost resembled defeat. Her eyes fell on the surface littered with papers. Her astonishment grew with the widening of her gaze. “That’s your excuse? Work? You’re a gods blasted commander! What is all this paperwork?!”
Regina took one look at the expression of genuine appall and almost laughed. There were times she could admit that her first officer grasped a sense of duty in her work, but generally speaking Emma was a rebel at heart. Like her son, she lived on flights of fancies and wishes on stars. It reminded Regina just how much Emma’s behavior embodied more girl than woman.

“When you grow up, Miss Swan, I’m sure you will come to understand.”

“Seems like I was right,” Emma replied to the condescension. “Being captain is not unlike babysitting. But let’s not dwell on that. Your face doesn’t seem inclined. Instead, why don’t you join me for a lunch break.”

Insufferably, Regina shook her head. “One of your many talents, no doubt.”

“But I’m buying,” Emma explained like it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. “And, anyway…” Please don’t say it, Regina thought. *Please.*

“… there’s a little guy waiting outside in a hover car who won’t budge if I come out alone.” Emma tipped her head pleadingly. “Henry really wants you to come.”

The second his name was uttered Regina felt herself weaken and hated herself for letting the metaphorical door crack open. Any further and it meant her undoing.

“It’s most likely the last time you’ll see him,” Emma mentioned, knowing on the surface it didn’t matter but under all those defenses they both knew Regina cared more than she liked. “We’re scheduled to leave port in two days?”

“That’s correct. The *Storybrooke* commences launch as soon as our chief engineer gives the all clear.”

“Leroy giving you a lecture on his engines again?”

“They are *my* engines,” Regina stated firmly. “And he is nothing I can’t handle.”

“I don’t doubt that. So back to my offer…”

“Fine.”

“Really? You’ll come?”

“Close your mouth, dear, or you’ll swallow a glow fly.”

* * *

They had their last lunch at The Classic. By Henry’s insistence Regina got the pancakes which were specially ordered with fresh fruit. Pleasantly surprised by the good nature of their waitress, Regina allowed herself a moment of pure joy over the stack of fluffy flapjacks. After several seconds of beholding, the deep furrow in her brow was noticed. Both Henry and Emma proceeded to instruct her on the best method of “digging in” as they called it.

The two helpers took great delight in bringing another into their circle. Pancakes at The Classic was… well, it was a classic sport for the Swans and to share it with someone else meant the world to them. It thrilled them even more just to see her enjoying them.

“You want some pancakes with those pancakes?”
Regina paused mid-bite and managed to swallow her mouthful to reply, “Is that permitted?”

Emma and Henry laughed, knowing this was too good to be true. They had created a monster.

“It’s called ‘seconds,’ Regina,” informed Emma, “and, yes, they will let you order more pancakes.”

Her lips were patted dry with a napkin. “I shouldn’t.”

“As far as I know – and this is purely speculation – Cosmofleet does not have a policy against pancake feasts, so I don’t think you’re in danger of being court marshalled because of an inhuman appetite and good taste in food.”

“What if I can’t finish a second helping?”

“That’s what you have us for.” Emma’s smile widened as she ruffled her son’s hair. “Right, little pilot?”

“Right!”

Regina chuckled at the serious nod before picking up her fork again and commencing to ‘dig in.’ She purposely played ignorant to the wave Emma gave their waitress. Soon there was a second, steaming full plate and Regina settled that it was too late to back out now.

“You have a long way,” Emma said following a sip from her coffee, “before you are granted the title of a true pancake connoisseur.”

“It took me two years to be awarded the rank of lieutenant commander and five to captain. How long should it take to earn the title of pancake connoisseur?”

Emma shrugged smugly. “It takes as long as it takes. You, on the other hand, have in your possession a secret weapon.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“Tell her Henry.”

Licking his syrup stained lips in preparation, he exclaimed, “The Swan Eaters!” He thrust a fork in midair for effect.

Regina frowned. Emma as well.

“Oh… kid. That didn’t come out the way it should have come out.” Emma shook her head reassuringly at the captain who had seemed to grow from disturbed to amused. “We don’t eat swans. He meant that we, the Swans, are eaters. Really, there’s no slaying and eating of the Queen’s creatures in our household because that would be…”

“Beastly,” Regina helped out.

“Yeah.”

“And against the law.”

“Yup.”

Henry’s legs flapped under the table. Giddy as a school boy, he picked up his fork and stuck it into the air. “Teamwork!” he cried. His fork wielding arm held strong and true, waiting for the other two
to join him in the war cry.

As her tines clinked musically to the others, Regina’s face fell into memory. She remembered reading a book as a child. The title *The Three Musketeers* appeared in her mind, flashing gold on its worn burgundy cover. It had been her favorite story, but by the time she grew into adulthood the notion of three brave swashbucklers remained just that: fiction. The dream of her own family embodying a close-knit team that always watched each other’s backs never came true and instead of a pleasant memory, it was called up as a harsh reality.

“When do I get my award?”

“What award, Henry?”

“Oh,” gasped Regina. Her stomach dropped and she suddenly lost her appetite. “Henry, I’m so sorry. I forgot.”

“Anyone want to clue me in?”

Regina’s gaze left the boy’s despondent face for Emma’s. “I may have promised to give him something after we were rescued. At first it was just a story to distract him, but I did mean to offer him something. Nothing extravagant. Just something small he could keep. A reward for his bravery.” Regina’s eyes met the table as she shook her head, trying to understand how she could have done such a thing. “I can’t believe I forgot. It was senseless of me.”

“You’re right. It was senseless.” The snap was targeted in Regina’s general direction, causing her to flinch. Not wanting to upset her son, Emma lowered her voice and leaned closer over the table. “You can’t make promises you can’t keep, especially to kids.”

Regina paused, at a loss for how to respond. She didn’t know why she forgot Henry’s gift. She meant to pick something up for him at one of the many small shops passed by on her jaunts outside the Presidio. For a young boy of four Henry showed great courage in a horrific situation. In Regina’s mind an act like that warranted recognition. In yet she forgot so easily. Maybe because she wasn’t a mother or maybe because for the past 24-hours she had tried to make herself forget a weak moment.

Sleep had been lost over the debate. Had she acted like the valiant young commander her mother could be proud of? Or had she succumbed to the fear entrenched prison that day, latching onto the first person who opened his arms to her, making promises she couldn’t see through? She was awake the whole night, torn between duty and emotion; one half yearning for the boy who banished her fears and the other half calculating the odds of what would happen if she allowed the former to hold sway.

Witnessing the devastation strewn across a novice face, Emma took pity on Regina. Softening her words, she said, “It’s fine. He’ll get over it. Just don’t do it again.”

Regina gave a vacant nod.

When the check came Emma left the table to pay at the register.

“I’ve always wanted to adopt a child.” Regina didn’t have a clue why she was confessing it, and to a child not five-years-old. She didn’t know if it was to cheer him up after forgetting his gift, but it quickly dawned on her that telling Henry eased a weight she never knew she carried. “A little boy would have been ideal, but it didn’t matter either way.”

“Why didn’t you?” Henry asked inquisitively.
Regina breathed and answered for the first time to anyone, “The time was never right. I work in Cosmofleet and that takes me away from home quite often. I’m already responsible for so many lives. My duty as a captain just seemed more important at the time.” She smiled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. It never did when she so much as thought about it.

Henry took in the strange confession. The lines of his face scrunched similarly to his mother. Without a word he climbed out of his high chair, his growing legs slowing the business down enough for Regina to grin, and hopped into the booth next to her. His hands were in his lap as he stared up at her.

“You must be sad.”

Regina smiled again. This time even the boy wasn’t fooled. Her throat bobbed. “Sometimes,” she whispered and took his hand, squeezing it. “But I am grateful for the people already in my life. I may not have children, but I take great joy in bestowing my affections on brave, handsome boys like you.”

“Like me?” Henry squealed with the perfect combination of happiness and shock.

Regina laughed, smoothing his bangs to the side. “Just like you, Henry.”

When lunch came to a close they gathered outside on the sidewalk. It was a lovely late morning, the sun chasing down on shadows and light traffic purring in the air. A local bakery opened its door to free its aromas of fresh loaves and buttered croissants. Outside of vintage shops the wisps of dresses and sleeves of jackets danced in the breeze on al fresco shopping day.

A very normal weekend, one would have thought, devoid of work responsibilities. To breathe the carefree, fresh air and be thankful for life in the aftermath of an atrocious incident.

While Emma and Regina lingered, Henry busied himself with his nose against the glass of a toy store window. Knowing the glowing toys and levitating miniature spacecraft would hold the attention of her son indefinitely, Emma addressed her captain.

“Thanks, again.”

“Yes.” Regina surmised from the shuffle of feet that Emma was beset with awkwardness. “And I do appreciate the lunch. You can rise to the occasion,” she muttered, shielding her eyes from the sun unnecessarily, “once in a solar eclipse.”

“Now I know you’re holding back.”

“I enjoyed lunch.”

“And…”

“The waitress ceased her dithering.”

Emma made a gesture for her to continue.

“And I suppose the company was not frightful.”

Clapping her hands together, Emma truly did believe she created a monster. “Boy, that must have been hard for you, huh? Must have been all those pancakes.”

“Conjecture all you want, Miss Swan. I happened to enjoy myself during a meal and that is all there
“Damn, I never thought pancakes – of all things – would make an honest woman out of you. We should flip on the holonews. We might be able to catch you in the noon report.”

“Enough.”

The laughing could not be faded.

“Your child is more mature than you are.”

“Say it isn’t so!” Emma mocked pleasantly. She then crossed her arms and reinforced her stance. “But seriously, it was kind of nice to see a frown-less Captain Mills for a change. You’re not so bad out of your element. Much less intimidating.”

“I can be.”

“Not with Henry around.”

“Ah, yes.” Regina smirked, cocking her head. “Because you would not think twice before using him as a shield.”

“What can I say? He’s got something I don’t have.”

“A brain?”

“Ha,” Emma deadpanned. “No. I mean he has a way of melting you down to star dust with just a smile. He could disable Storybrooke’s sublight drive and you’d just coo at him in rapturous delight. He’s got a mad crush on you, you know?” Her jaw hurt from pinning together her shit eating grin.

“Jealous, dear?”

“Of my son?” Emma made a ‘psh’ sound with a roll of the eyes that didn’t quite convince the other woman. “There’s nothing long-lasting there. A mere spark. The flame will burn out, just you wait.”

“Mm, we will.”

Regina bit her lip, wondering when she and her first officer had become so… friendly. She held the stare until Emma relinquished hers to duracrete at faster than light timing. When had they started talking about sparks and flames for gods’ sake? She caught Emma’s blush and the hand rubbing the back of her neck and Regina smirked. Seven hells, she thought just as her smirk began to sag. Am I flirting with Miss Swan?

Emma saw the captain flip her hair to the side and thought it was the prettiest flippy move she’d ever seen. Granted, she wouldn’t call herself an expert in hair styles. A hand went to her own hair and combed through its wind-blown curls absently. All charm and grace, Emma Swan grimaced to her beauty treatment.

“Momma!” Henry squealed, causing the two adults to snap back into the present. “They have the toy I want! Can we get it?”

“We’ll see, little pilot. Just give me a minute. And don’t jab the window like that or it will break.”

Emma watched as her son’s tapping slowed from manic to methodical. She smiled, letting love wash over her. Her heart beat erratically for how close they had come to losing each other. Leaving Earth in two days would prove a greater challenge, but she hoped the distance would only reinforce the
heart renounced to him the day he came into the world. She hoped her love for him became as strong as his for her.

“We have something in common now.”

Like Emma, Regina spoke with an ever fixed gaze over the boy. “What is that?”

She turned towards her captain. “We both have a score to settle with the Raiders. Though our rules of engagement differ, rest assured the next time a Raider vessel comes our way,” Emma set her jaw firmly before it opened to utter promise, “I won’t hold you back.”

Emma was not normally a threatening person, nor was she one to exert terror upon others. But as Regina felt those words pass over her like a rolling shadow she felt the stirrings of fear. Not for herself, but for the one that uttered the impassioned promise.
“I totally get her.”

“Who?”

“Regina.”

David’s and Ruby’s heads turned simultaneously to each other, matching their looks of concern before turning back. They sat side-by-side on the Storybrooke cafeteria bench across from their first officer.

“Emma, I thought we talked about this. She’s an enigma. A pretty enigma, but an enigma nonetheless.”

“Yeah,” David chimed in, “No one just ‘gets’ her. And if they did they wouldn’t live to tell the story.”

“That’s a bit dramatic, guys. I thought you two would be happy that I cracked the case on our boss. She’s really not as ferocious as people claim.”

“Claim?” Ruby asked flatly, her cornbread dropping from a hand. That same hand was used to feel Emma’s forehead. “Are you sick? Have you spaced out? Because that is a serious condition and you need to make straight for Medbay now.”

Emma batted away the hand. “I’m not spaced out. I don’t have a fever. And I’m not suffering from delusions. I’m just saying that you guys – her crew, I mean – haven’t given her a fair shot. When you believe the worst about somebody for no reason you end up making the situation worse. We all have are demons and when we can’t deal with them someone else is wrongfully blamed. It’s called projecting.”

David’s chewing slowed. With a worried gaze at Emma he murmured to Ruby, “I think she really is sick.”

“Since when did you quit fire whiskey for a PhD in psychology?” A huff from Emma told Ruby her tactic of sarcasm would not unravel this mystery. She and Emma had not known each other for very long so it would be trial and error from here on out. “Just what happened between your breakup with Ariel and today?”

“What are you implying?”

“That it’s normal for someone to bounce back from a relationship… but not with your boss, Emma.”

“That doesn’t bode well for your career,” David mentioned helpfully.

“I am doing no such thing!” Emma choked. She leaned back from the table, frowning at the two. What an odd thing to suggest, Regina as a rebound. When had this become romantic? She didn’t think she implied that when the subject first came up. They were just friends. Sort of. “And to answer your question, yes, something did happen between my breakup with Ariel and now, and yes, it had to do with Regina, but no, there is nothing… there is nothing going on between us beyond friendship. We just had lunch a few times. And we went to the park.”

Emma’s gaze went down to her plate. She had to bite her tongue a bit from leaking the rest of the
story. Truth be told those handful of shared meals and that one trip to the park had not been solely between her and the captain. Henry had always been present, and he was quite the welcome addition. Emma would doubt her relationship with Regina had gotten past bitter and threatening if it had not been for her son. He softened her like no one could. He brought out a side of Regina even she seemed surprised to express.

It disheartened Emma that she couldn’t tell this to her friends. It made it that much more difficult to explain why she and Regina could now be within a meter of each other without coming to blows (verbal or otherwise).

“The park? Lunch?” David’s suspicion grew to supernova proportions. He leaned in, his shirt centimeters from grazing the ketchup on his fries, but he was too busy calculating Emma’s motives to notice. “How come I don’t believe you?”

“David, you’re not a Quarthen. You can’t wave a hand and detect if I’m lying. Come on.”

“Did you take her to the White Rabbit?” Ruby asked, seriously. “Because plying her with fire whiskey all night is the only way I can see her spilling all her dirty secrets.”

“I did not get Regina drunk. She’s probably too snooty to drink anything but her own cider.” When Emma received enduring looks of doubt (one narrowing of eyes and another’s chewing at ruby red lips), she threw up her hands. “Vaporize me, do you really think I’m that shallow? I am capable of giving a girl a good time without adding liquor into the mix. And don’t read into what I just said. Regina and I ate pancakes and talked. And during all that I happened to see a different side of her. That’s it. No alcohol involved. No assembly required.”

“You seem confident for someone who’s only known her for a few months. Ruby and I have worked under the captain for years and we don’t even know where she grew up.”

Ruby shrugged and asked Emma in a soft voice, “Can you say that you do?”

“No, but I like a challenge. I’m not saying I know everything about her. What I am trying to get across is that there is much more to her than you think. In a way, I sort of relate. She puts on this appearance of a strict, ‘no-nonsense’ commander who probably makes the admirals shake in their boots with a flick of her wrist. She’s way more insecure than that. She’s lonely.”

“Emma,” a downturned mouth soft yet weary from his years in Cosmofleet, David affirmed, “we’re all lonely – pilots especially. Our jobs take us lightyears across the galaxy to places that have never seen a holomap. We’re just a micro-speck through a high-powered telescope on Earth.” He shook his head sadly. “Being in space is isolating, even when you live on a spaceship cramped with hundreds of others. We leave our families for this job. I miss my parents… Ruby misses her grandmother even when they’re in a rough patch…”

“Saying Captain Mills is lonely is easy, Emma. I don’t claim to be her friend, but there is much more to her than that. There is more than that to all of us.”

“We just wouldn’t advise digging any deeper. You don’t know what you’ll find beneath the surface.”

“Geez, she’s not some creature from the far reaches of outer space.”

“But how do you know she’s not?”

“Not funny,” Emma grated, rolling her eyes to the laughing duo. She propped her head on a fist, wondering if defending an ‘Evil Queen’ was worth the teasing. Sighing, she thought of all the times
Regina opened up to Henry and the scant few instances the captain revealed herself to Emma, and realized the mere act of wondering might not be worth it either.

“With all due respect to Captain Mills,” Ruby said, “Regina is trouble. She suspended Sidney Glass because he couldn’t stop sniffing around. Wait, Emma! Put that finger down. I know what you’re going to say. I realize you are nothing like that slimy stalker, and I’ll grant that you seem to have gotten closer to the captain than anyone else has. But if you don’t use caution when peeling back those layers you’ll get suspended.”

“It’s come up in conversation,” Emma stated flippantly, like the notion was anything but problematic. “Several times, in fact.”

“A lot worse can happen, Emma.” David peered behind both his shoulders and hugged his glass of orange juice. “We’re billions of lightyears from Cosmofleet Command. Captain Mills is the only authority here and if you cross her there’s no telling which airlock you’ll be accidentally blown out of.”

“Listen,” Emma rubbed at the day’s oil and sweat building on her forehead, “this attempt to understand Regina didn’t come up out of the blue. We’ve all read about her and seen her in the holos. I spent my five years as a cadet memorizing her mission strategies, her moves, the number of times she’s retaken a sim until it’s flawless…

“She may very well be the reason I stuck it out as a cadet. I looked up to her. Everyone did. I still kind of do, even if working beside her has all but shattered that image I created of her. Before I met Regina I wanted to know who she really was, how she became this galaxy renowned captain. Now that I’ve been assigned to her command that matters even more.”

Ruby cast a glance to David before tipping a sympathetic head to their first officer. “We just want you to be careful. You’re our best second-in-command since the last numbskull. We’d like to see her stick around this time.”

“I’m grateful that you guys want to protect me. Honestly. But just trust me. If I can get Regina to open up I won’t have to worry about thwarting another mutiny. The whole crew will benefit from a captain that’s not tied up in knots.”

The other two murmured their agreement, though it came across more as noncommittal. Winning them over was not going to be easy, Emma knew that. It was not about agreeing with her so much as it was about giving her a chance. She could relate. All Emma ever wanted for herself was to have someone on her side for a change, someone to stand up for her choices. And if David or Ruby or any number of the crew didn’t abide by her willingness to unravel the missing pages of Regina’s life, Emma would just have to try harder. The captain won’t become an open book overnight. First, she had to actually get legitimate dirt on the woman. Something that would convince her friends. More importantly, she would have to convince herself. Ruby had been right; there was more to Regina than loneliness.

The door hissed shut behind her. In the privacy of her quarters Emma fell onto her bunk, unmade from that morning aboard Storybrooke. This was her second commission as first officer and the pressure exerted doubly than previous. The crew recognized her face now, some her name and rank. They regarded her as “that woman who saved the ship from a death ride pull into a star” or “the second-in-command who unknowingly threw her hat into the ring for future captain (that is, after the present one was properly overthrown).” That was not really how it went down. Emma never actually heard her crew speak about her in such a way, but it’s what she imagined; hence the amplified pressure since marching aboard.
With her back against the bulkhead, Emma stretched one leg onto the bunk with the other hung over the edge. She swung the latter as her son would, the toe of her boot scuffing against the floor. Her head fell back and she closed her eyes.

“Henry,” she murmured.

It came over her differently this time. Instead of the near heart attack she suffered on the premiere shuttle ride to Storybrooke, Emma could feel the beginnings of a heart breaking. It crept up, no mercy and little warning. All it took was a swinging of her leg, something she’d seen him do a thousand and one times. Such a minuscule trigger. A trivial memory that prodded those pangs beneath her ribs. It hurt so blasted much, but she couldn’t see it, couldn’t touch it. She couldn’t rip open her chest, reach in with her bare hands, and liberate it to the vacuum of space. She couldn’t because it was the very reason why she was capable of love. It was never possible until Henry showed her. The pangs were a side effect of being a mother, and she had to make friends with it until home was something she could wrap her arms around, not lightyears away.

She pulled open a compartment under her night stand and brought out the tablet. After powering it on she sought what was needed.

“My little pilot.”

Smiling warmly at the toothless grin of a first birthday boy, Emma flicked through the photos. Each one brought a brightness to her shitty afternoon: Henry slopping birthday cake frosting over his nose, Henry presenting his colored drawings on a datapad, Henry kissing her cheek out of frame. She came across a video and started it. His laughing played musically to her ears and echoed through her quarters. She laughed along at the ghost white sheet over his figure and, underneath, the glowing circuits hanging in his little fists.

It was a sad attempt at a makeshift holotheater. Emma tried to set one up for him the year before. It took several hours before it occurred to her, a space pilot and ex-hover mechanic, that the power component was not only missing but sold separately. Henry hardly cared, as evidenced by the sheet costume and extravagant giggles. He made the most out of his mother’s mistake, unknowingly cheering her up in the process.

Emma exhaled, blinking back tears. He is safe, she thought for the billionth time. He may not be with me, but he’s safe.

She continued to scroll through the photos, thinking of Henry and, in so doing, Regina. Having the captain around had to have been a novel life experience for him. He didn’t get the chance to converse a lot with adults who were not his mother or teachers, and if the chance arose Emma would bet his timid nature created a barrier to them. As a result, Emma had been careful about allowing a new person into his life. For as kind and excitable as he was, Henry could be fragile and sensitive to rejection. And if she knew anything concrete about Captain Mills, rejection came easy to her as silence in a vacuum.

Any person in Henry’s life that made an impression on him would affect his emotional development. It’s something she feared as a mother herself, whether she met his needs on a daily basis and made him happy.

Yet as thoughtful as the situation was handled, Emma wouldn’t disregard the weight off her shoulders. Because of Regina, she had not had to tip-toe around a secret. No one in Cosmofleet knew she had a son, Emma made sure of it by putting down roots a safe distance from the Presidio.

Keeping Henry from her life all these years had been taxing. Up until Regina, Emma had forbade
herself from taking him anywhere near the academy for fear that she’d lose her job or be disgraced in some way. She was more furious at Regina for taking her son there than the fact that she took him without her consent.

That fury and underlying terror originated four years ago. Emma had not discovered she was pregnant until her exams scored below average and her absences in class became more frequent due to severe bouts of morning sickness. She eventually had to take off of school in order that no one learn of her condition. Henry arrived after she turned 24. She was a second year cadet. At the risk of being seen differently, she kept him from that world. Not even her close friend, Mary Margaret, knew.

Still young and ambitious, Emma wanted to be perceived as a hot shot pilot, not a single mother struggling through academy. She wouldn’t take a hand out and wouldn’t be looked at like she needed one in order to graduate. If people knew – friends, rivals, superiors – she would cease to be a promising, determined young woman. Never once had Emma resented Henry – he was a gift and the most important thing in her universe – but if people knew then he would be a detriment to her career. Sacrificing a dream of space travel meant throwing in the towel, and she would not let her son think that’s how the world worked. You could succeed in anything you wanted badly enough and work hard enough for it. And Emma prided herself on being that example for him.

She thought she could do both: her dream as a Cosmofleet pilot and care for her son. Emma loved flying so much that she couldn’t see herself doing anything else. The income was adequate enough for them to live on, anyway. So no, she wasn’t ashamed of her secret but ashamed of herself if people knew how badly she struggled. Regina had been right; an underqualified girl with a hero complex had no business serving the fleet. She was too impulsive, too reckless in the face of authority that she’d sooner jump out an airlock than carry out an order that didn’t fit her personal schedule. But Emma loved her dream enough to try. She loved her son enough to make him grow up in a safer galaxy. She never regretted her decision to keep him. She just wanted to make their lives easier by fabricating a white lie. Emma wouldn’t stand to be perceived as someone who lacked the career-driven nature that most women her age had, or someone who had chosen a kid over a spacer’s life. Just a little secret, something that didn’t hurt either of them, would save her from that pity. In hindsight, the lie alone could be seen as pitiful or selfish.

Then came Captain Mills with her contempt, her dark shadow, and her pretty hair, and she befriended Emma’s son. The once thought bitch (who probably still retained the title of endearment) became responsible for carrying a part of that burden. Now Emma could talk about her secret. She could breathe around her son and someone she worked for without having to make excuses. The fact that Regina knew of Henry’s existence made Emma’s life easier. And that she knew what he looked like, how he swung his legs in his chair, how he liked tons of syrup on his pancakes, and that she could make him smile meant something to Emma she couldn’t describe. It felt similar to relief.

A chime from the chrono at her wrist advised her of her impending duty. With one last look at her son, she shut down the datapad and slid it back into the nightstand compartment. Safe and sound, just like Henry.

Emma stood from her unmade bunk and proceeded to her closet. Sliding open with a hiss, the small compartment contained her red leather jacket, a few pairs of pants, one pair of boots, some tank tops and shirts, and long-sleeved uniforms that she had no intention of wearing in the next century. Slipping on a tight-fitted dark blue long-sleeve, Emma made herself presentable. After Regina promised to keep mum on the Henry thing, the least her first officer could do was get the wrinkles out of her shirt.

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The holochart activated with little fanfare. A push of a few buttons and the coordinates were submitted. The process made way for a whoosh of white light as three-dimensional space rose from the transmission table. Stationary and twinkling in midair, stars, planets, and moons presented in their orbits.

Regina reached out and spun the hologram counterclockwise with a flick of her hand. The image remained flawless as it spun to her force and then slowed to a stop. From an alternate angle the source of her interest became clear. With two hands she reached into the holo and expanded the sector by moving her joined palms outward. With every inch the stars and planets grew larger, more defined in their unique features. The image was adjusted by a few minor pinches and turns of her fingers until the destination became visible.

The greenish blue sphere was a hospitable, agrarian world warmed by a star twice its size. Orbiting the planet were three small moons. The medium sized giant called Dagomir possessed a biosphere well-suited to human life, yet its oxygen rich atmosphere was dangerously toxic to non-human species. Its land grew so fertile that it drew farmers and immigrants alike from the farthest corners of the galaxy. The agrarian life was the cheapest way of life in the Milky Way, so it gained the consideration of a great number of sentients.

Regina had personal familiarity with the planet – its lush green fields a memory from her childhood. Its land could be considered humane compared to Earth’s deteriorating natural landscape. Dagomir was a feast for anyone’s eyes and a memoir of Earth’s former image.

As their first assignment, the Storybrooke was sent to the Outer Reach. The location surprised Regina at first, suspicious about being sent so far out in the early stages of their commission. However, those were her orders and any doubts were to remain undisclosed.

And so they were tasked to Dagomir. There stood a minor trade dispute between the Spice Union and the people of Dagomir. Spice was an expensive commodity. It did not compare to the edible seasonings of the Old World, but could be described as a concoction of rare chemicals and synthetic and organic minerals. Processed correctly and it could be used to restore arid soil and bring life where life had not been possible.

Usually in these situations it was the planet that sought intervention in receiving a fair rate. Many Union vessels were known to pull one over on unsuspecting buyers in order to come out rich. In addition, the fleet was occasionally called upon not only to settle transaction debates but to police arms dealing (which happened to be an informal side business of the Spice Union). But as outlined in the assignment handed to Captain Mills it was not Dagomir but the Union, surprisingly, that asked for fleet assistance.

Regina perused the greenish blue world with an eye of annoyance. Mediating over a trade quarrel was not her idea of an exciting first mission since departing Earth. To make matters difficult she hadn’t even managed to sleep well. It was a miracle she was a captain and not the helmsman. No good would come of a sleep-deprived pilot. And when she thought of in the middle of the night no further good could possibly come from revisiting a world from her past.

"Rumple, I’ve just sent you the coordinates for our next jump. Make it a smooth one, please."

The reptilian eyes of Storybrooke’s helmsman gave a roll. “As always, Captain.”

Regina powered down the grid and the sector she had been observing along with the fresh green planet of Dagomir. The image collapsed into a pinprick and winked out.

The ship’s artificial gravity systems allowed the crew to walk about while in hyperspace. As the stars
through the viewport extended to limitless arrows, Regina strode without impediment to the captain’s chair. From the side compartment she withdrew a tablet and stylus. Leroy had sent an engine report along with his recent modifications. Her pen made a few notes before moving to the next item. She went about the next dozen reports, reading, making revisions, proposing new adjustments. Some were dispatches from Command (which were typically ignored or else she developed a migraine from extensive appraisal of bullshit), while others were crew related which she filed for last.

Contrary to popular belief, being captain was not all about chasing the plasma off pirates, nor was it about having your own spaceship. It meant something different to every commander, but for Regina there was a severe obligation to it. She took herself and her position seriously, not standing for unruly crew or dishonorable engagements on a mission. The Commonwealth had an image and when the Storybrooke was tasked with a mission it was her job to uphold that image. When sent to settle conflict, explore new resources, or conduct a rescue mission, the only priority second to the assignment was discipline. Her vessel would fly straight and true and her crew would not act like buffoons.

Ironic in timing, one such buffoon arrived on the main bridge. Carrying what seemed to be all her weight on the heels of her boots, Lieutenant Commander Swan came waltzing through, stopping a moment to greet each of the senior officers present.

Using immense effort to focus on the reports, Regina ignored the intrusion. Instead of greeting her first officer she poured all her energy into jotting down notes she wouldn’t be able to sort out later that night. The cruel pen scrapes against glass and barely contained frustration did not go unnoticed.

“Is that my quarterly evaluation or are you just psyched to see me?”

Emma, the sole proprietor of having understood the joke, laughed.

“It is a work-up of the recent transactions between Dagomir and the Spice Union. Included is a history of all engagements the world has had with foreign commerce, as well as the Union’s tax, tariff, and trade agreement laws.” Head raised to meet the other woman, Regina’s voice rose in slight pride. “But you would know all about that, dear, as it is logged in your APP.”

Assignment Preparation Packet, Emma recalled from memory. A niggling sensation pestered her. “I skimmed it,” she confirmed as her hand fiddled the edge of her sleeve.

“Last time I checked, it still remained unflagged. There is no need to lie, Miss Swan. I know you never read it, nor planned to.”

“I’ll read it tonight.”

“We arrive in Dagomir’s orbit today. Isn’t that right, Rumple?”

The pilot turned slightly in his chair to confirm. “Five standard hours, Commander.”

“So I’ll read fast,” Emma mumbled, unconvinced herself.

“It is already too late to make up for your incompetence.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do not apologize to me. Apologize to your crew who depend on its first officer not only to be informed of our mission destination, but to keep them out of harm’s way. In this case, Miss Swan, paperwork does save lives.”
“Regina…”

And that was the last bit of patience the captain scrounged up that day. The muscles of her jaw could be seen from a distance, working at something to shred to pieces. Emma happened to be standing by, waiting to be made an excellent example of.

“You will do well to address me in the proper form,” she stated in a clipped tone. “I will take ‘Captain Mills’ or ‘Commander’ and answer to nothing less.”

Ruby’s casual glance quickly turned cautioning to her friend before minding her own business.

“You’re joking, right?” Arms folded, Emma shifted from one foot to the other.

“When aboard my vessel you will answer to me and you will do so with respect.”

“You’re fine with me calling you by your first name in private but out in the open it’s back to ‘Captain’?”

“I can assure you, Miss Swan, we have not been in a proximity even resembling ‘private’ nor will I ever be ‘in private’ anywhere with you. Rid yourself of this delusion or you may find yourself following your predecessor.”

Emma blinked. For lack of a better response her mouth hung open like a monger fish. All hopes of an amicable conversation flew out the airlock leaving her to stand and stare flabbergasted.

“What did I do now?” she asked. Her eyes stung a bit and that angered her more than being laid to blame. She shouldn’t feel cut down by this woman. Yet the tingling sense of rejection begged to differ.

“I believe I explained.”

“No, that’s not it.” Emma’s voice dropped to a whisper. “What is going on with you, Regina?”

Her whole weight seemed to go with the sigh. “Just listen to me, Miss Swan.”

She didn’t reply right away, nor divert her stare. The main bridge droned with the usual computerized whirs and officer murmurs, but as far as Emma was concerned they were alone. She cast out anything and everything around them to focus on Regina. She looked tired. Emma detected sallow cheeks and dark circles under equally grim eyes. She hadn’t been taking care of herself. She looked hungry, and for a moment Emma nearly asked her superior if she wanted to grab lunch. Horrified, the thought was shook away with a movement of her head. The little shake went unnoticed by Regina. To Emma, it seemed like everything she did went unnoticed.

Unless I’m breaking regulation, Emma thought glumly.

“Alright,” she finally managed.

Turning to Emma, Regina cast a look of surprise like the discussion had passed her by. Or perhaps because her first officer actually agreed to an order.

“Alright,” Regina echoed.

Their eyes held before it occurred to the captain that it was happening at all. She went back to her datapad, scolding herself over why it had to be said at all. “Alright” like she was some academy drop-out who couldn’t articulate suitable English. “Alright” like she had just agreed to let the
mechanic fix her BenzHover.

Emma took a seat at one of the stations at the other side of the bridge. Procuring a data stick from her pants pocket she jammed it into the drive. She brought up a set of data on the screen, allowing it to scroll aimlessly. She let her eyes move across the screen dully, having not read this much material since she was a cadet at the academy. Her lids drooped as she settled her chin into a palm, trying her best not to sulk.

Everyone aboard the Storybrooke went about their tasks as smoothly as the engines that propelled them across the cosmos. During the trip, Emma propositioned Belle (an authority on galactic archives) for the history of Dagomir and its dealings with Spice Union. Her effort in seeing through her responsibilities went detected by the captain who watched the history lesson with a lingering eye. Though it irked her that Emma could not find her own means of doing her job, she would not strike down the officer’s attempt to make up for the blunder. Ensign French was available to tutor, of course, and Regina had better things to do than waste her breath on deaf ears.

Five hours into hyperspace, the vessel went about preparing itself for reentry into realspace.

Rumple oversaw the ship’s automations from behind the helm. A quick observation of the ship’s plasma signature, sublight drives, and other facts and figures proved just how smooth the transition turned out. Smiling proudly to himself, he disengaged auto-pilot and prepared to take over the controls. Of course, few if any corrections were to be made. Ensign Belle French always narrowed coordinates down to the micro parsec.

Their mission target was framed by the front view screen. Dagomir held suspended in the vacuum of space, appearing in its familiar cyan hue. Everything looked as it should. From the moment Storybrooke left the docking station to its exit from hyperspace the mission could be described as flawless.

Until a sweep outside their forward viewport confirmed the opposite.

“As we can all see,” Regina said, “Dagomir is as it should be, but with one missing detail. Where in the gods blasted universe is the Spice Union’s ship?”

Assuming the question had been directed at him, Rumple shook his head and answered. “Obviously not present.”

“You are my helmsman, Mr. Gold. Have you dropped us on the wrong side of the planet?”

“I can only fly one ship at a time, dearie. The whereabouts of a Union ship lay outside my responsibility.”

Compressed steam hissed between her teeth. Regina sought a better opinion. “Ensign?”

“I dialed in the exact coordinates Command sent us.” Belle hovered over her navigation screen, triple checking the numbers as only her captain had drilled her time and again. “The Storybrooke is where it should be.”

“And I suppose this is merely a joke Command has played on us? Supplying its own taskforce with false data, hm?” Regina directed to no one in particular. Her hand waved in irritation. “Someone is to blame. I want to know now.”

Emma stayed in her seat, keeping out of this one. After a few months as first officer she was aware of whose ship this was and knew her input would not be appreciated at the moment.
“I’ll just check the short-range scanners and see if they can pick up anything within the area,” David said. “The arrays are fully operational so they should detect any random subspace energy fluctuations.”

“Thank you, Officer Nolan.” Regina bowed her head in his direction. “It’s about time someone proposed a solution.”

Ruby swiveled in her chair. “Incoming transmission, Commander.”

“Aaaah, Captain…” David’s voice wavered as he panned between Regina and the scanning results. “There is a vessel to our starboard. Looks to be asserting itself between us and Dagomir.”

“What is this?” Emma went to the science officer’s station and stood frowning over the data. “A set up?”

Regina stood regal and measured. “Is it the Spice Union?”

“Unidentified,” replied David. “There are no visible markings and they’re not transmitting a registration beam so I can’t get even the most basic information off of it.”

“They’re hailing us,” Ruby said.

“Send it through.”

While Rumple and Belle watched from their chairs, the rest of them gathered round the oval transmission table. The grid emitted a soft glow that rose and transformed into the face of a middle-aged, human male. A weary, yet experienced face presented under a shortly trimmed beard and curly hair already shocked with gray and hints of silver. He held a well-mannered expression that did not seem at all hostile. The small smile made them all feel strangely at ease with this mysterious stranger.

“Commander Regina Mills of the starship Storybrooke. To whom am I speaking?”

“A pleasure, Commander.” The projected image bowed slightly in greeting. “I am Leopold White.”

“Your ship does not transmit a registration beam.”

“That would be because we do not wish for our identity to be celebrated right away. You see, first impressions are valued greatly amongst my people.”

“And just who might your people be?”

“Well,” he chuckled to himself, enjoying the captain’s ignorance, “you know of us. Our name is quite familiar to you as it is to every citizen of the Commonwealth. Even the smugglers and hermits scattered about this fair galaxy know our reputation. We call ourselves the Freedom Raiders.”

There were collective gasps throughout the main bridge. A mounting anxiety touched each of them for it was not every day that a Raider placed themselves on the doorstep of Cosmofleet. And to do so willingly – one vessel against the greatest ship every built. There had to be a catch.

“After all these years,” Leopold mused, “I thought it was about time I came to you. Oh yes, I am well aware of how fiercely you seek us out – myself in particular.”

“Why would I pursue you specifically?” Regina asked with genuine curiosity. “We have never met.”

“We have not, that is correct, but we do know each other through a mutual acquaintance.”
“Who?”

Leopold chuckled softly to the captain’s naïveté. “Why your mother, of course.”

Ignoring the glances thrown around the table, Regina inhaled sharply and straightened her posture. Chin held high she threw back, “My mother would never consort with the likes of you. She is a retired diplomat with an honorable service record. She would not stoop to your level of hypocrisy.”

Leopold laughed. “You are indeed as high-minded as your mother. And quite the pretty face she so often describes.”

Hands planted to the table, Emma leaned forward. “You’re arrival is kind of ironic seeing as there was supposed to be a Spice Union ship in Dagomir’s orbit. Now, in light of the Union’s record of never once missing an opportunity to trade with its investors…” a smug Emma paused to let that sink into the captain, but Regina’s pleasant surprise didn’t last long enough, “… what in seven hells did you sons of bitches do to the Spice Union?”

“Emma,” Ruby chided under her breath as David did the same.

Regina simply doled out a withering look before cleaning up her first officer’s mess.

“Interfering in a mission of official Cosmofleet business is against the law and grounds for imprisonment. You are also in league with a known terrorist group –“

“In league?” The man’s eyes brightened as he corrected proudly and in a manner that did not suggest he was in any danger. “I am its leader!”

“ – And you will henceforth be taken into custody. Resisting arrest is futile and it would be in your best interest to cooperate. I do not wish for a bloodbath so early in the evening.”

“It surprises me, Regina, how you can be so impolite to your stepfather when my daughter is aboard your fine ship.”

Unable to direct her fury at either of those implications, Regina’s eyes widened in alarm. “Excuse me?”

“Your stepsister, Mary Snow White. Did you really not know the identity of your own chief medical officer?”

Emma looked dumbly from Leopold to the captain. “Mary Margaret?”

“No,” was all Regina could muster.

“Quite the reunion, isn’t it? If only Cora were here.”

That seemed to snap Regina out of her shock. “What have you done with Mother?!”

“Nothing she wouldn’t want me to do,” he replied, luridly, if only to get a rise out of the captain. Regina did not disappoint for she had already taken the first lethal step forward. Leopold smiled when she faltered and remembered he was a mere hologram. “You will see each other very soon. She is simply thrilled to reveal all the developments we and our Raiders have made.”

“Why now? What makes today so different from all the years I spent hunting you down?”

“I matter of destiny, Regina. And my own personal designs.”
“I do not believe in juvenile concepts of destiny or galactic conspiracies.” Through hardened confidence there was twitch at her temple, a telling gesture.

“Best believe it sooner or later,” Leopold advised. “You will play a consequential role in our next plot – the last in a long line of carefully planned attacks that mean the inevitable fall of the Commonwealth.” There was a shift in his expression as the once friendly smile transformed to a grimace of dark warning. “I will not have my people unprepared.”

The transmission ended too abruptly for the crew of the Storybrooke. Everyone but Regina looked at one another in varying shades of apprehension, eyes alight with disbelief.

“Did he just…?”

Ruby settled David’s question with an unhurried nod. “Yeah.”

Emma looked at Regina from across the lifeless transmission grid. Like her senior officers she held a healthy amount of worry for their captain. To be compared to the Freedom Raiders was anything but a compliment. Lifelong condemnation went hand-in-hand with their kind of villainy. Emma feared what this Leopold White had in store for Regina, yet she couldn’t help but note how apropos the slander was. After all, the brand of ruthlessness wielded by the Raiders mirrored that of their most dogged adversary.

Regina stepped back as if hit by a photon torpedo. Her hand caught the back of her chair as she reeled from the onslaught of news. A hand lay to rest on her chest, spreading her collar apart at the button. Unable to catch her breath, it seemed that she had been dropped into a pressure chamber, every square inch of gravity bearing down from all angles until she was but a pancake of molecules on the floor.

Never once had Cora sought out a partner since her husband passed away. Regina’s father had been the one love of Cora’s life, the only man who could ever give her happiness. She always prided herself on being the picture of independence, so the idea of even dating another man seemed doubtful. And if Cora had found someone – married someone – surely the news would have been relayed to her own daughter.

But married to a known terrorist? Was it even love?

Regina felt like her whole existence was a fabrication, every memory from birth to the present a tale scribed by an author. Were her experiences predetermined? Was every person she every met or so much as glanced at a mark on the timeline that was her life? The ice cold hands of manipulation gripped round Regina, squeezing tight. Most devastating of all, she felt a monstrous sense of loss. Mother, she thought. Have you betrayed me? The trained part of Regina’s memory prevented the thought from ending on ‘again?’

The last piece of horrifying news sealed her fate into rage: Mary Margaret Blanchard… her sister? Regina swallowed over the bile gathering from within. Not only that, but the daughter of her enemy? It had to be a joke, yet the idea made her want to take the ship apart piece by piece with the claws of her nails. You couldn’t just play with people like they were puppets. She was a commander, not a king’s fool.

The rest of her senior officers awaited orders from a safe distance. They knew their captain was prone to erratic bouts of anger and snarling tones. But the tempest growing within the body that was their commander was something else entirely. Unearthed before them was a new side – a darker side – of the captain they had never faced.
Without a word Regina made tracks to the turbolift.

Seeing as none of the other officers had the balls to do so, Emma raced ahead to slip between the lift doors before they hissed shut. Shoulder-to-shoulder, she could feel the heat siphoning off the captain. Emma easily categorized the temperature as anger.

Staring forward, she asked as casually as possible, “So, ah… whatcha up to?”

Too bothered by her intent to sear the doors off the lift with her glare, Regina did not make a move. “If you think you can stop me, Miss Swan, you can hand me your resignation this instant.”

“What are you planning on doing to Mary Margaret?” Not ‘with’ Mary Margaret because she knew the captain well enough.

After a moment’s hesitation wherein that glare wavered, Regina made her plans known. “I am placing Doctor Blanchard in a detention cell where she will rot until I can think of a superior fashion of torture.”

“Don’t you think there should be an… oh, I don’t know, a cooling off period? Before you do anything rash like shove spliced Korobi sticks under someone’s nails or blow up an unidentified ship. If you remember, that last one didn’t turn out so well for you.”

“She will suffer for her association with terrorists.”

“That’s not her fault!”

Hair whipping with the turn, Regina confronted Emma, flattening her against the curved wall of the lift just with her accusing eyes. “Did she tell you about this? Have you known this whole time and not told me?”

“What? No! I was always under the impression her father used to be a famous commander in the fleet until his retirement. Mary Margaret got in some fight with him and they ended up estranged from each other. After that she changed her name and has never spoken to him since. He hasn’t even sought her out. That’s all she told me and that’s all I know.” Emma’s hands went out in a cautionary gesture as if Regina were a territorial saberwolf. “I can see how angry you are, believe me. It’s understandable that you’d feel betrayed. I wouldn’t lie to you right now.”

“Angry? Betrayed? How observant!”

“Can we just talk about this like rational adults?”

“That is rich coming from you,” Regina scoffed. “Gambling, drinking, fighting, … That’s quite the example you’re setting for your son.”

Emma’s eyes flared. “Don’t tell me how to raise my kid!”

“Then stop handling me like I am some fusion reactor about to go nuclear.”

“Regina, that’s not –“

“Why is this blasted lift not moving faster!” Regina punctuated the curse with a smack of an open palm against the doors. The step she took to attack it moved her (and her trembling chin) out of Emma’s view.

“What did they do to you?”
Regina took a breath in. The only thing it achieved was a shake to her confidence. “They took something from me,” she said. Her jaw tightened so as to secure the chattering teeth. In all the years she had trained herself to placate it, batter it into submission, a deep seeded sadness clawed to the surface. She closed her eyes, shut them tight, and begged for her own body not to betray her. “It was precious to me and they stole it.” And then came anger. “That is all it takes. That is all you need to know.”

A minute passed. The damn lift still hummed away on its journey to Medbay. When Emma found her voice it came across as too alien to identify as her own. Never had it been defined by the kind of soothing grace it now took on.

“If someone I loved disappeared I’d want vengeance too.” Her gulp could be heard within the lift walls. “If Henry had been taken from me I’d move heaven and all the worlds to get my hands on the person responsible. I’d want blood.”

“Yes,” Regina agreed breathily. Her eyes fell closed as if overtaken by euphoria, however unknowable its purpose with her.

“I understand that you’ve waited years to face whoever is responsible. But you can’t lash out at the first person who is even remotely linked. You can’t blame Mary Margaret for it. She never hurt you. They did.”

“And she will lead me to them. I will make sure of it.”

“Regina, listen to what you’re saying! She’s an officer of Cosmofleet. You’re condoning the arrest and torture of one of your own crew members!”

“That is correct.”

The tone struck Emma as emotionless and it nearly had her stumbling back. More devastating was her limited power over the captain. Helplessness spread through her like a numbing agent.

“Please, Regina. Anyone else.” Emma forced herself between the lift doors and the captain. She searched and found the eyes she meant to plead with. “Anyone else but her. She’s my best friend.”

“The universe is infinite. You’ll manage to find a replacement.”

“You can’t do this!”

Teeth bared and all sense of cordiality lost, she roared, “I am CAPTAIN! I will go where I wish and do as I please! No one can stop me,” Regina’s lip curled, her very presence weighing Emma down with a new level of loathing, “least of all you, Emma Swan!”

The lift doors parted with a hiss and she swept through Medbay like a solar wind.

* * *

“I tried.”

“Emma… don’t.”

“She can’t be stopped. I-I don’t know how…”

“This is not your fault,” Mary Margaret pressed. She laid her hand against Emma’s, the transparisteel barrier keeping her from the sweaty anxiety it gave off. “It’s not her fault either.”
“How can you say that?!” Emma exclaimed, tears forming in her eyes. “When you’re in here… how can you not blame her? Why aren’t you angry? Why am I the only one who’s upset about this? This is not justice! This is not how she’s supposed to act!”

“The captain is holding me here as a precaution. It’s obvious that she’s hurting right now and needs someone to blame. Until she finds my father…” Mary Margaret bit her lip and shrugged, “…I suppose that someone is me. Anyway, it’s not so bad in here. The bedding is a step up from the itchy thread count in my quarters.”

“Stop it.” Emma looked away from the sorry excuse of a cot. There was a toilet, a sink, and a mirror, but that was as homey as detention cells came.

“I know, Emma. I know she’s a far cry from what you imagined her to be. But you have to let it go. Let that woman you idolized go because she is not real.”

“That’s not what I’m upset about!”

“Of course it is.” The doctor smiled wistfully, tipping her head. “And I can tell how helpless you feel right now, seeing me in here. But to say that’s the source of your untethered appearance right now would be a mistake. I think I know you better than that.”

The whisper barely made it through the audio speaker. The state of Emma’s hair proved she heard it. Her hands wrung through the tangled strands again and again until it brought relief. It never came. She tried pacing instead.

“On the bright side, if the Raiders assume control of the Storybrooke,” Mary Margaret’s hands gestured around her reinforced cubicle, “I’m in the safest place.”

“They can get in,” Emma advised harshly. “It’s you who can’t get out.”

“My father won’t let any harm come to me. We may not have spoken in ten years, but I’m all he has left in the galaxy.”

“For all you knew up until an hour ago. Apparently now you have a stepmom and a stepsister. Do you even know who this Cora is?”

“As I’ve said before, Emma, I haven’t contacted my father in years. The last time I saw him or heard from him was the day I packed up and left home.” Hurt clouded Mary Margaret’s features, inspiring a chin to lower against her chest. “I didn’t know… I never thought he would remarry again. It’s just occurred to me how estranged we really are. My own father… he was responsible for all those attacks. I never knew. This whole time…”

“Hey!” Emma barked. She tried to get the poor woman’s attention by slapping a hand against the barrier. “Hey, you! Don’t you dare feel responsible for something you didn’t do. You had no idea what kind of person he was because you were smart and left before he recruited you into that criminal fraternity of his. He’s not your family, Mary Margaret. Family doesn’t leave each other.”

The doctor pointed out weakly, “But I did leave.”

“Because he stopped being a father. He abandoned his own daughter long before she left him. You saved yourself, Mary Margaret. If you hadn’t then you would be a branded terrorist right now.”

“But don’t you think it is more courageous to sacrifice one’s own wishes and desires for the greater good? I mean, what if I had stayed? I could have taken care of him, Emma. I could have prevented all of it!”
“Don’t think that—“

“It’s possible!” Mary Margaret exclaimed, the proof of it in her flaring eyes. “It would have been. Giving up my own freedom is a small price to pay for the millions of lives that could have been spared.”

“That was Leopold. That was all on him and it always will be. Stop thinking about ‘what ifs’ or it will send you spiraling into some fourth dimension. It’s the kind of backwards theoretical bullshit they frown upon at the academy. You can’t change the past. It’s a physical impossibility.”

An unexpected grin came to Mary Margaret. “The fourth dimension is called the Minkowski Continuum, or in layman’s terms, spacetime. And according to Professor Leary certain phenomena from the Reach has been studied and might suggest temporal mechanics is possible.” Her head tipped amusingly, smile holding. “Or was that one of the lectures you skipped?”

Schooling her own grin, Emma set the story straight. “I never sat a single course of Leary’s. I just heard the rumors.”

“It’s 2258, Emma. I think it’s safe to say time travel lies outside the rumor mill.”

“I’m still not letting you go swan diving into a black hole in order to patch things up with your dad. I don’t care if it saves lives. What’s done is done. This ship needs its chief medical officer and I blasted well need my best friend!”

Emma didn’t mean for it to come out so desperate. Mary Margaret was giving her those puppy eyes and that just didn’t sit well with Emma. She needed to be strong for her friend, not the other way around. Mary Margaret was the one in detention while Emma had the capabilities to get her out of there.

“Let’s just focus on the present, shall we?” After sucking in a deep breath Emma let it go in a whoosh. She only wished for her insecurities to leave her as well. “Now believe me when I say I’m not the one you have to convince here. I know you’re innocent. We just need to cover our bases. Is there anything that would connect you to the Raiders? Besides Leopold?”

“That is a very excellent question.”

The identity of the voice sang so unmistakable Emma didn’t bother turning. It was only a matter of time before her friend’s captor arrived to inflict her torment.

“There is no need to be afraid. You may speak freely, Doctor Blanchard.”

Emma glanced at the clicking heels before following the gold pinstripe on her pants, past the crisp blazer, and ending into the depths of unreadable brown eyes. Emma threw the woman a baleful look before staring back through transparisteel.

“Is the audio system broken?” Regina asked with a condescending tilt of her ear. “Please have a care to answer, Doctor.”

“No.”

“No’ what?”

“No,” Mary Margaret said emphatically, “there is no evidence to suggest I am now or ever have been involved in radical activities. There is no conceivable connection between myself and any terrorist organization.”
“And Leopold White? What is your connection to him?”

Emma’s head whipped to the side. “They have no connection!” she defended sharply.

“I think she is capable of speaking on her own behalf,” Regina declared evenly, eyes still on her captive. A single brow arched in waiting.

“He raised me until I left home at the age of 18 – around 2248.”

“So he is your biological father, yes?”

Mary Margaret held her captain’s accusing stare a moment longer before affirming with a soft, “That’s correct.”

“You are the daughter of a known criminal who has over the years amassed a following of extremists who go about the slaying and kidnapping of innocent sentients. And yet you wash your hands of any and all responsibility for the acts committed by your father?”

“There are not enough detention cells in the galaxy to put away those of us who are held accountable for our parents’ sins.”

Nodding silently, Regina placed her hands together as if in prayer and pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips before speaking. “Doctor Blanchard,” she began, frowning like the news disturbed her more than anyone, “you claim that you left home in 2248, which coincides with the first mass offensive of the Freedom Raiders. Over the years as Leopold led his ragtag team of murderers you studied at the academy, accumulating knowledge in Cosmofleet battle strategy, base operations, and advanced weaponry training. Then, just a few months after graduating and getting assigned to a fleet ship, the Raider’s principle leader – your father – makes an appearance and in a not-so-subtle manner threatens every life form that calls itself a citizen of the Commonwealth.” Brow furrowed, Regina clicked her tongue to lord sentimentality over the doctor. “It is suspicious, isn’t it?”

Mary Margaret’s mouth opened, clearly blindsided and on her way to emotionally unstable. “I – I took an oath to do no harm. I c-cannot hurt a living soul.” Her voice dragged off as she was unable to scrounge up any further defense.

“Look at her.” Emma emphasized with a wave toward her friend. “Does she look like she has any idea what you’re talking about? She’s a doctor not a spy.”

“Do you have any idea what a spy looks like, Miss Swan?” Regina’s head turned slowly to Emma. “Have you ever heard of the term ‘sleeper cell’? These persons can infiltrate normal society. They can look and act the part without suspicion. They lie dormant – amongst us – waiting for their orders to attack, sabotage, or relay intelligence.”

“You’re acting a bit melodramatic, Captain. There’s no way Mary Margaret is capable of that level of operations.” Emma shrugged her shoulder and lobbed a “no offense,” as apology to her friend.

“And that is based on what?” Regina’s eyes narrowed to slits. “How many years of experience in studying our adversary can you lend to this inquiry?”

“This is not an inquiry! This is a witch hunt!”

“I base my questioning on hard facts, Miss Swan, not hocus pocus.”

Like a spectator at a cyber-volley match, Mary Margaret panned from one opponent to the other. The voices only grew louder. Blood rose to the surface of their rosy cheeks, the veins in their necks and
temples pulsating. Any peep from her clearly wouldn’t have made a dent. The intensity with which
they argued became a serious understatement, growing to unstoppable levels. Mary Margaret was
only thankful she stood on the other side of the barrier.

“She doesn’t even have a history of attending political demonstrations! Just check her records,
Regina.”

“Records can lie. They can be tampered with.”

“Who are you trying to convince here?”

“I do not have to answer to you,” Regina sneered. “That is quite clear from this temper tantrum.”

“She wouldn’t even boycott the corner bookstore when it banned her favorite book. How can a
person like that be under suspect for terrorism?”

“How else would Leopold know exactly where to find the Storybrooke? She has been feeding him
information, allowing him the wherewithal to track my ship.”

“She’s my friend,” asserted Emma. She stood on the verge of pleading, her hands out, palms up, and
weighing to her justifications. “I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she would never betray us.
Why can’t that be enough for you?”

“You really think she’s your friend?” contended Regina. She crossed her arms and laid into the
blonde even further. “Are five years enough to know intimate details of a stranger? She doesn’t even
know who you really are.”

Jaw tightening, Emma stared hard enough to emit lasers. “Shut up.”

Mary Margaret’s puzzled face went from Regina to Emma. “What is she talking about?”

“Nothing.”

The word alone carried little weight, but the glare meant for Regina interpreted as warning. This was
getting personal. Emma was reminding her of her promise and if it was broken the Storybrooke
would be losing more than one officer that day. It had nothing to do with getting thrown out of the
fleet for lying about a son, or quitting because the shame was too much. It had everything to do with
trust. That was all it had ever been about. It also happened to be the only thing putting the captain
and her first officer in a permanent deadlock. Something had to change. Someone had to make a
choice.

“It is by my authority as commander of this vessel that Doctor Blanchard be kept in detention until I
deem it unnecessary. Command will be informed of the situation and approve further course of
action. Until then,” Regina closed her eyes, drew in a breath, and let it out in a huff, “you have my
consent to investigate the doctor’s unfortunate involvement with Raiders.”

Emma’s crumpled expression widened in appall. “I have to find proof of her innocence? There’s
hardly any proof of her guilt!”

The quick rise and fall of a chest, more erratically felt than seen, was an uncustomary reaction. No
one stood up to Regina this way and exhibited such intractable behavior. Her fists closed, nails biting
into her own flesh. She couldn’t stand her in this moment – Emma with her green eyes, childish
outbursts, and irrational love for pancakes. Having her as a first officer was as close to suffering as
the captain had ever felt. How dare she speak to me this way, Regina thought. All she wanted was
Emma out of her life. She’d be happier for it. She could be a better captain because of it.
“You have 24-hours to gather evidence that exonerates Doctor Blanchard,” Regina gathered a breath before leaning in to deliver the blow, “or don’t bother setting foot on my ship again.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Space was a lonely, desolate vacuum. Really, it was the last place anyone should find themselves alone. If your instruments failed the last thing to rely on was yourself. It was left up to whatever brain cells remained after your academy years spent on fire whiskey and ale to find a solution. If it couldn’t be done you were as good as dead. And everyone knew not a miracle in the galaxy could save you. Because in space no one can hear you scream.

Emma would admit it; she felt the tingling of fear as her shuttle left the Storybrooke hanger. Though she had spent the same amount of time off-planet as other academy students, this was different. This time Emma was unsupervised – no superior officer to reprimand her, no co-pilot to correct her trajectory. More importantly, she was without her best friend who always knew how to calm her down and make her see reason.

But that was why Emma had to face her fear. That was why she flew lightyears from the nearest life form with no specific destination in mind. It was a fool’s errand, but her only hope of saving Mary Margaret.

In light of this solo adventure and how quickly it sprung up, Emma had little time to pack for the journey. The shuttle itself was fitted with the necessary tools, but it was her survival that mattered. Her mission could take a mere four hours or it could take longer than the strictly agreed upon 24. The chances she would be confined to the shuttle alone were slim. She had to prepare for extreme weather conditions, zero oxygen rich environments, unfriendly hostiles… The list never ended. Emma had to prepare for the worst case scenario.

Survival just happened to be her strong suit. It took a matter of minutes for her supplies to be gathered and stored in the craft. Among her equipment were a week’s worth of food rations (just to be on the safe side), spare tools because one couldn’t fly on a vessel that had only one spare spanner, and one light EVAC suit in case the shuttle’s exterior needed repairs or gods forbid Emma had to abandon ship and then she was really in dire straits. In addition, she brought the usual utility belt and grapper, vibroknife, spare comlink, her red leather jacket, a photo of Henry, and a snub-nosed pistol that packed a punch.

Seated in the pilot’s chair, Emma fished one of the items from her pocket. There in her hand rested a rectangular piece of shatterproof glass the size of wallet. It was smooth around the edges and smudged from frequent handling. With her forefinger she unlocked its properties with a tap at each corner. Spread out and filling up the glass was a two dimensional photo of her smiling son. Emma updated the photo regularly, but recent spiraling events prevented her from changing it in time for this expedition. It didn’t matter, though, because the picture made her smile anyway.

The first hour ticked by uneventfully. As precious minutes expired in the dark cabin Emma wondered if one person was meant to travel across the stars alone. Ironic because Emma prided herself on independence and running from authority. And that was precisely what she was doing: evading her superior officer. Call Emma weak, but she just couldn’t stand up to Regina anymore even when the issue could have been pushed further. It exhausted her, body and soul. She couldn’t image how Regina must have felt, especially after finding out her stepfather was a terrorist and her stepsister had been working under her command the whole time.

She sighed and stared vaguely into the blue eyes of the boy in the photo. The more she stared the
more she dwelled on Regina’s change since leaving Earth. Her 180 flip in temperament, though not a shock, pointed towards a cause Emma wasn’t ready to acknowledge. If she did she would have to admit that Regina missed Henry more than his own mother did. Emma knew the pain of separation well and understood that it took quite a great deal of compassion to make that pain possible. But if Regina was hurting this much after getting threatened by her greatest enemy, Leopold, then being away from that sweet boy she’d come to know must have made it all that much more worse. Henry had developed a bond with the captain, it couldn’t be denied. He always talked about her when she wasn’t around and when she was he couldn’t stop being his adorable, charismatically stubborn self. And just then as she stared into the depths of his eyes Emma realized that it was not just his mother that had left him this time but the captain, too.

A rustle from behind broke through Emma’s ruminations. Grabbing the arms of her chair, she spun to see an empty cabin. Reminded yet again of her seclusion, Emma rolled her eyes and slumped back down.

The sound returned, this time more distinct. Emma stood and followed it to the narrow aisle leading to the outer hatch. On examination of a third racket the mysterious sound’s origin was determined as the bulkhead itself.

Tentatively, Emma raised her knuckles and rapped on the compartment. The sound she picked up was not hollow. According to shuttle log, the area should only contain thermocouples and installation. Frowning, Emma made to open it. Fingers hovering over the release pad, she thought better of her approach and stood to the side of the compartment before opening it.

There was a girly squeal as a woman burst forth from the closet and bounced off the bulkhead opposite. Emma had to grab her arms in order to prevent the stowaway from collapsing.

“Ruby?” Emma choked in disbelief. She didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. Based on the officer’s comical entrance it was a little of both. “What are you doing here?!”

“I thought you could use some help. It’s not easy to navigate the entire galaxy by yourself, especially if you don’t have any idea where to look.” Ruby’s eyes took in the shuttle, widening a bit as they explored. “And I’m always confined to that damn swivel chair. I never get assigned to field duty.”

“That’s because you’re communications, Ruby. And this isn’t an assignment. It’s punishment.”

“Oh, don’t get your harness in a twist. This will be fun! Like a girl’s day out in space!”

Emma stared blankly before shaking it off. “Ruby, you left your post! What is the Storybrooke supposed to do without its communications officer?!”

Ruby shrugged. “They’ll manage.”

“Regina is probably blowing a fuse right now,” Emma mused darkly. She searched the floor like it held the strategy for dealing with that fallout. “You know what she’s going to do to you when we get back, right? Next to you is the last place I mean to stand.”

“Will you stop worrying about what Regina thinks? Gods, you’re obsessed with that woman.”

“I am not!”

Splaying her fingers out, Ruby touched each of them to her points. “Saved her, defended her, supposedly befriended her, can’t go half a parsec without mentioning her… Must I go on?”

“There’s nothing to go on to. I wouldn’t have even brought her up if it weren’t for someone’s stellar
idea to stash themselves in the RTG compartment.”

“So that’s why my skin was burning.”

“Don’t worry. You’re not at risk for radiation exposure. You’ll live, which I can’t say how pleased Regina will be about that.”

Ruby peered down casually to her chrono. “Well, that only took 30 standard seconds, but go on. Tell me more about what pleases the captain.”

“Ruby,” Emma groaned, clutching her forehead, “it’s not like that.”

“Your Regina Complex can be seen from the Outer Reach territories.”

“You say that like it’s a disease. That’s not the way she is. I see the good in her.”

“Just because you see something no one else sees doesn’t mean she’s good. That’s classic denial.”

“And you’re being a classic pain in my ass.” Emma sat back in her chair while Ruby took the co-pilot’s. “If only I had pushed her more and made her see reason to think Mary Margaret innocent. It’s not entirely Regina’s fault.”

“It’s funny you should say that. Emma, look around you. She’s the reason we’re here right now and your best friend is locked up and probably being tortured. Regina is emotionally compromised and she is going to get your friend killed because of it. Are these the actions of a good person? Of someone who is not to blame?”

“To be perfectly clear, I did not claim Regina was a good person. There is good in her – however small – but it’s there. And if there is any chance of her seeing that then there’s hope.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, giving the impression she heard this spiel before. “You know I like you, Ems. You’re a stand up person with a good head on her shoulders, so I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. I’ve been here a lot longer than you. I know the captain’s record. You, on the other hand, haven’t been here long enough to know Leroy’s moonshine is used to degrease Storybrooke’s ion engines. I’ll give you a year or two and if you still think she’s Queen Redemption I’ll personal give you a ride to a psychologist.”

“You’re a good friend, Ruby,” Emma said. She patted the woman’s shoulder. “I’m glad I have you to commit me to an asylum.”

The officer patted the hand at her shoulder. “What are friends for?”

Their laughter soon died down. Eyes drooped to the hum of the shuttle’s hyperdrive and backs sunk further into the leather flight seats.

“Would it be the worst thing in the galaxy if I doubted my best friend?” Emma shifted in her seat so she could better gage Ruby’s reaction. “Regina said something… It was before I left on this wild goose chase. It kind of made sense.”

Ruby gave a silent nod to continue.

Emma went back to gazing out the viewport. “Regina said that no one can really know everything about another person, even if it’s someone we call a friend. I’m starting to think there’s some truth in that. How can we believe the person we live with or talk to on a daily basis is who they say they are? Appearances are deceiving and people are just as deceitful. It’s selfish. It’s also survival. I mean, if
you think about it, sometimes we don’t even recognize ourselves and what we’re capable of. We tell lies to protect our livelihood, to protect others. We’re able to make someone think we’re the best or worst versions of ourselves.” Emma peered into the vast expanse of outer space, looking past known space, past the Reach, further than infinity. “I doubted her for a second. My best friend.”

It took a while for Ruby to speak, but when she did it was unexpected.

“I once thought Granny was body snatched.”

Emma’s brow crinkled. She turned away from the starry landscape. “Excuse me?”

“It was a phase,” Ruby defended. “At eight-years-old I believed in everything. The point is, Emma, we believe the worst things about the people we love. It is because we love that we doubt.” She shrugged, turning back to the viewport and lacing her fingers atop her stomach. “We’re only sentient.”

Amused by the notion, Emma snorted. She mirrored Ruby’s pose, reclined back, hands on her stomach, and thinking of loved ones.

“We’re only sentient.”

* * *

The nearby Novanjk System had a total of four planets and two moons. None of the planets were known to sustain intelligent life. The furthest removed from its sun was so bereft of heat that every square kilometer of its surface was encrusted with ice.

Planet Khione was a frozen world boasting few indigenous life forms. Its constant storm-weathered atmosphere made it inhospitable to surveying technology, hence its lack of humanoid civilization. Few subhuman creatures populated the planet, although it was known that the fearsome saberwolf reigned from the top of the food chain.

Aside from a few minor instances of turbulence, Emma landed the shuttle on even ground without a hitch. Because their craft could not sustain enough power for more than two hyperspace jumps, they had to choose their destinations wisely. Khione was an ideal place to start as it held a subspace relay station. The technology there could not hold a glow stick to various fleet space docks throughout the galaxy, but it had the power to perform basic communications. If Ruby could get into the system and bring up recent transmissions in the area they could uncover information that would clear Mary Margaret. All they needed was proof that Leopold and his Raiders pursued Storybrooke without spy intel.

“You couldn’t have parked a little closer to the base?”

Slapping the shuttle door a few times to ensure it sealed shut, Emma drew her first steps on Khione. “What?!” she hollered into the wind, pointing to her hood-covered ear. “You gotta speak up!”

“Why couldn’t you park any closer?!”

“We don’t know the state of the base,” Emma replied, pulling Ruby in so they wouldn’t have to shout. “It’s surrounded by sharp crags which won’t allow any craft a safe landing zone. The ice here looks stable, but with these high winds and sheer cliffs I want to stay on the safe side and put the shuttle down in a low-risk area.”

“But it’s a long way to the communications relay.”
“Then we better stop chatting and start walking!”

Ruby glowered at her superior officer’s back which was already making great strides ahead of her. “A bit bossy, aren’t we?” she muttered.

They walked on and ever on. Biting wind slowed their pace as did slippery inclines and unexpected outcroppings. Though Khione hung a far distance from its sun there was just enough light to lead the way.

Emma chuckled at Ruby’s multiple attempts to adjust her goggles. Sliding her own further up on a rosy nose, she hardened her mind and body for the journey. It was not a cake walk even with her athletic build, but Ruby was so petite and inexperienced in this kind of fieldwork that she faced more of a challenge. Not that Emma didn’t have any confidence in her; Ruby could be a very resourceful woman and especially capable in hyperchannels, two-way holotech, and all forms of radio communication. But circumstances changed when you’re dropped in a hostile environment and lightyears from a rulebook, as Emma was learning quickly. Even the first officer was unfamiliar in this territory. The closest she ever got to hostile environments like Khione was in the academy holochambers which could be loaded to simulate any particular atmosphere or locale.

Not any less self-governing or unmanageable than before they landed on Khione, Emma had to remember this wasn’t a solo mission. As commanding officer she had a responsibility to not only protect her crew member but wield the hammer of authority.

The jittering form of Ruby glided into her peripheral and Emma had to diminish her body’s reaction to the extreme cold. Her nose and fingertips had lost semi-feeling several meters ago and all she heard for the past half hour was the tap dance of her teeth. With a frosty exhale she shook off the dangers of frostbite and focused on her mission. She had to look like she could take it, which she could (in theory). If Emma was skilled at anything it was acclimating herself to the elements and bragging about it.

“You’re lucky the shuttle even had a spare E-suit,” Emma said, in order to make the time pass faster. “Otherwise, I’d have had to leave you in the shuttle to play solitaire with the computer.”

“Yeah, well if the computer would cut the bitchy attitude I’d have thrived back there. At least the shuttle cabin is heated. This is just ludicrous.”

Ruby visibly shivered in her parka and glared at the snowy peaks like they were to blame (which they were). Of all the places for her first field assignment it had to be a frozen wasteland? Why couldn’t it be a paradise? Ruby trudged after Emma, kicking up snow in her wake. All she could do was curse the weather and hug herself for warmth. Whimpering pathetically, Ruby shoved her mittens further into what she hoped were her toasty armpits. She couldn’t tell bundled up like Old World Fort Knox in that silver coated E-suit.

Unlike G-suits (namely EVAC suits) which protected against adverse effects of gravity, the environmental suit was designed to safeguard against a particular environ or atmosphere. Different parts of the suit – chemical barrier pads, helmet, water weights – could be detached while other parts like a fur-lined hood and mittens might fasten easily to the suit. The customization of one’s E-suit depended on the environment. In the case of frozen Khione, the two officers retained the essentials that afforded warmth. Also, due to the dangers of high air pressure, they each kept a breathing apparatus on hand.

“Survival in these conditions is not for the faint-hearted,” Emma asserted, sniffing through the ice crystalizing in her nostrils. “Unlike you I’m trained to acclimate my body to the elements. I face hostility and conquer it with my instincts.”
“That’s a particular set of skills. You seem the type that would blossom here.”

“It comes from my constant need to run from authority.”

“Sounds like someone is channeling the Captain.”

Emma slowed to a stop, cocking her head back with a withering look that proved she was not going to fall into that trap again. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

“Yet you just did.”

Emma rolled her eyes and walked on.

When the station came into view they ground to a halt because if they had gone any farther they would have been swallowed by an abyss. A few meters from the compound awaited an enormous crevice. It circled their destination like a moat and was a half a mile wide. According to their sonic reader the trench was unbroken by a conduit. There appeared no probable way to enter the compound with that immense an obstacle.

“Who builds a moat without a bridge?” Ruby asked. The sight of the half mile wide void alone personally insulted her.

“Someone who doesn’t want visitors.”

Squinting through the snowy vortex, Emma spotted the first thing since arriving on Khione that wasn’t white or made of ice. If she hadn’t worn her goggles, which prevented snow blind, she wouldn’t have caught it. She smiled and laughed despite her numb cheeks.

“I fail to see the humor in our predicament.” Ruby frowned at her jovial first officer. “What do you see?”

“A magic carpet!” Emma shouted, jogging towards Mecca.

The skiff was buried in snow up to its seat. After dusting the snow off Emma stared it down, biting her lip. Based on previous experience working as a mechanic she recognized the short-distance craft. It could haul up to a ton of cargo on its flatbed trailer, yet still travel up to eighty miles an hour. The craft itself was hulking but sturdy and should get them safely over the trench and back.

Ruby took one look at the thing and visualized her impending free fall down the trench. “Is this safe?” she inquired, watching Emma crawl under the skiff on her back.

“Relatively.”

“And what are you doing?”

There was a human grunt followed by a mechanical groan. “Making some adjustments in the repulsor. It’s been sitting here casted over in ice for who knows how long. I want to make sure its calibrated right so we don’t go falling to our deaths.”

Ruby’s eyes soared to the wintery sky. “Comforting.”

“Can you hand me the spanner?”

Ruby rustled in the backpack for the tool and slapped it into the palm of the flapping hand. It only took some tinkering and light cursing before Emma got it to start “purring” as she termed fondly.
“You definitely have a flair for anything that flies. Is there anything you can’t pilot?”

“I like fixing things.” Emma scratched her neck, leaving a trail of grease behind. “Of course, that’s after I intentionally break them.”

She diverted her gaze (a lingering sign of guilt). Her previous employer at Tillman’s Garage had the unfortunate pleasure of dealing with her constant need to “check something out” in a client’s engine when it was only a routine antigrav check. Though the unnecessary fiddling was deducted out of her pay, Emma would profess to know more about repulsorlift technology than any mechanic on Earth. Literally.

It was smooth sailing over the trench. When they cleared the gap and settled to the ground it took a bit of coaxing on Emma’s part to unfasten the arms from around her waist. With a muttered apology Ruby dismounted in an oh-so-elegant manner only a jagger slug could match. She would have kissed the ground if her lips didn’t run the risk of freezing to it.

With the security of a hollow moat, there apparently was no need for locked doors. They entered through the hatchway and were instantly drenched in darkness. Thankful for her superior officer’s packing skills, Ruby unloaded a pair of glowsticks and gave one of them over to Emma. Brandishing their path with artificial light, the two officers navigated the empty corridors and stairways.

Of the various relay stations scattered throughout their galaxy only a few were unmanned, which meant the structures ran on recycled power and automated systems. The equipment ran as efficiently on its own as it would supervised by technicians. Not having to explain their presence to anyone, Emma felt at ease with the abandoned station. The only thing that didn’t sit well was the drip-drip of condensation and eerie echo of stillness.

“Are you sure there’s no one maintaining this site?” Ruby asked, the tremble in her voice evident. Just to be extra sure, Emma paused to tilt an ear. “Yeah. Pretty darn.”

“The least they could do was leave a few lights on. I can’t see past –Shh! What was that?!”

“What?” Emma gasped, wide eyes panning the hallway.

“Jeepers!” Ruby jumped at something she alone heard, possibly an alien, a serial killer, or the ventilation system.

After an exaggerated double-take, Emma cackled and repeated, “Jeepers?”

“It’s what Granny says. Usually in instances of shock and horror.”

“Does she squeal like a little girl, too?” Emma asked before earning a jab in the shoulder. “Ow!”

“What a little girl.”

“Fraidy cat,” Emma sassed back.

The corridor led to a large room filled with cubicles and floor-to-ceiling processors. The empty chairs may have been for show but the fact that no one should have been present to admire the display was brow raising.

“I’m telling you right now,” Ruby’s shifty eyes swept the ominousness, “if I see an unattended steaming mug of coffee and a half eaten donut I am so jetting out of here.”
“You watch way too many movies, Ruby.”

“The likelihood of an entire colony – or a base full of technicians, for that matter – getting snagged and impregnated by hostile xenomorphs is relatively straightforward. I mean, how else do you explain the Gigeron 6 Incident? Haven’t you seen *Aliens*?”

“Sure. Back when I was born 270 years ago. What archive did you have to break into to get that piece of history?”

“W-whoa,” Ruby stuttered, halting her progress altogether despite the darkness closing in, “you did not just dis *Aliens*. Do you even realize how relevant those movies are today? Sigourney Weaver launched a thousand generations of female spacers with the line, ‘Get away from her you bitch!’”

“Ruby, I’m right next to you. There’s no need to shout.”

“I can’t help my love for Sigourney.”

“You’re in love with a fictional character?”

“Oh, Em,” Ruby sighed with a cringe and giving a sympathetic pat on the arm, “we need to get you out from under those hovercars.”

Emma would have replied with something snarky if it were not for the building sensation that they weren’t alone. Of course, talk of aliens didn’t help the situation. She swallowed. Her heart jackhammered in her chest and it was only about to get more intense. A sharp crackling, like the back of a spoon cracking along an egg shell echoed. Emma gave a yelp, almost jumping out of her E-suit.

“Seven blasted hells! I heard it too!”

“I told you!”

Ruby grabbed an arm she *hoped* was Emma’s and hauled her to what she *wanted* to be the communications room. Thankfully, she was correct on both accounts.

When their heart rates returned to normal and their fears dwindled to nervous chuckles they got to work. Every surface of equipment was adorned by a coating of dust but it all looked operational. Lights blinked, computers whirred, and most of it seemed to respond to Ruby’s touch. Definitely out of her element, Emma simply watched from the sidelines.

Because Khione’s relay station was the only one within a hundred lightyear radius, there was an exorbitant amount of data to sift through. The base could transmit frequencies and messages across long distances, so somewhere in the multitude of coordinates and communications awaited their evidence. Ruby narrowed down the parameters by using the last few weeks of data and singling out certain frequencies Freedom Raiders were known to use. Of course, not anyone could decrypt a terrorist communiqué. There were just as many capable pilots, scientists, doctors, and technicians in the Raider camp as Cosmofleet. Ruby, living up to her title of chief communications officer, found what they needed in no time.

After listening to the unscrambled transmission it became evident that the Raiders trailed the Storybrooke without inside information. Before the voices warbled out they did pick up on the words, “Leopold wants to recruit his daughter.” Other than that, Mary Margaret wasn’t mentioned.

“We got it!” Ruby exclaimed, pocketing the data stick containing their proof. “Now we can free the doc!”
“Yeah, if this doesn’t satisfy the Captain I don’t know what will.”

“And as thrilled as I am to have successfully completed my first field assignment… can we please get out of here?”

“Hang on, there’s one last thing I need you to do. Can you get a track on where the transmission originated from?”

Thrusting a hip out, Ruby leaned on the console. “Does a hyperdrive need a motivator?” she drawled cockily.

“Uh, yeah?”

Ruby punched in a few commands into the computer. A data stick popped out of a slot and it was handed over to the first officer who pocketed it without a glance.

“Don’t you want to read it?”

“No time,” Emma replied curtly, zipping her suit up to the neck and pulling up her hood. “My communications officer thinks aliens are going to strike, so I better get her out of here.” She smiled for effect and popped on her goggles.

Ruby followed quickly after, nearly tripping on Emma’s heels. “You say that like you weren’t going to pee your E-suit not ten minutes ago!”

For as desirable as the warm shuttle cabin seemed, they were not able to get far. Though the windstorm had picked up in force it was not the reason for delay. Neither was the skiff which might have still been operational. No, if the growls carried on the wind had anything to say about it, Emma and Ruby would not be leaving Khione alive.

“A-are those…?”

“Saberwolves,” Emma confirmed.

Peering from behind a generator, they spotted a pack of seven seemingly majestic creatures pacing from across the trench as if waiting for their prey to cross. The saberwolf was about three times the size of the extinct Earth wolf. Because their environment had little sunlight the pups developed enhanced night vision which was far superior to a human’s. Even if they were without their razor sharp fangs and limber pounces their foul yellow eyes alone could terrify any one of the meager life forms on Khione to death.

Escape on foot would be futile. There only hope lied with the skiff. Through the whipping snow Emma spotted the craft a few meters out.

Emma wet her lips and felt them chill immediately in the wind. “I think once we breach the gap we can outrun them with the skiff, lose them in the canyon if need be.”

“You think?”

“This isn’t a simulation from our academy days,” Emma defended, shrugging. “Reality isn’t an exact science.”

“David would say *everything* in the universe is an exact science.”

“Yeah, well I’m not chief science officer. I go with my gut.”
“And your gut is telling you to do a suicide run on a cargo skiff? Can’t you just shoot them with your blaster?”

“This thing?” Emma withdrew the pistol which seemed larger in Ruby’s imagination. “On a saberwolf? Are you spaced out?! This couldn’t even take down Regina when she’s homicidal!”

I mean, it packs a punch but not that kind of a punch, Emma thought.

“Then why did you bring it?”

Emma had asked herself the same. Though she was without a doubt skilled in survival, she was anything but skilled in the preparation for survival. Maybe in hindsight Emma should have packed a more powerful weapon (like a blaster canon). Maybe she should have finished what she and the captain had started before getting shooed off to a frozen planet crawling with saberwolves.

A lot of ‘maybes.’

Emma grimaced and scratched her hood-covered head. “Probably not the best move on my part. Next time we visit I’ll be sure to bring a nuclear arsenal. In the meantime, I think we should use the skiff. It’s the only transportation this base has going for it. You have a better idea?”

Ruby tugged absently on the fur lining of her hood. If this were a matter of signaling for help or rerouting a distress beacon she could find it in her own understanding of communications to accomplish it. But strategizing her way out of a brigade of saberwolves? It was a tactical conundrum nowhere near her wheelhouse.

“Oh, I just thought of something!”

Emma whirled to see eyes alit with epiphany. She may have been desperate, but the first officer could have sworn there was a light bulb haloing Ruby’s head.

“What? I’m all ears. Anything that will get us out of that jam.” Emma indicated to the pack of snarling wolves beyond the trench.

“It’s just that… I find myself on frozen Khione in nothing but expensive lingerie, a skinny uniform, and an E-suit to protect me.”

“Yeah?” Emma whined, jumping in place if only to warm the brain cells into forming an escape plan. “What about it?”

Ruby looked over at Emma with a weight of guilt in her eyes. “I should have packed those wool socks Granny gave me for Christmas.”

***

Captain Mills busied her hands with paperwork like she wasn’t clocking her first officer’s absence. Twenty-four hours, that was how long she had given Emma. It was adequate time to save her friend or damn her to a space prison that rivaled Old World Alcatraz. If only Regina could shake the hour glass a bit, speed up the sands of time just to be done with the whole matter. The doctor was guilty beyond all shadow of doubt and the only thing standing in the way of a grueling trial was Emma Swan.

Wherever that woman was in the galaxy and whatever sordid plan she was concocting Regina could guarantee that she would not return with the proper evidence. Her stubbornness would get her in all manner of predicaments. Regina could just see it: Emma crashing into a space port due to over
theatrics, Emma fumbling a translation with her prime witness, Emma making some ingenuous slight to a native’s religion thus running her off the planet entirely, tail between her legs.

The captain’s snicker echoed in her quarters with no one to hear it. She received silence in return.

Regina wasn’t really sure why she even gave it a thought. Her little problem had been solved without having to suspend or resort to airlocks. Dwelling on the past did more harm than good. She had already spent far more time than necessary arguing when Emma was around and enough hours of the day cataloging inadequacies when bereft of her presence.

Maybe she would promote Lieutenant Nolan. Though lacking in ambition, he had the obedience of a Labrador and the potential to shepherd the crew as a second-in-command. He was far more coordinated than Emma, had more dress sense than the typical freshman cadet, and offered counsel worth her time.

For as much confidence as Regina placed in governing her own musings, Emma was out of her hair and yet as she read through each deck report, argued every point of engine upkeep with Leroy, and wandered nearly every corridor on the ship, that woman still managed to invade her thoughts.

A heated sigh left her as she flicked back her hair. The lift doors hissed open and Regina stomped into the main bridge with as much subtlety as a rhinoceros. Her senior officers diverted their eyes quickly, already schooling their expressions before David gave the customary “Captain on deck.” Their superior’s moodiness could be detected from a deck away.

“Miss Lucas, status report.”

Everyone shifted uncomfortably.

“Uh,” David paused to clear his throat. “Ruby accompanied Lieutenant Commander Swan, remember Captain?”

“Oh, yes.” Regina shook her head absently. “Officer Nolan, you may commence with the report.”

“We are proceeding to our mission target zone, vectoring at 400-mark-03. Weapons, shields, and propulsion are fully operational. There was a power spike in one of the reactors, but Leroy mentioned you settled the matter with him.” David’s lips thinned, skipping out the colorful rant from the engineer on how the captain had the gall to tell him how to do his job. “I took the liberty of sending all other systems data to your personal tablet.”

“I see,” the captain remarked, perusing the screen of her datapad. “Thank you.”

“We also intercepted a message while you were gone. Belle, if you would…”

Ensign French swiveled around with a studious look. “Captain, using the ship’s advanced communication equipment I was able to decrypt the message. It took some trial and error on my part, but the audio is now cleaned of interference.”

Regina’s brow rose, clearly impressed. “If you continue to be this accommodating, Ensign, I will have to make you chief communications officer.” Her fingers drummed against her armrests minutely.

“A wise selection, Captain,” Rumple supplied, clearly unconcerned by his bias as Belle’s intimate.

Loose brown curls moving to her shaking head, Belle vowed in a flurry, “Oh, no, I would never steal Ruby’s post from her.”
“From her hasty and willing act of following in Miss Defiant’s footsteps,” Regina said, “it seems she wouldn’t care less.”

“Miss Defiant?” David quirked a brow, smiling wryly.

“Make of it what you will. They are making it all too easy for me to suspend them from duty.”

“Defiance is a quality you admire, though, is it not? One that you in fact possess or you would not so actively ignore the more trivial assignments from Command.”

“Did I ask for commentary, Lieutenant?”

At the speed of a blaster shot, he stood at attention. “No, Captain,” he answered after clearing his throat.

The baleful stare was held over David until its purpose was seen through. Regina rose from her captain’s chair and proceeded to the center of the bridge.

“Ensign, do you have that message ready?”

“Presently, Captain.”

With a few calibrations in the audio, Belle cleaned up the transmission until two distinct voices emanated from the oval communications grid. The speech read in English and were possibly human, one male, the other female.

“What I witnessed was pure terror. These ‘people’ as you call them are not so different from us. They are parents and children just as those that make up our resistance. They are as protective of their way of life and just as ideological as our most constant supporters.”

“Clearly a woman’s voice,” Belle gathered. “The conversation was fragmented upon analysis, so we cannot hear an opening or conclusion of the call.” Her head shook harmlessly. “If Ruby were here she would be able to better extrapolate. I am just a navigator.”

Regina waved a hand. “Play the entire message, whatever you were able to extract.”

Belle nodded and started the audio from the beginning.

“… I don’t understand why he had to target so close to a school. This is about drawing attention to a political misuse of power in the Commonwealth, not gambling with innocent lives.”

“It’s a point of humanoid rights, sweetheart. Politics is just a tool they use to destroy the people. Their weapon is policy, ours is action. It’s only a matter of time before one wins out. Leopold had every right to attack where he did. You were there. You saw how weak the people are. The only way to get through is by use of force.”

“What I witnessed was pure terror. These ‘people’ as you call them are not so different from us. They are parents and children just as many that make up our resistance. They are as protective of their way of life and just as ideological as our most constant supporters.”

“Yeah, but THEY weren’t forced to abandon their homes. Their own leaders encourage a society bereft of nonhumans and create laws which defeat the purpose of free colonization while the general population just sits on their asses and watch it happen.”

“The ideologies of our leaders may be different, but their methods are not unlike. They are both
ruthless and misguided."

“Talk like that will get you killed. The last thing we need is suspicion of a traitor in our ranks. Morale is already low with Leopold buzzing off after the Mills daughter and neglecting home base matters. I don’t want to hear about this when you return. Got it, sweetheart?”

“I’ll get it when you stop calling me ‘sweetheart.’”

“Snowball’s chance in a supernova. You brought the kid with you, right? Leopold is counting on you not to screw this up.”

“He’s with me. And it didn’t take much persuasion, either.”

“Well, aren’t you the charmer? The gang’s gonna have to start calling you ‘Cradle Raider.’”

“Please don’t.”

The raucous laughing ebbed. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to take a little more pride in what we’re doing. We can all feel the solar winds changing. After all these years of waiting it’s all come to this. She’s going to change everything.”

“I’m well aware of our undertaking, and I’m personally understanding of hers.”

There was silence for a moment before the man spoke.

“Just need to be reminded of where you stand, where your head’s at. You’ve been away for a long time now.”

“What, you calling me sympathetic? Vaporize me, I haven’t been away THAT long.”

“Well, I know you don’t take too kindly to Earth folk. With your tribe’s history –“

“You mean my short-lived tribe’s history?”

“Cool your ion jets. At least you still have your sister –“

The man’s voice trilled and crackled out.

“That was all I could get,” Belle said.

David folded his arms and stared pensively at the darkened grid. “I think we can assume the two voices in the transmission belong to Raiders. How influential in the ranks… I couldn’t say.” He considered the matter further, silently and with a rubbing to his chin. When the course of a solution eluded him he awaited Regina’s contribution. But it never came. “Captain?”

Her head jerked up. Regina’s mouth opened to speak. She paused, her eyes faraway and mind clearly elsewhere. Lips pinned shut, she returned her stare to where the transmission dissolved.

“I recognize the female’s voice.” Regina’s fingers began tapping at the glossy flat control panel, its beeps and whistles chiming before the grid powered up. “But I need more proof that she is indeed who I suspect.”

Regina entered a Cosmofleet passcode that allowed her access into Earth crime scene archives. Arising from the grid was the image of desolation. It resembled ground zero of a photon torpedo strike: searing durasteel bent at odd angles, charred, soot-stained earth, and a forest of rubble. Shook by the suddenness of the image, Regina planted a hand to the table, doubled forward slightly. She
breathed in a few times to let the nausea pass and allowed the tremors to trickle out of her system. Satisfied that she could go on with her job, that was exactly what she did.

With a hand hovered over the panel, each finger pressed down, creating a circular pattern. She made several counterclockwise motions, projecting the three dimensional image into a video at forward speed. Her hand stopped its adjustments when a blonde ponytail flicked into view. She allowed the real-time footage to run, watching with breath immobile as Emma ran like the hounds of hell were at her heels. Regina followed the video as the blonde led a rescue team to the cave-in where her son’s emergency beacon had directed her.

A few more turns on the panel and the scene of a small scale apocalypse fast forwarded through a frantic mother’s commands, shouts of joy, tears, and a family reunion. Regina swallowed thickly, blinking her gaze away for a moment. It seemed so long ago that she and Henry were trapped in that pit. So long since she allowed herself to be someone else’s comfort. Regina had allowed that rare connection at the same time it was nearly lost, and now the actual loss of it – the distance of the other half of that link – was taking its hold over her.

It was only for a moment, but it was enough for the significance to set in. It explained why she jerked awake from nightmares of exploding starships and being buried alive. It explained why she had little tolerance for poor crew performance and why her first response to the former was to snap rather than show the error of one’s way through reason. The captain had been in irritable spirits, more so than normal.

Her loss, the distance, and an unspoken yearning were every reason why Regina had to banish Emma Swan from her own starship.

Because she missed him.

“Captain?” David prodded gently. “Is there something in particular you’re looking for?”

Blinking back to the present, Regina cleared her throat. “The female Raider in question was present at the recent attack outside the Presidio. She is seen here,” Regina zoomed in on the subject, a short woman with dark hair pulled under a lowered cap and tending to the captain herself, “disguised as a paramedic. That is how I recognized her voice.”

It wasn’t the full truth, but Regina still had a promise to keep. She had already made the mistake of not identifying Mulan when the ‘paramedic’ tried to press an oxygen mask over her face. Regina chalked it up to a high-stress situation.

“Just a moment, dearie.” With a stride to the transmission table, Rumple directed his inquiry with a scaly forefinger. “You were among the survivors in that terrorist attack? Whatever were you doing there?”

“I arrived on site just after the attack. The rest is hardly your business.”

“You were there to help,” David gathered slowly, frowning like he couldn’t comprehend it.

“There were so many casualties. I can’t believe someone would do such a thing,” Belle remarked sadly. “Did you manage to save any of the children?”

Rumple leered bravely in the shadow of the captain, muttering, “Hardly the saving type.”

“My being there is not under examination,” Regina scolded matter-of-factly. “Mulan is. According to vocal recognition software the voice of the paramedic and that of the female Raider in Belle’s message are an exact match. “
“So a Raider was at the blast site. Isn’t that a needless danger?” David asked. “What could this Mulan gain from being there? Why risk exposing her identity as a terrorist just to witness the damage her people caused?”

“Is it not obvious, Lieutenant, that of all the paramedics to attend to me, a Cosmofleet commander, that day it was a Freedom Raider? After Leopold White threatened me less than 24-hours ago the irony is —“

The blood in Regina’s veins turned to ice. After having allowed the footage to resume she caught something that justified her vengeance beyond epic proportion. In the holo, Mulan had made several cover glances elsewhere. Instead of tending to her patient, the disguised EMT had another in her sights.

“Commander?” Belle asked. “What is it?”

Regina slowed down the speed and manually revolved the image for a better perspective until the object of Mulan’s spying became clear. Her hand jerked back from the holo as if scalded. She inhaled sharply and stumbling back from the image. She would never have thought this would be their fate. The intended dread the image portrayed, what it meant to the Raiders, and to her… It was a nightmare come to life.

“No…"

David touched her arm. “Captain Mills?”

Regina shook her head, unable to accept it. The connection became clear, its truth staring her in the face and forcing her to confront the consequences. The transmission Belle intercepted… this boy the two Raiders spoke of… Cradle Raider… Mulan, the babysitter/paramedic tending to the captain but setting her sights across the rubble on her target…

Henry Swan.

* * *

Their shuttle entered the hanger bay with exactly an hour to spare. With an air of smugness, Emma greeted technicians and mechanics as she and Ruby left for main deck. She inhaled the sweat, oil, and coolant, mystified by how the smell sat so right with her. The feel of her boots scraping the glossy floors of the corridors, the unmistakable jar the lift gave between decks C and D, the smiles she received upon her return… It all felt familiar and invigorating. She had missed the Storybrooke. The realization that she had more than one home – and that it was a place rather than a person – was not a thing to be taken lightly. Emma had been a child of a crumbling system that had no better found parents to support her than a place to call her own.

“It’s good to be back,” Ruby said, recognizing her friend’s expression. “Isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it sure is.” With a smile, Emma initiated the lift that would take them to the main bridge. “It only took a few months.”

“It’s different for every crew member. David and I were recruited at the same time and he settled in a full two years before I ever did. Belle always says she had an easy transition, but I’d bet Rumple had something to do with that. And Leroy has been here since the Old World Stone Age, so your guess is as good as mine.”

“I can’t imagine sticking it out in one place for that long, even on a state-of-the-art Regal-class like this.”
“Are you expecting to gain a position in command? Be a captain of your own starship?”

“Paperwork and protocol are not my style,” Emma replied, cringing. “I’d rather get some experience in the fleet and charm some prospective references. I’d like to start up my own bounty hunting business. Bring some legitimacy back to the profession.”

“Entrepreneur, eh? Well, you have the resourcefulness of an android and the instincts of a seasoned pirate. You’re ability to evade saberwolves, though…” eyes narrowed doubtfully, Ruby tsked, “…not a shining example your prospective clients would appreciate.”

“Hey, you just said I was resourceful!”

“Not with a skiff.”

“I’ve flown heavier cargo and crossed wider barriers than that trench.”

“All while getting chased by a pack of wolves? Wolves that chew on the bones of humans? Emma,” Ruby cautioned with a smile that did more harm than good, “you may have oversold our transport’s capabilities when you pulled a 180 degree roll in midair. You think that flatbed was collateral? What about my sanity? I lost it back there when you ‘safely’ landed on the ice,” she air quoted. “I was screaming for dear life, praying Granny wouldn’t go looking through the black box under my bed after I’m dead and gone, and what were you doing? Laughing!”

The lift doors opened and Ruby stomped onto the main bridge. Emma rolled her eyes to the indignant huff and just trailed after. “But it was cool!”

“No pun intended, right?”

“Do you even know how many people can pull a move like that on a two ton skiff? I can barely hold up five of my fingers, Rubes.”

“Miss Swan.”

Emma whirled to the unusual call of her name. It had not been addressed with the same acridity owned by the captain. Yet there Regina was, looking oddly out of sorts.

“You look surprised,” Emma resorted with a cocky half-grin. “Didn’t think I could find my way back or is it a lack of faith in my ability to help a friend?”

Regina stared, unimpressed yet frozen with bewilderment. She had managed to operate up to her usual standards, barking orders and governing with an iron fist. But the second she heard that word, “cool” and from a Swan no less just all but razed the stability built up since she identified the hostage boy.

“Okaaay,” Emma drawled, “I can see you’re not in a talkative mood, so I’ll get straight to the point. Ruby and I just got back from Khione. Aside from the saberwolves and near rape by an invisible xenomorph it was a nice little vacation. And if I were you I’d give your chief communications officer a raise. Ruby snagged a Raider transmission, decrypted it, and traced its original source.” With a swift lob the data stick aired forward. Regina blinked in time to catch it. “In there you’ll find crystal clear evidence that Doctor Blanchard was not in fact responsible for leading her father to this ship. Oh, and included are coordinates of a possible Raider base not far from here. It’s all there,” Emma assured. She glanced at her chrono pointedly before snarking, “And returned well before the agreed upon 24-hours… Captain.”

Regina was sure of one thing and it was that she did not approve of the tone. The entire bridge
reeked of smug superiority. One small feat and this woman was thrusting her shoulders back like she
could terra-form a wasteland with a snap of her fingers. Such a misplacement of one's faculties. If
Emma put as much effort into her duties as she did flashing that smirk, there was a slight chance she
could transform herself into a worthwhile first officer.

A crease marred the captain’s brow. She looked down to the smudged data stick in her hand. Yes,
she was absolutely sure of Emma’s show of disrespect. What became a bit hazy was just how
impressed Regina could admit to being at the display of determination and timeliness in her first
officer.

Emma, on the other hand, was not sure why her captain had fallen silent. Patience was not the usual
shade that matched the pressed trousers, silk cream blouses, and sharp as durasteel blazers. Regina
looked to be holding something back, and from the constricted lines on her face it was doing her a
world of discomfort.

“May we speak in my quarters, Miss Swan?”

“If you have something to say then say it. Otherwise, I’ve got a friend I need to release from false
imprisonment.”

When Emma received no reply she turned her back. A total of five strides were drawn and a slap to
the turbolift call button sounded before the captain intervened.

“They’ve taken Henry.”

The lift doors spread, but Emma remained frozen to the bridge. Slowly, she turned around, her
hesitant eyes searching for the source of an absurd claim.

“The Raiders have taken Henry hostage. He’s on his way to Leopold this very moment.” Regina
tipped her head, not apologetically but as if to say I told you so. “I did request to speak in private.”

“Okay, back the fuck up. Henry is Earthside with Mulan. He’s probably in school as we speak,
drawing pictures of starships and behaving like a better kid than I was at his age…”

Emma dragged off, her fears spreading wide green eyes. The more reasonable places she claimed her
child was at that moment the less confident tone her voice took on. It was like Emma was struggling
for an explanation that her son was safe and sound where she left him.

Her chest began to tighten. Emma started to see spots behind her eyes. She couldn’t know what was
fact or fiction. How could she when her job constantly questioned her past? She couldn’t wheedle
out motivations like she used to because doubt had turned against her. Because the definition of trust,
what it meant and how blind she’d be without it, was slipping through her fingers.

“Where…is he, Regina?”

“Miss Swan…”

“WHERE?!”

Emma’s roar startled everyone on the bridge including Regina. She would be damned if some
captain with zero know-how in raising a child coaxed her into submission. Where Henry was
concerned, Emma would break every fleet regulation in existence to ensure his safety.

“Who’s Henry?” David asked for everyone not privy to the now broken agreement.
There was no more hesitation left in Emma. After four years she didn’t have the strength. After her only family had been stolen from her, discretion meant little.

“My son,” she answered. Bristling over the silence, Emma turned to the captain. “I think I’d like to speak in private now.”

* * *

Regina did what she could. Her explanation was more than adequate, never skimping on details and laying out every event and malefactor as organized in her own captain’s logs. When she had Emma sitting with a tumbler of untouched cider she began her story with the interception of the Raider message and the mention of a hostage child.

From there Regina continued uninterrupted save for the clinking of a tremulous glass. She revealed the footage of Mulan at the blast site, knowing Emma wouldn’t be satisfied unless she saw it with her own eyes. Henry’s babysitter identified as a terrorist… It had been enough to strangle the words from her throat, but Emma sat there staring at the holo but not registering the magnitude of what it showed. That or she was a very good actress. It struck the captain as curious. If this had been her child she would be screaming her lungs out, throwing things, and demanding why out of all the billions in the galaxy it had to be her son. If Mulan had been the only person she trusted and had been betrayed by that trust, Regina would hunt that woman down until her vibroknife sizzled red.

Why isn’t she angry? Regina thought. Why isn’t she tearing this place apart?

With Emma silent, Regina could only confess her suspicions. Mulan had been in Emma’s employment since Henry’s birth. They had first met on Presidio grounds and not through the agency frequented by single, working mothers. Either Mulan had been deliberately placed in Emma’s path or she was recruited later on. Either way she had casted her fate in with the Freedom Raiders.

What made no sense was why Emma Swan? If Leopold wanted to seduce the help of a Cosmofleet officer, why begin his infiltration four years before her initiation into the fleet? And how could he possibly know she would graduate? Of the hundreds of applicants only a few dozen were accepted to the academy each year and of those about half managed completion.

At the end of her briefing, Regina sat back from across Emma with a passive demeanor. The intel had been thoroughly articulated and answered nearly all of Emma’s questions, yet it did not grant a mother solace. Emma rolled her eyes to herself. She didn’t expect peace, and when it indeed failed to appear she remained an empty shell in yearning.

Drawing a hand through her hair, Emma took a deep breath and let it out. She needed to feel something cool and unyielding in her hand. She stretched forward and grabbed the first thing in sight. The cider went down exactly like its maker praised it would. If she had felt this lousy ten years ago she’d allow the glass to shatter and cut deep enough to siphon the poisons of her pain.

Emma returned the glass to the coffee table, empty. Her lips smacked a few times, enjoying the numbing sensation of apples and liquor before speaking.

“Why is your mother involved?”

“I…” Regina started, hands leaving from under her thighs and coming together on her lap, “honestly do not know. I am not privy to her dealings now any more than I had been before she retired from politics. Although it does not surprise me. My mother was known to… carry on business with dubious patrons.”
“Yeah, but were they ever terrorists?”

“I cannot answer that.”

Something in her voice didn’t sit well with Emma. It was like getting an abnormal reading on David’s scanners – impossible to detect yet obviously pertinent to her knowledge. The ivory sofa creaked as Emma leaned forward with forearms resting on her knees. Brow rising at the anomaly, she asked, “Because you’re protecting her?”

“Because I do not know, Miss Swan. I have not seen or spoken to my mother in over two years thanks to my work’s constant traveling. If she is a Raider as Leopold claims – and is anything else to that man, for that matter – then it was all done with forethought. Twenty years as a Commonwealth delegate has given her ample sources and access to sensitive information Command couldn’t crack. My mother is a resourceful woman who does not need protecting.”

“I don’t know why I’m surprised by your mom’s involvement. Mental instability seems to run in the family.”

Brown eyes narrowed coolly. “I do not appreciate what you are insinuating,” Regina emphasized. “Kidnapping children is not in my nature and neither is betraying my government.”

“What happened to ‘four years is not enough to know intimate details of someone?’ Or are you just immune to that argument? A commander of long tenure has absolutely no grievances against a rightfully corrupt system?”

Regina’s shock was evident in the way she reeled back on her sofa. “You agree with the Raider’s accusations against the Commonwealth? That it is corrupt?”

“It’s not virtuous,” Emma contended with a pointed tip of her head. “Anyone’s off their speeder if they think the Commonwealth doesn’t lie, cheat, and steal to make it in this galaxy. They hardly conceal their contempt for non-humans and immigrants. In fact, they make credits off of it.”

“It surprises me, Miss Swan, that you would find fault with a system that gave you the opportunity to fulfill your dream of becoming a pilot. Some would return the favor by offering the benefit of the doubt.”

“Like you did for me?”

“I do for every one of my crew members,” Regina stated matter-of-factly. Her first officer rolled her eyes off to the side, not even feeling the sting of her question going unanswered directly. Her silence proved just how familiar the dodge had become. “The Storybrooke is their home. I intend it to be a fresh start for anyone seeking to serve a higher cause.”

“Save the speech. We’re getting off track.”

“Finally, we agree on something.” After swiping her hand across the tops of her pant-clad thighs, Regina brought one leg over the other in a show of formality. She laid a wrist comfortably on a knee while the other planted at her side. “Now,” she proclaimed, “I can understand why Leopold would seek me out, but I cannot explain his interest in you. Henry is obviously being used to lure you into a trap.”

“Is it so hard for you to believe that I might be special?”

Regina’s head angled down, indicating that her first officer should know better. “This is hardly the time to crack jokes, Miss Swan. And of all the people to find you interesting, the Raiders should be
the least desirable.”

But how was Emma assigned to her command? If Leopold needed Regina to move forward with his plans, how was he to know Emma would take on the position as her first officer? Unless he did know and had a hand in her assignment, therefore proving a spy had been planted in Command. The more Regina thought about it the more it sounded like conspiracy. This was too huge to be a simple matter of a terrorist led coup against the government. It also had the makings of an issue way above the ranking of a humble commander.

It was possible Emma’s instatement to her ship was of the intentional kind. Leopold had an insider who could move officers wherever it suited him, so he had her recruited to the Storybrooke under the command of Regina Mills, the daughter of his companion. All this meant, of course, that the circumstances of Emma’s graduation were disputable, and that if not for Leopold’s intervening she perhaps would never have been promoted to first officer much less seen the inside of a fleet starship. The likelihood did not surprise Regina, who had questioned Emma’s assignment from the beginning, yet she wasn’t about to share this information. No one wanted to know they had been manipulated or that their successes never managed to outweigh their failures. If Emma discovered that those five years of retaking exams, humoring loathsome instructors, and spending nights in a simulator away from her son had meant nothing… Regina wouldn’t crush her like that. There were other ways of doing so, but not that.

Emma rubbed her hands together. “So Leopold wants you because… what? Your mother convinced him to recruit you as a Raider? So you can help her strike down the leader and rule the galaxy as mother and daughter?” Emma chuckled, eyes wandering the captain’s quarters like she couldn’t believe they were living a holovid. “It sounds a bit like something out of one of Ruby’s favorite movies.”

“You are being awfully cavalier in your denunciations for someone who has never met Cora. I am a Cosmofleet commander who has access to confidential files. Security codes, decryption software, locations of weapons manufacturing, schematics for terra-forming, star base construction, and the next advancements in stealth technology.” Regina listed every one on the point of her finger and drove on without hesitation. “Can you imagine what the Raiders could do with information like that? They could wipe out the entire fleet without tripping an alarm. So,” she said flatly, “make note, dear. If that sounds like a holoprogram to you then I suggest you take to heart how real our situation has become.”

“Noted,” Emma muttered. She glanced at the coffee table before searching the room for the object of her desire. “If this conversation has moved from my missing kid to the mass murder of an entire military fitting… I think I’d like a refill.”

Silently moving to her decanter, Regina splashed her brew nearly to the brim of Emma’s glass. Respecting the speed and wealth of service, Emma thanked her. She also noted that Regina returned with her own glass, contents occupying in close abundance to that of her guest. Somehow, the idea of the captain matching her intake put her at ease. Of course, she wasn’t expecting to end the night hacking through military strategy while getting semi-plastered with her superior.

Emma smirked as the woman across form her drank greedily from her swill. It wasn’t a step towards friendship, but it did resemble something more professional than that – like gaining a copilot for the end of the world as an alternative to flying solo. Captain Mills was a renowned strategist and Emma wouldn’t accept any other to plan the rescue of her son and, supposedly, an entire planet.

“What am I going to do?”

Regina frowned. “Pardon?”
"About Henry. They’re obviously using him to get to me – for whatever reason." Emma’s hand waved casually before rotating her drink glass. The pads of her fingers connected with the priceless crystal, gathering the excess cider along the rim. The fist of her other hand came to rub at her eye, scrubbing at 48-hours of insomnia. “How the hell am I supposed to get him off of a secure Raider base without getting him killed or leaving him an orphan?"

“We.”

Emma’s head rose tiredly. “Huh?”

“You are a part of this crew whether I like it or not. If any one of us falls captive, the responsibility rests on the captain. We take care of our own.”

“That sounds rather generous of you.”

“I will grant that this is a unique situation. Henry is neither a member of my crew nor an initiate of Cosmofleet. Breaking off of our principal mission to engage in battle with a terrorist organization – and without so much as a footnote to Command – is grounds for treason. As captain of this vessel I could suffer great penalty.”

“But?”

Brown eyes diverted. Their wandering ended at Newton’s Cradle levitating on her desk. “This is Henry.”

“And you care about him.”

“He is the child of one of my senior officers. She cares for him. I have led you on countless missions already, Miss Swan, and I can calculate what would transpire were I to prohibit this rescue mission.”

“I’d go after him anyway,” Emma gathered.

“And get into trouble,” the captain added with a condescending bow. “You cannot take on an entire base of Raiders by yourself. I would think you had more sense than that. After months under my command and tutelage you should know better.”

“You’d think.” Chuckling, Emma leaned back and crossed her legs in a manner that drew a scowl from the ladylike captain. “So we take the Raiders on as a united front – fully armed, no showmanship, and absolutely no emotional breakdowns.”

The captain shrugged. “I can abide by those rules if you can.”

“Yeah, well I intended them more as guidelines than anything.”

Despite herself, Regina found herself grinning. It faded as quickly as it manifested. The dangerous nature of their plan and what was at stake sent a shiver through her. Regina didn’t think she’d ever felt this frightened. Not only was Henry’s life at risk, but they were readily storming the lion’s den where her mother awaited her arrival. Yet as the tremor shook her glass of cider (now but a sip remaining) there also ran a tingling from her toes to her fingertips. This stimulating sensation did not have its origins in fear or anger, but excitement. This was an adventure of a lifetime for the commander of the Storybrooke relished a good fight.

Danger… risk… exploration… adventure…

Regina smiled, draining the last of her cider. It was heaven.
For all you non-tech wizards out there, the RTG compartment Ruby stows herself in is a Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator. Thermocouples convert heat (released by decay of radioactive material) into electricity. Essentially, it is a nuclear battery for situations that call for more than a few hundred watts. These generators are currently developed by the U.S. Department of Energy and NASA (i.e. Mars Science Laboratory). So… yeah, it’s not something you want to find yourself stowed away with.
“Nice welcome committee.”

“That is quite the overstatement, Miss Swan.”

“After months of working together it worries me that you haven’t adjusted to my humor, Captain.”

“Has anyone?”

The beam of Emma’s glow stick illuminated the smirk and all she could do was sulk. The setting called for a subdued character anyway, with the shadowed, empty corridors and dismal drone of a ventilation system.

Hours ago Belle pinpointed the location of the Raider base thanks to Ruby’s decryption skills at Khione’s relay station. Exiting hyperspace cloaked and on high alert, the Storybrooke came upon its destination: a monstrosity of a space station on the outskirts of the galaxy in what was known as the Outer Reach. The only markings that identified it were the black block lettering on its hull: Xelphi Six, an insignificant name to Regina and all her crew.

Since their shuttle docked at the base they hadn’t witnessed or been approached by a single soul. It appeared as abandoned as the relay station Emma and Ruby had visited, running on auxiliary power and as mute as outer space.

It was spine tingling, hearing the echoes of their footfalls along the enormous, curve walled corridor. They walked close to a mile through a maze work of these hallways and still not a single Raider in sight. For a hulking station as this the corridors should have been bustling with technicians, and for a Raider base there had to be an army of soldiers marching about. It only made their journey deeper into the station that much more ominous.

Emma had begun to worry, feeling that breadcrumbs should have been laid for their return trip. Scanners were useless to map the levels because the bulkheads were crafted with an alloy meant to disrupt radar equipment. Of course, escaping was of no concern if they didn’t find Henry. And Emma would blast her right arm off before she left without her son in tow.

At the end of one hallway was a turbolift where the away team assembled inside. After a punch to a button their transport began its noiseless ascent.

“Must these uniforms be worn on all field assignments?” Mary Margaret complained.

She stood as the subdued character of lesser height between the captain and first officer and scratching an itch near her shoulder blade. The gray zippered jackets and oil black combat trousers decorated with utility pockets and zippers were not the fashion style the doctor would wear off-duty much less on assignment. A medical coat was comfort to her, and she could sleep in it she could.

A fatigued exhale blew from her mouth. “They constrict motor movement and are awfully scratchy.”

“Remind me, Doctor, why I allowed you to accompany this task force?”

Emma snickered behind a hand, detecting the barely restrained irritation. Regina hadn’t been graced with Mary Margaret’s company for an hour and the hint of steam was already screaming from her ears. It had been all fine and well to release the doctor from her cell, but to walk shoulder-to-shoulder with her was just too great a suffering. Emma could admit, though, her friend carried on a tad whiny
and practically ignorant of her presence. It struck Emma as surprising that after learning the existence of her best friend’s son Mary Margaret hadn’t responded with a little disappointment. Actually, more like with no response at all. Emma could have expected betrayal, anger, sadness, any of the above. But indifference? The doctor was acting like the lie meant nothing, like a mineral of sand bouncing off a satellite. If this neutrality translated as forgiveness, Emma wasn’t taking the hint.

“Captain,” Mary Margaret shifted from boot to boot, “if we cross paths with my father I would ask you not to let any harm come to him.”

“Is that an order?”

“As chief medical officer I am the only one on the ship with any power over you.”

“That is correct. If my health prevents me from doing my job you have the authority to relieve me of command. But that is not the case now, is it?”

“If you want to see justice done Leopold must be taken into custody for a fair trial.”

Shuffling her boots, Emma cringed before speaking up. “Look, I don’t want to take sides here, but the doc has a point.”

“Come now, Miss Swan, even you will admit to the corruption of our court system. If Leopold has shown us anything in the past 48 hours it is his ability to infiltrate one of Cosmofleet’s own. He can do more damage at a higher level. He will do more if he is not stopped.”

“Please.” Mary Margaret looked up at Regina with a gentleness not seen in any of the captain’s crew. “Please, do not hurt him.”

“I am unprepared to make such a promise.” Regina had to glance away from the pathetic insistence in Mary Margaret’s eyes. After sufficient teeth grinding and a fiery stare at the turbolift doors Regina decided to meet her halfway. “However, I may be able to make an effort if the same goes for my mother. She is my concern and no one else’s.”

Mary Margaret held the captain’s glare before breathing out, “Fine.”

“A wise choice, Doctor.”

The lift came to a halt and the doors opened to a similar corridor, ten speeders wide and high enough to accommodate a light freighter. However, instead of a metallic smooth floor Emma’s boots hit grating. Her eyes followed the convex bulkheads and noticed the dim lighting from above illuminating the rest. Along the walls on either side of the wide aisle were locked accesses, perhaps detention cells. They were spaced several feet apart and all sealed shut. Based on the unending stretch of grating there could have been hundreds of individual lockups. Henry could be in any of them.

A few paces were taken before Emma heard none trailing. She turned. “Aren’t you coming?”

Regina shook her head. “If my mother is on this station I must find her. I cannot leave knowing Leopold has entangled her in his nefarious plans.”

“If Cora is here then my father will be with her.” Mary Margaret tipped her head to Emma, requesting empathy. “He has done terrible things. Many lives can be spared if someone can get through to him, make him see reason to stop this never-ending circle of animosity. I have to try, Emma.”
“If that’s what you want. If you think it’s going to do any good… go ahead. I have no right to stop you.”

“Putting things right with my father will do more than bring a family back together.”

“Hardly,” Regina said flatly with a roll of her eyes, “if this is an experienced killer we’re dealing with.”

“There is good in everyone, Captain. You just have to look deep enough.”

“Mass murdering ideologues do not negotiate with peacekeepers. Or estranged daughters.”

“But you intend to conform your mother who is a –“

“Alleged,” intoned the captain irately, “alleged Raider.”

“Hey!” Emma snapped her fingers. “Focus on who the enemy is here.” She glanced at her chrono. “Now we don’t know how long we can go on wandering without being noticed – or ambushed. We’ll meet back at the shuttle in a standard hour. You two watch each other’s backs. Promise me?”

“Certainly.”

The doctor’s quick, heartening reply gave way to stagnancy. A fidgeting Mary Margaret glanced up at the captain, uncertain whether to make eye contact.

Emma raised a disapproving brow. “Regina?” she prompted, crossing her arms.

There was a narrowing of brown eyes. “As the Lieutenant Commander wishes,” Regina sang, her smile a bit too sarcastic for the other two. The small dip of her head didn’t support the testament any further.

“It’ll do,” Emma sighed. “Keep your comms on and signal for help if you need it. Don’t diminish the risk for pride’s sake,” she finished with a glance to the captain.

“And refrain from heroics?” Regina asked.

Emma opened her mouth and then closed it at the woman’s smirk. “It goes without saying. Be careful?”

A sharp click from a cocked blaster and then, “Yes, dear.” Regina flipped her hair back with an elegant whoosh. “Shall we, Doctor?”

The lift doors closed before an answer could be made. Emma was now left alone in the hushed detention center.

* * *

The turbolift continued its ascent until it brought Regina and Mary Margaret to an open chamber. The durasteel grating took them to an oval-shaped, open air control room which was ringed by laboratory panels.

Spoked from its center were catwalks leading to other control areas and metal stairways going above and below. Regina looked over the railing at the dozens of catwalks stretched below her feet. From her perspective, the stairways led to just as many levels. Save for the illuminated computers and glowing aisles, the rest looked like a sea of nightmarish emptiness.
A raised, round platform was at the center of the chamber. From under each of its five steps shined a low, blue light, illuminating its winding path around the dais.

The design was cold. Everything had a coating of durasteel and nothing yielded to humanoid pressure. Even the oceanic blue lighting added to the ice cold feeling of inhospitality.

To Regina, it looked more like an undersea habitat used for xenobiological research and exploration. Test tubes, trays of vibroscalpels and forceps, and beakers and flasks of neon colored chemicals cluttered the outer desk area. Also spread across it were microscopes, datapads, CO2 incubators, centrifuges, and a large cold storage fridge. Regina walked along the outer circular desk and stopped before a jaw dropping spectacle.

Suspended in transparent jars and floating in fluid were strange specimens. Regina squinted into one of the containers, spotting three stumpy arms, two legs, webbed feet, and a pair of beady eyes. No mouth, no ears, no trace of humanity. The area shelved similar jars, all filled with a particular sample.

The bone deep cringe told Regina to get out of there. Nothing about this research spoke of furthering scientific exploration. It was playing god. No ethics, no laws. It was bending life to suit personal needs – or heaven forbid entertainment. Regina looked from jar to jar, hand gesturing forth to test its authenticity but staying by sheer revulsion. She was hesitant to confirm it, but these specimens were indeed life forms – or what remained of them.

“What is this place?” Regina didn’t know how to answer the doctor’s question. She was trying to come to grips with the kind of experimentation going on in the laboratory.

No sooner could the captain and the doctor voice their insecurities on unethical research when they heard the grated staircase creaking under footsteps.

“Oh, you’ve finally arrived!” The voice had a deep caliber, yet sang as feminine as her appearance. Regina turned to verify the familiarity of the tone alone.

Cora Mills had a beauty and grace that matched her daughter. Sultry brown eyes were rimmed with dusky makeup, cheekbones sculpted from Greek goddess Aphrodite herself, lips pursed red, and a pretty aggressiveness painted the rest in a raised chin and fixed gait. Fourteen years retired, the former delegate had made peace with the aging lines around her mouth and the hint of crow’s feet. The pride she took in her aging body made her all the more elegant.

Her wavy brunette hair cascaded over her shoulders. The dark magenta robes made her seem out of place in the freak show laboratory. Though slightly shorter than her daughter, Cora rose above her in experience and character. Her presence alone was enough to fill the entire chamber and then some.

“Regina,” she hummed, smiling. Without warning her hands formed around the cheeks of her grown daughter. “Leopold, come!” Cora patted the astonished captain’s face before turning to her supposed husband. “Come meet my darling daughter!”

Mouth agape and blank of thought, Regina took in the gleaming smile and turquoise tunic that layered behind the outer robes. Her mother looked the same in her usual dress of a traveling delegate, yet Regina couldn’t escape the niggling feeling of something missing – or wrong – with this image.

Mary Margaret froze in place as the Freedom Raider leader himself made an entrance. He was clad in a more contemporary appearance seen in most rogue mercenaries. The slate gray of his high
collared shirt matched the midnight black zipped jacket and gray and black camouflage combat pants. A blaster was holstered to his thigh while a vibroknife waited not far away. Military issue boots were laced as tight as any high ranked officer. The only thing that threw them off of the clean, uniformed appearance was his silver slicked back hair which curled out at the nape of his neck.

Leopold’s gray, withering face harkened back to the holomessage they received on the Storybrooke. The image dared them to conclude that he was merely an old man pointing a finger at a government that slighted him. Now confronted in person, Regina and Mary Margaret couldn’t ignore the commitment in those eyes. They shined with the intent to fulfill a cause.

“Theopold is a self-proclaimed scientist,” Cora explained, gesturing to the lab equipment. “He likes to dabble in biology, though I cannot admit to the same. Disgusting creatures…”

Hands clasped behind his back, Leopold remained stoically quiet.

The ends of a magenta robe whirled as Cora burst out favorably, “You must be Mary.” The doctor opened her mouth to correct, but was engulfed in a hug from the woman. Her red lips curved up around perfectly white teeth as she gushed, “Your father told me everything about you. I am so pleased to finally make your acquaintance.”

Leopold remained a distance from them. “It’s Mary Margaret now, isn’t it? And an M.D.?”

“Doctor Blanchard, yes. I’m so glad you approve, Father.”

Before he could make his opinion known, Cora took the lead with precision. “It is just splendid to have the family together for the first time! What an extraordinary feat that you two found each other, not even knowing you were sisters. Isn’t it wonderful, Regina?”

There was nothing wonderful about her sisterly union with Mary Margaret. Despite that and her mother’s suspicious behavior, Regina gave a nod. Such a response, automatic and dutiful, hearkened back to her childhood. Every bad scrape, every minute wasted on her father’s holopuzzles, and each afternoon spent slipping out to watch what real children her age do eventually ended in a consent to authority and a strict order to curtail disobedience. Terrified of the consequences, all little Regina could manage was a nod.

Now grownup and holding the rank of captain, Regina had little fear, and if she did it wasn’t the only thing taking ownership of her dipping chin. It was shock. In all her years of living with Cora her mother had never shown this kind of affection. Regina remembered a hug at every birthday and one final embrace on her graduation from the academy. Cora didn’t oversee her homeschooling as a child, leaving the hired instructor to deal with such studies. She skipped family breakfast and was rarely seen until dinner. Cora was barely around, and if she managed to make an appearance it cost her daughter a lecture on trade agreements or a red print across the cheek for not studying hard enough. Whenever Regina asked her father why Mother never played with them she would be told that Mother works so much because she loves them and wants to make the galaxy a safer place for them. When Regina pushed further on the reasoning for sharp backhands and withheld desserts she would receive a solemn smile and a “She wants the best for you, dear heart.”

A delegate had responsibilities higher than family while the attentions of a young girl were secondary. Growing into adulthood, Regina understood why her mother chose politics over story time. Duty was not just any principle, it was a Mills principle. She respected her mother’s hard work and her steadfast loyalty in the system. It was the kind of standard every daughter should meet. Regina owed her successful career to the lessons of her childhood and to the kind of woman her mother was. Ultimately, it couldn’t have been easy raising a child and traveling the galaxy as an ambassador to the Commonwealth.
“What are you doing with him, Mother?”

“Didn’t Leopold tell you? We are married. He has been my husband these past three years, in fact.”

“And it never occurred to you to tell me?”

Cora brushed it off with flick of her wrist. “You were so busy. I could never get a hold of you and when I did it was rarely enough to get to the details. My daughter,” she tipped her head fondly, “captain of the greatest vessel in the fleet and traveling to destinations unknown… I am so proud of you.”

Your own mother remarrying a terrorist hardly counted as a mere detail in Regina’s book. She would have stressed that if Cora hadn’t proceeded to butter her up with praise. Though complimenting her own child was a rarity, it became a classic diversion of hers. Regina saw the ploy, but she couldn’t help the blush.

“Cora has told me stories of you, Regina.”

The captain instantly hardened. She glared at Leopold. “Oh?”

“You should be lucky to have been raised by a woman who understands the meaning of sacrifice. With your aptitude you could have done anything – become a surgeon, an entrepreneur, even a politician like Cora. And yet you chose Cosmofleet. From your record at the academy and what I’ve heard over the course of your captaincy I’d say you have found your niche. The youngest captain in the fleet. And a woman! Your skills will lend themselves greatly to our cause.”

“I did not offer them,” Regina shot back. It was clear by the twitching nerve in her forehead that her anger barely stayed concealed. “If my skills are put to use they will be to end your cause.”

“Good,” drawled Leopold. “We need more people with short tempers. It is that lack of fire in one’s eyes that fails to inspire me. The Raiders need your kind of fire.”

“Mother,” Regina hissed, “please tell me you have no idea what he’s talking about. Assure me you had no part in this.”

“There is more at stake here than you realize, my love. While you are sent off to settle petty disputes in the Reach, Earth is left to fend for itself against a bigoted system. Families starve on the streets while those more fortunate invest in the construction of skyscrapers. Laws are enforced to turn away immigrants who seek a home of their own. Politicians reap the benefits of these atrocities.”

“But you always believed the Commonwealth was good,” insisted Regina. “You were one of them: a politician representing the best of a system that’s sole purpose was to protect its people.”

“And I was wrong. While I was convinced my work held meaning it wasn’t until I met Leopold that it became clear. He lifted the veil from my narrow mind and showed me just how appalling the truth can be. The Freedom Raiders were created to expose this truth. We liberate society’s outcasts and, in turn, they became a part of our family. We strive to break the chains of injustice while the Commonwealth brands us as terrorists. We show the people how corrupt their government is, how deep its hatred runs, and the holonews paints blood on our hands.”

“The Raiders were responsible for ruthless attacks,” Mary Margaret pointed out. “Innocent people were killed because of their impatience to negotiate peacefully and make their case in a court of law.”

Cora tipped her head at the doctor and smiled down as if she were talking to a child. “You will soon understand, Doctor Blanchard, that the galaxy is not divided into black and white. Every star has a
world too stubborn to support reasonable life just as every government has its selfish bureaucrat.”

“The Raiders are meant to accomplish great things,” Leopold said. “I have every hope that you shall join us, Regina, in our impending triumph.”

“Just what part am I expected to play?” Regina directed the question specifically to her mother.

“We will discuss the details in good time,” Cora explained. Her tone reinforced the necessity of postponing an answer. “All you must know now is how long this plan has been in effect. After all this time it brings me great joy to finally share the future in store for you. You are meant for so much more than commanding lowly minds, it is now going to be realized.”

“How long?”

Cora frowned, taking the captain’s question with genuine confusion. “I’m afraid I don’t understand the question, dear.”

“How long have you known that Leopold would use me in his despicable plot? What did I have to do before I earned the right to make a choice in my own fate?”

“For one thing, dear, you had to learn how disappointing people can be, how they can hurt you enough to make you stronger. That you picked up long ago and perfected quite well, if I may say so, along the way.”

Regina felt cold, colder than when she first set foot in the blue glowing laboratory. She knew how long her mother kept this from her. She knew it by the way Cora’s smile grew a bit wider at the mention of “disappointing people” and “hurt.” The words themselves were like thorns. She almost forgot how cruel her mother could be.

Yes, Regina knew exactly how long. The year, the day, the hour, the minute. Every detail burned into her racing heart. But she swallowed, bore the sting in her eyes, and asked anyway.

“How long, Mother?”

Cora just turned up her chin and studied her daughter. Brown eyes pierced mercilessly, laying a trail of severity from head to toe. In the end, she ignored the question for a drive down memory lane.

“Do you remember that engineer your father hired to our family ship? The young man that came on in the summer before your nineteenth birthday?”

Regina managed a raspy “Yes.”

“His death was tragic, indeed. There’s no need to hide your grief, Regina. Not from me. Not when it was I who was responsible for his passing.”

Mary Margaret gasped behind her palm while Leopold stood boringly off stage.

“Mother…”

Cora clicked her tongue in sympathy. She closed in on the swaying form of her daughter, catching hold of her shoulders before the poor thing keeled over. “You knew this whole time, didn’t you? Why didn’t you come to me? Accuse me? I could have given him more time to escape those wretched bandits. There was more than enough room in the shuttle for all of us.”

It was as if Cora was giving Regina every reason to lash out. She was willingly handing over motive
to strike her lover’s killer down and Regina stood there weak and shriveled as the day she was born. Truthfully, they knew it would not come to that. Mother and daughter understood each other better than anyone. Regina saw Cora choose a course of action that left Daniel behind in the explosion. As angry and heartbroken as Regina had been, she couldn’t do anything about it. Not then and not now.

“You lost a dear friend and mourned for months. From that moment on I made a promise to myself to find you something worthwhile to fight for. And it would not be for a boy engineer. A cause, Regina. That is the thing that lasts. Ideas are greater than people. They inspire and fulfill. I wanted more for you than a life of regret. So I sought out those that felt as I did, but who had seen what lies beyond the curtain.”

“I was nineteen. It was my life, my choice to make.”

“You were intelligent and career driven, but no one at nineteen can make these kinds of choices. No one should have to.”

“You sold my future out to a man I had never met.”

“Regina!” screeched Cora, eyes shut and hands splayed out as if to stop the nonsense. When her daughter sobered adequately her tone evened. “Dear, you were not in your right mind back then. That boy had a poor influence on you and if I had allowed it to continue he would have prevented you from a successful future. He would have held you back. If I had stood by and let it happen you would have been softened by love and eventually birthed children that stole you away from your duty. Look at my life, Regina. Do you know how hard it was for me to serve in politics and care for a child? It tore me apart that I couldn’t be with you, my love. I never wanted that burden for you. That engineer had to go. It was the only way your future could be ensured. Then your path could begin.”

Regina’s mouth felt dry as the Tume desert. She could also feel a scorching heat spread across her cheeks, her face, her neck. “What did you do, Mother?” She was so focused on steadying her voice that the shaking fists at her side went unnoticed.

“I did what I felt was necessary.”

“You did more than close that hatch on him.”

Regina eyes searched her mother’s, but saw only the past. She saw herself running down the corridor of her family’s ship, accompanied by Daniel, and Cora and her bodyguards. They were being ruthlessly chased around every corner. She remembered when they arrived at the escape shuttle how their filing in created a bottleneck, how in the flurry to escape Daniel had pushed her in to safety. Most of all she remembered Cora’s hand hovering over the hatch release before the rest of them even started boarding. It was poised there the whole time until Daniel was last. She waited to push the release until he stood just within viewing distance of her daughter. Regina could still hear the hatch hissing closed. In horror, she put the pieces together.

“You met Leopold before the Raiders even captured our ship, didn’t you? That was your plan from the beginning. Eliminate the distraction and send me off to the academy.” Regina frowned through the liquid clouding her vision. “We were never in any danger were we? The target was Daniel. You wanted me broken so I could fulfill your plan.”

Regina didn’t need to hear an answer. She was smart enough to deduce it. The satisfied smirk on Cora’s face seemed to bear more than enough proof. The last nail in a coffin Regina never had the chance to kiss goodbye.
Emma’s search down the long corridor came up empty. Every tap to a locked hatch came back as an echo. If Henry was being held captive on this level she must have been looking in the wrong place. She had no choice but to continue down the wide hallway, knocking on cells and hoping for the best.

At one point the suspense became too much. Her heart ached to be reunited with her son again and she would not wait any longer.

“How?”

She stilled, turning an ear as her call echoed down the winding corridor. No reply. She went a bit further as there seemed to be no end to this detention center.

“I don’t care if I wake up an entire army…” she muttered dryly before hollering, “Henry!”

“Momma!”

Her heart stopped. She blindly felt for it with a shaky hand, but only felt the tight weave fabric of her field jacket.


There was a sound of clapping feet. Based on the short strides they were likely small tennis shoes belonging to a four-year-old. Emma ran faster, her boots banging roughly against the grating. Her eyes searched in front of her, through the ceiling light, around a corner… And there he was. Running on his two little legs as fast as he could, Henry was every bit the escape artist his mother could be proud of.

Emma’s watery smile faded when her son’s tracks stopped. His captive crept up behind him and took hold of his shoulders. Emma’s pistol came out lightning fast and trained itself on Mulan. Mouth set in a grime frown, Emma held her weapon still as death as if a well-placed bolt between the woman’s eyes wouldn’t faze her.

“Get away from my son you bitch!”

“Emma, calm down.”

“Do not tell me to calm down!”

“It is in Henry’s best interest for you to lower your weapon. The last thing both of us want is a misfire.”

“What in seven hells do you care about him? You took him away from his only home and have held him captive here.”

“This was Leopold’s plan,” insisted Mulan, her eyes softening. “I never signed up for this. The only reason why I went through with it was because Henry knew me. If I was with him I could make sure he wasn’t hurt. He wouldn’t be as scared with me as he would have been with some stranger.”

“If you feel so bad about it why didn’t you tell me?” Emma shook her head, too impatient to hear an answer. “In fact, how long have you been working with the Raiders? Was this planned from the beginning?”
“Emma, you have to believe me. There’s only so much I know. Leopold and his advisors keep their developments very close to the chest. As a spy I am probably the least authority on all things pertaining to the Raiders. Honestly, my orders were to bring Henry to the Raider station. That’s it.”

“Then what’s keeping you from handing him over to me? I thought we were friends, Mulan. Why can’t you just let us go?”

“I don’t think any of you are meant to leave,” Mulan said, shaking her head sadly. “I’m sorry.”

“If you’re going to stand between me and my kid… You know how protective I am of him.”

“Yes,” she said sadly. “I do.”

With that, Mulan gave Henry a deliberate push to the side so he was not in harm’s way. She saw the way green eyes followed him, but he was no longer Emma’s current priority. Neither of them had a choice.

Slowly, Emma’s gun lowered. At the risk of a stray bolt injuring Henry, there could be no pistols in this fight. Emma was a confident brawler – brawler because her style had been perfected in the bars and alleyways rather than on the mats of an academy gym. She was stronger than Mulan and could roll with the hits. However, if Emma lacked anything it was precision. Mulan was a born and bred warrior. Fighting ran through her veins as speeder repair techniques ran through Emma’s. It might well be a short contest, but at least Emma had something to fight for. It was the only thing she ever fought for her entire life.

Eyes fixed straight ahead, each opponent unleashed their vibroknife. Twin snap-hisses emitted and released a pair of silver glowing blades, each but a few inches in length. Emma held her ground, feet shoulder-width apart. Everything about her stance attested to her determined character. The line between her eyes read no mercy and a furrowed brow meant business, save for the nervous polishing her thumb gave to the blade’s hilt.

Mulan was a vision of grace and patience. She kept her position low to the ground as a smaller target and ready to spring an attack. Polished black hair ran over her shoulders, barely whispering against her even breath. She waited for Emma.

Emma was too stubborn to wait, so she lunged first. Her blade hand snaked out like a whiplash, sizzling through the dank air of the corridor. Mulan had but to shimmy to the side to evade the attack. Emma came at her again, weapon slicing high, low, then in an arc. Each time her opponent met her with an evasive maneuver. Not one time did Mulan lash out, not even with the elegance with which her kind was known for.

Growling irritably, Emma slashed faster, elbowed and kicked harder, trying to back the woman into a corner. Perspiration streamed down her face before she realized that she couldn’t touch Mulan. All she had managed to do since the fight began was tire herself out.

Emma tried her best, but her best was not good enough. She had to pull out every technique her rusty memory owned in taking this warrior down, every dirty trick the slums taught her as a teenager. Her life depended on it. More importantly, Henry’s life depended on it.

* * *

“How could you do such a thing?” Mary Margaret’s gasp bordered on a shriek. “To your own child?”

“My actions did more than secure Regina’s future at the academy. They guaranteed a union that
would set about the liberation of thousands. From the moment of our alliance, Leopold and I have created an organization known round the galaxy.”

The doctor gaped and sputtered, “A-an organization associated with murder!”

“Elimination in the name of a greater cause,” Leopold corrected. “Death is a natural part of life. Killing is a necessary evil.”

“How can you believe that? The father that raised me would never have thought such a thing. I was taught that life – every life – is precious and worth holding on to. You were the very reason I became a doctor.”

“Yes, a doctor.” Cora strode to one of the microscopes, and caressed the frame, unsure how the thing worked. The stiff smile showed how hard she tried to understand her husband’s idiosyncrasies. “Which is exactly what we need here, don’t we, Leopold?”

The leader gave an indistinct grunt.

Cora’s wrinkled hand patted the piece of equipment once. Her eyes studied the curious ones of the doctor. She patted again for good measure before clasping them in front of her. “You do want to spend time with your father, don’t you? Patch things up? This is the perfect opportunity.”

“Stop this, Mother.”

A fine brow rose. Cora inhaled through her nose, daring Regina to speak in that tone.

“Doctor Blanchard is mine to do with as I please. You will not be recruiting her to the Raiders.”

“Our sole interest is in you,” Leopold explained. He took an authoritative step forward, passing from shadow to bathing blue light. “We need to know certain intel about the Commonwealth and the operations carried out by your fleet. Confidential intel. You are a high ranking commander with access to such details. You are also the darling of Cosmofillet. Therefore, you are the ideal candidate for defection.”

“Defection?”

“You will not be returning to the fleet. We have ample resources here which you will use under the supervision of myself and my close advisors. You will supply information and coordinates and we will offer you safe haven.”

Regina cocked her head, narrowing her eyes coolly. “Forgive me, but that sounds more like a hostage situation.”

Leopold shrugged like it was of no concern.

“And what of my crew? And the Storybrooke?”

“Such a superior class vessel will be requisitioned to the Raiders. Your crew will be given the option to defect. Otherwise, they will be eliminated.”

Chin dipped threateningly, the captain growled, “They do not take kindly to ultimatums. And they will not allow their captain to be captured against her will.”

“Such steadfast loyalty in those people,” Cora muttered. The near animalistic display of protectiveness Regina had over her crew seemed to capture her interest. “Where is the Lieutenant
Commander? Saving her son, I imagine. It’s too bad she can’t be here. I was looking forward to meeting her.”

Mary Margaret grew just as curious. “What do you know of Emma?”

“Is this another case of meddling in other people’s lives?”

It left Regina’s mouth before she could realize what was being said. The gall of her attack reddened Cora’s ears, yet the woman remained frighteningly passive.

“I know of the girl’s reputation through Leopold’s source. He has many infiltrated in Command. One such spy was instrumental in – how shall I put this? – helping the poor thing along.” Her brunette locks whispered against the robe as she shook her head. She gave Regina a sympathetic frown. “I don’t know how you dealt with her. I can’t imagine what a nuisance her kind can be.”

“Emma is the kindest, most courageous person I have ever known!” defied Mary Margaret. “She didn’t need anyone to help her through the academy. She finished on determination and merit alone.”

“She was a loose cannon!” Cora contended with a laugh. She was enjoying the debate. “The girl could barely pass her exams, needed therapy to settle her authority issues, and on top of all that managed to get pregnant. She didn’t think about the consequences of what that responsibility would entail. She had no career, no husband to support them. And yet she decided to keep it? It is no wonder she failed her courses so regularly.”

Deep down Regina knew Emma was a better mother to Henry than Cora ever was to her. Gods, did she know it to the point where she nearly screamed so in her own mother’s face. But the severe look in Cora’s eyes, the look that said Mother not only knows best but knows her daughter’s weakness… That look beat her down time and time again until she felt the size of an atom. Regina knew the truth. She just couldn’t scrounge up the courage to say it.

“I’m sorry that you had to deal with that,” Cora continued. “You deserved better, someone who excelled in their studies and rose to our level of standards. However, due to your imminent desertion we couldn’t have a world class first officer sniffing around. A dull mind was paramount to the success of our mission. If our agents hadn’t intervened the academy would have shipped her off to a back world mining colony where many undesirable dropouts are placed. On file, the only reason she made it to first officer was to get her out of Command’s hair. A simple matter of sending a petty delinquent off to be dealt with.”

“It’s no matter,” Leopold waved off, anxious to move on. “Mulan will deal with her.”

Worry blossomed in Mary Margaret. “Captain?”

Regina took the threat in stride. As her mother said, there was more at stake than was realized. The matter of Leopold must be taken care of before Regina took on any more complications.

Taking a calming breath in, the captain let it out with her mounting concern. “Miss Swan can take care of herself.”

* * *

A sizzling and then the acrid smell of burnt flesh… Emma looked down and saw the gleaming silver hilt. The rest had been buried in her lower left abdomen courtesy of Mulan. In the struggle, Emma’s knife got kicked away and as they rolled on floor, grasping like animals for the jugular, it was the fingers of a traitor which found the hilt of a fleet regulation vibroknife.
Kneeling unsteadily on the ground, Emma saw Mulan backing away. Then, from across the corridor, Henry came into her fuzzy vision. His eyes were kind and his face held a sort of confusion. He didn’t know what was going on, bless him.

“Kid, I need you to look away.” Emma bit down on a groan as she felt the blade searing through blood and tissue. The pain was extraordinary, and not in a way that asked for a second helping. She had experienced plenty of rough fights in the slums growing up and worse at the hands of cadets who couldn’t take a loss in the simulator. She knew the graze of a vibroknife, the sting of a near miss from blaster fire, a punch, a kick, the pop of a shoulder dislocating... But this? A five inch vibroknife in the gut? *That* was pain. She didn’t want to feel this, but she also couldn’t allow her own son to watch her die. “Close your eyes like when we play hide and seek, alright?”

“Momma—”

“Just...” she gasped, wincing through tears, “just *do it*!”

Eyes widening to the booming voice, Henry scampered back into a corner. His mother had never spoken to him like that, and the only time she did was when the blaster case in her bedroom closet had been found curiously opened.

In one swift move she removed the blade. “Blast!” she spat out. The pain intensified with every small movement, but she thanked her lucky stars that her tongue hadn’t tasted copper. Yet. Checking the blood-stained area, she made sure the heat from the blade cauterized the wound. She clambered to her feet, meeting Mulan with a glare. “I can’t believe you knifed me.”

“I didn’t mean to injure you.”

“No, just stab me in the metaphorical back,” Emma pressed harder against the wound so she could stand with a bit more pride, “in front of my *kid*.”

The emphasized word was delivered with such poison it made Mulan flinch. “You won’t kill me, not in front of Henry. I know you Emma and you are not a killer.”

“Well, then. I guess this is a day for surprises.”

* * *

Regina was already boiling in anger before Emma had been brought up. In the span of a few minutes she had been manipulated, threatened, and reminded of her dead lover’s killer whilst his memory was simultaneously thrown in her face. With the intimidation of her first officer’s life and probably that of her son’s, the rage seemed to increase tenfold.

“With Mulan’s skills,” Leopold said, “I would care a great deal more about what happens to the Lieutenant Commander than you lead on, Regina.”

The condescending way it was said, along with the tip of his head fueled the anger. It didn’t occur to the captain the reason for it lied with the danger held over Emma and Henry. All she could see was Leopold, looking so passive and untouchable and ignorant of his crimes. He was the prime target of blame. He was responsible for ruining her future, for murdering a gentle young man who just wanted to fix ion engines the rest of his life. Leopold destroyed her happiness.

“You destroyed my happiness.” It slipped from her tongue like boiling acid, harmless from afar but deadly if touched. “You have destroyed countless more, and I will make you suffer for it.”

In blind rage Regina dove, blaster flashing in her outstretched hand as she pulled the first shots off.
Her pseudo promise to Mary Margaret or the fact that her actions were unlawful did not occur to her. All that registered in her vengeance-filled head was the fact that Leopold had to die.

Leopold flung himself on the round platform. He escaped the bolts with but a few grazes to his jacket. From his belt he unholstered his own blaster which he set on the captain. Regina dove over the laser blasts and tucked herself into a roll. Leopold continued to fire at the sprinting target, a grim frown set on his face. Wayward bolts hit one of the dais control panels, setting off a shower of sparks and engaging the platform to rise. Once Regina heard the dead clicks of his overheated blaster she ran for him and jumped for the moving stage. With her fingers latching onto the grating for dear life, she used the momentum of her legs to gain a foothold.

“Father, no!”

Mary Margaret’s cry spurred the captain to take heed of the shadow bearing over her. Leopold looked down on her with a small smile. Just when she thought he would stomp on her hands and kick her to her death, he did something that surprised her like never before. With the toe of his boot her blaster tumbled off the platform and clattered several meters and climbing below them. Fighting to hold on, Regina stared at him, aghast. He chuckled and gave her room to climb up. His hands gestured for her to ‘come hither.’ It was a challenge, one Regina could not turn down, not because of her pride or her training, but because her life depended on it.

When they were face-to-face, unarmed, and on equal footing Leopold shed his jacket while Regina did the same. Unrestricted in a gray fitted t-shirt, she fell into a defensive stance. Stepping back on her rear leg, she positioned her other leg forward, her left lead hand above it while the right hung back in a tight fist close to her neck.

Though an accomplished student, Regina rarely excelled in combatives. It was not something she could perfect for her small frame wasn’t conducive to the brunt force attacks taught at the academy. She adapted through limber movements and evaded attack with swift dodges.

But where she overcame cadets with agile moves and calculated jabs, the opponent before her lacked the restraint to deliver a killing blow. This would be different from the sparring battles at the academy. Not even the silly squabbles she’d engaged in with space pirates could compare. There would be no rules of engagement in a hand-to-hand fight with Leopold. He could incapacitate her – kill her – in a blink of the eye.

Exhaling slowly, Regina blocked the first series of attacks. Each defensive move pushed her back, closer and closer to the edge of the platform. If she were to lose her footing it would be a 25 to 30 meter fall. The distance was not a worrying factor, but the various objects, all breakable glass or having oddly shaped corners, were capable of coming in contact with a falling body. With the amount of equipment below, there were few landing spots to break a fall.

The captain ducked and twisted under a roundhouse punch. Before she could even get a decent kick in Leopold recovered with one of his own to her sternum. Reeling back from the force of the blow, Regina scrambled to catch hold of one of the panels. Her eyes watered as each uneven breath struck a pang.

“Been out of training too long, I see.” The Raider hung back, allowing his opponent to steady herself. “Five years as a captain can do wonders for one’s career, but it manages to weaken the physical body. I have been a commander for over thirty years and look at me. Still as tough as a cadet fresh out of the academy.”

If there was anything Regina hated about sparring it was the taunts. Talking was a cheap way of getting into your opponents head. It had nothing to do with technique. If it were up to Regina they’d
leave the chatting for after the scuffles when she could flash a victorious smile. In her current case, she realized that might not be an option.

With a growl, Regina struck back with renewed vigor. Using a swift jab to the nose she temporarily blinded him to tears gaining the opportunity for an opening. A swift barrage of attacks followed. The edge of her hand struck his forearm. An elbow went out and met under a gray, grizzly jaw. Then a fierce blow to the gut led by the fist of her hand. Regina moved fast and resilient like nothing held her back. She remembered Mary Margaret, begging her not to do anything that would haunt her for the rest of her life. She also recalled an oath taken long ago to protect the innocent and uphold justice. But Regina cast it all aside. The only memory she allowed to consume her was one of Daniel, the way his eyes declared those three lasting words before the bright white flash came.

Her face furrowed in concentration, squinting through beads of perspiration. Her attacks slowed and began to lack the aggression that had fueled the fight. Leopold clearly had the upper hand, she knew that. To adjust to his ruthless style, Regina put all her energy into defense rather than direct attack. Maybe she could tire the Raider out before he snuck in a final blow.

But as Regina made the mistake so many times at the academy, she failed to mind her proximity. Overzealous in her blocks, she allowed her small body to come in close quarters. Before she could rectify her failure Leopold spotted her vulnerability and used his brute strength to twist her around and kick her feet from under her.

Regina let out a pained cry as her knees struck the floor and did so again as her arm was twisted behind her back. Leopold had manipulated her wrist in such a way that any movement would send shooting pain up her arm. Any pull beyond its normal range of motion and the joint would twist out of place.

“Do you submit?” Leopold asked, pressing his knee into her spine for emphasis.

Her teeth clenched. She refused defeat no matter how imminent or obvious. She would not submit to this man, a terrorist, a murderer, her odious step-father. Daniel would not want her to. Cosmofleet wouldn’t stand for it either and neither would her crew.

From her limited position, the captain peered through the webbed grating down at Mary Margaret and her mother. They were watching the whole time, helpless to either opponent. But the look on Cora’s face, the small, seemingly insignificant move of her head was all Regina needed to make her decision.

With impressive maneuverability, Regina twisted out of the lock. Before she even drew breath she turned and fashioned her sweeping leg into a punishing kick. Leopold took the hit, thinking he would just absorb it, but he had underestimated the force and stumbled back. His heels teetered over the edge and with one final glance at Regina he tipped over, eyes wide and mouth open in a silent scream.

Mary Margaret’s scream was deaf to her ears. All she needed to hear was the sickening crunch and crackle of electrical equipment. It was over in a matter of seconds. Wobbling over to the control panel Regina managed to call the platform down to the main level. She stared blankly at the body as the dais continued to lower. Her heart pounded in her ears, blood pouring through her veins at top speed, but all the rest was numb. The sprained wrist, her aching muscles… She couldn’t even feel the arms of her mother wrapping her up in a nurturing embrace.

“It’s alright, my love,” Cora cooed. She stroked at the mussed, brunette hair. “It’s over now.”

Soon the shock wore off and the pain washed in like a tidal wave. Wincing visibly, Regina escaped
the embrace. It became strikingly easy putting distance between her and her mother. She had not forgotten and would never forget.

“I am so glad it was you. Leopold would never have lasted long acting like the murderer he was. He would have watched the world burn before succumbing to the Commonwealth. Ideology can be an enduring motivation, but a damning one if not managed.”

Regina’s eyes fluttered as she shook her head, baffled. “I daresay this was your plan all along?”

“Call it a mother’s intuition. I know what you are capable of more than you do. I always have. That is why we are here now. That is why I am proposing an alliance.”

“An alliance?”

“Yes,” Cora assured, smiling as if she had not just been made a widow. “You will join me here on this space station along with the rest of your crew. But first there is a matter of Leopold’s men. He ordered the Raiders on this station to hold position until he had your cooperation. Once his disappearance is noted I will explain the circumstances of his death: He attempted to defect over to the Commonwealth. His bringing you here gave him the opportunity to turn himself in as an act of goodwill. But you would not give in. You were instantly converted by my heartening speech and declared your allegiance to the Freedom Raiders. I will say that Leopold engaged a match and fell to his death.” Pursing her red lips, Cora took a step forward and laid a hand reverently to Regina’s arm. Her eyes widened word after passionate word. “It is the Raider way to take ownership over what you kill. They will see you as their new leader. And as your mother I will advise you. With an army of Raiders following your every whim and the most powerful starship at your command the galaxy can never stop us.”

Lips parted, Regina simply blinked. She felt like a child again, when her mother had cajoled her into political studies or endless decorum lessons. She felt like a datacard, heavily bent and molded from frequent use. She felt handled to fit the slots so many had insisted would get her ahead in life, the slots that would profit or gain her the most decorations on her uniform. Not once had the question been posed, the question of what she wanted.

Cora’s proposition was never what Regina wanted. Then again, becoming a Cosmofleet commander was never what she dreamed of either. Desires rarely exceeded expectations. But sometimes sacrifice was rewarded with surprising opportunity. And for a moment she closed her eyes and considered.

* * *

When all was said and done, Emma would kill anyone – friend or foe – who threatened a hair on her son’s head. With that said, exhausted and sporting a semi-closed wound, Emma bent to pick up her fallen blaster and resumed her stance. She blew a sweaty strand of hair from her vision, wincing as she tried to thrust her shoulders back in a show of authority. The show of strength could be pathetic or poetic depending on how you looked at it. At that point, Emma was too blasted tired to pick either one.

“Emma, don’t end it this way. You don’t want him to see this.”

“He’ll thank me later.”

“If you kill me he won’t get that chance,” Mulan pointed out. Her feet made a subtle shuffle to the side, nearer to Henry. “If I don’t comm Leopold in the next ten minutes he’ll send a force of Raiders to investigate.”
With a sniff, Emma cocked her blaster. “Then I guess I better make this quick.”

Mulan was quicker. Sliding in behind Henry she used his body as a shield. Her eyes met the hulk green of Emma’s.

“Please remember,” she whispered loud enough to reach Emma ears, “I never wanted this. Goodbye, my friend.”

Henry’s head collided with the bulkhead of one of the hatches. The sickening crack elicited a cry from his mother as she dove. He was caught just in time before hitting the floor. Emma’s wild eyes went from her unconscious son to the darkened corridor. The echoing of footfalls grew further away. Mulan had escaped.

The grating cut into her knees as she held her son. She looked over the sweet face, his small chin, and poke worthy cheeks, and the slight traces of tears. Or were those hers? A moan scrambled feebly from her throat as she rocked over him. Her lips mumbled feverishly, silently begging for him to wake them from this nightmare.

“Hey, little pilot,” she spoke close to his ear, continuously stroking his hair. “I’m sorry I shouted at you, but Momma really needs you to open your eyes.”

Henry had been her salvation in so many ways. He shouldn’t have had to do any more. He was just a kid. What more could be expected of someone that young? Emma knew all too well, but she’d be damned to a supernova before her son had to find out this way.

She would be damned.

* * *

Regina held onto consideration. It was really the only thing she had at that point. Choice had been an illusion all her life and this had just now been realized. All the instances Regina thought she had control: at the academy, as a captain, in the fight of her life behind enemy lines… If the Raiders had the power to intervene in Emma’s schooling, what would stop them from doing the same to her? How could she know if she passed training on her own worth?

Her life and all those ‘choices’ were a farce, but now that she was confronted by it she felt true power filling up the empty disappointment. There was no way Cora could go on without her. She needed her daughter to confirm a false story. The Raiders needed a leader who had seen the butt of a gun and bled, who had suffered loss and risen from abysmal mourning. For once, Cora’s survival depended on Regina. The feeling tasted like ultimate control, so foreign and intoxicating, and Regina enjoyed it.

“Why kidnap an innocent child?” she contended. The intentional diversion managed to hit its mark as Cora frowned in confusion. “Why use him to lure Emma Swan here? What use is she to you?”

“Divide and conquer, Regina. The boy served as a distraction to your second-in-command. An assurance. Nothing more.”

“Since I was a girl I have traveled with you to many colonies. I’ve seen how you debate with politicians and deal with the common people. But steal a child from his mother?” Regina shook her head, offering a look of disgust. “Even that is low for you, Mother.”

“I will not explain myself to you. It baffles me that you do not uphold a sense of respect when in my presence, especially when I offer you a once in a lifetime opportunity. I taught you duty and responsibility. Those are the things that got you here and you should be thanking me for every year
you had command of a starship. You were like this as a child – spoiled and ungrateful. I gave you anything you asked for: a speeder bike, a holocomputer, those ridiculous horseback riding lessons!"

“I only wanted you, Mother!” The ache in her plea shocked them both. Hands shaking, face flushed, Regina wouldn’t back down. “I wanted those things so I could share them with you. I was so lonely as a child. I begged you to stay with me and Daddy.”

“Of the countless colonies we visited there were more than enough commoners at your disposal. They were adequate entertainment for a child of your age –“

“But they were not like me. And we never stayed long enough. The moment I made friends with someone I was called away because my mother received a new assignment.”

Cora waved it off like it was gum under her shoe. “And your father quit politics the moment you were born, leaving me to be sole breadwinner. You were a needy child, requiring constant attention. He stayed with you out of pity.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“You know he did, or you wouldn’t be looking at me with that pitiful face.”

The sound of sobbing brought their attention to Mary Margaret. Her trembling body hunched over the body of Leopold.

“He’s alive!” she cried, to no one in particular or anyone that would help. “His pulse is weak, but he’s alive!”

“Stupid girl,” Cora jeered, red lip curling and looking down on the good doctor in disdain. “Your father had it coming. It was either this or a swift assassination by his own followers. Leopold may have birthed a reckoning, but he stumbled along the way, made too many enemies in his own circle. Some,” she smiled pleasantly, “didn’t think his methods were cruel enough. I happen to agree.”

Mary Margaret’s mouth opened in a scream as her hair was pulled at the roots. Cora dragged her across the floor and heaved her up to her knees. From the folds of her robe she procured a hand blaster. With an indulgent grin she brought the butt of it to a pale temple.

Regina could only stare in shock at the stage that was set as if it had all been done for her, to please her.

A dark chuckle rang out through the chamber. “What strange specimens the academy churns out these days. Nauseating, simple-minded, and utterly dependent. I thought Cosmofleet had more honor than this. Do you see the incompetence, Regina?”

“What I see, Mother, is one of my own being held at blaster point.”

“Oh, you cannot take this big sister role seriously, my love. Your stepfather will depart from this world in minutes and with him your relation to his offspring. There is no need to hold to this sense of indecisive love.”

“It is not a matter of family. I do not consider this woman to be any relation to me. However, she is one of my crew and until the day comes when I am rid of her it is my responsibility to keep her from harm.”

Cora clicked her tongue and laid a stern once over on her daughter. She shook her head in disappointment. “Oh, they have certainly done a number on you.”
“They?”

“They mean you to make you into this yielding matter. spineless are the lot of them,” she sneered dismissively. “I could almost venture… subhuman.”

Despite the gun bruising her doctor’s temple, Regina took a step. “You have spent so much time with these criminals. These remote hideouts keep you from reality. Leopold may be your husband, but whether he cares for you or not he has intentionally clouded your judgment. I will grant, Cosmofleet is filled with idiots, and Command is just as accountable.” Her foot ventured forward, seizing another step. She allowed her hands to hang loosely near the permanent contract and last resort that was her blaster at her thigh. “But they are not all like that, Mother. If you have any faith in me, know that my crew has been disciplined to superior standards and are just as qualified as I.”

“Your first officer, a girl playing at space wars. Your doctor, the daughter of the man who killed your one love. When will you see, Regina? These people are not your friends. They are not even your family. They owe no loyalty to you. They would sooner leave you to star dust to save their own worthless skins.”

“That’s exactly what you did to Daniel,” Mary Margaret pointed out.

“He deserved his fate. As will you and your friends.”

Something snapped in the doctor. A rare fire was stoked and fueled to nuclear intensity. Fury came over Mary Margaret and forced her to disengage from the hold. “NO!” she wailed, arms flying out in an uncoordinated flurry of attacks.

Shocked by the fire in Mary Margaret’s eyes, Cora raised her hands in defense. Her blaster was battered away and she only had her open palms to protect herself. Regina observed like a statue, predicting the consequences. She saw her weakened mother reach for a throat. She saw the sharpened end of a durasteel railing which broke off under Leopold’s fall. Mary Margaret and Cora didn’t see it, but Regina did and she did nothing.

Gasping under an iron clutch, the doctor made one last ditch push, sending Cora reeling back. When Regina blinked she saw her mother choking up blood, her hands fluttering around the durasteel rod. While Mary Margaret retreated back with a trembling hand covering her mouth, Regina stumbled forward.

The captain choked over tears. “Mother…?”

Regina kneeled and grasped at the robes which took on a color as dark as the stuff pouring out of her mother’s chest. In rare times of her childhood she had been held by her mother and felt the love a hand on her head afforded. Regina did the same, supporting her mother’s head with her own hand. Taking on the role of nurturer was a surprising turn of events as Regina never really knew what it meant to be nurtured. She still felt like a small child then, though it was her hands giving comfort.

“I should have tried —” Cora’s voice broke off. A shudder hit her, forcing her eyes to close and bear it. “Should have tried harder… Made you love me…”

“I don’t think that’s possible.” Hot tears streamed. Regina shook her head, tipping it sadly, and gave a weak smile. “I already love you, Mother. I always have. Don’t you understand?”

Cora’s eyes fluttered before staying with her daughter’s. They widened, seeming to behold Regina as if she were birthed from her anew. But her fading body continued to sink. Second chances expired.
No time for apology. She crooked a finger for Regina to come closer. With one last effort Cora licked her blood-stained lips and rasped out in warning.

“The people whom you serve are not as they seem.” Despite the heavy hand fighting to caress her daughter’s cheek, Cora’s glassy eyes held truer than ever. “Tread carefully, my love.”

The hand slipped from Regina’s grasp and fell lifelessly to the body of what was once her mother. She stayed there for a while, burning this time and this place into her memory. Long after her cheeks had dried and betrayal nothing but a dull cramp, Regina bid farewell to the last of her family.

“I’m sorry, Regina.”

It was the first time the doctor had failed to use her title. Then again, the slip was probably intentional. The captain made eye contact, not surprised that the woman’s eyes were as red-rimmed as her own. She spotted Leopold’s pale corpse and understood.

“Neither of us kept our promise, I suppose.”

It carried little trace of emotion, but Mary Margaret nodded to the confession. Everyone dealt with loss differently; apparently Regina’s way lied with detachment. It was as close to an apology as she would receive, yet it meant so much more coming from the captain.

Regina didn’t refuse when Mary Margaret made to wrap her sprained wrist in gauze. All the cutting words in her vocabulary did not mean anything if they didn’t meet their mark. Mary Margaret was suffering enough. Regina would hardly call it mercy on her part. They both got what they deserved, she supposed. Both of them had been estranged from their parents and succumbed to their manipulation. In the end, there had been too much death for vengeance to be exacted. So Regina let it go out of sheer exhaustion and submitted to the doctor.

Once Mary Margaret finished she stepped back. “I don’t like being here, Captain. The Raiders will soon discover what has happened and run us down.” Her eyes diverted from the two bodies with strict purpose. “And I’m worried about Emma.”

With a succinct nod, the captain bent down to retrieve her blaster. She checked the charge before pulling back on the cocking mechanism. “There’s one last thing we must do.”

* * *

Regina and Mary Margaret arrived at the lonely rendezvous point. The shuttle remained as empty as they had left it. Ten minutes had passed after the agreed upon time and Emma had not shown up. The doctor paced outside the shuttle dock, biting at her lip and brainstorming the worst case scenario. Regina leaned against the bulkhead, arms folded, finger tapping an anxious rhythm, yet retaining the stoicism associated with her rank.

Just when the captain was considering the worst, a figure down the corridor came hobbling into view.

“It’s Emma!” The doctor sprang out of her despair and leapt forward. “She made it!”

With a sigh and the hint of a smirk, Regina pushed off the bulkhead. “Late as usual.”

As Emma came closer the harsh ceiling light revealed that she was not alone and that she hardly looked the same as when they last saw her. Her once sunlit blonde hair came down in tangled strands. Sweat soaked, her face had lost all color, her lips an even greater pale of pink. The woozy eye contact she made with the captain and the doctor drew attention to her unsteady gait, and, finally,
to a crimson-splashed shirt. To her crewmen, she appeared like death walking.

“You’re bleeding!” cried Mary Margaret.

“You’re a doctor,” Emma said, managing a weak smile for effect. “You’ll fix it.”

Said doctor could only stare in bafflement, hands out to heal, but deathly afraid she’d make it worse. In time, her jaw did close and she did put on a mask of professionalism before her new patient. Her visual inspection eventually fell to Emma’s charge. The sweet, brown-haired boy cradled in her arms, though ostensibly in slumber, looked very out of place amid all the blood.

“Unconscious,” Emma informed at the behest of the captain’s gawking. “He took a bump to the head, but I think he’ll be okay.”

By the constant shifting of eyes over Henry’s body the words were to convince herself more than anyone else. In the midst of Mary Margaret’s worrying over incoming Raiders and updating her friend on recent events, Regina tuned out everything. Her consciousness seemed to slip from the moment and focus on the chaos. Just standing there, body and mind in shock, she was uncertain whether to look at the blood covering her first officer or the pale, lifeless boy in her arms.

“Here, let me take him.”

Interrupted in the middle of one of her anxious tangents, Mary Margaret watched as her captain (or the woman who used to look like her captain) reached out for the boy. Regina grimaced as the body weighed heavily on her sprained wrist, but she battled through the pain for the child’s sake. Star struck, Mary Margaret couldn’t believe the kindness being exhibited before her eyes. It seemed impossible that the captain would offer up her services to someone as ‘lowly’ as a child without the guarantee of getting something in return. A storm battled in those brown eyes, between hope and panic. They mirrored those of the boy’s mother and Mary Margaret soon realized that Captain Mills and the child must have known one another.

Wariness flashed across Emma’s face, but it only lasted for a second. Though a proud woman who hated to admit defeat, it struck relief in her to have someone take on a little responsibility. She felt lucky to have Regina there, and, more importantly, Henry was lucky, too. She allowed him to be slipped from her arms which were heavy from the burden of carrying him across the station. Emma didn’t allow herself to dwell on how good the two of them looked like that, Regina wrapped around Henry who nestled there safe and cared for.

The three crew members plus one civilian boarded the shuttle swiftly. While Henry was placed gently into a chair, Mary Margaret helped Emma to the co-pilot seat.

“Hold still.”

Emma bit down on her lip as a medpatch was placed against her lower abdomen. She gave a sharp yelp as the pad’s antiseptic gel molded to the laceration and the surrounding inflamed tissue.

“Is it cold?”

“No,” Emma ground out. “It stings.”

“Well, it’s the best I can do with the shuttle’s medkit. When we get to the Storybrooke I’ll have access to better supplies to patch you up.”

“And dose me up with morphine?” Emma asked with hopeful eyes.
The doctor gave a withering look. “If need be.”

While Henry slept oblivious of the danger still closing in, Regina checked and rechecked his harness. It was cold there in the shuttle, so with careful precision she closed his jacket until her thumb on the zipper met his chin. Knowing there wasn’t much time for pleasantries despite the fact that he still lied unconscious, Regina whispered soft assurances to him before swiping away the bangs from his forehead. She then stood and caught the doctor’s curious eye.

“What?” she snapped.

Mary Margaret blinked erratically and sputtered, “Nothing.” She took the chair beside Henry and stared straight ahead and tried to act like she didn’t witness something pure and true in the famed ‘Evil Queen’ of Storybrooke.

Once Regina fell into the pilot’s chair her hands flew across the control panel, firing up the nav-com and commencing the start-up sequence.

“What’s the rush?” Emma asked with a slight chuckle.

“We armed and set auto-destruct from the main computer,” Mary Margaret answered from behind. “The whole station is timed to detonate in less than three minutes.”

“What?!”

“It was the captain’s idea.”

“Regina!”

Throwing switches and releasing their shuttle from the docking clamps, Regina practically screamed at the control panel. “Do you have a better plan for escaping?” she asked, focusing on the half dozen alarms shouting back at her. “Or would you like a hoard of Raiders to come trailing after the Storybrooke? They just lost their leader. Right now they are angry, reckless, and they will want their revenge.”

Emma swallowed, falling back into her chair. “No, no. The bombs were a good decision.”

“Are you positive? Because I can take my time if you absolutely insist upon it!”

“Of course I’m positive! Gods, Regina! Just get us out of here!”

Paying her first officer one last glare, the captain hit the thrusters causing the g-forces to throw them all back into their chairs.

“Hang on.”

Eyes squeezed shut, Emma muttered, “Little late for that.”

After an extended burn of their engines, Regina eased off propulsion controls. Their shuttle gently slowed, easing their backs from the cavity of their seats. She swung them in an arc so that the station came within their viewport. Several seconds later they shielded their eyes from the blinding white light.

When the flash died down a wide sweeping ellipse sprung from its epicenter, blue in color and washing over them and all of space like a harmless breeze. A spear of light pierced out from its origin before collapsing back in on itself for the final blast, taking the rest of Xelphi Six and everyone in it
with the explosion.

The next thing they saw was a brilliant sunrise.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The metallic sound of a knock caused Regina to meet her closed doorway with a glare. She would have expected the courtesy of being left undisturbed after the events of last night. Based on the faint pang in her wrist, her over-used tear ducts, and the fatigue from a sleepless night she felt entirely used up. Specifically, she felt like someone threw her into a wormhole and then slingshot her around a moon. Just thinking about it plagued her with exhaustion.

After Cora’s death the reality of it still wracked at Regina. She still had yet to face the consequences of her mother’s betrayal and failed to accept what her passing meant. It was more than betrayal to her, it was one against the Commonwealth. Cora had sold out her friends, her family, and her government. If news spread, this might lead constituents to hazard a closer look into their politicians and their dealings abroad. After all, loyalty in one’s government these days was as fragile as Earth’s ozone layer. It only took one rumor to spark a wave of distrust in the Commonwealth. For if a retired dignitary could defect to the Raiders, who was to say she was the last?

Yet her visitor refused to respect privacy or the fact that she was in mourning. The sharp knocking persisted, echoing throughout her quarters and in the confines of her throbbing head. Throwing aside the blanket donned for warmth, Regina thrust herself up from her sofa. She marched towards the door and slapped the hatch release, preparing to cut down the idiot soul who disturbed her slumber.

Emma Swan (the idiot soul from the other side) snapped to attention at the sudden appearance of the captain. As a shock to Regina, the first officer’s uniform never looked so neat. In fact, it had to be the first instance the woman even showed up in uniform. Her black boots were polished to a shine while the gray pants tucked into each boot as ordered. The regulation black long sleeve shirt of First Officer appeared a bit snug along the arms but fit nicely to her build. A slight bulge at her abdomen evidenced the medpatch still healing her knife injury. And to top it all off Regina noted with bewilderment how golden blonde hair usually left askew had been pulled up into a tight pony tail.

The show of upholding dress code had a most unusual effect on the commander. Taking a step back, she had to grasp the edge of her doorway to bring her back to reality – if this was, truly, reality. Regina blinked rapidly, taking in the appearance with parted lips. Though visibly haggard from her ordeal, Emma still looked as roguishly charming as a ‘free trade’ smuggler. And the smirk at pink lips indicated that Emma knew it, too.

Eventually, Regina cleared her throat for a proper address. “You’ve managed to look no worse for wear, Miss Swan.”

“Ah… thanks. I think.” She scratched her forehead before coming out with it. “Look, we’re just here to say hi and give a formal show of gratitude.”

Frowning, the captain peeked behind Emma and saw no one there. “We?”

“Yeah, I thought you might –“

“Cap’n!”

Finally, the second part of Emma’s “we” charged out of nowhere and came to a screeching halt before Gucci boots. Sporting a rocket ship-themed band-aid above his eyebrow, Henry Swan looked
like every one of his dreams had come true after having finally set foot aboard a starship.

Toe-to-toe with the beaming child, Regina wasted no time kneeling down to his level and enveloping him in a hug. The swiftness with which she offered affection was not dwelled on as he returned the embrace with equal enthusiasm. She smiled into the smell of his shampoo and the subtle hint of boyish innocence. Later, it would astound her how she managed to let him go. They had come so close to losing each other. That danger seemed worse than their predicament in the terrorist bombing on Earth. This time she had come within inches of losing her little friend. It bled tears from her prickling eyes.

“You certainly look all patched up,” Regina said, observing every inch of Henry’s face. “Does your head hurt at all?”

“Nope. The doctor say I’m okay to go!”

“Well, if the doctor says so…” mused Regina with sparkling eyes.

“Yeah, I’m fine by the way.”

Regina gave the waving woman a mocking glare before stroking the boy’s bangs again. It was becoming a habit hard to break.

“Your mother should be very proud to have so courageous a little boy. Escaping peril twice in one week is a feat I even cannot boast of as a commander.”

“Are you proud?” His heels rose with the peak in his voice.

The question elicited a pause as Regina was not sure how he meant it. Proud as a captain? A friend? Dare she consider… a guardian?

“Yes, darling.” Her soft honesty washed over the growing smile. She brushed a thumb over the adorable, blushing cheek. “I am very proud of you.”

Arms folded and leaning against the door jam, Emma observed with a carefree demeanor. A strange joy came over her at the sight of her captain and her son sharing identical expressions of mystification. Neither understood what was happening or could identify the rush of novel emotion running through their veins. But as an outsider looking in Emma knew exactly what was transpiring between them. While the newness of it struck a bit of uncertainty in her and called her to reinforce the wall she built between anyone and the home she built with her son, conversely there was something about this event that calmed her. It eased every last doubt in her mind regarding the captain’s psychotic vendetta (now history), even in Regina’s spiteful sarcasm which just barely masked the veneration.

Watching them chat and beam away at each other made her want to make a break for it before they saw the evidence in her eyes. No tears, just the truth of it staring back at them. And if there was anything Emma needed work on it was confronting humanoids bare of lies or distrust. Because Henry and Regina were the last two people in the galaxy she could lie to or doubt.

“I like your starship.”

Regina laughed, feeling the exuberant swing of Henry’s hand in hers. “Thank you. I quite like it myself.”

“He was too shy to ask you himself, but he wanted a full tour from the captain herself,” Emma explained. “I already told him you had important captainly duties to attend to. It’s no trouble.” she
held a hand up before Regina could oppose. “David offered to show him around. And we’ve got a few more days until we’re Earthside, so you two can get into trouble later when the captain finishes her chores.”

Henry giggled to the wink in his direction.

Rising to her feet, Regina leveled a stare at Emma. “That sounds like very assertive talk coming from a simple first officer.”

“Yeah, well, when the commander decides to slum it with the lesser crew members…”

“Ah, Henry being…” Regina dragged off her realization with a rolling hand gesture. Her lips thinned as she grinned internally at the thought of the boy staying on indefinitely.

Emma nodded after the fact. Her hands hid themselves in her pockets and she rose up on the balls of her feet. Eyes winced to the awkward silence before she found a voice.

“Listen, I just want you to know I stand by your decision to detonate the Raider space station. Whoever was on that thing made a decision to throw their support – not to mention their lives – in with those terrorists. I’m sure the rest of the crew feels the same as I do.”

“I… appreciate that.”

“Also, I read your report on our recent skirmish.” Catching the contemptuous glare, Emma cocked her head and gave a crooked smile. “You really think I wouldn’t? Anyway, the little detail of Mary Margaret’s given name came up and – me being me – I couldn’t pass up the opportunity of reminding the good doctor.”

The captain sighed and crossed her arms. “Of course you couldn’t.”

“Yeah,” Emma itched her brow, “which was not appreciated. I don’t think I’m allowed to pass Medbay threshold for the next year, regardless of injury, plague, or impending death.”

“Smart woman,” Regina said, her shoulder shrugging.

“Wow, did it hurt saying that? You look a little pained, Captain.” Emma chuckled, disregarding the appreciative scowl to her teasing. “Besides, I think it hurt more to defy Leopold than give yourself and your crew over to him. It was, ah… it was really ballsy and, well, I just want to say thanks for living up to my expectations. It can’t be easy to please all your fans.”

A sculpted brow from the captain rose. “You’re a fan?” A smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“Um, can we just forget I said anything?”

“I don’t know… Henry, do you think we can forget that Miss Swan here is a raging admirer of mine?”

“Nooo,” sang Henry, giggling between them.

“Ugh, can we just memory wipe the last few seconds? Please?”

Regina took devilish joy in the violent blush coloring her first officer’s face. “I can disregard the comment from my Captain’s Log,” she replied. Despite the glowing opportunity to embarrass Emma, she decided to take pity on the poor woman. “That’s the best I can do.”

A long suffering sigh escaped Emma. “Good enough.”
“Momma?”

The tug on her uniform and faint trace of a whine begged Emma to look down. “Hey, little pilot.”

“Momma, are pancakes here?”

Both women laughed despite the serious pout on the boy’s face. Emma gave her son’s hair a tousle.

“I’m sure the cafeteria can scrounge up the stuff. Though I doubt it’s as good as The Classic.”

“Can the cap’n come?”

Emma managed to hide the wince with a smile, yet still felt the guilt of having to disappoint her son. “Oh, Henry… I don’t think the captain can –“

“I’m sure we can work something out,” Regina interjected. She laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t a promise either. At the risk of setting precedent, she couldn’t imagine dashing this boy’s hopes, not to mention the dormant expectations of her own.

The military strides of Chief Science Officer Nolan sounded down the corridor. “Hey,” he greeted to mother and son. His jubilant smile had a contagious effect on the two. “You two are hard to catch up with!”

“Lieutenant Nolan.”

“Commander!” At the sight of the captain, David’s eyes widened. He immediately fell into a salute. “Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

“At ease, Lieutenant.”

Eyes wide and mouth open, Henry took in the display of military etiquette with nuclear level fascination. To Regina it was heartwarming that so young a child took the operations of rank and file with outright wonder, while Emma concerned over why rules and regulation took precedence over the workings of an ion engine or the distinctiveness of a *Regal*-class lavatory. Henry’s priorities clearly did not follow in his mother’s footsteps.

While David led Henry away on a ship-wide tour, Emma lingered in the captain’s doorway. Having not been invited in, she had no other choice but to bide her time with the careful scuffing her toe gave the floor.

“So,” Emma drawled, heavy curiosity taking over, “I’ve been wondering…”

“That is quite the achievement.”

“… Back on the Raider space station, when you were faced with great risk and with no sign of backup… Were there any doubts then? About sacrificing the crew in Leopold’s proposition?”

Not expecting Emma’s serious tone or the nature of the question itself, Regina faltered in responding. It wasn’t for lack of an answer, she knew exactly what to say, but the interest her first officer had in her decision making had startled her. Never had Emma put this much effort in drawing this kind of… fascination in her captain’s sworn duty. Before, she just didn’t bother showing interest. Now, it was, Regina might venture, rather flattering.

Captain Mills responded with a resounding, “No.”
“Even if they’re Mary Margaret?”

Regina knew it would sting before she even said it. “Yes.”

“That’s an impressive turn around,” Emma pointed out. “Is that recent mutiny so distant from your memory?”

“I haven’t forgotten that day. A captain would never forget it.”

The fierce look in Regina’s eyes ensured that the event would be forever burned into memory. Betrayal like that, for however short it lasted, could not be dismissed so easily, or so soon. Emma would certainly never fail to recall the image of her captain being manhandled by the fury-blind crew members. Brown-eyed fear like that, not just for losing one’s position, but for one’s life, couldn’t be forged. The terror had been as real as the threat of mutiny. After that, Emma would never discharge her captain as cold or unfeeling, not when she had witnessed such uninhibited sentience.

“I know I’m no good at taking orders.” Emma said. Her hand fussed with the edge of her shirt, which had ridded up over her bandage. “I have little to no experience, my patience with crew performance reviews is nonexistent, and I annoy you out of spite…” Her features scrunched to an outlandish yet candid proposition. “But I can learn to be a better first officer.”

Regina had but to raise a single brow to exhibit her authority. It came across as harsh to anyone else, but Emma had associated the gesture with humor, and found it positively endearing.

“What else have we been doing for the past three months, Miss Swan?”

Emma laughed out loud. The whole thing struck her as humorous. She contemplated how far the two of them had come since she had strutted aboard the Storybrooke. Although she had gotten to know some aspects of the queen bitch captain that had been her idol in academy, her efforts had barely scratched the surface. She had suffered and grown for months under Regina’s leadership and tutelage, yet there were still more layers of the captain to be peeled back. The challenge thrilled and frightened her simultaneously. But that was why Emma Swan had joined Cosmofleet. It was why she stood toe-to-toe with the commander against every directive known to a fleet officer.

To explore the unknown… It was adventure worth her time.

* * *

Captain Mills fell into the sounds of her main bridge with a familiarity known to all seasoned commanders. As she sat in her captain’s chair, dividing her attentions between the streaking stars through the viewport and her datapad, she opened herself to the subtle retorts of her vessel. The hum from state-of-the-art ion engines, the sucking whirl from air-scrubbers, every beep and whistle of the sensor arrays, and all the murmurings of her officers was like music to her ears. The life blood of her starship sang through her veins. Its vibrations along every durasteel surface, each bulkhead and floor tile purred in satisfaction as she took every precaution necessary to keep it running smoothly.

But for as tranquil as these resonances, the captain was plagued by moral dilemma.

Not for the first time in the five years of her command, Regina broke regulation. In a deliberate act to conceal the truth, the details of Emma’s tampered academy scores were excluded from her report as was the incursion on Xelphi Six. Despite their galactic threat, the Raiders were dealt with by using unlawful means. Regina took matters into her own hands, disregarding the chain of command put in place for this very reason.

If Command every got wind of this there would be hell to pay. Tampering with or omitting sensitive
information in an official fleet report had severe consequences. But that was not why Regina was
determined to keep quiet about her offense.

She couldn’t expose the truth to Emma. There would be times she’d be tempted by the threat of
embarrassing the girl beyond all measure. After all her sufferings in keeping her first officer in line it
was a welcome prospect. Emma would push her to that place without knowing, giving reason
through her insubordination, rash action in the midst of a mission, or by just being her stubborn old
self. But Regina had to pass up the opportunity by realizing the damage that might ensue if she
didn’t. Crushing Emma would be a temptation, but also a regret. It wasn’t like Regina to take others’
feelings into account, but weren’t her feelings at stake, as well? She’d be affected about as much as
Emma. As to how and to what extent, Regina wasn’t quite sure.

Keeping the truth could be just as harmful and therein laid the dilemma. Emma would probably
never forgive her for it. She had every right to know how she had been recruited to the \textit{Storybrooke}
and on whose charity. Yet Regina could live with the lie, Emma couldn’t. If in her position, Regina
would want to be spared the realization of not having been good enough to graduate after five years
of honest hard work.

In the end, cowardice won out. A captain couldn’t lose her first officer over this, not when the recruit
had the potential to become something great. Regina acknowledged it and as Emma’s superior she
had a duty to harness that potential and nurture it into self-awareness. She would challenge Emma,
push her beyond conscious abilities to reach her untapped potential. She would treat her like any
other first officer and maybe give her a good shove harder than the rest.

With a sigh Regina put her concerns away for a future date. Flicking off the items on her datapad she
put the device away and approached the transmission table. Rumple had already set them into
hyperspace, but waited for specific coordinates. Next to him sat Belle, going through a navigation
systems check. David and Ruby stood over the communication’s panel, failing to appear engaged in
duty amid their plot to bet on whether Mary Margaret would change her name back to Mary ‘Snow’
White. At one of the panels across the bridge sat Emma, the nail of her thumb getting chewed out. A
devastating frown crossed her face as she powered through but the first chapter of \textit{Cosmofleet
Regulations and Directives} manual.

The scene struck the captain as intimate in that the people taking up her bridge had become quite the
familiar sight. They were almost, dare she say, family. Though she wouldn’t go so far as using the
word irreplaceable, her rag tag team of senior officers was unique, if anything, and that was
something to be proud of.

Command had a series of complex missions laid out for the \textit{Storybrooke} before they reached Earth.
None matched the thrill and danger of their last, yet after the harrowing escape from the Raider space
station and swift response of her medical staff, engineers, and senior officers, her crew deserved
some time off, perhaps even shore leave to one of the paradise worlds Ruby kept going on about
since Khione. After a shocking betrayal and a devastating loss, Regina was readily willing to offer it.
The crux of the matter lied in the destination. Where in the galaxy should their escape be made to?
Regina couldn’t come up with an answer, so she turned to a more inquiring mind.

“Lieutenant Commander Swan.” A grin struggled beneath pursed lips and a brow rose in good old
fashioned challenge. “Where to?”

Shocked that Regina was openly asking for her input (and it would seem with a smile), Emma
genuinely thought about it. To get a better perspective she approached the viewport and stood before
it as she did her first day on the job, hands on her hips and peering out into the vast corners of the last
frontier. Oddly enough, Henry’s bedtime stories sprung to mind.
“Second star to the right,” Emma answered with a glint in her eye, “and straight on till morning.”

Chapter End Notes

To find out what happens next check out the sequel “The Threat Within.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!