

Emma

School was starting soon. A shame, really. It felt like summer was ending before it even started. Emma only had the time to fight her own personal demon, and nothing more. No time for strolls through the park. No ventures to the city pool. Not even a caravan to the city library. If they weren't kept busy by their own issues, they were kept in by fear of nuclear fall out, serial murderers, and police investigations.

Typical life to those that accepted it. Atypical to Emma. The longer it went on, the more of her life was lost to this atypical life, the worse she felt in the mornings. It didn't help that she still had George and Scott to deal with, a decision still yet to be made. And yet, it would've been so much easier had either of them been like the other . . .

It was late afternoon, and Emma knew Scott was studying in the downstairs library. What, she'd no idea. Maybe she'd ask. Talk to him. Get close. Something. Anything.

Before she'd gone downstairs, she made sure to throw on her favorite pseudo-lab coat; a sort of scandalous number that made it look like she had nothing else on but that alone, short down to her mid-thighs, with a low enough v-neck that paired with the right push-up bra, she might have been able to show a bit of cleavage. Wear a pair of combat boots with it and become an instant femme fatale. And not just an ordinary femme fatale, either--a femme fatale for /science/. In her eyes, there was no other better way to be.

Still, despite how much ego-boosting her favorite outfit could do for her, she hadn't actually started feeling better from this morning. A shame. Maybe spending time with her boyfriend would help. Before Frieda's, it had. There was no reason for that to change.

Scott

A mere few feet of plaster and asbestos away, Scott was spending this summer day much as he had spent the other ninety: cooped up in a small room filled of the combined smell of yellowing pages and stagnant gross sweat. Sunlight wafted in through the windows on the far wall, long blocked by the 8-foot-tall shelves. He poured over the pages of another Scholastic bestseller, enjoying a certain calm and serenity unknown to the rest of the Halfway House. The best day? Maybe not. A good day? Most certainly.

Emma

When she first got a look through the crack of the door, Emma saw the vague image of Scott's back. Seemed like he was at a desk, far off in the back of the room. Alone? She'd no way to tell. Probably. *Hah, maybe I'll sneak up on him.*

She took a step. Heard the creak of floor boards. Realized then that she she'd worn her boots. *The only time they don't work for me. Ergh. Okay, fine. Alternate plan.*

The default plan? Push the door open slightly, then close it behind it. Sneak in, get behind him, and get his attention. Tap on his shoulder, maybe. Or tickle him a little. When he spun to see

her, she could kiss him on the lips. Surprise him even more. That was more than mischevious enough.

And if she was caught? Alternate plan. Stop sneaking, stand up straight. Tell him *I'm just looking for a couple books*. Then maybe peer over his shoulder, see what he's reading. Yes, this was also a viable plan.

It all depended upon the circumstances, really. She was going to do her damndest to surprise him, and committed herself to it when she started to slowly push the door open and, in a surprising turn of events, was NOT greeted with the familiar groan that accompanies the operation of most doors at the Halfway Home. By whatever stroke of luck, the shoddy construction of the decades-old structure graced her this day by miraculously not failing her at the moment she most depended on it. The open doorway granted her full view of her prey, still unassuming, absorbed in the borrowed fiction.

Slowly closing the door behind her, Emma strolled the few feet it took to reach her target. With the clunky leather boots, she wasn't exactly inaudible. It appeared, however, that her Scott's ears were nowhere as sharp as his eyes. *Appeared* being the operative word: It wasn't two steps before a familiar, quiet voice greeted her.

"I don't like it when people try to scare me. If you want to have fun at my expense, you could at least give me fair warning."

Emma stopped dead in her tracks, stilled in a pose still befitting a spy, hunched over, hands out, unclenched. What, he actually heard her? Emma thought it was all going perfectly. The door barely made a sound. The floor boards didn't even creak. Something traitorous was afoot, and she likely couldn't have stopped it, regardless of her efforts.

So, she straightened up.

"I'd never do that," she finally said after a moment, a second she took to let her heart stop beating as hard.

Then, she took a few more steps forward. Just enough to get closer to Scott. A few feet from him, maybe. If the opportunity was available. The element of surprise was gone, but she could still get close.

"I mean, that's not a thing I'd /ever/ do. You know me," she continued, putting on her best little-miss-innocent voice.

Scott

The friendly voice was enough to finally pull Scott's eyes away from the library book.

"Emma? Why didn't you just. . ."

His sentence was cut short as he turned his head to more properly greet his girlfriend. While he was familiar with Emma's typical promiscuous apparel, he was caught a little off-guard by her outfit today. He caught himself and got quickly that train of thought right back on the rails.

"Uh. . . I'm sorry. You normally knock. Do you want me to get your biology books?"

Emma

Caught staring? Maybe? Possibly? Was it wrong that it would've been nice? Or, at the very least, felt nice. For her. George and Scott were the only two boys that'd shown her any affection since the accident. It . . . it was a little boost to the self esteem. One she felt was unwarranted, but that never made her feel any less good when either of them noticed her or held her or kissed her.

Thinking about it, maybe that's what she wanted. She'd felt horrible all morning. Not physically, though. Since the issue with Odyn, she'd been drained. Lethargic. She spent a few nights wanting to cry, but never told a soul about it.

Grab a chair. Pull it up. Sit close. And she did just that. She leaned to the left, rested her weight against Scott. Even set her head upon his shoulder.

"No, not really," she replied, "I just wanted to see you."

Scott

Scott took the not-so-subtle hint and maneuvered his arm out from under Emma's weight, brought it up around her neck, and started gently stroking her hair. He turned and brought his great golden eyes down to gaze upon her.

This new vantage point caused Scott yet another surprise as he noticed Emma's meticulously assembled v-neck / pushup combination. He quickly turned his gaze back to her hair, treating the exposed flesh in the same way others would treat a solar eclipse. He hastily thought of a way to take his mind off the subject.

"What did you want to talk about?"

Emma

She shut her eyes. Smiled some. It was nice, the feel of him running his hands through her hair. Almost made her wish he could touch her face. Caress her cheek. Anything like that. Not really an option, regrettably. Not one she was comfortable with. This, though--this was nice.

"Nothing, really," she replied, her voice faint like a whisper, "I just wanted to see you. Just, you know . . ."

She moved her arms, wrapped them around Scott's back and chest, and lightly hugged him from his side. Rested her head on his collar, just inches from the crook of his neck. Right where feathers began, down beneath of his sweat shirt. Right where it was still like resting her head against a down pillow.

Scott

Scott felt the eagle instincts start to stir in him: He was in contest with another male, but the female wasn't giving that one any attention at the moment. Obviously, this would be the best time for a courtship display to prove his superiority. His feathers slowly perked to life, growing to a beautiful display of shape and color.

That would be, however, if he weren't clad in an oversized sweatshirt to hide them. As it stood, the shirt just puffed up another half-inch. As the higher-level thought came back to him, he realized there was no way Emma couldn't notice this, and immediately became self-conscious of this action.

"Em. . . Emma? Would you mind. . . Could you. . .?"

He couldn't even finish that train of thought. There was no way to salvage this.

Emma

It was like he got a bit cozier. Interesting. Could he control his feathers like that? Make them puff out on a whim? It was like making a pillow puffier and comfier. Had he been shirtless, and were his feathers not sticky with summer sweat, she'd have run a hand through his feathers. In fact, it was still tempting. The only reason she didn't was that she'd have to put her hand up his shirt.

"Hmm?" she moved her head a bit, pulled back so her head was on his shoulder and she could look up at his face. She had a genuinely inquisitive expression, as she'd little, if any, idea if Scott was uncomfortable. She didn't think he was. She didn't think he had any reason to be. He said he liked her, right? They'd hugged and they'd kissed before, too.

In the process, she pulled her right arm back, just enough to set her hand upon his upper chest, tips of her fingers draped over his collarbone.

Scott

As the panic settled, Scott started to realize that Emma might not even have the slightest clue why his feathers were standing up. She probably had no idea why he was freaking out. She'd just been acting so. . . differently today: The outfit, the sneaking, the closeness, it was a step beyond the usual "studying and also a little smooching" he was used to.

Granted, the last few weeks were a step beyond what he was used to. Times change, and people change too. Most of his life, he was vehemently opposed to change. After all, the only constant change he knew of was happening only to him, and he hated every minute of it.

But Emma didn't.

Maybe he was overthinking this. In fact, he *was* overthinking this. Emma was his friend. His girlfriend, even. Whatever she was playing at, however odd, it wouldn't be harmful or embarrassing. Even if she was acting a little different than usual, he still loved her, and she loved him.

As his feathers started to settle, he took his free hand and laid it over the one she had placed on his chest. He looked down to her, and as the great gold of his eyes locked with the soft green of hers, a weak smile came to his lips; he knew that wherever Emma was going, he wanted to come along for the ride.

"Could you. . . could you hold me a little closer?"

Emma

Scott's request was . . . surprising, considering the noise he made a moment ago. He almost sounded uncomfortable, it just took her a moment to get that. But . . . he wasn't? No, he wanted to be closer. That made Emma smile. Genuinely smile. She hesitated a second, bit her lip and thought about how close might be too close. She didn't really know in the end, but she nodded her head nonetheless. In the end, though, her hesitation came not from this, but from the act of looking into Scott's eyes. They were beautiful. Entrancing.

But she moved eventually. It just took her a moment. When she did, she pulled her right arm back, tugged on Scott's arm, the one he had around her shoulders, and set his hand on her side, down close to her lower back. Then, he could hold her close, too.

Without further hesitation, she leaned into him again, wrapped her arms around him, set her head up against the crook of his neck. Shut her eyes and sighed contently.

Scott

Scott wrapped his other arm around Emma, and leaned his head down, softly kissing the top of hers. He sat there, taking in the heat of her body, the comfort of her embrace, the smell of her hair. There was nothing malevolent in her actions. It was just. . . nice. He wished that they could just sit there like that forever.

Emma

He kissed her forehead and she smiled again. Scott was always soft. Always warm. If ever there was a person suited to comfort another, that person was Scott Valle. She didn't even have her head against his feathers anymore, and she could still feel that way.

"You're warm," Emma whispered.

Scott

The soft words resonated with him. He hadn't noticed it before, but he was quite warm. Too warm, in fact: he felt a bead of sweat start to roll down his forehead. Of course, just when Scott was most content, reality had to step in and ruin things again. He moved his left arm to mop his brow, breaking the embrace.

"Uh, do you think you could let go for a minute? It's too hot with my shirt on."

Emma

"Mnn?" Emma hummed curiously.

She pulled back, brow furrowed quizzically. What was he implying, that he was going to take off his shirt? Emma glanced past him, back to the door. If someone walked in, it'd be bad. But . . . if that was what he was doing, maybe it was best to let him. Maybe suggest he put his shirt back on after a moment or so, but at least let the boy be free for a bit. She always hated to think of how stifling it was for him to be forced into secrecy all the time. Wearing thick clothes that just made him uncomfortable all the time.

Nevertheless, Emma briefly returned to her own chair, rather than partially sitting in Scott's.

Scott

With Emma's silent acknowledgment, Scott rose from the weathered wooden seat and reached for the elastic band and the bottom of his bulky sweatshirt. He hesitated momentarily, looking to the door as though the population of the Halfway Home had just decided they needed a collection of ancient paperbacks. When the door did not burst open with a few dozen children thirsting for knowledge, however, he finally worked up the courage to pull the autumnwear over his head.

As he felt the fresh air meet his moist skin and ruffled plumage, Scott let out a small sigh of relief, knowing that he would never tire from that feeling. He tossed the dampened shirt to the table and started to stretch out his wings, feeling his feathers separate, transforming from a single crumpled mass into a spread of unique and specialized quills, honed to flying perfection by a few hundred million years of evolution.

With a well-rehearsed motion, Scott contorted his arms slightly to bring the stiffer flight feathers into alignment, wincing as he felt a couple that didn't quite agree with the others. He checked his wings in a meticulous fashion, manually realigning anything which would catch as he moved around. With a final swift movement of his hands, his tail feathers were freed from their denim prison, and slowly walked back towards Emma, ready to continue what the summer swelter had rudely interrupted a minute ago.

Emma

When Scott got up, it became clear to Emma that her suspicions were all accurate. Scott was going to discard his sweatshirt. She checked back to the door, too. Made sure even after Scott

had that no one else was coming. When she looked back, he'd tossed his shirt away. Set it somewhere he could find it. Stretched his arms--his *wings*--out. Mesmerizing, really.

Emma bit her lower lip again. Smiled some. "I like it when you don't have to wear a shirt," she said, perhaps a bit brazenly, but truthful all the same, "Have I ever said that?"

She waited for him to get close. To sit down. To be in range for her to snuggle up to him, set her head upon his shoulder, feel the warmth of his feathers. Run a hand up his belly, up his chest, and glide her fingers through his feathers.

Warm, she thought to herself. He was warm. Comforting. *Wonderful*.

Scott

"Several times, yes," Scott said as he sat back down, looking straight into her eyes again, "In fact, you've referred to me as 'the comfiest pillow.'"

He put a hand around her waist, opened his mouth, and made the slightest croak of a sound. He bit his lip a little and broke eye contact, blushing a little and looking around nervously.

"Would. . . would you like to rest your head?"

Emma

"Well, it's true," she said cheerily, "I've never had a comfier hug or a better person to cuddle with. Ever. I love it."

And at his invitation, she rested her head upon his chest, near where plumage met skin. Where his feathers were the softest. Coziest. She could just rest her head there, right where feathers met his collarbone, shut her eyes, and go to sleep. In fact, she'd done that before. Once, maybe twice. Just laid down with him at night and fell asleep. He kicked her out of his bed eventually, but it was good while it lasted. She'd always had it in mind one of these days to protest. Say, *can't I just sleep here tonight? Please?* Maybe he'd be open to the idea.

Once, though. That was all. Once, they'd shared a bed together for an entire night, but she was never able to appreciate it. She was too broken. Maybe she still was. Maybe she was always going to be. But she hadn't been able to appreciate it for what it was. It was worth another try sometime.

She shut her eyes. Thought about it awhile. She was silent for a time, content just to think, relax, and continue to trail her fingers through Scott's feathers. Sometimes, she traced her hand down to his belly again, but brought it back to his chest shortly thereafter.

Why not. I'll ask it.

"Scott?" she whispered, "We should sleep together sometime."

. . . perhaps the wrong phrasing . . .

"I mean--share a bed, you know? Like the other night! Sleep together, not . . . *sleep* together . . . you know?"

Okay, that was awkward. But the suggestion still remained.

Scott

As Emma laid her head down on his toned chest, Scott's nervousness faded away again as he felt her weight recompressing his contour feathers, her warmth soaking into his bare skin and the rest gradually trickling through his plumes. As he was working to bring his hand back into prime hair-stroking position, he noticed one of hers preemptively wander over and start rifling through his down. He inhaled sharply and stifled an unconscious giggle as the hand left his coat and went straight for his exposed chest, making a beeline for his midsection.

It was almost enough for him to miss her question the first time around. Unfortunately, he eventually assembled the words with relative ease: *We should sleep together sometime*. He froze up for a moment, heart pounding and brain working a mile a minute on a reason that she would bring that phrase to bear.

Didn't she say something about post-coital relationships before? Didn't she ask what would happen if we. . . did. . . things? We're only 13, though. She can't possibly be bringing that up. But then again, "post-coital." Why did she say "post-coital"? WHY DID SHE SAY "POST-COITAL"?!

His mind raced with the worst train of thought, putting very little effort into interpreting the next few words that she spoke. It was so busy with the topic at hand, in fact, the sensation of Emma's hand moving back up to his chest surprised him, eliciting a wheezy laugh. It also broke his concentration on the sordid topic and brought his faculties back to creating meaning from the noise he had heard a few seconds ago: . . . *share a bed. . . like the other night*.

A wash of shame quickly came over him as he realized that last train of thought was as pointless as it was sleazy. Emma didn't want anything weird, she just wanted for them to be close. For him to be by her side and keep the nightmares away again. Something simple and innocent. He worked to spit out some words in hopes of covering up anything stupid he may have thought.

"S-sounds lovely. . ."

Emma

"Okay," she smiled in spite of her Freudian slip.

Was it *actually* a Freudian slip, though? Thinking about it just then, Emma wasn't too sure. Maybe a few times over the last year or so she'd actually thought about intimacy. What it'd be like to sleep with someone again, in the not-so-innocent way. Even missed it a few times. But she hadn't thought about it with Scott. The biology of it, maybe. How Scott passed genes. The real science of it all. But the feelings involved? No, she hadn't thought that far ahead. Not before. Not today, either.

"It's wonderful, you know?" she whispered into his chest.

--and just a moment before shifting her weight a bit. Scooted closer. Sat in a way where she was half on Scott's lap. She tilted her head then, just enough to kiss the center of his chest.

"You go to sleep, being in someone's arms, or, for someone else, with someone you love in your arms. And then," she took in a breath, recounted the feeling of it all, and sighed. Longingly, maybe. Nostalgic, too, perhaps. Not about any person in particular, just the act alone. "You wake up. And they're still there. And you're still in their arms. And everything feels right in the world. No matter what else bad is happening, it all feels right."

She kissed the middle of his chest again. Recounting the feeling, she wished she could really share that with him. There was nothing else in the world that could make a person feel more loved, of this Emma Vaerbond was convinced.

Scott

Scott was filled with relief that Emma was ignorant of things which were blazingly clear to him. He let the thought drift out of his mind and focused on her getting even closer. He tensed up a little as he felt her lips, and shortly after, her warm breath against his chest. He steadied himself a little and worked to listen to the words she was saying, rather than the heat she was radiating. Her breath, hot and moist, continued to beat down on his skin.

The feeling started to overwhelm him a bit. He felt his heart begin to race again, as a growing worry spread about this kind of contact. Mrs. Frieda and the various missionaries at the house had warned him about getting even to the first base on that field. Still, he held back even though this was starting to feel wrong. She just wanted to have him close, to take in his softness and warmth. He could always afford her that.

"You can fall asleep in my arms," he said, bringing his richly plumed arms around her, "I'll always be here when you awaken."

Emma

Feeling the warmth and softness of his arms around her, Emma took in a deep breath. Held it and sighed a moment later, contently. Happily. She nuzzled her head against his chest and gently moved up, up until her head rested upon his shoulder again. Where every word was a breath upon his neck.

"You're too good for me," she whispered.

Then, she slid closer. Wrapped her arms around him loosely, wriggled so that she sat on his lap a little more. So that her lips were up against his neck. So she could kiss his neck and breath in his warmth.

"You know that?"

Scott

Scott shut his eyes tightly. The warm breath on his neck was bringing forth goosebumps. He hoped that she was as ignorant of this as she was the other signs, until he felt the sensation passing on down to his arms, causing his plumage to perk up yet again. Sensations washed over him, so many that he didn't know if he liked them or not.

This is what couples do. This is what you're going to have to do with her eventually.

Eventually, though. Not now. They were just children. This was the kind of thing that people did in high school, or college maybe. On the other hand, Emma could honestly try this on someone in high school and they would return it without a second thought. Enjoy it, even.

He was overthinking this again. He needed to relax just roll with it. She couldn't take this much farther, could she? If she did, maybe they could just take a step back and leave it there. Maybe he could keep her satisfied without making this awkward.

Without another word, he slowly snuggled his head against hers and tried to calm down. Maybe if he looked more comfortable, she would leave it there. And maybe he would actually enjoy it as well.

Emma

She moved her head up, just a bit. A couple of inches, maybe less. Just enough that she brushed her cheek up against his.

For a second there, she wanted to move a little more. Move her legs. Straddle him. Wrap her legs around him and his chair and be as close to him as she could. But she couldn't. Emma knew that. That was too much, too fast. She had her morals. Values. She liked to take things one step at a time. Waltz up the steps of a relationship's developments, sure, but she didn't miss steps. She refused.

It was that one last barrier that kept her from promiscuity, this Emma knew. That wasn't who she was.

She kissed his cheek, though. To her, it seemed Scott was enjoying this. The closeness of it all. The warmth and the intimacy and how it felt to be with someone you felt so strongly for. It was

the same way she felt, 'else she wouldn't be there. Wouldn't be with him like this. Wouldn't want to kiss his lips more than anything else in the world.

Scott

Scott relaxed a bit. Finally, she had gotten back into familiar territory. He loosened up a bit and let out a slow breath, knowing that he had a response prepared for this.

"Well," he chuckled a bit, "*that was*. . . different."

He nudged her back a little, turning his head to look deep into her eyes, and once more, a smile appeared on his face.

"You sure know how to show a guy a good time."

And with that, he leaned in and planted a quick one on her lips.

Emma

Emma lightly returned the quick kiss and smiled back. "Well, I'm glad."

Now, it would've been easier to sit were she straddling him. But, no matter. With the distance now between them, she was able to look him in the eyes. Lose herself for a moment, just searching. Big, golden eyes. *Beautiful*. She'd wanted to say that before. Often, in fact. It just never came out. Was never relevant. And now, it still wasn't. Another day, maybe. Another time.

"And . . . it's not all you here, you know?" she said as she draped her arms around Scott's shoulders, "I like you. I like to be with you. And I like to kiss you . . . and be close like this."

She let her eyes wander again, down a bit. Down to his lips. She wanted to kiss him again. Or him kiss her. Longer, maybe. If he didn't soon, she was most certainly going to take initiative.

Scott

"Well, I like you too," he said, turning his head away a little, "and I want you to be happy when you're with me."

He turned back to her again.

"I trust you, and I trust the things that you want to do when we're together. You always seem to help me understand myself, and give me some purpose."

He leaned in a little closer.

"And I like knowing that when I hold you close, and when you fall asleep in my arms, I can keep the nightmares away."

And he gently kissed her lips once more.

Emma

Emma shut her eyes. Took in his words just the same as she took in his kiss. Returned the kiss. Returned the feelings.

I don't deserve you, she wanted to say. You're too good to me.

She leaned into his lips. Wrapped her arms around his shoulders so she could hold onto him--keep from falling, maybe. Keep him with her. Keep this kiss from breaking.

There were, after all, many feelings a kiss could convey. Passion, want, love, need--any of it. All of it. She wanted to relish it all. Take in every feeling they could convey with a kiss and let herself lose all the loneliness that all still lingered from a time before Frieda's. To let herself kiss her boyfriend with a sense of passion, and know that the same passion was returned.

Or . . . hoped. No, Emma was convinced it was true. Believed without a doubt that if she kissed Scott deeply--tasted his lips, committed to a subtle slip of the tongue--that he'd return it. Because he felt the same way about her. And not just the physicality of it all. She missed that, yes, but physicality--how /she/ viewed it--was nothing if it was empty. Nothing, were it not a language that best conveyed the idea of "love."

Otherwise, it was just hormones. Loose, raging hormones. Something everyone had, but it wasn't her way. That wasn't how she formed relationships. That was never why she kissed or laid with someone. It was always a matter of the heart. Always.

Scott

Scott was more than a little confused. His kisses normally passed quickly, but Emma wanted this one to keep going. Was it. . . was it *that* kind of kiss? The french kind? It had to be. That's what people started doing in movies when they had kissed this long. When they loved each other.

He panicked a little, this time not from a rush of emotions but from a simple realization that he really had no idea how this maneuver even worked. In doubt, he turned to examples from the movies he had recently referred to. There was. . . a little more leaning in followed by the mouth opening a little. He was pretty sure they would bump their teeth if he tried that too aggressively, but Emma would probably know how to avoid that.

Slowly and gingerly, he leaned in a little more and opened his mouth a little. He took it on trust that she knew what to do next.

Emma

This. Emma missed this. So, so much. A wonderful embrace. A wonderful kiss. A feeling of warmth that spread to even the broken parts inside of her. Something shared with someone for

whom she had such deep feelings. Returned feelings. It was like her heart skipped a beat, jumped and held itself higher in her chest. It was told flat-out that something was okay. That Scott felt the same way about her as she did him.

It was that type of kiss. A french kiss, some called it. But nothing hard. Nothing unnecessary. Just a slip of the tongue. A taste of her boyfriend's lips. A push only slightly beyond. A push so that the tip of her tongue could reach his, and little more. She could lead it just fine. She'd been through it before. She knew what she liked and knew what she didn't like.

A *hard* kiss. That was one of them. She didn't like anything *hard*, ever. A hard kiss, a tough squeeze of a hug, a tight grasp on her hips or her shoulders or anywhere during a moment of passion. It was wrong. Painful.

Things were tender, with Emma. Slow. Drawn out. Loving. Embracing, kissing, making love--any of it. She could only be slow, tender, and methodical. It was the only way. And with this, the way they were, embraced and sharing a slow, tender, and sweet series of kisses . . .

Emma was all right. She was fine with just this. She'd nothing else. No reason to persist further. No reason to look for anything else. No reason to deny him, should he move his hands. Touch her. Anything like that. No reason to tell him *no*, so long as he didn't go too far and didn't speed things up or be any rougher than this. Guys did that. She knew this fact. She knew things happened. She could play it off. She could enjoy the result, whatever it may be, but it wasn't necessary. Because Emma was always fine at this line. Rarely could she feel a need to cross it. And even rarer, would she *want* to of her own volition.

No, Emma was fine drawing it to this. Maintaining it. Just kissing her boyfriend--tenderly, passionately--and relishing in the fact that they *could* do this. They *could* express their feelings this way.

Scott

As Scott felt Emma return the motion, he calmed a little, knowing that the deduction he had made was the right one. He started feeling something else, though: a foreign presence had slipped past his teeth and touched the tip of his tongue. Something soft and tasting slightly of. . . cool citrus? Kind of like that off-brand toothpaste that he had borrowed from Emma once.

And then he pieced it together.

Ew. No. Gross. This was his grossest adventure. He wanted off the ride right now. He pulled away, pushing her back for leverage. He broke the kiss, broke the embrace, and nearly broke the chair in his mad dash away.

Just as he'd gotten up, he realized he had probably done the rudest thing possible in this situation. He had thoroughly embarrassed himself and needed to make his exit now. Without

any sound, he stumbled to the table, grabbed his shirt, and started trying to pull it back over his head, desperate to get away from her before she had any chance to chastise him.

It didn't work. He had gotten tangled up in his sweatshirt, and had no way to get it on before she would react. He pulled it off again, sat down at the table, put his head down, and started to cry. He had screwed things up. Royally.

Emma

For the moment, everything was wonderful. Emma was happy with a feeling of intimacy for the first time in a long time. A year and a half. Maybe more. It was a part from her life that'd been gone the whole time, a part she never knew she'd have missed so much.

And then, in an instant, it was broken. She was torn away, and it felt like her heart was crushed beneath in the rush of movement.

Paralysis was what she felt at first. She just sat there, in the chair Scott pushed her into, hands by her sides. *Why* never came to mind. Not the question, anyhow. Just immediate, striking numbness. For the time being it felt endless. Scott was off by the table. Tripped, it looked like. Sobbing.

For the first time in a long time, she wanted to be angry with someone. Stand up. Kick the chair over. Scream at him. Call him a coward. Tear his heart out like it felt like he'd done to her. But she couldn't. She hadn't the strength to. Hadn't for a long, long time. Instead, she just felt numb. Cold.

". . . Odyn was right, huh?" she finally said.

The words felt foreign to her, yet vaguely familiar. She was speaking on instinct alone. Not thinking about it. Something she didn't do, ever. Everything she said, Emma almost always thought it over at least once. She was a quick thinker. It made everything seem natural. But here, now, this was natural. Natural self disgust.

Weakly, she stood. Hobbled to her feet. "I'm even worthless to you. Ugly. And disgusting. And scarred up."

She walked on a pair of glass legs. Hesitant, fragile. Prone to break at any time, yet strong enough that without resistance, physical or verbally, they could still carry her back to bed.

Scott

Emma's words cut Scott deep, bringing forth a few harder sobs. He could hear the light thud of her combat boots get a little softer and then stop, followed by a quiet mechanical clicking.

"Don't go," he pleaded, bringing his head up and his bleary-eyed look on her once more, "Please, don't leave me here alone."

The words came out high and screechy. He wasn't even trying to control his voice anymore. He wasn't thinking about a lot of things. He just wanted her to stay. To know that he was sorry.

Emma

Emma stopped at the door. Still had the knob in her hand. She'd just pulled it open a bit. A couple of inches. Hadn't the chance to get much more than that. Hadn't the opportunity to leave. Would've, maybe. Would've if he hadn't spoke up. Would've gone up to her room. Laid in bed. Ignored Manny and Jingles and Nele and all of them. Give up being awake. Resign herself to sleep.

"Why?" she intoned harshly.

And again, she wasn't thinking before she spoke. Hadn't thought about the tone of voice she wanted to use to convey whatever message she had to deliver. All she knew was that she was upset. Scott was a source of this. But that was more surprising and confounding than anything else. Scott as a person was hard to be angry with. She could only really blame herself, in the end.

But the cold and the harshness remained, nonetheless. It was how she felt, and right now, Emma was having a hard time hiding how she felt.

"You don't want me."

Scott

He struggled against everything not to break down again right there. He couldn't keep this up for much longer. His lips were trembling, his voice was failing, and his whole frame was shuddering. Adrenaline was taking over, and it was going to turn him into a pile of despair and self-loathing.

He needed to find to find the words that wouldn't make her leave that door.

"I want you to stay. Isn't that enough?"

He held on just a little longer, waiting to see if this would make amends.

Emma

"Then . . . what is it?" Emma turned a bit. Finally managed to look at him. "You want me to stay, but you don't want *me*."

She didn't feel overtly hurtful or aggressive or socially violent. But she'd been here before. Had these thoughts, back before Frieda's. Wished to God and all that was holy and all she'd never believed in that she'd never feel them again. Maybe not the worst feelings in the world, but they weren't pleasant. Back then, they were unfounded. But now?

"So, what, do you just like the *idea* of me?" she wanted to sneer as she said it. Almost did. Would've, had she not felt so numb to everything. She needed to feel her face to contort it. "It's just nice to have me on your arm. Have someone to be strong for. And-- and think that maybe you can fix me. Like-- like-- like an emotional project. But to hell with anything else. Because-- because--"

The numbness kept her from feeling the warmth in her eyes and on her cheeks, but Scott would probably see it. Hear it, too. Emma was crying.

"Because anything more just isn't worth it. Too complicated. Too scarred up. Right?" A pause-- and then, a second later, a yell: "Right?!"

Scott

Were Scott in any other state right now, he might have tried to fight that claim. Right here, right now, in this library, however, he was using the end of his reserve just to hold himself together. That accusation gave the final push to topple his now fragile psyche. He could feel himself letting go, despite his best efforts to throw together anything to stand as the mildest facade of composure.

But the remaining actions were involuntary. He felt the pressure at the back of his throat, the tears welling up in his eyes, and the contortion of his facial muscles. It was over. He had lost. He was about to collapse on the table again, feeling literally heavy with guilt and selfishness, when a new and unfamiliar feeling crept in: Rage. At himself, his prudishness, his body, his condition, but also at Emma, and her words, her actions, her complete inability to show him any mercy at his weakest moment.

"You want to talk about complicated scars?!"

He grabbed a clump of down right at the top of his shoulder, and pulled, tearing them out with a sharp wince. He took a moment to get his breath back. "Well, look right there, I'm covered from head to feathery tail with them!"

He stood on up shaky legs and walked towards her, feeling a little fresh blood ooze from the injury he had just inflicted. He didn't care about it, though; not the blood, or the tears streaming from his eyes, or the snot running down his nose. He wanted her to understand some things.

"We've all got scars. It's not fair. It's not right. Sometimes it's not even natural," he seethed, holding the now-useless quills in front of her face, "Some of us get over them. I don't care about your scars. You shouldn't either."

His heart raced. He felt the room spin under his feet. He needed to throw up. He was saying and doing things that were completely alien to him. It didn't matter where it came from,

though. Those words were out there, and he honestly didn't care one bit. If she was going to be angry at him, he wanted her to at least be angry for the right reasons.

Emma

Shut up.

Emma had never been angry with Scott before. Not like this. Maybe it was because of what he said. Maybe it was because of what he did. Practically shoving bloody down in her face. Making her remember what it was like to bleed. Bringing back everything she hated to think about. Showing to her that he could do the worst to prove something.

Don't bleed to make a point.

He should've hit her. Stood up, approached her, and smacked her across the face. That would've hurt so much less. She'd have been able to sleep that off. By the end of it, Emma almost wished he had.

You . . . you . . .

It would've made her feel more justified if he had. Would've made her lungs not feel so compressed, like all the air had been siphoned out of them at once. Would've made her hand sting less when she slapped him.

"You ignorant! Immature! Prick!" Emma raised her voice louder. Damn near screamed at him. Slammed the door behind her. Accidentally shut off her own exit when she turned to slap him.

"I want you . . . in . . . in spite of that!" she pointed fast at the clumps of feathers he'd left behind, "I don't CARE about that. You DON'T disgust me. But I disgust YOU. And then . . . and then . . ."

She was done crying, now. That was all dried up. Now, she wanted to be the coward. Run away. But not yet. She wasn't done yet.

"And then . . . then . . . then you have the *NERVE* to make yourself *BLEED* like that?! For *WHAT*?! To prove a *POINT*?! There's no *POINT* to *PROVE*!" Emma heaved. Out of breath. Ready to collapse. Ready to run away. "I've done *NOTHING* to you! *YOU'RE* the one who pushed *ME* away!"

Scott

The slap across his face knocked out whatever rage may have been left in him. For a moment, everything stood still. He registered a sting in his shoulder. A sting which was steadily growing in magnitude. He'd really just done that. Just torn off a piece of himself and shoved it in her face.

He hung his head, and his hands went slack, causing most of his discarded plumes fell to the floor. He could feel the blood trickling down his shoulder, and the remaining feathers sticking in his hands. That really didn't matter, though. He felt worse in his heart than he did anywhere on the outside.

He tried to think about the point he was trying to prove with that gesture. To put together a sentence to express what his enraged tirade couldn't.

"You don't disgust me," he choked out.

In a mechanical fashion, he walked back to the table and put his head down. He didn't feel like crying. He didn't feel like talking. He didn't feel like thinking. He just wanted to close his eyes and disappear forever.

Emma

In the silence that persisted, Emma turned from Scott. She leaned forward against, the door. Still had her hand on the knob. Still prepared to go back to her room. Her thoughts were ablaze with what she'd just done. She slapped Scott. She really, honestly hit him. Of all her friends, of everyone she knew in the halfway home . . . she'd never raised her hand to slap someone. Not even George, when he was being an insensitive brute. Not even Nele, who deserved it sometimes. This just wasn't something she did. But now, she'd done it. She'd hit Scott.

Emma felt the burning need to apologize. She didn't. Not yet, anyhow. It was guaranteed to come. She was going to stew over it all. See herself as the bad-guy. Lose all acknowledgment that Scott had done any wrong at all. Apologize profusely. Cry a little. Beg him to not hate her. Emma had no idea that it was to come, but it was only inevitable. It was the only possible result of this.

"Then . . . why would you . . ." she started, her voice barely louder than a whisper--but she cut herself short, bit her lower lip, and shook her head. "Nevermind. Just . . ."

She didn't want to talk about it anymore. Now wasn't the time. She was feeling too terrible to try and be civil. Any attempts to talk it over and reason out what happened, why he pushed her away when she tried to be more of a girlfriend to him, and not just a friend to cuddle and kiss periodically.

"Just . . . just put your shirt back on," she whispered, her voice choked by tears, "Please. I want to go upstairs and I don't want people to walk in on you like this."

Scott

"Sure," Scott droned.

He stood up, reached over to the shirt, pulled it back over his head, and shoved his tail feathers back into his pants. He sat back down and laid his head on the table again. He felt a wet spot on the inside of his shirt as it slid around on his bad shoulder.

It reminded him how much he disgusted himself.

Emma

Emma didn't say a word. Just waited until she heard the cloth of Scott's shirt ruffling, until she no longer heard any movement. Then, she glanced behind her, made sure he really had his hoodie on. Once she did, she refrained from sighing. Emma had no idea what she was hoping for anymore.

For a moment, she paused. Tried to think of something to say. Failed miserably.

And with one long breath, one deep sigh, and a reluctant twist of the doorknob, Emma left Scott alone in the library.