Summary

When the author of The Do Over spell makes himself known as a threat Emma and Regina’s relationship is pushed to the ultimate limits; lines are drawn, trust tested, love questioned and all caused by a twisted game of words, a proposed deal, and a promise made by the author. Will a unique bond forged in another life and in their real one be enough to see them through? Unique A/U SQ.

There was a new game afoot and Regina realized with a sick stomach as sweat pooled at her hairline that Emma was the dice he was using to play it. She shivered. He wanted the oath broken and that only meant one thing; he’d force her into a deal damning Belle and gaining his right to retaliate once she got her magic back from him. He’d finish them or try, but Emma, unable to defend herself, would be caught in the crossfire. His words from before in the diner flashed through her brain; ‘sentiment is consequential so use yours to your advantage.’

Words he twisted and a version of Emma she hadn’t counted on had trapped them in a ring of fire he just lit and they both would burn if she was not careful with hers or if her girl lost words completely...

Notes

Dedication: There is a love out there that pushes against seams of the fabric of what we are in a society full of labels and judgments; it is self defined and indefinable, raw and refined, free and leashed. To those of you that have ever had who you choose to love challenged, or the way you live your life judged. And to those that have had the joy in finding your family of choice…and for those still searching…

This one is for you.

Disclaimer & Tags: This is not a stand alone fic and I strongly recommend you read the first part of their journey: The Do Over before this. I own nothing, but my own ideas. This work will contain themes of the following – family feels with angst, healing from the past, self discovery and acceptance, unconventional exchange of power, undertones of authority/obedience dynamics and some age regression of an adult – not play (mental). This work contains no sex or romance between Emma and Regina. There will be spanking of a consenting adult and an adult in a minor’s body. Don’t like = don’t read. I encourage reviews, questions, and constructive feedback, but bashing or cursing this work will not be accepted.
Chapter 1

From The Do Over…

"Promise?" 

"I promise. We will work through this together… as a family."

That word, though she’d used it freely enough in either life now meant so much more with Emma's claim on her. They had found each other years ago in the messiness of their present life and again under the spell of an alternate reality; two souls in disarray, each seeking to belong to someone that meant home.

Their real life was about to get complicated, but it had never been simple. Not for them; Regina and Emma, the Mayor and the Sheriff, the Queen and the Savior, or Mama and her sweet little swan.

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Emma leaned back against the couch in the study watching as snow fell gently outside the window, not allowing the arms around her to fall away. They were home again and it was the end of November just after Henry's wedding. The newlyweds had left for their honeymoon the day before and they'd toasted that send off before consuming their potions and beginning their journey. The cider still had ice melting in the crystal goblets resting on the table at their knees. In between their hug of return and celebratory toast ten months of another life had passed for them and Emma blinked hard hoping to wake up back in the lavender room she'd come to love and a life she was not ready to say goodbye to.

It was a funny thing to be back to where the power struggle had started between them when Henry had run away to Boston seeking her out. The same formal room, same white couch and yet this time they were sitting side by side without struggle between them; the power was there, but it had morphed into an easy tug of peace not war. They had changed significantly, their dynamic and relationship, in the three years leading up to the spell that gave her a do over at childhood. Finding that path with each other and walking it had not been easy. Emma wondered how to find her way back to that road again with the woman sitting beside her, a woman she had come to love in this present life in a way their world did not have a name for. Their exchange wasn't romantic, wasn't sexual, and it wasn't traditional or even understandable from the outside. She knew what it wasn't and wondered now what it was with this unexpected shrinking effect that had followed her home.

Within the spelled world in the months they were together Emma had gained a new understanding of herself, what made her tick and what mattered most to her. What she needed and wanted was to belong to the woman who held her and in return to have a claim within a heart she'd never imagined was so big. She had accomplished what she had never thought possible. The little girl had found a home within the beating walls of Regina's heart too, and she wasn't ready to move out.

Not in the least.

Regina had given her what no one else had been able to; a home and to feel loved when she had been at her most vulnerable and mistrusting. When she had fought, argued, and pushed, the brunette had been patient, understanding, and absolute. That was true in both realities. When the Queen accepted the role of being her parent in the spelled world the brunette had not asked it, or even taken it. Emma had pushed, had asked and the little girl she was had taken the Queen as her Mama.

Emma had known the transition home would be hard on both of them and they had discussed that
ahead of time, but she didn't think it would be this hard and the toms piece inside of her upon returning was not expected. She wanted both lives, needed both lives. It wasn't fair.

But how will that work and does she want that too?" Emma thought, head beginning to cramp with the weight of so many what if's.

Green eyes found the clock. It was near midnight, way past her bedtime. That thought made her shiver; she was an adult and didn't have a bedtime anymore. The strange idea made her throat thick with grief.

"What are you thinking about?" A husky voice filled the quiet.

"I was thinking about being home again and all the stuff that comes with it and that I'm up past my bedtime, but then..." She shrugged, sinking down in the couch.

"Well... it is late." Hesitation seeped in where it wasn't before. "How about we both turn in? We will look at this with fresh eyes in the morning." Regina stood, starting for just a moment when Emma did the same as their shoulders touched for the first time in so long. Gaining confidence, she offered a hand out of habit and what she saw in green eyes as a need. "Come."

Grateful for the routine still flowing between them, Emma took it, marveling at how they still fit together despite being the same size now. She was led upstairs and to her bedroom door.

"I hope you don't mind, but I did a bit of redecorating before I took my potion and we left." The Queen opened the door, heart full as she watched Emma take in the space.

"How did you... Jasper?!" Emma dove into the room and went to the familiar white bookcase now housing a mix of her adult items and ones from their spelled life, leaning down to greet her fine finned friend swimming among the yellow gravel. "He's here and... Stitchy." Feet traveled to the white bed, now queen sized and pulled the blue alien into her arms, inhaling the scent of home still lingering on his fur.

Regina bit her lip with hope that she hadn't over stepped. "You can change it back or anything you want, but I thought you might need—"

"It's perfect." Emma sank onto the bed, running her fingers over the familiar duvet. "You're right I need it, at least right now. Thank you." Wet eyes met brown.

"You are welcome. Your clothing and personal things from before the spell are still in the desk, drawers, and closet. Change and I'll be back to say good night." Smiling softly, Regina left the room and went to the master suite.

The realization that Emma didn't need direction on getting ready for bed, or even to be tucked in forced a hand to cover her mouth as eyes flooded, already missing the little girl she'd come to love as her own. She leaned her head against the wall near the door, a sob escaping. Cutting the cord in her heart that belonged to the child was a painful reality upon returning, it was inevitable, or had been in her mind. She was not expecting to see that little face again in the flesh when Emma had shrunk so suddenly. A gift, but letting go of that life would be so much harder now, if not impossible. When Regina chose to love she loved hard and with everything that she was. In their spelled life that had been no different.

Her heart hit the wall again as another quiet sob took her, as if that would wake her from this dream. The rattling of something that hadn't been there before when her forehead hit, caused her to draw back. A red and purple cast print hung there, one Emma had made in another life for her birthday. The spelled trunk transporting and placing the items had done its' job well. Too well.

Regina brought her hand up to trace the small palms and the word above it. She swallowed thickly, more tears falling as a finger finished the last letter.

She had tried not to become attached to the little girl's gift of title or the feelings that came with it. Role of Keeper and mother had blended when she hadn't intended them to. It had been easy, and Emma with her sweet smile, little giggles and trusting eyes had made it so. And now her little girl was gone. Sitting in that pain for even a moment left her shaking and she shook her head quickly, more tears falling as a finger finished the last letter.

"My necklace and bracelet. ... Are they here, too?"

A purple mist settled around that long neck and slender wrist. Emma smiled at the cool heaviness of silver resting against her skin. "Thanks." She lay back down as the brunette approached and sat on the edge of the bed. Now that sleep was near a part of her wanted to fight it and she gave in even as tired as she was. "Sooooo what do you think the shrinking means?"

Regina raised a brow at the stalling tactic she knew well and was unable to help her next words.

"It is time for sleep Emma."

"But what about my magic? I feel it back now. Do you think it's causing this?" Pushing back like always against redirection.

The Queen smiled softly, expecting no less. "I'm not sure, but until I don't want you using your powers. We need to be careful until we know more. Alright?"

"But my magic feels fine, like it always has."

"Even when you shrunk briefly?" Brows arched, but not in surprise.

Emma shifted her legs, drawing the covers up under her chin. "Kind of. It was there, but almost like it was out of reach or going in and out like a light bulb."

"That is exactly why I want you to wait until we can practice together when... when you are that size again. We need to test your magic in general before you go poofing off who knows where."

"Okay, I'll wait." Emma agreed and yawned.

An elegant hand abandonedly reached to run through blonde curls, but became uncertain for just a moment.
"It's okay Gina, it's still me." She breathed again when that hand settled firmly and fingers massaged her scalp making eyes heavy. "G'night."

"Good night my dear girl." The Queen kissed her swan's forehead and turned on the swan light out of habit before remembering, but Emma's eyes were already closed, so she left it.

Grief found her again in the solitude of her room as Emma slept soundly down the hall. She couldn't help it. Ten months of tucking in a child version of Emma flashed across her mind. Reading in the rocker, making sure little teeth, hands, and face were clean before bed had become ingrained. Even with pieces of their ritual that had been carried out tonight, it felt too fragmented, but hope whispered that maybe not everything would change, maybe... Three words tugged at her mind and allowed her to at least attempt to get some much needed rest.

It's still me...

Sometime in the early morning hours among the dawn breaking, a charade of dreams and restless sleep in the vastness of the master suite, Regina felt the bed dip and a warm body curled up along her front. Warm breath mingled with hers and her fingers found the ends of blonde hair. As Emma settled into sleep, the smell of cinnamon and melon brought enough peace to Regina to begin to feel sleep teasing behind her swollen eyes and she found it with an arm wrapped around her girl resting at her side.

A/N - I am traveling international for the next few weeks and will most likely not be able to post but once or twice. I will try to get a chapter a week between now and June 17. After that I will be back to my usual 2-3 posts a week. Hope you liked this first peek!

Thoughts?

Next time - Game plan for how to deal with their current situation is discussed and Emma runs into Snow... :-) Let the drama begin!
A/N - Hello my lovelies! I am sitting in an airport before I board for Europe (as shout out to all those reading from there) and I was able to squeeze in another chapter for you before I leave. The next won’t be until the 17th or 18th this month, so I made it a double shot.

Enjoy!

Emma shifted, twisting the sheets like vines around limbs as she woke. A full minute passed as she tried to figure out where she was and why her body felt strange; then the night before rudely returned to the forefront. With a groan of displeasure she covered her head with a fringed pillow, just now realizing she was in the Queen’s bed and sat up to take in the room. It appeared to look the same as it had in their spelled life, but it wasn’t seen with little eyes. That difference was sobering. The familiar picture on the nightstand brought memories rushing back.

The blonde leaned over and fingered the gold scrolls of the frame holding a picture of them in their other life, a two for one selfie first thing in the morning where her little half decided to make a funny face last minute. Of all the pictures the Queen had taken this was one that showed both of them uninhibited, and she knew was one of Regina’s favorites; coined as a perfectly Emma thing to do. In the haze of waking she wondered briefly over how it could be here, and then remembered the spelled trunk Regina had said acted as a transport between worlds. The Queen must have known they’d be returning home soon and had prepped as she always did, ahead of time. The thought and care that went into that piece of their journey home Emma was grateful for.

She sighed with want and decided it was time to brave the day. The smell of breakfast wafted through the vent overhead calling her stomach to attention. Bare feet found the floor and she went to find her Keeper, no to find Gina. That thought tugged roughly at the snapped thread in her chest along with another much heavier one sitting on her heart.

‘Was Gina still Mama?’

The thought made her pause in the kitchen doorway breath catching. A negative answer would devastate her beyond repair. The familiar tingle from last night flushed through her skin and she shrunk, drowning in the large yellow t-shirt she was wearing and boxers became a puddle at her feet.

A bowl of strawberries nearly fell from the Queen’s hand as she observed the shift from across the room, having had her own memory logged mind reminding her of times past upon waking. Her eyes misted, but she recovered quickly and went to kneel down in front of the pint sized Savior who was currently trying to keep the t-shirt from falling off. A wave of her hand changed Emma into a new pair of Wonder Woman PJs that were now spelled to stretch if the girl suddenly had a growth spurt.

“Better?” Voice breaking the quiet and hands went to adjust the shirt collar that didn’t need fixing, finally settling on little shoulders.

After a minute, Emma’s mouth got to working. “Yeah, thanks. I woke up big and now…” A frustrated, but accepting shrug. “Why is this happening?” She fell into open arms resting her head on a shoulder and was grateful to be picked up, already missing that closeness being an adult kept from her. The arms holding her were tight and immobile for a long moment before Regina headed toward the counter.

“That is what we need to spend today talking about, among other things. Did you sleep well?” She set the girl onto a stool, letting go with great reluctance and went to finish plating breakfast.

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“Kinda, until I wasn’t.” A little hand reached for a piece of turkey bacon when a plate was set down.

“Did you have a bad dream?” An automatic question.

“No.” Emma scrunched up her face now unsure if her presence had been welcome since she hadn’t been little at the time. “Why?”

“I just wondered if that was why you came to me last night.” The brunette dumped coffee out of the yellow mug she’d prepped for Emma and after a rinse, put watered down OJ in it instead before taking a perch on the empty stool.
"I'm sorry."

Regina sighed when her words were mistook and turned so she had green eyes. "You have nothing to be sorry for, you are always welcome to seek comfort from me, big or small." She set the mug next to the girl and fluffed wild curls. "Especially just because."

Emma relaxed and took a sip of juice, pining after the steaming mug in a regal hand. "I was neurotically looking forward to coffee this morning. Do you think since we are home now that—"

Regina shook her head. "Absolutely not, at least when you are small. You may have all the coffee you want, within reason, when you grow again." Full lips took a firm line at the scowl forming.

"Is that a rule?" Emma pressed back, wanting to know exactly where the line was again.

"It is. A knowing smile teased. "Care to challenge it?"

"Maybe after breakfast," Little teeth tore into another strip of meat, chewed with worry and swallowed before speaking. "What do we do about this? I'm supposed to go to work on Monday. What does this mean for us? And what about when I'm big again, how will that work?" Gesturing between them and at her small body, as panic of the unknown began to take over.

"Well, first we need to talk about what may be triggering the shrinking and if you can control it."

Regina began as a strawberry found her mouth.

She paused and thought more about the other questions. There was a lot to consider and the few hours of sleep she'd gotten had helped clear her head enough to begin processing some possibilities. She had weighed different options as she cooked breakfast and decided on the most logical to put on the table for Emma's consideration. One she thought made the most sense given their circumstances.

"For us, we will keep it simple. The rules for how we lived when you were little will apply here when you are little. When you are an adult our rules for that will remain in effect. That way things are predictable, no blurred lines so to speak. Would that work for you?"

Emma processed that. The same idea had crossed her mind. Part of her hoped that would be the case and more than willingly, she nodded. "That will help some, but what about everyone else?"

"That is an entirely different can of worms and one we will open after breakfast."

She slipped easily into her role with that little pouting face. "Please eat, you need your energy."

As the girl tucked into her food with purpose at that comment and the Queen further thought about how to navigate their new conundrum and wondered about Emma's question. How would the town react? What about Snow and David? Their son? That made her head spin and hurt. They hadn't felt obligated to share. Now, that privacy would be infringed upon and that did not sit well with her. It never did.

As the girl tucked into her food with purpose at that comment and the Queen further thought about how to navigate their new conundrum and wondered about Emma's question. How would the town react? What about Snow and David? Their son? That made her head spin and hurt. They hadn't felt obligated to share. Now, that privacy would be infringed upon and that did not sit well with her. It never did.

"Oops? Emma, what did I tell you about using your magic last night?"

If it was possible for that pale face to go paler Emma accomplished that feat. "Not to, but I forgot and you told big me, not little me." Scrambling for a possible loop hole she found.

"Nice try, but you are one and the same here," Regina stood to begin cleaning up the mess being cleared away as she thought about why her magic was so shaky. She'd performed that spell dozens of times and never broke a dish, wondering if her little untrained body wasn't used to magic was at fault.

The timer on the stove chimed, releasing her and she went right to the Queen, hugging those legs with nothing to be sorry for, you are always welcome to seek comfort from me, big or small." She set the mug next to the girl and fluffed wild curls. "Especially just because."

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"Looks like you used your corner time appropriately. Your theory is a very real possibility. We will test that idea when you are big again."

"What about everyone else, Gina? If this happens in public or if someone sees me?" Her brow pinched.

"Let's start with why you are shrinking and growing. If we can figure that out and if you can control it, that will affect my answer to that question. Come sit with me." They made their way into the living room and she sat. Emma seemed to hesitate for a moment, so she patted her lap in welcome, smiling when the girl found her usual place. "Now, last night before you shrank, do you remember what you were thinking right before it happened?"

"I was thinking that something was wrong when I couldn’t hear mini me anymore, but also right when I realized she’s still me." Blushing when she admitted knowledge she'd tried to use to worm her way out of corner time.

"I thought as much. And when you grew?"

"I just saw myself bigger I guess and missed being taller."

Emma’s whole face turned pink. "I don’t wanna tell you."
Patient as always, Regina waited a minute before trying again. “I need you to tell me sweet one so we can figure this out.”

Green eyes flashed up at the affection. “Am I still?”

“To me you will always be my sweet one. Is that what this is about?”

“Kinda. yeah. I wondered if… if you were still Mama and then I got small.” She buried her head into dark hair. “I don’t wanna grow up yet. It happened to fast and I think something broke on the way back. My chest feels funny, like something snapped that shouldn’t have, but it feels okay, I think. It’s hard to explain.” Emma waited for Regina to finish checking her for injury at the mention of something breaking.

“Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Nope. Just an ache when I think about having to be big again. I missed parts of it, but like I said I don’t wanna grow up yet.” Grumbling the more she thought about it. “Not like I have a choice though. We are home again.”

“Perhaps the spell somehow knew that and maybe broke the tether keeping you completely an adult. I’m not sure even if that is what happened and I will need to do some research to figure that out. Mean time the spell has made it so you don’t have to grow up yet, not all the way at least.”

Green eyes welled. “But mini me is gone and I don’t know how to be her here.”

“She is not gone.” Reassuring Emma as much as herself. “All you have to be is you and that is something we have been working on in both lives.”

Emma ducked her head, needing to ask, but anxious at the answer. She had lost too much, had be given too many false hopes and starts in life not to be. “Does that mean you are still Mama?” Wet meadows looked up again as a bottom lip caught between teeth.

Hope answered. “As long as you want me to be, Emma. I told you always and forever when you asked me if it was okay that you considered us a family and I meant that.”

Emma rested in that comfort, letting go of her swollen lip. “So how do I control the shrinking… Mama?” Tasting the word in this life with a little mouth and finding it brought the same joy.

“There seems to be a connection to your desire to be a child or missing parts of it and becoming small and for growing, perhaps it is as simple as wanting to be big again. Try thinking about yourself as an adult now and we will see.”

The girl squirmed, not liking that idea, but closed her eyes. She thought about being big again, but the pressures that came with that and thoughts of the warm lap she was on along with wanting to stay in those arms kept the familiar tingle from taking over.

One shoulder popped up and down quicker than a jack rabbit on a pogo stick. “Guess that doesn’t work.”

“Did you try your best?” Regina dropped her tone in knowing.

“Noooo.”

“Emma. We need to test this.”

“But what if I can’t get small again, like this is a fluke or something?” That possibility made her stomach clench and after being rudely ripped from their other life last night she was anxious to have to face this world again as an adult.

“I hardly believe this is a fluke and you seem to have more ease with the shrinking than growing, so please try for me so we know for sure.”

“I don’t want to.” She wanted to say no, but knew that was not an option, in either life.
want you to either.” A little smile sprouted between them. “When we got home last night I was afraid I’d never see my little girl again, even though I know you are the same person, that realization was triggered when you shrank and grew.”

“I didn’t think about how that would make you feel. I’ve been so focused on me through this whole thing that… I’m sorry for not considering how… I should have known that.”

“You have nothing to apologize for Emma. You’ve been a child, my child, for ten months, at least in the other time line, and a lot changed between us there that we will need to talk about and learn to navigate.”

“You’re still my best friend Gina. That hasn’t changed.” The blonde liked how those words eased the lines in the brunette’s face. “You’re still Mama, too and… I realize I need you to be both, just like I know I have to me, no matter how complicated that will be.”

“And that is a very grown up thing for my little girl to say.”

With a deep sigh like popping a soda can tab, Emma closed her eyes and accepted tingle that took over returning her body to full size. She went to move off of the Queen’s lap, but those arms wouldn’t let go.

“I’ll hurt you Gina. I’m too big.” Even as those words were said Emma settled back.

“You are never too big to be held when you want or need it.”

“Promise?” Emma closed her eyes, overwhelmed with a feeling she had no words for.

“I promise.” One sealed and delivered with a kiss to a pink cheek.

A familiar, yet forgotten ring tone in the foyer distracted them and the Regina raised her brows as the lyrics from Hole – Nobody’s Daughter came floating into the room.

“I thought I asked you to change that.”

“You did. I just didn’t.” Emma hopped up at the pat to her hip, smirking over her shoulder as she went to pick up her phone, actually not missing being glued to technology. Snow’s name flashed across the screen and she declined the call, sending a text instead.

“Who is it?”

“Snow. We were supposed to have lunch together this weekend at some point, but I never confirmed before we left cause of the spell stuff and now…” She shrugged, leaving the phone on the table and returning to the sofa.

“And now?” Regina wrapped her arm around those adult shoulders that seemed to carry the weight of the realms as Emma at down.

“I don’t want to see her today. It’ll be weird and I don’t want to risk shrinking and having that blow up in my face.” Emma slouched, picking at the cuffs of her PJ sleeves and tracing the gold W pattern on the fabric of her wrist. She didn’t feel like Wonder Woman at the moment.

“Probably wise at present, but you cannot avoid her forever.”

“I know.” A blonde head dropped to the Queen’s shoulder. “I just will today.”

“We may need to tell them Emma, in case something does happen. They won’t understand otherwise and that may create a very big problem.” The practicality of that idea made the Queen feel numb; that would not be a pleasant conversation.

At all.

“You don’t think they’d try to like take me or anything?” The horror drained what color was left in Emma’s face.
"I don’t think they would know what to do, but having an opportunity to know you as a child would mean the world to them." Snow would melt and so would her Prince Charming, at first. Then the skirmish would begin. "I can imagine the anger they’d feel if they didn’t know why suddenly their daughter is a little girl and only wants the Evil Queen." That affix rested bitterly at the corners of her lips.

"Hey!" Emma jerked up, jabbing a finger into a tan forearm. "You don’t get to say that about yourself Gina."

"You are right, I apologize." The brunette receded immediately, knowing how much her girl hated that rare slip.

Pacified for the moment Emma’s hand found the Queen’s. “I’m an adult though and it’s my choice who I’m with, even if I’m fun size. They’d have to see it that way.”

“I know Snow, better than she knows herself sometimes and that is not how she will see it, dear heart. Not in the least. Waiting for them to find out will backfire and they will find out. We cannot stay in this house forever and life must go on.”

“I’ll tell them, I will, but not today.”

“Not today, but tomorrow we need to begin living again.”

Emma nodded eagerly at that firm tone. “I can try my magic now, if you’re cool with it?” Wanting distraction from that reality and receiving a nod she waved her hand summoning Stitchy. Her fingers scrunched happily in his blue fur. She tested a few more spells, including poofing across the room and back.

Regina smiled. "Your theory seems to be correct, so our new rule stands. No magic when you are small, until I teach you, that is."

“You taught me a lot of things.” Guilt took over that pleasure.

"I can practically hear your thoughts. Share them with me please.”

A tingle took over and Emma shrunk again. She lay down to rest her head in the Queen’s lap. "Have I ever taught you anything?" Her thumb rubbed her bottom lip, asking permission to enter.

“Nearly every day I learn something new from you or about you. Most importantly you have taught me that I can love again, not in the same way as I did Daniel or even as I do Henry. It’s different and I am still not sure how to define it, but I have you to help me.”

“We are a team.”

“The best of the best, sweet one.”

The next morning brought the reality Emma had been dreading and a return to her adult size upon waking. She was grouchy at the thought of having to tell her parents about the spell. They’d originally planned to keep the spell just between them, but now with the shrinking side effect and the unpredictability of that, the special memories she shared with the Queen would be open to scrutiny. She sighed as she finished getting dressed and turned at the knock on her open door.

"Are you nearly ready?" Regina stepped into the room, watching with amusement as Emma hopped on one foot.

The Savior finally shoved her foot into the boot, excited to actually get out of the house for a bit. They had tested the shrinking effect and growing several times throughout the day yesterday and she felt she had enough of a handle on the change process to brave breakfast at her favorite diner. It was still random, but for now if she concentrated she could shift at half the time with success. She wondered if that would get better or worse over time.

“Yeah, I just need to figure out my hair.” Smiling at the Queen and catching sight of her wild mane in the mirror as she tried to run fingers through tangles. She dropped them automatically when she felt familiar hands threading the curls into the beginning of a braid. They both froze for a moment, their eyes meeting in the mirror before the blonde turned around.

“This is what I mean Gina. How do we do this?" Emma caught the olive hands before they left her hair. "I didn’t mean that I don’t want your help. I need your help. I need this... both. I just don’t know what this is yet. I like to have terms for things and I did before we left, but now... I’m scared.”

“I’m scared too, for some of the same reasons as you, I think. That fear of rejection and the unknown is something that runs strong in each of us.” Regina looked away briefly gathering her thoughts ready to share what had been pooling in her throat for the last day. "Caring for you as a child made me realize that I’ve missed having that role. When Henry left for collage my role as his mother changed. He didn’t need me to take care of him like that anymore. After experiencing that in the spell again, something inside woke up. I need to be needed like that and now that we are..."
home again, I am not sure how that role fits outside of when you are small.”

“Maybe we are thinking about it too hard.” Emma hoped it was as simple as her next words. “If it feels right or good to us, let’s just be ourselves with each other.” Green shifted between brown.

A proud red smile formed. “When did you get so wise?”

“I have a good teacher.” Emma grinned back and turned around. “Will you do a fishtail braid?”

Those hands returned in answer and soon after they were making their way to the Benz. Emma routinely went to the back door and after a moment of hesitancy went to the passenger side. It was strange riding up front as they drove to Granny’s.

“When are you meeting with your parents?”

“After we have breakfast, at noon I think, at the loft. They said Neal was at a friend’s house, so it’d just be us.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“They’d BBQ you Gina before they BBQ me. It’s my stuff to deal with and I don’t want them trying to make this about you or attacking you for thinking that this was your idea. Their minds will go there anyway and I don’t want you in the cross fire.”

“Still, I’d like to take you and drop you off at least.”

“I’d like that. Thanks.”

At the diner they found their usual booth. Ruby greeted them with menus and Emma found she was actually bummed at not getting the color mat with crayon pack she was used to. She read the menu twice before shoving it away with a sigh, not sure what to get.

“Is something wrong?”

“No… Yes… Maybe.”

Regina tilted her head. “Which is it, dear heart?”

“I don’t… I just… Do you remember Christmas Eve when we went to that fancy restaurant and we read the menu together and you asked me what I wanted to eat?” She continued when she received a nod. “I couldn’t tell you then, but I can tell you now. I liked it when you picked for me. Not having to make decisions like that was so freeing. I miss that already. I know it’s dumb of me, but I do.” Eyes became glassy.

“It is not dumb and that negative reference of yourself is your one warning.” The Queen leaned forward in the booth and softened. Picking up where they left off as her girl needed her to.

“Would you like toast or bacon with your eggs?”

“Bacon all the way… Real pig bacon, not the bird kind.” Emma grinned, blinking back tears as Ruby came to the table and Regina ordered for them. The waitress didn’t seem to think that strange and she relaxed. “I just realized that this is kinda like the first day of the spell. You took me to Granny’s remember? Except this time I don’t want to set you on fire with a flame thrower.”

A nod. “You were quite upset that day.”

“Yeah, it feels like forever ago, but not.” Another realization hit. “How did you deal with that hate from me?”

“It wasn’t hate. Anger, even rage at times, but never hate.” Regina recalled the embers of little green eyes past. “Some part of you seemed to recognize my intent and truth to my words. We had a goal, planned the steps, and worked them as they needed to be worked. Most things tend to work themselves out from there.”

“Still, I was less than nice to you on a good day.” Emma’s lips twitched remembering some of the harsher things she’d said.

“And on good and tough days you learned to be. We found our way and we will again, here too.”

Their drinks arrived shortly after and Emma happily sipped a cup of coffee, the bitter taste sweetened with cream.

‘Maybe being home again won’t be so hard to adjust to after all.’

“Emma! Seriously?” A shrill shout accompanied the matching ring of the diner door.

‘Nope, never that simple.’ Emma thought as her shoulders hunched to her ears in the booth at the anything but sweet sounding voice coating the air. Green eyes matched Snow’s across the diner.

Regina turned to see the former Princess stalk toward them. “Why is she so upset?” She whispered whipping back around.

“Cause-I-kinda-blew-her-off-when-she-asked-me-to-breakfast-this-morning…” Emma rushed and turned on a smile when Snow parked in front of their booth. “Hi, fancy meeting you here.”

Snow nodded once to Regina and turned annoyed eyes to her daughter. “You could have told me you had plans already with Regina instead of telling me you had paperwork to catch up on at the station.”

“I do have paperwork. I just changed my mind and I thought you’d have other plans by now.” Emma shrugged, not daring to sneak a peek at russet eyes she knew were calculating that half fib. “We are still set for noon though right?”

“Yes, and maybe after we can have lunch together?”

“Maybe, yeah.” The blonde shrugged noncommitally and dropped her head back against the booth as the Princess walked away to get a to-go order. She looked down her nose and away quickly when she caught the brow arch.

“Paperwork, really?”

“Yeeeepp, lots of it.”

“Emma, we’ve talked about this.”

“And you said we don’t lie to each other, you never said anything about other people, Gina. And technically I always have paperwork to catch up on at the station. That never lets up.” She shoved two strips of bacon in her mouth when their food arrived.
“Speaking of which, we need to advertise for an assistant at the station to help with that.” Regina cut into the smoked salmon avocado confection on toast.

“I don’t need an assistant. I got it. I just need time to do it, hence not having breakfast with Snow.”

“But you’ll put off paperwork to have it with me?”

“Always.” Her sweet, but cheeky reply got her nowhere.

“We will discuss what qualities you are looking for in the applicant, you may be in on the interviews, and hire whomsoever you wish, but you need an assistant. There is money in the budget and the station is understaffed as it is.”

“That’s not much of a discussion.”

“Then please think through other options, present them, and we will look at other possibilities as I always encourage you to do. Deal?”

“Deal.” Emma swallowed and squirmed in her seat. “Sssooooo, am I in trouble for the small, tiny, little-bitty white lie, but not a lie I used to get out of breakfast with Snow so I could have it with you?” Smiling sweetly and filling her mouth with more bacon.

A fork paused outside of prefect red lips. “Do you need to be?”

Defiant, but not a defiant shrug. “Am I?”

“That is not what I asked you.” Brow arched in wait.

“And that’s not what I asked you.” Emma pressed the issue, not wanting to admit the truth bobbing in her throat or to have to decide her own fate.

“Emma. Do you need to be?” The fork lowered to a plate.

“No… Maybe…” Shoulders finally dropped with guilt. “It was a crummy thing to do.”

“You are right though, we never set the rule about fibbing to apply to other people, just between us, and I will honor that.” Regina offered a genuine out to the blonde.

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course, though I’d like an answer by dinner time.”

Emma nodded, a fair compromise, already deep in thought about the pending conversation with Snow. She nibbled on her eggs as the brunette watched her pondering what the rest of the day would bring. The short time she’d been awake had been a whirlwind of emotions and she suspected to be further unhinged by the day’s end. She wondered if she would find absolution with herself in a place she suspected she needed to be and guided by the hand now reaching for her own.

Please comment (those feed my soul :-) ) And fan art for the chapter is also on my Tumbler.

*waves from plane*
Chapter 3

A/N - I'm baacceekkk! :-) Regular posts will come from here on out, my usual 2 or more a week. There are two flashbacks in this in italics. Enjoy!

An hour later, Emma stalled outside of the loft front door shifting anxiously from foot to foot, a fist resting just above the aged wood. Sweat began to break out on her upper lip as she thought about what she was about to do. The door opened before she could touch it and boots stepped back startled.

"Hey Emma, come in." David greeted and pulled his daughter in for a hug.

The blonde grinned tightly returning the embrace and crossed the threshold of the apartment she used to call home. That word had a whole new meaning now. The specialness of that, she felt, by sharing such a personal journey she was still processing was about to be ruined.

They sat together at the dining room table. A warm mug of hot coco she couldn't help but compare to Regina's gave Emma's nervous hands something to do as Snow caught her up on the town gossip. Talking about nonsense made the time pass by slowly and Emma wanted nothing more than to blurt out what she had to say and bolt. When Snow paused long enough to take a breath Emma tried to turn the conversation to something deeper.

"So I need to tell you guys something kinda big and I need you to let me finish my thoughts without interrupting." She opened with the line she's practiced with the Queen, advocating for her need to be allowed to speak. "Can you let me do that before you ask questions?"

"Of course, Emma, you can tell us anything." The princess reached out a hand to take her daughter's, eager to share what she hoped was a bonding moment.

"Shoot Emma. We are all ears."

David's easy grin helped Emma relax enough to begin. "So, you know I moved in with Regina last year... There was a reason for that, well more than one. We've been working on a project that has really helped me realize some important things about myself and well, us." She made a circular gesture. "And I have done a lot of thinking about the past, our past and it was because I got a ch—"

"Is this about the tree again Emma?" Snow squeezed a pale hand. "We've been over this. We didn't have a choice."

Emma bit her cheek, slowly counting to five before responding. "No, this isn't about the tree... Well It is, but it isn't how you are thinking about it and before you say anything else you agreed to let me finish before asking questions." She fought to keep her tone civil, frustrated at being interrupted.

"She's right, Snow. Let her finish."

"Thanks, David. Like I said, we've been working on a project, a spell actually, that let me—"

"A spell? What kind of spell?"

"I'm trying to tell you." Clenched teeth ground against each other. She took a breath and forced her mouth to relax and tried a different approach. "I have always wondered what it would be like to have a do over, a second chance to have a childhood unlike the one I actually had. I became obsessed with the idea for years and finally had a chance to—"

"We told you we were sorry Emma."

A pale fist pounded a thigh under the table and Emma turned pink trying to control her temper as she had been taught. "I'm not trying to make you feel bad or trying to blame you for anything. I'm trying to tell you what I have spent the last three years of my life—"

David cut in. "Emma, your mother is just—"

"Stop interrupting me, please, both of you. I need to be able to talk to you about this and I'm trying really hard to explain." Emma dropped her head in hand and whipped it back up at Snow's next words.

"It was 38 years ago Emma and I'm so sorry you were hurt by that, I am because I love you..."

The woman hesitated for a moment. "I know you don't want to hear this, but I would do it all over again if it meant saving everyone. That's what heroes do. That's what this family does and a responsibility you inherited at birth, as a Princess, for your people."

"I never asked to be a Princess or the Savior. You made that choice for me." Her eyes burned and she regretted not being able to reach for the Queen's hand, or having that quiet strength at her side.

Snow's eyes were sympathetic, but her lips were firm. "It's time you grew up Emma, and put the past behind you."

The blonde stood, nearly causing the chair she was in to fall to the floor. After a deep breath. "I'm trying to do just that and you won't let me talk. I'm done here." Old habits of running hard to break.

Snow stood up with David and rounded the table. "Emma we should talk about this. You're running again."

"So what if I am? You are not ready to listen yet, so I'm going. We can try again another time."

"No." Snow reached to grab Emma's arm. "You need to sit and have this out with us."

Jerked her arm away, but keeping tone level. "You don't get to tell me what to do." There was only one person in the world who she allowed that right and coming from anyone else it infuriated her.

"I am your Mother Emma."

Green eyes flashed. "You gave birth to me, but you did not mother me."

Snow turned red, hurt mixed with insult, and she took a step forward, as David held her back.
“You are my daughter Emma Swan White and you need to start acting like it.”

Emma flinched, startled at the addition to her name. It was foreign sounding and cold. She finally lost it as her last nerve ripped. “Fuck off.”

The door slammed before she realized she’d stepped outside. Fighting for breath she waved her hand and teleported home in a puff of white smoke. She appeared in the study, having been specific in her mind to land near Regina.

“I wasn’t expecting your call for another hour at least. How’d it go?” Regina’s hand found a bouncing knee.

“It went.” Emma let out a sharp breath.

“And not well I take it?”

“I told Snow to F—off. Well, I used the actual word anyway.” The weight of that action felt good coming off, knowing she’d promised to keep her cool during the conversation and failed.

“You must have been very upset by something she said for you to do that.” Validating Emma’s efforts at keeping a promise to be civil with Snow, she nodded in understanding.

“She told me to grow up and I couldn’t get a word in edge wise. I said what we practiced and got close a few times, but she kept interrupting, they both did after agreeing not to.” Slouching. “I messed it all up.”

“No, you were simply not allowed an opportunity to get your words heard.” Redirecting that piece of misplaced ownership. “Though, your temper seemed to have gotten the best of you at one point. We will keep working on that and try again with them tomorrow.”

Hopeful green eyes looked over. “You’ll go with me, even after my big speech about being able to do it myself?”

“That is what being a team means. I’m sorry to hear that it did not go the way you wanted. Tomorrow will go differently.” Then gently. “You also need to consider an apology for saying what you did.” She’d make sure Emma would be able to have her say, even if she had to stick a sock in the Princess’ mouth to achieve it, though Emma was not without some ownership to the troubled relationship. A hand stroked a braid when the blonde leaned into her shoulder.

“You are upset about the cussing then?” Emma asked, deflating. They’d worked hard on that in their other life and some part of her wanted that accountability to transfer here.

“I’m not thrilled with it, though I understand you were triggered.”

“I thought about your question in the diner about...” Nails raked her jeans, leaving white streaks in blue as lips struggled to finish.

“Needing a reminder?”

Green eyes closed briefly at their code word and blushed. “I don’t want one, but yes for both cussing and fibbing. And yes, I know you didn’t ask if I want one.”

The Queen kissed the top of a head. “But you need one.”

“Yeah, I think I do.” Ducking a pointed chin at how easily they slipped back into their dynamic. She recalled a moment in their other life after being grounded when the Queen had said that required dependency would help reinforce their dynamic and that Emma needed to remember that. The child she was didn’t understand that statement, nor did she remember their dynamic because of the spell, but the adult now realized the comforting weight of those words.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I mean yes.”

“Find your corner then.”

Emma slowly left the couch and faced the wood paneling across the room, turning to look at the Queen over her shoulder. “Fifteen minutes?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

At that confirmation, thoughts turned to the first time she had asked that question and of the conversation had before hand.

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# Flashback three years ago... before the spell-

“Soooo, I’ve been meaning to tell you something today and I don’t want you to freak out on me when I do.” Emma chewed the end of her ponytail.

“I will do my best not to ‘freak out’ on you.” Quoting the blonde with a reassuring smile, the Queen finished signing the last paper of the day and closed the file on her desk, watching as Emma began pacing the study.

“I kinda messed up, a little bit, and forgot to do the budget report for the Sheriff’s department this month.” She closed her eyes, expecting to be told off and deservedly so, but cracked one eye open when she heard nothing.

“I imagine you’ve been distracted lately with the realization of the possibility of the spell we spoke of. I know I have been. Much more time do you need to complete the report?”

“More time? Like you’re not angry at me?” Both green eyes found the Queen’s briefly before dropping.

“Annoyed yes, but not angry.”

“Oh.” Emma sunk into the chair opposite the desk.

Regina narrowed her eyes slightly in confusion. “You seem upset by that idea. Why?”

A shrug.

“Emma, you can tell me.”
"You’ll think I’m weird... well weirder than normal for me." Smiling a bit at the teasing grin coming from across the desk.

"Try me."

A deep breath. “I was kinda hoping I could see what it might be like to have you... take charge of me, like you will in our new life.” Blushing furiously and biting her lip. “I guess I’m curious what this thing or relationship we will have will feel like with the role I’m asking you to take on for me.” Squirming when brown eyes were full of something unreadable. "I can’t stop thinking about how much I need someone to do that for me, especially when I mess up because I’ve never had to be accountable to anyone who cared about me before. I know it’s really strange and weird and dumb." "It is not any of those things. Your ideas or feelings never are, Emma, and I’ve been meaning to discuss that with you at some point and we may as well now.” Regal fingers dropped the pen. "You refer to yourself as stupid or dumb when you are anything but. Do you remember the promise we made to each other about accountability?" "Yeah, I was thinking about that when I spilled my guts a minute ago.” Sarcasm rolled naturally between them.

"I am calling in that deal now and I think you need me to, am I right?"

Emma squirmed in her seat, eyes not leaving the Queen’s. “You’re always right. Doesn’t that get tiring?” She stifled another cheeky comment.

"Only with you, my dear.” A kind jab in return.

“Are you going to do about it?” Emma lifted her chin in mock challenge.

"I am not going to do anything, but you will be.”

"Oh?” A blonde brow lifted.

"You're always right. Doesn't that get tiring?"

Emma turned to look back. “That sounds wayyyyy better than this right now.”

"I will be sure to remind you of that in our new life when you throw a fit at my suggestion of that very idea.” Lips twitched upwards at the pouting Sheriff.

"Fifteen minutes, huh?"

"Fifteen minutes.”

The past faded as Emma’s reality charged in when she heard a desk drawer open, close, and the lid of a marker snapping shut after a few minutes. Heels clicking on wood paused at the sofa.

"Come here Emma.”

With a heavy sigh feet turned and shuffled over. Nerves wore at the seams of her as Emma stood next to the Queen, eyeing the stack of index cards in the brunette’s hand.

“What are those?”

"These will help you make the connection between saying a curse word and associating something unpleasant with it. We will get to that in a moment. Tell me why you felt the need to lie to Snow today.”

"I didn’t want to see her yet, cause seeing her meant telling her about the spell, our spell.” She wrung her hands. “That means sharing our other life and I don’t want that judged.”

"I imagine it is and now are you glad of that choice?"

"No because it means I’m in trouble with you.”

"By your own choice, I might add.”

Regina chuckled softly and sat on the sofa as Emma stood in front of her. “The time out was for your not so white lie and I’m glad you realized the underlying cause of why you made that choice.” She held up the cards briefly and set them next to her right hip. "Now for the cussing.”

"I think I just changed my mind, Gina.”

"Unless you choose to say that word, that is not your decision at this point.” The Queen called the Savior’s bluff, waiting for their agreed upon word of cinnamon. In the echo of nothing that followed she gave direction. "Take down your jeans.”

When denim rested at knees Emma found her place over those firm thighs and buried her head in her arms.

"Sit up on your elbows and hold these please.”

White cards were placed face down in Emma’s hands and she puzzled over them until she was asked to turn over the first card and read it out loud. Her tongue felt fat as she mumbled the word ‘damn’ and yelped in surprise as a hand snapped across her red boy shorts, with more strength than she was used to feeling in the last ten months as a kid, but right now she wasn’t a kid and that thought was sobering.
“Ow! Gina! What happened to a warm up?”

“This is a reminder, not stress relief dear heart. Do you recall that difference?” Even the case, the brunette gently brushed a forearm across the red seat.

“That is not what you need though is it?”

“No...” Emma scrunched her toes when that hand returned to rest on her bottom. Regina read her well, sometimes too well for the blonde’s liking.

“You will read each card three times. Understand?

So that was the game and a clever one Emma knew she would lose, but that was the point.

“Yeesss.” Stalling with a deep breath then she tried the word again and that hand fell a bit harder than last time. The third caused her to wince and kick up her feet.

“Next card.”

And on they went through the slim deck. By the last card Emma’s face was wet and as red as her underwear, which was pulled to her knees. Skin on skin; olive to milk came next. No layers to hide behind, no walls. It was something they’d talked about early on in their relationship. And while not all spankings ended that way, Regina seemed to always know when the blonde needed that extra layer peeled away. One Emma discovered she needed sometimes for closure, which was close now as she was asked to read the last card.

“I don’t wanna say it. I get it and I won’t slip again.”

“Read the card Emma.” A firm undertone left no room for disobeying.

Lips rolled inward as more tears fell. “Fuck—Ow!”

Her cheeks burned and did again when she repeated the word. The last utterance broke her hold on composure and cards spilled to the floor as she sobbed in her arms. It wasn’t about the pain of the spanking, though there was that. Pain was merely a tool to get her to where she needed to be, to feel, and to own; asking for accountability to someone who loved her. A hand in her hair eased the tension in shoulders and Emma gave into her tears, breathing through them as they washed her of guilt.

“Take as long as you need to baby.”

Muffled cries came in answer and after a few minutes Emma moved to push herself up to stand on wobbly legs. She yanked her boy-shorts up and kicked off her jeans before curling up on the sofa to rest again the Queen.

Red lips kissed a falling tear. “Are you glad I pushed?”

“Yeah, I needed you too... The cards were a good idea.”

“I thought so. Perhaps next time you feel the need to curse you’ll recall the feeling associated with it.” Gently tapping the blonde’s hip with her hand and eyeing the cards scattered on the floor.

Emma nodded in agreement and thought back to the last time she’d been over the Queen’s knee in their other life and how different that experience was, no less or more than the other, just different. The feelings of safety and love after the fact were the same in both worlds and that consistency meant everything to her.

“I missed this.” Seeking fingers found the birthstone necklace at a regal throat. “The give and take we have.”

“I don’t think that went away entirely in our other life, just adjusted for that relationship.”

“Yeah, maybe it did. Maybe this, what we are, didn’t change as much as we think it did.”

Swan and Queen nested comfortably in arms as they shared thoughts of things to come and of things in the past without further words being spoken. Emma combed through her memories before the spell and settled on one where through their give and take they each had discovered a need in the other they could satisfy; her own question about accountability and Regina’s answer to it.

-Flashback – 3 years ago before the spell-

Computer keys clicked slowly as the blonde squinted at the laptop screen, annoyed when the sound of a knife against a cutting board interrupted her thoughts. “Do you have to do that here? I’m trying to think.”

“Cooking is what people typically do in the kitchen Miss Swan.” A brow rose at the Sheriff. “You can use any room in the house for computer work, but I may only use the kitchen for cooking.”

Emma wisely took the hint and saved her work. Shutting the laptop with a sigh, she lingered watching the Queen expertly cube tomatoes for a salad.

“What is on your mind, Emma?”

“Hmmmm? Oh, I was thinking that loud, huh?”

“You were. Something is bothering you, I can always tell.”

“I know and that still amazes me.” She stole a tomato cube from the board to snack on. “What are we?”

“Cooking is what people typically do in the kitchen Miss Swan.” A brow rose at the Sheriff. “You can use any room in the house for computer work, but I may only use the kitchen for cooking.”

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“You were. Something is bothering you, I can always tell.”

“I know and that still amazes me.” She stole a tomato cube from the board to snack on. “What are we?”
Not missing a beat a quick hand reached for a head of cabbage. "There are a number of ways to define that."

"I know and I'm trying to figure it out. What is this thing we are doing where I actually listen to you and do what you say and I like it and when I don't you hold me accountable and I still like it?"

There she'd finally said it. The 'it' that made her stomach flutter and blood pulse thickly at temples; that left her heart light and mind malleable as clay. This need for 'it' sat on one side of a scale begging for balance, primal even at her core. Like a lost sheep willingly exposing a throat to a known shepherd's crook who promised to only nip with a staff to guide instead of loop to choke.

And she knew Regina understood that delicate difference because the Queen was once on both sides of a crooked staff. At one point in life she knew the pleasure of guiding those lost in a storm and the desolation of being led into the eye of one. It was about the fluidity of power; their give and take, their warm dark dance on the cold white marble of the world.

Regina took her time responding, seeing that Emma was deep in thought as she organized her own over the Savior's words. When she noted green eyes seeking an answer she began.

"There are a number of different terms for what you described, but none I care for. I do not like labels, as you know. " Thinking directly about the one Snow had attached to her title. "However, you seem to need one from me right now."

"Yeah, I do." Emma swallowed hard. "I like to have terms for things and I wanna make sure we are on the same page and not expecting something else from each other."

"Specifically?"

Red cheeks. "What we are doing with the accountability thing and me doing what you say. There is nothing sexual about that for me."

"Nor I." The Queen assures, eyes clear and bright. "I am a dominant woman Emma and for me, between us, that has nothing to do with sex, though many people seem to feel differently about that for themselves, or so I've read. I'm also a nurturer by nature and I get great satisfaction at guiding others growth and learning. I can't help what I am, just as you can't help what you are."

"And what am I?"

"That is for you to define."

Emma bit her lip, uncertain about that task, but game. "Will you help me?"

"Of course, though you may not always like my way of helping. " Dark hair was tossed over a shoulder as a chin lifted in certainty.

"I know." Bold fingers stole another tomato cube, cheekily dodging the dish towel tossed her way. "But that's what makes this thing we do worth it."

Please let me know your vibes for this story :-)

Next Time - A group conversation with the Charmings opens more than one set of eyes. Emma misses their spelled life and Regina gives a much needed gift.
On Sunday morning Emma called Snow to apologize for her temper and requested another meeting to talk out their differences after some much needed prodding and reassurances from the Queen. That afternoon, both of them showed up at the loft and after a few awkward greetings, mostly on the Savior’s part, Emma sank down on a dining room chair. She squirmed a bit at the hard wood’s bite, still tender from the day before, and watched the way brown eyes mused over her predicament.

David set mugs of coffee in front of all of them and settled next to his wife. “Why are you here Regina? I’m glad to see you, of course, but I thought this was between Emma and us.”

“While this conversation is about you both and Emma, it also involves me at a level and I offered to come and support her with things she needs to say.” Turning to the blonde with a soft smile and gesturing to begin.

“I know I blew up yesterday, and like I said earlier, I want to try again to talk with you about something that’s happened and—”

“What’s happened?” Snow leaned forward in growing concern.

“Interrupting will not get you answers any faster Snow.” Regina stepped in as something in her tone made the Princess sit back quietly with narrowed eyes.

The blonde reached a hand out automatically to catch the Queen’s and gave a squeeze before releasing. She took a few breaths to gear up for what she thought would be another fight to be heard.

Snow watched the exchange, having tried to sort out why her daughter was acting so differently, now and with the changes over the last few years, and something she’d never suspected exploded in her brain. Green eyes bulged and she grabbed David’s arm in a death grip.

“You’re sleeping with her aren’t you?! That’s what this is about. Why you moved out and have been so distant from us!”

“What?!” Emma’s eyes bugged back in shock. “NO! It’s NOT like that. We don’t sleep together, not like you’re saying we do, but that’s not any of your business.” Gesturing to the Queen. “I’m happy and this works for us.”

David put a reassuring hand on top of Snow’s, but gave his eyes to his daughter trying to understand the obvious affection between the women.

“Something we don’t give labels or try to fit into a box. It’s hard to explain and that’s not why I’m here. Sighing now that it was time to rip the band-aid off. “I’m here to tell you that I asked Regina to do a spell for me, to give me a do over at my childhood. We spent the last three years planning it. Nothing was affected here, time wise, but we lived a whole other life for ten months in another world a few days ago. I was able to do some serious thinking and healing from my past without this life getting in the way.” Shifting her gaze between the couple. “And I’m telling you because there seems to be a side effect that I can’t really control.”
A cricket chirped… one without an umbrella or top hat.

Emma took the numbing silence that followed as cue to continue. “Sssooo, I’m kinda shrinking and growing at random. We are not sure why yet, but it doesn’t hurt or anything.”

Snow sputtered, but stopped, looking at David and back to Emma. “You were a… a child again?”

“Yeah, in a way. I was still self aware with my adult mind, but in a kid body and I shared that space with my inner child.” She tried to ignore the slack jaws gaping at her. “We took turns being present. I got to work through a lot of my past trauma and do some healing. I learned a lot myself and what I need to be happy. It was an amazing experience.”

“Who took care of you in this other world?” Snow answered her own question when her eyes followed Emma’s to her former step mother in shock. “No. No, that’s not right! Why wasn’t it us Emma? We are your parents!” Turning to the Queen in anger. “What did you do Regina?”

“She didn’t do anything I didn’t ask her to do.” Emma started to step in to defend the brunette and a quick hand coming to her knee gave her pause.

The Queen leaned diagonally blocking Snow’s glare and stilling a knight’s rescue attempt. “I simply listened and gave Emma what she needed.”

Sitting back when Regina apparently didn’t need her help, Emma took a slow sip of coffee and watched the chess game of the decade commence with David staring between all of them.

Snow burned moving forward her rook. “What she needs is to grow up. The past is the past and there is nothing we can do to change it.”

“You don’t get to decide that for her and while the past is gone, it can still hurt.” Blocking the path easily as she pressed for understanding. “As you well know, in regards to your past anger at me over your father’s death and mine at you for my mother’s.” The Queen slid back again, knocking against an invisible King only in Snow’s mind. More softly, after her words registered, she continued. “Emma has done a lot of hard work healing in our other life and here, as evidence by her apology to you this morning and her willingness to talk today to try and mend your relationship.”

‘Check.’ Emma thought, eyes darting between the two royals.

“That’s not fair Regina and you know I’m sorry about your mother.” Snow threw a pawn.

An accepting nod. “Just as I am about your father.” Regina captured the pawn used as a distraction. “The word sorry doesn’t stop the soul from bleeding nor does it bring a life back or allow a child a chance to feel what it is like to be loved.” Hard words to hear, but necessary for this game to end so they could get back to the reason they were all in the room.

That reason blinked. ‘Check mate.’ The blonde thought.

Snow crossed her arms in momentary defeat. “And your spell did that for her?”

“You don’t have to like what I did or even understand why I chose to do the spell. If you want a chance at a real relationship with me I need you to please start respecting my choices.” A ready sigh made her shoulders drop, or so she thought. “Like I am respecting the one you made 38 years ago. I forgive you. I’m still hurt, but I don’t blame you anymore for my experiences.” With those freeing words Emma felt a brief afterglow buzz in her system, but remained somewhat frustrated with herself. She wanted the hurt to go away for both of them and thought that forgiving this moment might get them started in the right direction.

David had quietly processed the exchange and hope at something he never dreamed possible knocked loudly on the walls surrounding them as he asked. “You said it was mostly random, but are you able and willing to show us?”

“Like right now?” Emma squeaked, getting pink, not expecting that request.

“We never thought we would ever have the opportunity to see or experience you as a child and now…” He trailed off, blue eyes full.

“I can try, but I can’t really control it. I still have my adult mind, it would just be a different body
and I’m not staying that way, not on purpose anyway.” Emma was uneasy of the motive, not his, but at the anxious look overtaking Snow’s face. She looked at the Queen who eyed her back for a long moment before nodding once. Closing green eyes envisioned where she’d rather be; in the rocker being held in the warmth and safety of home.

The tingle came and went as the gasps from two mouths did leaving Emma in a mini version of her adult clothing that she had spelled, along with her whole wardrobe, to accommodate any shrinking to avoid potentially embarrassing experiences.

To say her parents were shocked was an understatement. Ga-ga was more like it and the blonde fought not to roll her eyes as the Princess reached to stroke her cheek, which she allowed for a second before pulling away memories of a slap they’d never talked about from that same hand rushed in.

“You’re beautiful and so tiny.” Reaching again to feel blonde curls.

“Don’t… Please.” Emma remembered to add that word to the end of a sharp demand. She reached for her mug of coffee which magically shifted away across the table towards Regina. A cup of sparkling water appeared instead with a striped straw. She sucked it down, mouth dry.

Snow dropped her hand and eyed the Queen with a questioning look. “I can’t believe you two kept something this big a secret for three years.”

Emma’s little finger shot up, thirst finally sated. “To be fair, we just learned about the shrinking and I’m only telling you because it will probably happen randomly at some point. If I’m at the station or in town and Regina isn’t with me I need to know I can trust you to help me by knowing what’s going on.” With a furrowed brow. “And do you really want to go there about keeping certain things a secret?” Little fists clenched briefly under the table and relaxed when she felt a familiar hand on her knee, both in comfort and warning not to go at it with Snow about the Princess’ bad habit of revealing things she shouldn’t.

“What do you mean by that Emma?” The Princess tilted her head in confusion.

“Never mind. We’re leaving.” Emma stood abruptly and bolted around the Queen towards the door.

“Not so fast.” Barely catching the quick girl with a hooked finger in a belt loop. A scowl puckered on a small face when she turned the frustrated child around by the shoulders to face the couple, “You have one more thing you need to say, I believe.” The green eyed glare she received didn’t deter Regina in the least. “Go on Emma.”

The girl pouted, but tried to get the last thing off her mind as she turned to her parents. “I kept the spell a secret because I didn’t want to hurt your feelings and I care what you think of me probably more than I should.” She looked at Regina to see if she could get away with leaving it there, but expectant eyes had her continuing. “I do care though because you’re my parents. I don’t express it very well, but I love you and I care about your happiness. It’s hard for me to show sometimes when I don’t feel that my choices are respected or when I can’t get a complete thought out about how I feel.”

Snow watched the ease with which Emma leaned back against the brunette. She longed for that feeling for herself and wondered where she had missed that opportunity with her daughter. Maybe there was still time.

“I had no idea you felt this way.”

Green mist looked up. “I tried telling you, many times and maybe now….” Hands gestured at her petite form. “You’re ready to hear me.” Shifting to Regina and silently asking if they could dismiss themselves. She ducked her head and tried growing, but the intensity of the afternoon fizzed out her effort.

Regina stood taking charge. “There is more to share on all our parts, but this is enough for today.” A finger snap summoned their coats, magically fitting the larger one on the little girl. “We all need to take a step back and settle emotions before talking again. Agreed?”

Mumbled acceptance followed from everyone and as the Queen knelt to help little fingers with buttons Snow watched them enviously. Hurt suddenly passed over her face.

Regina caught that pain, knowing exactly what seeing another woman with your child felt like and after finishing with the coat, prompted. “Say goodbye Emma.”

A casual bye was tossed in the direction of the front door as the girl tried to pull the heels of her Keeper that way, disappointed when they didn’t budge.
“Properly please.” Quietly and more firmly stated. There was a small raw part of Emma that wanted to connect with Snow, but needed permission from her not be angry, for just a moment, by hiding behind expected obedience.

Small feet slowly curved around. “Bye.” Still reluctant, but softening as Snow approached and leaned down to her level. "And thanks for hearing me out. I am going to try harder..." Unable to finish, but it was a start.

The Princess reached a hesitant hand out, but stopped when her daughter eyed it. “I’m sorry it took me this long.”

At those words Emma brought her hand up to Snow’s shoulder offering a tiny smile and a nod before following heels out to the main landing as the door closed softly behind them. At the privacy Emma fell forward burying her face in the Queen’s black pea-coat.

“That. Was. Exhausting.”

“Ready to go home?”

“Almost.” Flicking a sleepy but wanting gaze up. “Can we go by the pond first to see the ducks?” Hopeful, then dimming when she had forgotten for a moment they were not in their other life.

Regina frowned thoughtfully. “Are you ready for that? Being in public, this size, I mean?”

“I can’t grow right now. I tried in the loft.” A shrug. “But yeah, I guess.”

“We may get a lot of questions Emma, ones I’m not sure you are ready to answer.” Protective over that lack of conviction.

“So what? We can tell the truth that this is a side effect of a spell... A spell that went wonky in Storybrooke, that’s like reality TV for these people on a daily basis. It’ll be fine.” Shoving the truth of regal words under foot and she pouted at the lack of matched eagerness from her Keeper.

“Not today, Emma. We need to go home so you can process this.”

“I’ve processed enough for a lifetime. Besides it’s not like Snow can keep a secret. The whole town will know I can’t reach the high cabinets by morning.”

“While that may be true, you are clearly tired from all this and rightly so.” An affectionate hand smoothed back curls from heavy eyes.

“Pleasssse Gina. I wanna go now.” Not able to help the whine in her tone.

“Tomorrow we will, now come along.” Firm, but willing to compromise.

Emma complied trailing behind to the Benz where a car seat was conjured and she willingly buckled herself in, once again missing their other life. She always knew they had to return, but that reality hit like a bucket of ice water the last two mornings she woke up and handling that in her current state was too much. Eyes smarted. All she wanted was time at the park because she missed home, even school, her friends, and the simplicity of their daily existence. She couldn’t comprehend the bigger picture her Keeper saw at the moment, though trusting in Regina’s decision; she didn’t have to like it.

Dark eyes watched in the rear view mirror and saw the melancholy framing a small mouth. When they pulled into the driveway the child darted from the car up the walk and Regina paused preparing for Emma’s flight and fight mode. Taking a breath she followed and opened the door. The blonde slipped inside, shed winter wear and ran upstairs. A door slammed a minute later. Heels moved slowly through the house putting things away and headed up to the master suite briefly before knocking on a closed door a few minutes later.

“Go away.” That small voice was muffled through the white door.

Taking that as her cue the Queen opened the door, but stayed on the other side of the frame.

“Careful with your tone.” Chiding gently as she took in the hunched form in the rocker where her girl always went, if able, when upset in their other life. “May I come in?”
Emma nodded, but refused to look when something was set on the desk and again when the Queen came to squat down in front of the rocker. Hands were placed on either side of damp cheeks and drew her gaze up.

“I miss it, too.”

Emma broke with that red lipped revelation and sucked in a hot breath. “I wanna go back right now... Please take us back.” It was impossible, she knew, but the child emotions taking over didn’t care.

“I know baby. Come here,” Regina lifted the crying blonde and traded places on the rocker, moving in a rhythm Emma found soothing. “It’s okay to miss it and even to want to go back. We will find our own way here and a routine again.”

“How?”

Regina gave the only answer she was sure of at the moment. “By doing exactly what we are doing right now.”

Emma thought about that idea and sniffed hard. “That’s too easy. Nothing is ever that easy.”

“Well, we will help each other then and we will start at the beginning.” Lifting Emma up, she pointed to the desk. “It is time I gave you something. Bring that box over.” She waited for the girl to resettle on her lap with the box in front of them.

“Can I open it now?” There was a lift at the end in excitement.

A kiss promised hope. “Yes.”

Emma tore the lid off and froze as her eyes took in the needle work she knew well. Small fingers ran over the green and purple threads painstakingly adhered to silk. She traced the lavender buds and the sunny yellow stitches of her first name in the middle of the book cover. “You did this... for me?”

“Remember when you lost your first tooth and you asked me about preserving memories?”

“Yeah.” Recalling the exact words about having a keepsake of experiences that belonged to her and not a file filled with words from people who didn’t matter.

“This is your memory book.”

Emma opened to the first page seeing a picture of herself sleeping, tangled in blankets with a thumb stuck firmly in her mouth.

“Okay, that’s embarrassing.” But she grinned anyway and read the fancy script, able to decipher only some of Regina’s loopy cursive with her limited reading skills and turned the page.

A hand went to her mouth at the sight of her tooth in a mesh bag affixed to the page with the date and a description of the event and on it went. The first day of school, silly moments captured and woven between firsts, like her hair cut, cheek to painted cheek with the Queen at the light festival, on the plane to Boston, the family picture at Christmas, Easter, Mother’s Day, and the beach. Still there were more. Pages of memories pinned on parchment and all became real again in heart, filling them both.

“Thank you Mama.” Emma leaned her head back, catching the underside of the brunette’s chin with a kiss. “This helps.” Hands went back to the beginning once more with a request to read each description. They both took more time to take in each moment the second time around.

Longer update coming this weekend. :-)

Next Time - Emma gets a feel for what their life might be like going forward now that knowledge of her do over has been shared. In trying to find balance, her thoughts return to try and repay her Keeper for the sacrifice that was given on her behalf. Emma makes a few choices that have different outcomes than she expected and her balance is regained for the moment.
"The most scary doesn't stop the soul from thinking nor does it bring a life back or allow a child another chance to feel what it is like to be loved."

Emma-price 6 - light festival, December 20th
Chapter 5

A/N - I was able to get a lot of editing done today, so here is Saturday's post early.
My longest chapter yet (no natural break to it to me) and there is a LOT in it - feels, ups/downs, several plot questions you are sure to have, etc.
I'm also quite proud of it. Enjoy :-)
Fan art throughout and on my Tumblr, too.

Emma slapped her hand on the alarm of the swan clock and sat up realizing she’d returned to her regular size overnight and that meant being an adult on a Monday morning. She sighed and got up to check on Jasper, finger waving to the red and teal fish.

“Adulting sucks, little dude.”

The fish let a bubble surface from his mouth as if agreeing and Emma went to her dresser opting for a sports bra in case any shrinking happened that day. Becoming small with an underwire on chaffed her skin like hell, a rude discovery at bath time last night, though the cream Regina had put on her had helped heal some of it overnight.

Feet went to the closet to dress in her typical skinny jeans and a red sweater. She was about to grab her tall boots when she noticed her purple Converse tucked in the back, melting at the fact that the Queen remembered them. A wave of her hand and white sparkles stretched the shoes to fit her big feet, tying them on with a grin and she added the adjustment spell to ensure they would shrink again if she did. Emma happily trotted down stairs to breakfast and took up her usual perch at the counter, cheesy eggs and cut apples waiting on a plate to be consumed.

“Good morning. I was just about to come wake you.” Regina went to the Keurig to start a cup of coffee for the blonde, having waited to see which version would surface.

“Morning and thanks for my shoes.” Emma lifted a heel up high showing off her Converse.

“You are most welcome.” Sitting and ignoring the paper in favor of watching Emma enjoy the breakfast she’d made. “You seem hungrier than usual this morning and that is saying something.”

“I know, huh? This shrinking and growing thing takes a lot out of me.” Grinning at the Queen as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. “So are we still on for the park after work today? I want to go regardless of what size I am. Getting outside for a while will clear my head.”

“Yes, if you are sure you are alright with going public if you happen to be small.”

“Yes. Like I said yesterday the whole town knows by now. Snow would have made sure of that.”

With a nod the brunette began to eat her own breakfast. “I will work on advertising the new position at the station for an assistant and hopefully we will be able to have interviews later this week.”

“That doesn’t give me much time to think of another option we both agree on. Can it be later?”

“Alright, I’ll wait to advertise for a week.” Consenting to the time extension and fingering her gold necklace in thought. “I’ve been thinking more about your shrinking. There are times when you seem to be able to will it and others that seem to be triggered or that prevent you from changing back, like yesterday at the loft. I’m concerned with it happening while you are alone and not being there to help you.”

Emma nodded. “Me too.” Somber again at facing the day by herself.

“There is a summoning spell I’d like you to put on our necklaces, if you are agreeable. Since we both wear them every day, if you shrink and touch the pendent and think of me with you it will trigger a response in mine.”

“But you can’t poof places anymore so what good will that spell do?”

“The necklace would act as a beacon and will guide me to you, I will just have to drive or go on foot.” Hating that she did not have her full magical strength. Performing a spell of that magnitude would drain her as it had when she used magic to slow Snow’s pregnancy in their other life.
Emma didn’t know it, but she had been nauseous and weak for days after.

“I don’t like the idea of you not having your full powers. There’s got to be a way to get that back.” Pale knuckles rapped the counter in frustration.

“We will have to do some research on that, but I don’t believe getting my magic back is a possibility. The spell should have absorbed it and it is no longer there to be taken back.” She tapped the silver swan pendant and her own birthstone necklace to refocus them. “Do you remember how to do a summoning spell and how to tether it to objects?”

“Yes, I can do it.” Recalling her magic lessons from years ago, then scrunching her face. “Why can’t I just poof to you if I shrink though?”

“Because your magic as a child has proven to be unstable, so you poofing to me or me to you is out. As well, we have a rule about you using magic when you’re little until I can teach you. You will need to learn those skills again and teleporting is a complex one. It will take time, but we will work up to it.”

“It sucks that when I’m small I still can’t do stuff like I can when I’m bigger.” Thinking back to last night when they had been reading in the rocker and she couldn’t read the bigger words in the book. When the spell blended her two half’s’ fine motor skills were still the same in her child body as it had been in their other life.

“I know and we will continue to work on those skills when you are small.” Nodding as she finished her coffee. “Now, the spell if you please. It is getting late and we both need to start our day.”

Emma took hold of both necklaces and concentrated. Gold and silver began glowing milky white and warmed against their throats.

“Let’s test it to be sure. Take your pendant and think about me with you.” Regina instructed and when Emma followed her directions she felt her necklace heat up and a straight red line appeared in her vision and stopping at the swan pendant.

“Did it work?”

“Yes, well done. We are all set.”

After breakfast and reluctant goodbyes Emma poofed to work, missing the idea of her yellow bug sitting in their driveway, but they’d both agreed that until the shrinking was under control, operating a motor vehicle was out. The last thing the town needed was a six year old who couldn’t see over the steering wheel attempting to drive a car down Main Street.

The station was quiet most of the morning, but filled with self-conscious stares between her and David who kept finding excuses to come by her desk. After borrowing the third pen of the morning she’d about had it when he asked to use her stapler. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, boots on the desk as she regarded his question.

“Look, you don’t need to ask to borrow stuff if you want to talk to me.” Smiling softly. “I’m still me. That hasn’t changed.”

“Maybe not, but you are different Emma… I don’t mean that in a bad way.” He held up his hands in a pacifying gesture when the blonde frowned back. “You seem happier——”

The song melody of Mindy Gledhill’s, Anchor, interrupted their conversation and Emma gave him an apologetic look and turned away to answer her cell.

“What’s up Gina… Yep, doing great… Finally catching up on that paperwork… Yeah, I will… Love you… Bye.”

She hung up and smiled down at her phone, the screen saver flashed back to a picture of them with Henry taken ages ago. The sound of a throat clearing jerked her back to reality and she spun around to see pacific blue staring at her.

“Did you just… say…?”

’Soooooo awkward.’ Emma thought and rolled back onto her heels with a tight smile.
Turning red and rubbing the back of his neck, David suddenly found the floor very interesting. “I’m just going to take my lunch break now.”

“Good idea. Me too.”

When David left she sank into her desk chair and slowly unwrapped her lunch, an amazing looking Italian sub Regina had packed for her. She contemplated what he had overheard and if she’d be getting a freaked out call from Snow later on. Sighing she tore into her food, groaning with pleasure at the taste of spicy mustard she loved.

By late afternoon Emma had made enough of a dent in the stack of files on her desk to call it a day. David had gone on patrol after lunch and Emma was glad of the quiet to get caught up. She was starting to think that having an assistant around wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Ever since they had learned about her writing ability Regina had he been adamant about providing accommodations and tools to ensure she could reach the potential she had; in both lives. Another grateful check on the long list of gratitude the blonde had going for the Queen.

With a text that she was on her way soon she poofed home fifteen minutes later, smiling to see that Regina had beaten her there. The second she was inside the safety of white walls shoulders dropped the weight of the day, glad to be home. That feeling brought a sudden and unexpected tingle rippling through her body. Heels came her way and she threw little arms around legs in greeting.

“I just walked in.” At the questioning look she was getting. “And just shrunk like a sec ago. Don’t worry I’ll summon if I do and you’re not with me.” Nestling her cheek into a flat stomach. “I missed you.”

Regina smiled as fingers ran through loose curls. “I missed you too. How was your day?”

“Boring, but I got a lot done and you know the best part?”

“What is that, sweet one?”

“No homework!”

Laughing at the little grin shining up. “Not tonight at least, but I was serious about practicing certain skills when you are this size. We have no idea how long this side effect will last and we need to make sure you continue to make progress in certain things in case it is longer than a few weeks.” As she strongly suspected it would be.

“That’s a royal buzz kill.” Joy fading somewhat, but accepting that it was one of those things between them that wasn’t up to her. “Can we please go to the park now?”

“We may. Go get the bread from the pantry for the ducks.” Smiling as little feet dashed away, Regina slipped on her coat and scarf, grabbing Emma’s and wrapped it around the child before heading to the Mercedes.

The park was nearly empty and Emma had the entire playground to herself after they had fed the few ducks left in town before the winter cold snap hit. There were some people who stopped to stare at them, but none who approached. On their way back to the car an hour later they spotted Archie and Pongo coming their way on the path that merged with the pier. The Cricket paused with a curious yet thoughtful look on his face before Pongo jetted towards Emma, tail wagging.

“Hey, Pongo! How are ya buddy?” Emma caught the dog in a hug, scratching the Dalmatian behind his ears.

“So it’s true then.” Archie took in the little blonde grinning up at him and then the Queen who watched the exchange with her own smile. “Snow said something about a spell and side effects?” A question for the brunette.

“I’m sure she did Dr. Hopper.” Regina didn’t choose to elaborate.

“And Emma’s staying with you?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “We live together Archie. The whole town already knows that.”
“Right, sorry. I just wondered… with the spell and you being a kid…”

Emma bristled and stepped defensively in front of the Queen. “That doesn’t change where I live or who I chose to be with. I’m still an adult and I’m sick of everyone not thinking I am capable of making my own choices!” Hands resting on her shoulders held back the next biting remark.

“Tone, Emma.”

“Sorry… Look Archie, I didn’t mean to snap at you.” Giving the cricket the benefit of her doubt. “It’s just been a long few days and we just came to the park to forget about it for a while.”

“It’s alright. I didn’t mean to pry. And I hope that whatever happened to cause this works out the way you want it to.” He smiled softly, a glimmer in his eye and tipped his hat. “You two have a good evening.”

As they watched him go, Emma bent her head straight back to look up. “What did he mean by that Gina?”

“He is smarter than he lets on half the time and I think he may just be someone we can rely on, if need be.”

“If need be for what?”

“Nothing to worry your pretty little head about. How does Chinese sound for dinner?”

A toothy grin answered back.

Tuesday brought another day at the station when Emma woke up big again, though less awkward than Monday. David had apparently kept the love comment he heard Emma make to himself because the blonde didn’t get a call from Snow having a heart attack. But several text messages chimed from the Princess wanting to talk more about their last conversation interrupted her day enough that she silenced her phone.

Halfway through the day with David taking all the patrol time she had about enough with writing reports and texted the Queen that she’d be home around 2:00 and to go ahead with posting the job for the assistant at the station. That would free her up to take back over some patrolling duties and she could poof places instead of drive and ease the file work that never seemed to end. Thoughts drifted back to the issue of magic and the Queen’s lack of full power. She hated the thought of Regina feeling vulnerable, even though it was well hidden by the refined exterior.

A particular idea tickled her brain and she wondered at the possibility of it. She felt a debt she was still desperate to repay, if she could just find the right spell to do it. Thoughts of asking for help in searching, as she knew she should, were drowned by her desire to do this on her own, as a surprise in repayment. Grabbing her red leather jacket, beanie, and gloves she shoved her phone in her pocket and disappeared in white smoke.
when she’d attempted mixing a potion that when sprinkled on something broken fixed what was wrong with it came flooding back. This was after she’d blown up their stove and in her panic of trying to fix her mistake her magic wouldn’t work right. Instead of telling the Queen, she’d taken a trip to the vault and ended up doing the same thing to the caldron. That hadn’t gone over so well for her. But she’d learned a valuable lesson she wouldn’t trade for not being able to sit; that she could always ask Regina for help and that request would be willingly honored without a second thought.

Pausing at the door, she brushed her finger tips across the metal flower work, knowing she’d be in some trouble if caught inside unaccompanied, but the idea of gifting the Queen with an answer to restoring the sacrifice made on her behalf outweighed that thought. The tingle came then and the blonde slammed her memories of their other life shut, fighting to stay in her adult body to complete the task she came to do.

A green eye popped open a moment later and she sighed, staring at her little feet.

‘Great. Just great.’

Closing them again she tried her hardest to grow.

Nothing.

“Rats!”

A hand reached for her swan pendent to summon Regina, but hesitated and dropped. She was already in trouble by being at the vault without the Queen. Summoning could wait and maybe presenting her findings would smooth over any mess she’d be in. Maybe.

‘Might as well make it worth it by looking for what I came for.’

That little rash voice made her stomach roll, but she found she had an increase in impulsivity that being small magnified. She removed a loose brick at the base of the small building where a hidden key was still resting, one of the old skeleton ones belonging to the Queen that Henry had swiped and stored here when he was ten.

The heavy stone coffin in the middle of the room presented another challenge entirely and biting her lip that she was about to break another rule, she used both hands to try and wave it aside. Stomping a foot when nothing happened, she recalled Regina’s voice telling her magic was emotion and concentrating used her frustration to magically nudge the coffin enough that she could squeeze down the opening.

Emma made her way into the main chamber, candles lighting automatically as she went, where the old books were kept and decided to start with the one used for their very spell. Setting her phone on the work table, she lost herself in the old pages, struggling to read more than half of what was there, but used the pictures and looked instead for key words like lost, powers, regain, and take back. At one point she was squinting at a page and realized she was having a hard time seeing it. Twilight seeped through the tiny green glass windows lining the back wall near the ceiling.

A glance at her phone showed the time to be nearing 5 pm and her gut tightened as the screen flashed with three missed calls from Regina, one from David and eighteen texts from Snow.

‘I am so dead. Like dig my own grave dead.’ Panic took over her thoughts as little fingers found the return call button, chewing her lip as a strained voice answered.

“Emma—Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I lost track of time.” Emma slapped her hand to a forehead at the high pitch her voice took. There was no hiding that she was in kid form.

A long pause and upon hearing the small voice, a clipped response came. “Where are you?”

Wincing at what she was about to say, “At the vault.”

“Stay right there. I mean it Emma. You are not to move. I’m on my way.”

Gulping she mumbled, “Yes Ma’am,” ending the call with a foot stomp. “Shi—shoot!”
She ripped her beanie off in frustration and stomped on it. With a mournful look at spell book, she trudged up the stairs and outside to her doom. Sitting on the steps of the mausoleum, she shredded leaves nervously as she waited. A few minutes passed before she spotted David’s truck along the road and it swerved suddenly her way. She groaned into her hands as the man exited, hurrying towards her.

"Are you okay?" He slowed his approach as narrowed green eyes took him in.

"I’m fine. Gina’s on her way to get me."

David pulled out his phone, seeing a text from the Mayor that she’d heard from Emma. With a sigh he sank onto the step next to his daughter, being sure to give her the space she seemed to need.

“You look kind of bummed at that idea.” Wondering why Emma would be upset with the obvious affection between the two women he’d observed yesterday and come to think of it for a while now.

“I’m not really, but she’s gonna be kinda irritated I was here without her.” Rubbing her hands nervously over her jeans, surprised she was sharing with him at all. “We have an agreement that I’m supposed to summon her if I shrink and I didn’t because I was trying to figure something out and that just blew up in my face when I forgot about the time.”

The man nodded, but still puzzled over that response. “That happens to everyone sometimes. Just tell her that.”

Purple converse ground a pebble into the dirt, “It doesn’t work like that for us. I don’t expect you to get that and I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Alright. Is it okay if I wait with you then?”

Emma shrugged, not agreeing or disagreeing, but silently grateful for the company. A few minutes later the Benz rolled up and the girl felt her heart sink at the obvious worry gracing the regal features. She knew that look and that her actions had caused pain instead of the surprise her failed goal of the day had been. The child stood and was wrapped up in strong arms, apples and vanilla filling her nose for a moment before she was set on her feet. A swift hand made firm contact once with the seat of her jeans, echoing around them.

Amid David shouting the Queen’s name and Emma’s plea to him that all was okay, the brunette began to scold the girl she was eye level with.

“You are not allowed in there by yourself.” A glance at the open door and the moved coffin said it all. “Using magic when you’re small and not summoning me when you shrank takes the cake on irresponsible behavior. You know better don’t you?”

“Yeah, but…”

“I was expecting you by two o’clock and when you didn’t answer my calls I was worried something had happened, especially with your random shrinking. I had no idea where you were for three hours Emma. Many people were put on alert looking for you and we agreed that you would summon me to avoid this exact situation we are in.”

“Oh.” Emma rolled her lips inward at the reminder that others were always affected by her choices and tried to look away, but her chin was caught.

Brows rose as the Queen returned to her full height. “Oh? That is all you have to say for your misbehavior? Just wait until I get you home.” Taking the girl’s hand and with a wave at the vault the coffin slid back into place and the door closed, re-locking.

They could feel the heat of David’s eyes watching their exchange and that’s when reality hit for both of them that they were not in their other life. Regina gave the man a brief nod in acknowledgement, finally taking in the fullness of fact that he was there. She sighed, knowing wheels were spinning in that Shepherd head, but getting Emma home and getting to the why behind the girl’s actions took priority over his gaping mouth.
Emma gave a halfhearted wave as she was led to the car and sat passively as Regina buckled her in, giving into the Queen’s need to make sure she was safe. Her embarrassment over the public swat never came as it used to on the rare occasion she’d been corrected in front of anyone. Guilt sank that bubble like a rock.

Once at mansion, Emma quietly put her things away as the brunette did the same and started to go towards the stairs. 

“Do not even entertain the idea of escaping to your room.”

The girl’s shoulders slumped as she turned around. “I was just going to…” At the stern expression Emma stopped.

“You are going to your corner in the study. Six minutes to think about your actions and then we will be having a lengthy conversation about the choices you made today.”

Emma was quick to obey that tone, leaving the room and missing the knock on the front door.

Shaking her head at the interruption, Regina opened the door and came face to face with a not so Charming couple. Snow aimed an arrow at her chest from the safety of the walkway as David tried to pacify his irate wife on the porch nearby. Rolling her eyes at the primitive weapon she stepped out, crossed her arms scoffing.

“Put the toy away Snow.”

“David told me what you did.” Snow’s lip curled, pulling the arrow back farther. “Where is our daughter?”

“Inside our home thinking about her actions.”

Without missing a beat, the Queen snapped her fingers. The arrow disappeared from the quiver along with all the remaining ones in the tube on Snow’s shoulder. Snow’s cold glare came fast. Unable to help herself at the very déjà vu moment Regina decided to point a very different kind of arrow of her own, hoping to trigger a memory of many years past for the Princess.

“I recall teaching you not to point or stare at people. It’s quite rude.” And was pleased it had the desired effect of a lowered bow complete with full recognition.

“Stop it both of you.” David stepped between them.

Moving her eyes to the gallant voice, “No, you don’t get to play hero David. You knocked on our door and she pointed a weapon at me. You both need to wrap your heads around the fact that I am not a villain anymore.” Then with some hurt at what he seemed to be ignoring. “You know I put Emma’s safety first. Or have you forgotten all we’ve been through and what it nearly cost when I didn’t step in.”

As the memory of Emma bleeding on a stretcher flashed through his brain, one his wife didn’t share, David took a full step back trying to recover at that reminder. “We just want to see that
she’s is okay. She seemed upset with your exchange at the vault and—"

Snow interrupted. “You hit our daughter.”

‘Not this again.’ Regina thought lips pursed and placed a hand on her hip, recalling a similar conversation with the Princess on this very porch in their other life. There was a big difference between that word and what she and Emma consented to engage in. That phrase coming from Snow, who had hit Emma, was a loaded one. She turned from the couple to the open door and called to Emma. There was no way these two would give them peace until they saw the Savior.

The little blonde came promptly. ‘That was the fastest time out I ever…’ She trailed off and came to stand next to heels as two pale faces stared at her. Emma shivered at the wind starting to pick up around them as it registered what must have happened. ‘I know what you saw at the grave yard looked one way, but it is so not what you are thinking—”

“I don’t know what this is and you,” Snow’s eyes flicked to Regina, then snapped back to her daughter as hands went up. “Is this some kind of fetish you have?”

Red to the roots of her blonde hair Emma covered her face, thoroughly embarrassed at the prospect of this conversation. She leaned against Regina, seeking the comfort she knew had her back.

“Snow, you are out of line. You’ve seen that Emma is, indeed, alright and this is not the time or place for this conversation, which frankly is none of your business.” Regina’s royal tone carried a definite end to their meeting.

Emma took a breath and dropped her hands to show a unified front. “We are not going to do this right now. I’m willing to explain some of it to you, another time, but this is what I mean by respecting my choices. And no this is not what you said and even if it was, there’s nothing wrong with it.” Looking up at the Queen, then back to Snow. “I’m safe with Regina, like really, really safe. This is where I want to be. It’s not the spell or a side effect. I’m a consenting adult here.” Squirming. “I just don’t look like it right now.”

The Princess softened slightly. “Emma she is—”

“She is the person I choose to be with. Go now. Please… I’ll call you later.”

Faltering and taking a step back Snow glared at the Queen. “We are not done yet.”

“Yeah you are.” Emma crossed her arms.

As his wife stalked back to the waiting truck David stalled, seemingly wanting to say something else. He eyed his daughter and lifted his brows in askance at the Queen.

Regina got the hint and turned the irritated child around. “Go wait for me in the study. I’ll be right in.”

“But…” Green eyes trailed over that man that was her father, not wanting to leave the Queen to fight her battle.

“It’s alright. He just wants to speak with me for a moment.”

Emma nodded and gave David a tight smile.

Regina cracked the door behind the blonde and took in the quiet man. “I owe you a thank you for keeping her safe until I could get to her and perhaps some insight for the shock you felt at the grave yard that caused all of this.” Eyes found a thoughtful blue. “Ten months have passed for us in a moment that it took for you to blink and our relationship is something that is constantly evolving. I am not going to speak for Emma, but know that her happiness in addition to her safety have been my top priorities for the last several years, Henry aside and I will not apologize for how we operate to make it easy for you or Snow.”

David processed those words. After everything they had all been through, Regina had more than earned his respect and he wondered at his blind eye the last few days. He nodded, showing his hands in his pockets. “You know something? She reminds me of me at that age, always charging into things, trying to save the world, defending people she loves.”

“She does that well.”
“My mother would have done what you did at the vault today and she was the best thing in my life until I met Snow or my children.”

“And she is the best thing in mine, our son included.”

“I think I am starting to understand this… And I don’t get it all the way, but I’m starting to see what this may do for her. And I’m sorry for earlier. I haven’t forgotten and Snow… She never saw the way Emma came in to the hospital and she just isn’t there yet, it’s different for her.”

Remembering he’d been on patrol that night and the state he had found them in. Red lips parted and eyes misted briefly at that willing bridge, hope for Emma to have at least one willing ear from the couple, as a start. Grateful too that he seemed to remember the promise she’d made him.

Catching the unreadable look he was getting, he needed to hear the answer he thought was there. “Do you love her?”

“Beyond words.” Voice carried a love mixed in layers of beautiful complexity that left no room for her affection to be questioned further.

David dropped his chin and full of his own grateful stew, nodded and left them to their evening.

Regina watched him go and waited until the truck drove away until she went back inside, closing the door and resting her head against it. Maybe one of the idiots wasn’t such an idiot after all, that thought kind in meaning. With a sigh she pulled away from the support of the door and headed into the study where Emma was sitting on the couch, hugging a pillow. Sinking down near the child, the Queen waited for the question she knew would come.

“What did he tell you?”

“That he is beginning to understand what our relationship may do for you and he thanked me, for a few things.”

Swallowing that double meaning. “That’s a lot for him to say.” Emma acknowledged that gift.

“It is.”

“I messed up big time, huh?”

“Mess up are not the words I would use to describe your behavior, but we will get to that in a bit. Let’s begin with why you didn’t answer my calls.” Taking the pillow Emma was using as a shield and setting it aside so nothing was between them.

“I didn’t hear it. My ringer was off cause Snow was blowing up my phone.”

“There is a setting to mute individual calls or messages. I expect you to keep the volume on otherwise, at least until you have a better handle on your shrinking.”

Emma licked her lips needing to admit something. “I can’t grow right now. I tried while you were on the porch with David. Since I decided to go to the vault when I was big does that mean we have to wait until I grow again to deal with this?”

A pause. “How do you feel about the idea of waiting?”

Ignoring the question, the girl continued. “But then there’s the fact that I didn’t tell you I shrunk when I was small and I used magic then too.”

Thoughtful at the blonde’s predicament and obvious need for a decision, she responded with the unexpected. “I’ll leave that choice up to you.”

Emma grabbed the brunette’s hands in a plea. “But I don’t want to decide that. Please Gina!”

“Yet, you made plenty of decisions without me today, ones you know better than to make regardless of what size you are, and so you will need to choose Emma. Either way your
consequence from me will be the same."

Emma pouted, already knowing that last bit, but hearing it from red lips made it real.

"I expect your decision when we are finished our talk, until then there is the issue of using magic when you are small a few times today."

Green eyes narrowed in confusion. "A few times? I used it once for the coffin."

"Then how did you get into the vault?" Curious at how Emma accomplished that feat without it and her brows rose in shock as the child reached into a jean pocket and produced an old skeleton key. "Where did you get that?"

"Henry hid one when he was ten, behind a loose brick of the mausoleum. I just remembered him showing me once and..." A shrug and she promptly handed over the key to the expectant hand. "So am I only in trouble for the magic and not the key or other stuff?" Hopeful to a fault.

Regina vanished the key to the safety of her lock box. "You are in trouble with me for a few reasons. I understand not having the volume up on your phone was unintentional and that is not something you have done before so you are not for that. Though, there is going to the vault without me and not summoning me when you shrank. Two fingers shot up beginning to count. "Using magic while small and lastly, not communicating where you were for three hours when I expected you home at a certain time, a time you set. Though, I realize that last one was also unintentional, it still could have been helped and is one we have talked about before."

Emma swallowed hard at three damn fingers for what had been said before her lateness, each a big enough deal on their own without being on the same hand. "I didn’t mean to though, not on everything."

A dark head nodded once while asking her final question. "Why were you at my vault to begin with?"

"I was researching a way to get your magic back, or trying to. I wanted to find a spell that would and show you as a surprise, as a way to pay you back for everything."

"Come here." Regina patted her lap and settled Emma into her arms so they could still see each other. "You don’t owe me anything. We have talked about this before and I have made that clear. I appreciate your sweet thought and we will look into that idea, but together. Alright?"

"Yes Mama." Emma dropped her head at how fluidly she exchanged the Queen’s name for that endearment when she was this size, staring at her hands. Fingers caught a little chin quickly. "You asked me if you messed up earlier. My answer is no, you have been more than just non compliant today. Being willfully disobedient is something completely different than acting out of fear or without thought. And that is the reason I am upset with your choices."

The girl bit her lip as those fingers left. "So am I like in drunk staircase night kind of trouble or blow up the stove slash caldron trouble?" Asking to try and gauge the level of hot mess she was in due to her actions, the stove and caldron being up there on the scale, though not at the top. "Definitely blowing up my stove and caldron trouble, though a bit more for being willful."

Wincing. "But isn’t it more like drunk staircase trouble cause..." Dropping her lack of reason as a dark brow rose. "I’m just going to put myself back in the corner now."

"That is probably in your best interest, but before you do I need a decision from you on if you would like to wait until you grow for your consequence as this concludes our talk."

"I don’t wanna decide." Arms crossed and a heel kicked the sofa in a pout.

"I know and having to decide is part of your consequence." She kissed a stubborn cheek. "Of course you may use our agreed upon word at any time, however until then there is not a question about which one of us is in charge in this relationship, dear heart." Reminding Emma that she always had a choice.

"I don’t think I should have the choice of our word when I’m small." There she said it, her decision and what she needed from the Queen.
A long pause. “Explain that please.”

“When I’m little, you’re Mama and it shouldn’t be my choice. It wasn’t in our other life and I know it was only because we negotiated that ahead of time cause of the memory thing, but... I need that consistency here. Besides it’s just different when I’m big.”

“We will revisit that thought further another time.” Accepting the girl’s decision, but sensing there was more there to uncover. “For now you need to finish your original timeout.” She stood the child up and sent her towards the corner with a soft pat, a silent agreement to give Emma what she needed.

The girl relaxed at that willing answer and stood quietly where she was sent, grateful for a chance to process their conversation. She hadn’t always been so willing and there had been plenty of times in the past, in this life and their other one, where she’d fought what became termed a chance to reflect. Through experience Emma had grown to accept the need she had for this requirement of her Keepers, one she didn’t know she even had, but the Queen assured was there.

In the beginning, she didn’t understand it and said such with plenty of head butting, even when it had been explained, but Regina confirmed she would in time. Now, timeouts served as a moment to take personal inventory, clean up thoughts inside, and prepare to take action to change behavior. For Emma, being still and mindful of her thoughts wasn’t something that came naturally. Through experience Emma had grown to accept the need she had for this requirement of her Keepers, one she didn’t know she even had, but the Queen assured was there.

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It amazed Emma how still her Keeper could be at times. While Regina had intensity in everything she did, that also applied to the times she was simply deep in thought, still in body, almost appearing not to breathe. Sometimes the stillness would startle Emma and she learned early on not to interrupt those quiet times of thoughts. Most occurred at night, after a stressful day or a very emotional one; Regina would retreat to her bedroom or study for a short pocket of time to just think. Asking why that was so when they began living together had caused the brunette to explain it was a learned behavior from that past that helped her process emotions without anyone knowing what she was feeling. A skill that had helped her once rule an empire, battle darkness, learn to love, and had saved her life because no matter who was watching or in some cases judging, it ensured her private thoughts. With Emma she was learning not to keep her emotions so tightly controlled or hidden.

Emma’s thoughts returned to her current predicament and she confirmed why she was facing the wall and how not to get here again. That completed her reflection time and she was called back over to the sofa. Her jean snap was undone and denim drawn down her short legs. She was guided across a firm lap, feeling the Queen’s right knee raise under her stomach, forcing her bottom up.

“Why have you earned this reminder Emma?” Regina wrapped an arm securely around that small waist.

A blonde head tried to hide in a pillow, but turned her face to reply as was expected. “I did stuff I knew better than to do on purpose like magic, going to the vault, and not summoning you.”

“Yes, and what is that called?”

The wait was torture and Emma couldn’t help the whine. “Maaammmma.”

“Try once more.” A hand rested where it would soon teach.

“Being willfully disobedient.”

“And that is something I will not allow from you.”

Redirection followed, at a measured strength and pace suitable for the little body over her lap. Tears and wiggles started from her charge immediately and there was a pause halfway offered as reprieve, though brief. Mind certain a tough lesson was needed to ensure the misbehavior did not become a pattern as the Savior was prone to do when past consequences hadn’t been thoroughly absorbed.

Emma let go and bawled. Emotions magnified in her small form and more still as the usual dozen she expected became fifteen; one in firm addition, she was sure, for each willful display that day. With the sting of skin and heat from crying came the cleansing of her faults and forgiveness in arms she trusted to always be there to hold her after.

And those arms did for a long time once she was sat up as she gave herself over fully to her Keeper’s care; that was the point after all, letting go of the walls she didn’t need any more. Amid
apologies, kisses, and soothing reassurances Emma vowed to make right her choices of the day
and with the Queen’s help and permission, find a way to restore the power sacrificed on her behalf
and maybe even the memories of true love lost.

Anchor Lyrics-

When all the world is spinning 'round
Like a red balloon way up in the clouds
And my feet will not stay on the ground
You anchor me back down

I am nearly world renowned
As a restless soul who always skips town
But I look for you to come around
And anchor me back down

There are those who think that I'm strange
They would box me up and tell me to change
But you hold me close and softly say
That you wouldn't have me any other way

When people pin me as a clown
You behave as though I'm wearing a crown
When I'm lost, I feel so very found
When you anchor me back down

There are those who think that I'm strange
They would box me up and tell me to change
But you hold me close and softly say
That you wouldn't have me any other way

When all the world is spinning 'round
Like a red balloon way up in the clouds
And my feet will not stay on the ground
You anchor me back down

Songwriters: Mindy Patrice Gledhill
Anchor lyrics © Blue Morph Music

A/N - I'd appreciate your thoughts or questions. Have a wonderful weekend!
Next time - A shorter chapter. An appearance by Granny and Ruby gives Emma some
confidence. Emma and Regina learn who wrote the spell. The Queen begins to piece together the
puzzle of the spell's price.
Emma didn’t grow the rest of that evening, or by the next morning, sleep that somehow seemed to help reset her height did not this time. She stared at the ceiling of the lavender room with a smile as sunlight danced through the crack of her drapes. Sighing in relief that she wouldn’t have to face work at the station or a chance encounter with Snow who usually had lunch with him on Wednesdays, knowing Regina would not entertain the idea of her playing Sheriff at all this size.

Sitting up with more joy than she’d felt since returning home she flung off the covers and quickly made up her bed, folding her baby blanket to put at the foot. With a smile to Jasper and Stitchy in arms, she went to find the Queen who was still in the master suite sitting on the vanity bench getting ready for the day. Their eyes met in the mirror as a gold earring was fastened and arms opened in greeting. Emma dove into them, enjoying the morning cuddle she had come to miss.

“How are you this morning, sweet one?”

“Good, I’m glad I woke up small cause that means I get to be with you today, huh?” After her adventure at the mausoleum yesterday she had no desire to stray far.

“It does, and we will have to call in your absence to the station after breakfast. There are some of your clothes this size on the right side of your dresser.” There were now after a wrist flick. “Go get ready and when you come back I’ll do your hair.”

“Okay Mama.” Emma grinned when that title brightened that regal face and left to do as she was bid.

Regina finished the final touches on her own hair and thought about what the day would bring. Each one since they were home had been harder than the one before in some ways and easier in others. Emma needed consistency and a routine to thrive which was easier here when the adult was present and in their other life school had helped to provide that. She wondered if that was somehow an option when Emma had little days but was not sure how, if at all, that could work. For now it wouldn’t, there were too many variables outside of their control. Maybe joining a class here instead would help? One Emma could attend no matter what size she was. She made a mental note to check around for options.

How would the town respond to those ideas and would the Savior be ridiculed or welcomed for something she couldn’t help? Archie had seemed accepting, but what about the rest of the town? The Queen decided to test that idea, if the girl was keen by going to the diner for lunch, willing to bet money that both Ruby and Granny would be open to the child Emma was today. Though, her secretary Ashley who had taken the job a few months ago would be the first test upon their arrival at Town Hall.

Little feet returned with a hairbrush and rubber bands, asking for twin braids. “Can we have waffles for breakfast?”

“We may and while I’m cooking I’d like you to pack a bag with a few things you would like to do today.” Fingers quickly finished one braid, tying it off just past the nape of Emma’s neck and tilted the blonde head left for the other.

Emma tugged at her green sweater. “I can do that, but….” Now quiet at the reality of the day before her. Shoulders were turned around when the twin plait was tied off.

“What is the matter?”

“What if people make fun of me or don’t understand?”

“Then we will help them understand. Regardless I will not allow anyone to hurt you and I have a feeling many people will be accepting like Archie was the other day. Speaking of which, how do you feel about the idea of lunch at Granny’s?”
Teeth nibbled a pink lip. “Maybe, yeah… if there’s ice cream, too?” Little brows wiggled up and down.

“A scoop yes, after your meal.”

“Sweet!” Emma bounced and ran off to her room to pack.

Breakfast was a quick affair which Emma inhaled in her happiness. The little blonde looked out the window as they drove to Town Hall and traced her finger against the frost on them that brought the promise of snow to the little town soon. When they walked hand in hand to the main building the custodian stared, but one look from the Queen had him doing a Fantasia version of sweeping much faster than should be humanly possible. Upon entering the Mayor’s foyer leading to the office Ashley looked up over the top of her computer and stood to get a better look at the now pint size Savior.

Emma waved shyly and waited on edge for her friend’s reaction.

“Wow, Emma… just wow.”

Green eyes scrunched. “Crazy, huh?”

The former blonde maid shook her head. “I heard you were shrinking and growing from some spell, but I didn’t expect to see you here like this.”

“Gina’s taking care of me. I’m too small to drive around patrolling or to go around kicking butt to fight crime so….” Shrugs.

Ashley nodded towards her boss, a woman she no longer feared, but respected for the friendship she knew the two before her shared. “That’s a great thing you are doing Regina. Let me know if you ladies need anything today.”

Emma remembered to breathe and followed the Queen into the office, stopping at the sofa to empty her backpack. “That was easier than I thought.”

“I had a feeling it would be.” Regina set her purse on the desk and watched as Emma opened a coloring book. “You may enjoy that for an hour and then I want you to work on a few things for me.”

“What things?” Shoulders dropped and eyes rolled knowingly.

Purple smoke swirled on the coffee table leaving a neat stack of papers with Emma’s pencil and grip.

“But I’m not in school and this is supposed to be a fun day!” Falling back on the sofa after eyeing the reading and writing sheets, Emma groaned.

“It will take you a few hours, tops. We will space it out throughout the day and you will have plenty of time for fun in between. You need the practice and you are not in school, which is why it is not negotiable. I will let you know when an hour is up.” Setting a timer on her phone and settled into her own work for the day.

The girl pouted for a while, wasting ten minutes over the idea, but eventually the urge to play took over and Emma lost herself in the pages of her coloring book. She took to the idea of the reading assignment with plenty of coaxing and finished the story questions without issue. Writing wasn’t as bad as she remembered it to be, especially with her special pencil. She was rewarded with praise and a hug upon completion that brought a familiar joy to her heart.

Later when they walked into the diner for lunch Emma had completely forgotten the worries of the morning about people accepting her until all eyes turned on them. The room became smaller and Emma lost herself in the pages of her coloring book. She took to the idea of the reading assignment with plenty of coaxing and finished the story questions without issue. Writing wasn’t as bad as she remembered it to be, especially with her special pencil. She was rewarded with praise and a hug upon completion that brought a familiar joy to her heart.

“At first you looky-loos get back to stuffing your faces and leave the Savior and Mayor in peace. There’s plenty of fresh pie for your open mouths.” Eugenia made a beeline for them and ushered them into their usual booth.

“Thanks Granny.” Emma whispered and accepted the menu offered.
“I’d always wondered what you looked like at this age. No one will bother you on my watch.”
Glasses dipped down a nose and cracked a smile at the Mayor’s grateful look. “Ruby will be right over to get your order.”

Emma brightened considerably after that and smiled up at the she wolf that came to kneel near the booth.

“Hey Regina and Swan, or should I say little swan, how are ya?” That wolfish grin was a sight for sore eyes.

“I’m good, just glad that no one is staring anymore.”

A nose wrinkled under big eyes. “Bet you’ve been getting that a lot lately.”

Emma blew out a hot breath. “A Polaroid lasts longer. I’m waaaayyy over it.”

“What can I get for you two today?” Eyes turned to the Mayor, having caught Emma’s glance that way.

“A grilled cheese and side of coleslaw for Emma. I’ll have my usual salad.” A regal hand gave menus back, eyeing the folded color mat in the waitress’ apron and flicked her eyes toward the child.

Taking the hint. “Coming right up. Hey Swan, do you want one of these?” Ruby tugged the sheet out with a crayon pack. Seeing the girl’s want mixed with hesitation she switched tactics. “I need the room in my apron for my order pad, so you’d be doing me a favor.”

“Sure, you can leave them here, if you want to.” The tone was nonchalant, but little hands snatched up the colorful wax and folded page the second they hit the table.

“Thanks for helping me out. I’ll be right back with your order.”

Regina folded her hands under chin, resting her elbows on the table and watched Emma happily complete the word search on the mat, red crayon circling with confidence. Three more people, now four with Archie on their side. Maybe it wasn’t about sides at all, but about being open minded. She hoped that was enough for their little family to sustain a state of normalcy, their sense of it anyway in their crazy lives, for Emma.

When their food arrived, Emma’s thoughts turned to the one person they both shared as her sandwich was quartered before being set in her place. “Do you think Henry will be as understanding?”

“We raised him to be and in a town full of fairy tale character’s I’d say he is about as open minded as you get. You cannot help what is happening anymore than you can breathing. He will understand that.” Regina began to pick at her salad.

“Can we FaceTime him and Paige like we used to, but when I’m big again so we can tell them?” Wanting the familiarity of her adult form to have this conversation with their son.

“Of course.” A tight smile.

“What’s wrong?”

“I miss him. It feels longer than a week since we have seen him at the wedding.”

“We raised him to be and in a town full of fairy tale character’s I’d say he is about as open minded as you get. You cannot help what is happening anymore than you can breathing. He will understand that.” Regina began to pick at her salad.

“Can we FaceTime him and Paige like we used to, but when I’m big again so we can tell them?” Wanting the familiarity of her adult form to have this conversation with their son.

“Of course.” A tight smile.

“What’s wrong?”

“I miss him. It feels longer than a week since we have seen him at the wedding.”

“Technically it’s been longer than a week, much longer.” A crayon dropped and an open hand reached palm up across the table, offering a smile of her own when the Queen took it and squeezed gently in return.

A familiar tapping came towards their table and they both looked up as a cane paused. “Well, well dearies, isn’t this a pretty picture.”

“Hello Rumple. To what do we owe the pleasure?” Regina sat back unable to help the mistrust seeping into her veins and kept a hold of the small hand.
His brows rose and chin lifted. “I heard about a spell with a side effect that went awry.”

Green eyes rolled. “You and the whole town have been enlightened by Snow’s tale. So say what you gotta say about magic having a price and blah, blah, blah, and move on.”

“Emma.” A small rebuke and not for the usual reason.


A gloved finger wagged in front of a little nose. “Careful dearie, your Keeper has a point.”

Both sets of eyes drilled into the Imp with wonder. Regina nearly swallowed her tongue and jaw set as the knock against the dark door she kept a dead bolt on pushed to open when his finger came too close.

Pink lips parted in shock. “H-how did you know that’s what she is?”

A tightly controlled and rusty laugh in place of a giggle came from the man as he leaned in closer so only they could hear. All too aware of how a royal hand tightened on a small one. “I know because I wrote the spell.”

He stumbled back as a little arm engulfed his neck unexpectedly, tickling something human in him he thought he had lost and had until he met his Belle and had again, nearly two years ago, when that relationship had been threatened. Very carefully, and for the briefest moment, he ran a hand lightly at the end of a braid. Then stiffened as he locked eyes with the Queen, who was unreadable to anyone else at that moment.

Almost.

He pulled back, making sure to keep his hands visible to brown eyes. Now was not the time for the talk he knew they would soon have. Patient as she was, he had all the time in the world, along with a few other things.

Emma felt tears she didn’t fully understand roll, but she knew what grateful felt like and this was it.

“Thank you.” A whisper was all the girl could manage as she sat back in the booth. “I know you didn’t intend it for me, but that spell changed my life.”

“As spells are wrought to do.” The man mysteriously confirmed. “Especially when they are mine. A piece of advice; sentiment is consequential, be careful of the use of yours.” With an appraising nod to the Queen and one to the little Savior he continued on to the far end of the diner where Belle waited for him in a booth.

“What’s he mean by that?” Emma watched him go, confusion clouding her face.

Regina loosened her grip on a small hand as he stalked away. “I am not sure, but I will find out.”

“Not in this case, no.” Lips set in a firm line. “At least when you are this size and untrained in your powers.” Shaking her head as her thoughts raced. “I don’t want you anywhere near him without me.”

Confusion returned. “But he is the reason we had that spell to begin with.”

“Yeah… but, did you know it was his spell?”

“No, I did not.” Russet eyes searched green. “Does it change the significance of your experience because he wrote it?” An inkling of doubt crept into her mind, as it always did when the Imp was involved with anything. Despite the man’s oiled appearance of sincerity to little eyes, he knew
something else he wasn’t letting on as always and that left her with unease.

“I thought it might for a second, but no. I don’t think so.” Emma moved from her side of the booth and plopped down next to the Queen. “I don’t care where it came from, it brought us together this way and I wouldn’t trade that for the world.”

And neither would Regina and a part of her was grateful to the Imp for that, but something wasn’t right. She thought more about Rumple’s words as Emma rested against her shoulder, little fingers stealing bites of feta from her salad. Knowledge that the Imp was behind the spell’s existence was significant. Regina quickly went through the order of events in her mind since discovering the spell’s existence and when she first began to craft it in regards to things that were happening at the time in Storybrooke. Something important was hiding there, she’d bet on it with certainty. Questions came next. If the price paid for casting it was set by him, why the price of magic and memories of true love? And did that mean he was the one who collected the debt?

And if so, what did he do with it?

It took another day to pass before Emma awoke her adult size again Friday morning. They had used the time she was small to start dabbling in beginners magic, which frustrated Emma to no end when her little fingers wouldn’t cooperate, but she made progress under the Queen’s patient explanations and examples. The morning she came downstairs an adult they decided to set up a time to call Henry that same evening.

The day at the station went quickly and there were even some interviews for the assistant position lined up for that afternoon at Town Hall where Emma poofed after work. David, as deputy, was invited to be in on the interviews. Things were still strained between them, but much less so since the meeting on the porch. As the three of them settled around the table in the conference room off of the Mayor’s main office, Emma noted the return of respect with which David greeted Regina. When he settled into the chair next to hers, she softened more towards him after that fact.

He was trying and that meant the world to her.

There were a few young applicants who wanted a foot in the door at the station and one in particular, a former crew member on Captain Hook’s ship that reminded Emma of Graham. He had a sweet scruffy earnestness that landed him the job. As the Mayor went over the final parts of the hiring process with Will Decker the blonde’s mind wandered to their pending conversation with Henry and as her mind began to worry the now familiar tingle swept over her body. She fought it and lost. Again.

With a sigh she turned to the Mayor and the new eyes of her employee who seemed thoughtful, but definitely shocked by the now little blonde with a sheriff badge on the pocket of denim jeans.

Will scratched his chin, having already known about Sheriff Swan’s recent debacle. “So if this happens at the station are you still my boss? Or…” Pointing at David. “Is it him?”

Emma bristled, face reddening. “Listen puppy, I am still the Sheriff.” Little fingers lifted the badge in proof, looking more like a disgruntled child playing dress up.

David decided to break the tension by showing their new team member out the door while he was still breathing, with instructions to meet them the next morning bright and early to start his shift. When David returned to the room Emma had stood and was pacing quickly with the Mayor looking on.

“Where did he get off asking that?” Blonde curls flew as she whipped around, finally seeing David sit back down.

Regina caught hot little eyes and gently opened the door to a conversation they all needed to have.

“Emma he has a point.”

“What point, Gina?” Arms crossing, defensive.

“I know you do not like idea of sharing your responsibilities as Sheriff and I recognize what a big step it is for you to accept an assistant, but with our current reality being that half the time you are small that may be something we need to consider—”

“Don’t patronize me… please” Added when a brow rose at her less than respectful tone.

“I am doing nothing of the kind. I am simply concerned and with good reason.”
“Regina is right.” David interjected, wanted or not, he had the same worry at the moment.

Emma’s eyes narrowed, still hurt over what she took as an implied suggestion that she couldn’t do her job. “Whose side are you on? One open conversation with Regina doesn’t give you the right to step into our relationship.”

“I’m not trying to. I’m worried about you and Will does have a good point. When you are… this way, you are unable to act as the law of this town.” He tried to be gentle, but wasn’t sure how his words were taken when misty meadows met his eyes.

Green cracked further and found the Queen’s. “This is not my choice, huh?” Slowly making her way over to open arms, accepting the hug.

“I do not think it is about anyone’s choice, just a fact we need to work with, baby.” Regina whispered the affection and felt the child relax.

Emma processed that and let go, stepping back towards David. With great reluctance she fingered her badge and went to unhook it from her belt. Her hand was caught, startling her and stopped the motion.

“That’s yours and that won’t ever change.” David knew what that badge meant to his daughter and he would never accept it from her.

“So what does change then?” As his meaning washed through, she looked between the adults.

Regina offered the only practical solution. “When you are small David will take over your responsibilities and Will can step up as deputy, once he is trained. When you are big we operate per usual. Does that sound alright?”

“I guess. Yeah.” Surprised by the lack of fight in her at the suggestion and with her acceptance the tingle returned and she grew into an adult again.

David’s eyes widened briefly at the shift and he smiled seeing his daughter’s relief after the fact. “I should get going.” He stood and turned to the door. “It is taco night and I have to pick Neal up from basketball.”

“Wait.” Emma bit her lip as her feet refused to move, but offered one step more in the right direction. “Thank you.”

Regina smiled softly at the exchange as they watched David leave and accepted Emma’s arms around her neck from behind. Blonde curls spilled over her shoulder and her hand twirled the ends.

“Can we have tacos too, Gina?”

A bubble of laughter passed red lips. “You and your stomach. Yes, we may, though we’ll have to stop by the store on our way home, we are out of tomatoes, lettuce and a few other things.”

Emma licked her lips at the idea. “We are out of rocky road, too. And the little dark chocolate squares you keep in the tin on top of the fridge I’m not supposed to know about.”

“How did you—” The Queen started and spun the chair around to catch the fleeing blonde by the hips.

“I kinda saw you one night when we were in our other life when I was supposed to be in bed. Sooooo when I had a craving last night when I was also supposed to be in bed I dove into your stash since it was in the same place.” Feeling cheeky Emma smirked mischievously.

“You know what this means Miss Swan.”

“I do?” Squeaking as her ribs were attacked mercilessly and with her current size she was able to tickle back. Laughter and shrieks rolled through the room, echoing about them.

“You win Emma!” Calling off their banter when the blonde popped a heel off to get to the bottom of a curled foot.
“Ha! Finally!” Emma stood from where their knees had found the floor and offered a hand to assist Regina. Then she broke into a happy dance, spinning about the room. “Yes! I win, I win, I win!”

“You do, this time.” A small challenge as the Queen became dignified again. “While I get my things, please start a list for the store.”

“Oh! On it!” Emma followed heels into the main office, swiping paper and pen from the Queen’s desk. Still smiling she penned the items they’d discussed. Laughter had been the dose of medicine she needed to let the worry of the future go for the moment. The feeling of gratefulness returned that even with all the upheaval they were facing, some things still were just as simple between them and beautifully so.

A/N - So Gold wrote the spell... hhmmm? :-)  
Next time - A not so charming grocery store showdown followed by a tough question about what forgiveness means. Henry learns about the spell and surprises both Queen and Swan with something unexpected. Emma realizes something important about Snow that may be the key to understanding the woman’s actions.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

A/N – I added a poll to my profile on Fanfic, link is here-
https://www.fanfiction.net/u/10370883/LittleSwanLover
- because I’d appreciate reader input on a subplot piece that will occur much later in
the story and one that will make more sense as we go. Poll will close at the end of the
week. Please vote if you want to and if anyone has ideas on what they want that to
look like once the results are in, please PM me. If I use your idea you will be the first
to get a peek at the scene it will be in and credit of course. I respond to all PMs, but I
got a lot of them and it takes some time to get back to everyone, so I appreciate
your patience.

Also, this story deals heavily with the themes of self acceptance, self definition and
understanding that we all have many sides to who we are. Sides that we may not like
or struggle to accept, but are not wrong and also ones that lay dormant until they are
woken up. Some that others do not understand, will judge, and push us to redefine
when we don’t need to. Regina struggles with a part of her nature in this story. Emma
does too, to fully define who she is and be at peace will all sides of her self and one
side in particular that has yet to be revealed, but needs some serious attention and one
many of you asked to see in The Do Over. That plot twist will reveal will be revealed
in about 4-6 chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At the grocery store they roamed the aisles shoulder by shoulder as they usually did before the
spell to complete their shopping. When Emma’s stomach growled, she suggested splitting up to
finish the list faster. She parted from the Queen to go to the cereal aisle across the store to grab the
granola and oats they both agreed on; an expensive brand with just enough honey notes to make it
sweet enough that Emma would eat it. Much preferring that instead of the tasteless horse feed
brand Regina preferred.

As Emma browsed the rest of the cereals an old favorite of hers and Henry’s caught her eye. She
smiled fondly at the memory of when they used to share one huge bowl on Saturday mornings
before an old school cartoon marathon ensued. Laughing as she recalled how they used to fight
over whom got to drink the sweet milk left over at the bottom of the bowl. Emma missed him
sorely and her heart pinched. Plucking the box off the shelf the tingle came again making her
shrink and both boxes hit the floor as little arms stuck out to balance. With a sigh at her small state
she reached down to pick up her mess. Arms full, a hand started towards her necklace to summon
the Queen.

“Emma?”

Hands froze and startled, the boxes dropped again. Emma’s head popped up catching Snow’s
eyes. The woman left her cart and knelt to pick up the cereal that had spun to a stop at the wheels.

“Can I please have those back?” Emma was not in the mood for any heart to hearts, hers still hurt
after how they had left things between them and about the arrow exchange incident on the porch
she’d pried from Regina who had insisted it had been handled.

Snow handed one box back, hesitating with the other one. Seeing her daughter as a child was still
astonishing. Unsure, too about how much of the adult she knew Emma to be was still inside,
despite the explanation she’d been given at the loft. She had always wanted to know what her
daughter was like as a child and the thick lens she was seeing this little version of Emma through
was hard to remove. It was damn near impossible.

Hesitant. “Are you here by yourself?”

“Here? Suurrrrrrre.” Sarcasm dripped as she rolled her eyes. A little hand went to a swan pendent,
remembering to summon and she felt it grow warm before she let go.

The pixie haired woman didn’t miss the way her daughter clutched the necklace or the brief glow
it had before that hand dropped, but she did miss the girl’s tone. “Then where is Regina?”
Concerned over why the Queen would leave a child unattended and was upset at the fact.

“She’s—”

“You shouldn’t be by yourself when you are this little.” Snow finally handed over the other box
and crossed her arms in worry.

Snapping. “Don’t interrupt me… Please.” Attitude tense and hot. “I’m fine.”

Big green eyes flinched. “You should come with me Emma, at least until we find Regina.”
“That’s not happening.” The girl took a step back as Snow approached, back hitting the display wall. She wasn’t scared, but she did not want to be touched by those hands.

“Emma, I’m not leaving you alone.” Determined to make sure her daughter was safe as she would do with Neal or any kid she may have found unaccompanied. She reached out a hand for Emma to take.

“I don’t need your help and I’m not al—”

“I just want to make sure you are okay.”

A foot stomped of its own accord at being interrupted again. More than frustrated that her words wouldn’t flow so she could explain herself better. Snow always made her feel flustered and her mind got tangled easily when that was the case. She managed to get out one biting word. “No!”

The Princess recognized what she thought was the start of a tantrum. Shaking her head, she gently took Emma’s arm and when the girl began to pull sharply away she let go. Ears were suddenly filled with a new cart and familiar heels clicking their way quickly. Her daughter seemed to snap out of something and she watched as Emma dropped the boxes and dove into the Queen. Envy and hurt pulsed behind her eyes as she watched arms that should be hers lift her child up.

Snow swallowed her first response and then her second before speaking. “Regina you need to keep a better eye on Emma when she’s this size. I found her wandering around alone.”

“She most certainly is not alone and by the looks of things she probably tried to tell you just that.” Lips a firm line when the Princess blushed. “We have a system in place if she shrinks and I am not there. She is plenty safe.” Brown eyes regarded Snow and Regina shifted slightly to better adjust Emma’s wiggling form, as skinny arms choked her neck.

“If she was with me—”

“And she is not.” The Queen stated softly without the dark bite she longed to put behind it, as she would have a one point in her life, but firm enough that her meaning be taken clearly; that this was not either of their choices. A decision instead that belonged to Emma. She held her tongue not to add that remark as memories of their other life and the teacher’s hands on little shoulders at school came rushing back. This was not the same woman from that life standing in front of her and they all had a different relationship here. One she hoped they could eventually get back to.

“Maybe she should be.” Snow stormed, wounds raw by her daughter’s rejection clouding her better judgment. ‘Where along the way have we become so lost to each other?’ The Princess wondered. Things were easier in a way before the dark curse broke and they were simply friends.

Emma pulled back from the safety of dark hair and turned to put heavy eyes on Snow. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, but I don’t want to go with you and I tried to tell you that.” They watched Snow shake her head as the cart she was pushing whipped around, speeding off and Emma relaxed as she felt her back rubbed.

“Are you alright?” Regina brushed curls away from a pink face.

“Yes and no. I just want to get done and go home.”

Nodding the Queen moved back to their cart, sensing that Emma couldn’t verbalize her feelings just yet. “Would you like to walk or ride as we finish up?”

“Ride please.” Suddenly weary and wanting to be closer to the Queen than her short legs would allow. She was set into the cart and took the list, pointing to the dented boxes on the floor. “Can we please get both?”

Regina picked up the box of granola and put it in the cart, holding up the other with an amused expression. “Coco-puffs?”

“They turn the milk chocolaty. It’s like magic in your mouth.”

“And it has nothing to do with the fact that there is a Wonder Woman headband you can make out of the box?”

“Well, duh! That’s obvious.” Emma grinned as the box made it into her arms and they headed to
Little hands reached for the dark chocolate squares the Queen loved from the candy display at the register and tossed them in the cart, trying to ignore the eyes around them gawking at her small form. Finally having enough she crossed her eyes, wiggled her fingers and stuck out her tongue to them. She wasn’t sure if that or the Queen’s raised brow after the fact made them scurry away.

When they pulled into the mansion Emma helped carry the lighter bags into the house and put away the items she could reach to their proper place. Keeping busy kept her mind from what had happened at the store. Anxious to keep moving she excused herself to the living room.

After quickly prepping dinner and setting it to cook, Regina found the blonde attempting to organize the DVDs in the basket below the TV by color and knew Emma was in full avoidance mode. She sat nearby with a book on the sofa, eyeing the girl after every page read, and waiting for the Savior to be ready to talk. Sniffles came first across the room, then feet trotted over, and finally little fingers pushed her book aside.

Emma stood quietly for a long moment, hands on the Queen’s knees in thought. “Why is it so hard with her Gina?”

“One of the most complicated relationships in this world or any other is that between a mother and daughter. And it doesn’t help that magic kept you apart and that you are nearly the same age when you’re an adult.”

“It’s more than that though and she didn’t mother me. I told her as much. You did, do, and that’s as true in our other life as it is in this one.” Emma frowned, fists clenching at the idea of that not being the case.

“I wasn’t implying she did, sweet one, and sometimes being a mother or mothering comes with choices that seem impossible to make to the one not making them.” Running a thumb along a soft cheek. “I know what I am going to say next will be hard for you, but you need to both hear and think on my words.” Fingers moved to lift a chin. “In another time and world Snow would have raised you. She made a choice and didn’t or couldn’t have that pleasure, and one I have no doubt that tore her apart and that must make looking in the mirror everyday a very hard thing for her to do.”

The Queen knew Snow White well, but she knew Emma better and herself even more. She had her own demons visit her dreams over Emma’s past and she had not forgotten the role the woman she used to be had played in the Savior’s past trauma. Regrets, though, she had none. Not over how they had gotten to this point and the relationship they now shared. Her choices in life had gotten her their son and now another chance to love in a similar, but different way with Emma. It was a raw and selfish, but primal love that fueled her actions a decade ago when Emma had first appeared in Storybrooke, one now she kept behind a barred door in the farthest corner of her mind with the mask of the Evil Queen.

A shrug, but not indifference at that truth. “It was her choice to send me away and so what if we are related and she would have, she still doesn’t get me. Like at all.”

“I’m sure it feels that way right now and that is frustrating for you, I know.” Tucking a blonde curl behind a little ear, Regina continued to coax little thoughts along another path. Her heavy words from before needed time to marinate in that blonde head. “Think about your friendship before the curse broke. What about that worked between you two?”

Emma shrugged again, but thought about that question knowing Regina would wait as long as she needed to be able to answer. After a minute she tried to voice her thoughts. “I didn’t know we were related. Mom didn’t exist or was someone in my mind that I thought gave me away.” Mouth drying out. “And when I finally met her and looked in her eyes and knew it was her,” looking away as her knees began to liquefy, “that was still true.”

“You forgave her for that, yes?” Almost there, to the root of the weed Emma needed to dig out, she could feel it. Regina reached out to steady Emma by the hips.

“Me?” Clear pieces split and fragmented with uncertainty.

“Are you asking or telling me?” Helping to stop the dance around the hard answer she knew was hiding there, Regina questioned.

“ Asking.” As the floor fell away to truth Emma leaned forward trying to find balance in the blue
silk blouse and she was allowed to for a minute before hands stood her back up. Those hands also
did not let go.

“Who did you forgive Snow for, Emma?” Gently lifting a small wobbling chin. “Was it for you
because you truly do or was it to try and make things easier with her?”

“I thought it would make it better.” Sniffing hard as Regina’s thumb wiped a tear away. “If she
heard me say it things would be different between us, but it still sucks and hurts more. It made it
worse Mama, so much worse.”

The girl hiccuped and blew her nose into a conjured tissue. Dealing with her childhood pain was
grueling and she didn’t think she’d have to face it again so soon upon their return. While she had
found what she needed to experience in their other life and family in Regina, not everything had
been mended as they knew it would not be. She also knew while the Queen would patiently
comfort and counsel, attempts at running, hiding or dancing around the truth that needed facing
wouldn’t be accepted. They had agreed it wouldn’t be, not ever again nearly two years ago when
her greatest escape attempt had nearly cost a life. For that she was grateful, even if it hurt to feel,
when that was the case.

“Forgiveness doesn’t work that way, sweet one.”

“I know, but I wish it did.” Emma’s hand absentmindedly went to her arm and rubbed.

“Does your arm hurt?” Reaching to slide up a sleeve and satisfied at seeing only pale skin present.

“No, I just didn’t like it when she reached for me. Ever since she slapped my face that one time
it’s jarring when she goes to touch me. It reminds me too much of being hit like that as a kid and I
can’t help pulling away from her when she does. When she thought I was by myself she wanted
me to go with her and I get that, but I tried to tell her I wasn’t and she still didn’t listen to me.”

Regina’s jaw tightened again at the memory of Snow’s hand print on Emma’s face, of the broken
green eyes that had stared into hers, but she remained quiet as the girl spoke freely.

“She looked at me with such betrayal and hurt, Gina. I felt bad for her. I feel bad I did that to her.”
Emma looked guilty up. “Maybe I should try talking to her again?”

“If that is what you want to do, you have my support like always, but Emma, you are not
responsible for her feelings.”

“I know, but…” Head shaking when nothing more came.

“I don’t think you do baby.”

“Maybe not… Can we talk about this later though? I’m not avoiding, not anymore. I’m just
hungry and tired.”

Brown eyes found the clock and at the approaching late hour the Queen stood. “The meat for the
tacos is simmering and the shells just need a few minutes in the oven. Come wash up and set the
table.”

Emma gratefully followed those directions, needing the routine Regina and their evening
provided. The tacos were the perfect combination of spice and bliss that helped to bring out her
chatter. As she took the last delicious bite realization hit that they were supposed to FaceTime with
Henry after dinner and she was still six.

The sour expression wasn’t lost on the Queen and she sipped her red wine slowly, letting the
currents of tart cherry and sweet chocolate mix and settle on her palette as it did in her emotions.
With some reluctance she set her glass down, wanting to respect Emma’s desire to be in adult
form for that conversation with their son and also knowing that she wouldn’t make that phone call
on her own if the girl wasn’t ready.

“We can reschedule for tomorrow and see if you grow by then.”

Emma looked up from her plate at hearing an answer to the unasked question lingering in her
mouth. Almost agreeing until she thought that offer through. Seeing the selfless look on the face
she loved made her head shake.

“You always put me first Gina. Now we are going to put you first. Let’s call, tell him and chat like
we always do. I don’t havta be big to do that.”
“Emma….” The small gift meant a lot.

“Can I be excused? It was really good.”

“Yes, take your plate to the sink. I’ll set the dishes to soak and then we will call.”

The girl bounced out of her chair and rounded the table, planting a kiss on her Keeper’s cheek. That word bought a sweet sentiment and she realized despite the spell that gave her the term; Regina was her Keeper through and through. Emma cleared her place with a skip in her step. A few minutes later they settled on the couch, and like the first time they all met to FaceTime on the phone in their other life, Emma sat on a lap and her quick fingers opened the app on the Queen’s I-phone. She took a deep breath and pressed the button to connect.

Henry’s easy grin flashed across the screen. “Hey Mom! Oh... um...” His eyes flicked from the girl with strangely familiar eyes and back to his adoptive mother. “You babysitting or something?”

“Not quite Henry.” Regina smiled at hearing his voice, a missed symphony to her ears. “There is something we need to tell you.”

“We? Where’s Ma?”

“Surprise kid!” Emma blurted and threw out her arms with a hopeful smile, heart pounding. “It’s me!”

“Woah! Like for real?” Henry’s nose got huge on the screen as he came closer. “Let me guess. A spell backfired in Storybrooke?”

“Not quite, but yeah, magic is involved and...” Emma’s teeth tore at a lip and she looked up at Regina for support.

“We did a spell last weekend that had an unexpected side effect and well, this is it.”

Henry tilted his head and raised a single brow. “You mean the one you’ve been planning forever that you think I didn’t know about?”

Jaws dropped.

‘Had it... Had we been that freaking obvious?!’ Emma thought and then she sputtered. “H-how d-did you know that?”

“Ma...” He chuckled at calling the little girl staring at him that word. “Come on. It was kind of noticeable, at least to me, when you started hanging around the mansion more and going with Mom to her vault all the time. You guys went from friends to best friends and then you moved in and well... I think it’s cool that my Moms worked together so closely on something. You guys used to battle it out and then you stopped fighting each other and went to fighting for each other.”

“So you knew and didn’t say anything?” Emma huffed crossing her arms.

“Yeah and you didn’t say anything either Ma, until now. Look I’m not a little kid anymore. You don’t have to try to protect me from stuff.”

Regina leaned forward with worry in the back of her throat. “We cannot help but do that Henry. We did not mean to keep secrets from you. The spell didn’t affect anyone here, shouldn’t of anyway and that’s one of the reasons we kept it quiet.”

“Mom, relax. I don’t see it that way. At all. I figured it was personal and that’s why you didn’t say anything. I know privacy is important to you, both of you.”

“It was very personal.” Emma dropped her arms, ready to share. “There’s this spell that gives you a kind of a do over at life and ten months passed in this other world that was only a second in this one. I did a ton of healing from my childhood and your Mom went with to make sure I was safe. It was amazing, life changing, and now there’s this shrinking and growing thing that happens kind of randomly that shouldn’t be, but...” Rolling her lips. “Is and I’m really… We just wanted you to be aware.”
A pause and a scrunched brow from across the screen. “Soooo you got to be a kid again?”
Another pause accompanied by a head tilt. “With Mom?”

“Um… yeeaaaah, in a nutshell.” Roses flowered on her cheeks at finally sharing the intimacy of that experience with Henry.

Thoughtful. “Did she make you cinnamon cookies?”

Emma blinked, eyes misted and she laughed. “Yeah she did, kid.”

“And did she read to you and do the different voices for the characters in books? She used to do the best ones.”

Tears flowed freely as the blonde laughed again. “She did!” Grinning and finally looking up to catch the brunette’s glassy eyes. “She was… is incredible.”

“Tears glad you got to experience that Ma. I know what that must mean to you.”

Wiping her face, Emma went to steady the phone in the Queen’s shaking hands. “So you are cool with this? The idea that I got a do over as a kid with Regina?” It sounded ludicrous when she spelled it out that way, but in her heart it was anything but.

Henry’s eyes found his brunette Mother’s. “We didn’t get along for a while Mom, but that didn’t mean that during that time I forgot anything you did for me or how safe and loved it made me feel. If Ma got even a fraction of that, I’m more than cool with it.”

Regina closed her eyes, quietly sinking into his voice. Henry had assured his forgiveness many years ago and they had worked to reestablish trust between them. Still, his words hit home and reminded her of what she had almost lost.

Deciding to give his Mom a quiet moment, he turned his eyes to the green pair studying him. “So yeah, Ma. I am. Besides, I bet I have a better chance at beating you at video games now.”

“No funny Kid. I can still whoop your butt in Mario Cart.”

“You’re on, Ma. Maybe when we get back to Boston we can come visit you guys.”

A smile budded from red lips. “We’d like that, Henry. More than you know.”

They talked a bit more about the side effect, the young man curious over the details and about his honeymoon before he paused and pointed his finger at the screen.

“Uh Mom...”

Regina looked down as déjà vu hit and smiled softly as blonde lashes fluttered.

“Not ‘sleep kid.”

“Henry we’ll call you again soon. I think we are both ready to turn in. It’s been a long day.”

“Okay, over and out. Night and I love you both!”

“We love you, too!” In unison.

When the screen went black Emma turned, curling up against the warm body, whining when she was lifted a minute later and carried upstairs. “I waaassss comfy Gina.”

“No bath.” Squirming to get back into those arms when she was set on the bathroom tile, yawning in protest.
“Yes a bath, a quick one anyway.” Turning the tap to warm and as the tub filled she helped Emma undress, adding bubbles at the girl’s request.

“Duck and boat, too?” Emma asked habitually and scooped a handful of suds and blew on them, giggling as they flew through the air.

“So much for not wanting a bath,” The Queen thought.

She added the small basket of toys from under the sink she had conjured to the water, not wanting to break the moment by doing magic in front of Emma, knowing the blonde had briefly forgot they were not in their other life. The transition was still one they were getting used to and it was more so with small things like the bath toys that caused moments to pass before reality rudely hit and those green eyes would begin to ache all over again. After the day they had, there was no reason to pull Emma from the small pocket of peace that was now. As the girl played Regina sorted out the little clothes, add them to the hamper and summoning a pair of warm yellow PJs. Before small hands pruned she drained the tub and wrapped Emma up in a clean towel, handing off the PJs.

“Go change and feed Jasper. I’ll be right in.”

“Read too?” Emma missed their story time. The last several nights she’d conked out before she remembered to ask. Even now, she fought sleep, nodding on her feet. Their talk with Henry reminded her how much joy she’d gained from that simple act.

“Find the book we left off with from your shelf.”

Grinning like she won the lottery, Emma quick footed to her room and got dressed. After dropping two red flakes into her fish’s tank she sat on the floor and rifled through the stack on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. They’d finished a whole shelf in their other life and there were still four more to go in this one. Rows of classics mixed with fairy tales and modern additions. Some had been Henry’s, some were ones she’d bought herself, and the others carefully chosen as gifts by a royal hand.

Plucking a gifted volume she sought up when the Queen knocked to enter, she climbed back up in that lap. She enjoyed the rhythm of highs and lows of her Keeper’s tenor as the story The Little White Bird flowed. It hit home in heart because the boy in the story never had to grow up. They were in a more melancholy part of the book, and Emma followed along, eyes glued to the page.

“...What is saddest about ghosts is that they may not know their child. They expect him to be just as he was when they left him, and they are easily bewildered, and search for him from room to room and hate the unknown boy he has become. Poor, passionate souls, they may even do him an injury...”

Emma thought about the parallel from that script against her constant battle with Snow and Regina’s words from earlier that evening. The question about her friendship with Snow before the curse broke in particular and how complicated things became between them when they realized who they were to each other. Like the dead and the living, one ghost stuck in the past and the lost child of one refusing to go there in favor of the present. This always happened when they read after a hard day. There was clarity to be gained from stories that she never quite appreciated as much before as she did right now.

“...All of our notions about ghosts are wrong. It is nothing so petty as lost wills or deeds of violence that bring them back, and we are not nearly so afraid of them as they are of us.”

“Gina... I think I know why Snow is being how she is.”

“Oh and why is that, sweet one?” The book closed with a small red smile and was set aside on the table by the rocker as Regina stood with Emma in arms.

“She expects me to still be her little Princess, the one she put in the tree to save everyone. I think she doesn’t know what to do with me how I am, even though I did what she wanted me to do by breaking the curse.” A big yawn tore through a pink mouth and Emma gladly nestled under the covers.

“Hmmmm.” Neither confirming nor disagreeing, as Emma didn’t need her to.

“And you know what?”

“What baby?”
“I don’t think she means to hurt my feelings. She’s just confused and trying to hold onto an idea of me that doesn’t exist anymore.” Emma tuned over on her side as she was kissed and tucked in, pulling Stitchy close as her crochet blanket was draped over the duvet. “Maybe I need to meet her where she is, I’m just not sure how to do that yet… Help me?”

“Always.”

“Night Mama.”

“Sweet dreams, dear heart.”

Regina gently stroked the blonde curls as the Emma drifted off, hoping that the fallen bridge between Snow and the Savior could start to be rebuilt on the sleepy sure words just spoken.

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Quotes from *The Little White Bird* by J.M. Barrie

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Chapter End Notes

Please take the poll on my profile on fanfiction.net if you’d like. J

Next time (probably Friday) – plot heavy—Regina and Emma revisit the comment made about safe words since the vault conversation. Emma remembers something important about consent and a promise is made. A flashback from before the do over spell gives insight on a past issue and a few glimpses of how parts of their dynamic came to be. In the present a forgotten file has adult Emma making a trip to the loft where something is taken, a little trigger to a long time smoking gun is pulled, and an inner demon returns.

*Appropriate trigger warning will be at start of chapter… It will be a cliff hanger… have a tissue or a box handy… sorry-not-sorry… but actually kinda sorry in advance.*
“Can we not do this right now?” Emma flopped back on the sleigh bed of the master suite staring at the ceiling. She blew hair off her forehead and sighed when the Queen’s face came into view from the walk in closet.

“We need to talk about it Emma so we are on the same page.”

“All we do is talk, talk, talk... I’m tired of talking.” Little arms crossed over her chest, cranky even after a nap a few hours ago.

“Sit up please.” Regina instructed and walked towards the bed.

Rolling eyes Emma turned over onto her belly, propping her chin under hand and gave her eyes to the Queen who came to perch on the edge of the bed. She kicked her feet in frustration against the blanket, at finally having to have this conversation.

It was Saturday afternoon and they had just finished up the weekly chores around the house. She had followed her Keeper into the master bedroom to ask about watching a movie as she watched laundry being put away and to her dismay the subject of her safe word, or lack of wanting one, had been brought up.

“I thought we settled it already. Do we have too?”

“Yes we do. I’ve given you plenty of space over the issue the last few days and now it is time to discuss it.”

A pout. “I’m listening.”

“You mentioned earlier this week before your reminder that you wanted to forgo the option of your safe word when you are small.” Regina ran her hand down the child’s hair when Emma blushed.

“Yeah cause we negotiated all that before the spell and I want it to apply now that we are home.”

It was an easy done deal in her mind and she wondered why it wasn’t for the Queen.

“I inferred that. What I want to know is if you were also implying that you wanted the no safe word option to apply when you are your adult size?”

Emma sat up cross legged and picked at the duvet. “It’s easier to have it be the same no matter what size I am, so yeah I do.”

“I am not comfortable with that Emma.” Catching green eyes as they snapped up in curiosity. “I understand the need for you not to have one when you are small, like we talked about before the spell. Part of that childhood experience for you in our other life was for me to make the decisions because you were, for the most part, a child with your emotions and impulses magnified despite your adult mind intact, at least for the early part of the spell. Due to our current situation with the shrinking in this life and the fact that you do have childish tendencies you cannot control, I am alright with continuing that here, though I want you to use your safe word anytime you are small when you need to pause, talk or process. That needs to be an option for you here because though blended with your little half you still have your adult mind.”

Emma squirmed.

“Is that not the case or is there something else?” Regina searched those eyes carefully.

“I do have my adult mind, but it is getting harder for me to stay in control that way when I am this...”
size, like it was in our other life as time went on. Or Like the vault. Big me made some of those choices, but little me took over and made other ones.” She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I hate admitting this, but I’m not capable of making the best choices when I’m small on my own and I know you get that and that’s why I’m asking you to take control when I am this size. But it would be easier without a safe word no matter what size I am. I told you it’s okay. This is me consenting.” Emma assured, putting hands over heart.

“Consent goes two ways.” Regina reminded. “And there is a difference with how things work between us when you are an adult. For example the severity of your consequences when you earn them and the fact that you are completely capable of making sound decisions when your emotions and choices are not affected by magic or childish impulses.”

Emma mulled that over knowing Regina had a good point. Several actually, as she always did. “So what, I am capable as an adult, is that the only reason?”

“People have also taken the option of choice away from you most of your life and I will not be added to that list now, even with your consent. Your safe word needs to remain fully functioning between us when you are an adult and to, in part, when you are small. When you are child size, I will make the decisions in regards to your safety, health, and discipline, but you will retain your right to safe word so you may pause, process, and talk if you feel the need to before we resume.” Seeing Emma’s scrunched face at the idea of her not being in full control she, added. “And we will remain regardless of its use when you are small. That will satisfy the need you have and our prior negotiations while still respecting my consent. Are you alright with that?”

Emma relaxed with that clarity and knowing that the Queen would hold the reins when she wasn’t able to. “Yeah, I didn’t think about it like you said.” It was a fair compromise. She rose up on her knees and wrapped arms around her Keeper’s neck. “Thanks for checking in with me, even when I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Communication is important and we need to keep checking in to make sure what we have between us is healthy and mutual, for both of us.” She returned the hug, adding a kiss and a pat to the small behind as she lifted Emma to set little feet on the floor. “Go pick a movie for us to watch. I’m nearly done putting away my things and I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

“Does it have to be a PG movie?”

“No… It can be a G rated one.” Completely serious.

“Got it... no Fight Club... Frozen it is.” Emma looked over her shoulder teasingly to see the response to the musical she knew the Queen detested after watching it nearly 20 times in the last ten months.

“You are begging to have spinach for dinner aren’t you?”

That got the blonde’s attention. “No Frozen. No spinach. Deal Mama?”

“Deal sweet one.”

Emma tossed a grin at her Keeper as she left the room to pick a different movie. She was glad to have that talk behind them and appreciated the brunette’s insight and understanding of their unique dynamic; one that evolved as it was, still required constant communication. Thoughts marveled at how they ended up at this point, the ease of their banter and open talks, blushing again as her mind drifted to her first correction, or reminder as they had come to call it and what that had meant for them.

::::::::::Flashback about 2 years ago… before the Do Over Spell and before Emma moved in::::::::::

Emma leaned her forehead against the white door of the mansion and knocked for the third time, nearly stumbling into the Queen when the door opened.

“Finally! You sleep like the dead. I’ve been out here for ten minutes.” She shuffled into the warmth of the foyer, avoiding the annoyed look from the brunette. She’d been doing that a lot lately.

“Somewhere not here.” Rolling eyes, Emma turned around when a hand grazed her shoulder. “Probably in my car and that is not here either. I walked from the Rabbit Hole. I’m too tired to poof. Last time I tried when I was, I ended up inside the pastry display at Granny’s. She’s still

"That is what most people do late at night and where is your key? You could have just poofed into the house as well!” Shutting the door and following boots into the main landing at the base of the stairs.

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whining about finding blonde hair in there. And we agreed I wouldn’t if that was the case…” Shrugging.

Regina pulled her robe closer and crossed her arms. “Regardless, it is two o’clock in the morning and you shouldn’t be out walking around in the dead of night, though I’m glad you were not driving.” Strongly suspecting that Emma was more imbibed than could be seen at the moment.

“I promised I wouldn’t do that and tell that to Snow.”

“What does she have to do with this?”

“It’s her fault I ended up at the Rabbit Hole to begin with.” Emma muttered and leaned back against the wall, nearly knocking a picture off when her head fell back. “Oh shit, sorry.” Spinning to straighten the wobbling frame.

A brow rose, clear now that the blonde was drunk. “Did you two have a fight?”

“Yep.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nope... Well kinda. She’s all weird about us spending time together, especially since we started the spell stuff, but I don’t want to talk about it.” Circling the subject as her mind blurred.

“I see.” Clear that Emma was in need of sleeping off the effects of alcohol before they broached this further. “You are welcome to stay the night, as always, but we will have to continue this conversation in the morning.”

“Awww, come on Regina stay up and talk with me.” Emma reached out and tried to catch a regal hand and ended up steadying herself using the wall instead.

“I’m tired Emma. Come and I’ll help you upstairs.” Concerned with how off balance the blonde was.

Green eyes narrowed, and she balked at that idea. “Just because I’m accountable to you doesn’t mean I can’t make my own decisions and I can stay up if I want to and drink if I want to.” Getting irritated, remembering her heated conversation with Snow and blurring the details with her current reality.

“That is not what I am saying. We will talk more in the morning. I am not having this conversation with you right now.”

Hurt and defensive, Emma pulled back. “So you’re giving up on me? That’s it?”

Regina took a step forward, hands open and out. “Of course not Emma, that is not how this works.” Gesturing between them. “We both simply need sleep right now. It’s the middle of the night. Go up to the guest room, get some rest.

With a huff the Savior started to stomp upstairs, upset at not getting the attention she wanted. “Fine your Majesty! I’ll following your fucking rules, but only because I want to.” Half way upstairs and through her tantrum she slipped, hands out to catch herself. Palms burned as they missed the intended step and she shouted out when her right knee slammed into the sharp edge of the step.

Hurrying to the fallen blonde. “Emma! Are you—”

“Hurt? Yeah, damn stairs.” Hissing as she was helped to stand and paling when she saw blood seeping through the new rip on her jeans.

“Easy. Here take my arm.” Regina cooed softly when she saw the blood, noting Emma’s squeamishness towards it. “Let’s go upstairs and into the bathroom. I have a first aid kit in there.”

“Good idea, yeah.” Mumbling as the last several minutes caught up to her slow brain.

She was led the rest of the way upstairs and into the guest bathroom. The Queen eased her down
onto the closed toilet seat and went to the wall cabinet, returning with the kit.

“Change into some shorts for me please.”

Emma waved her hand, magically changing into a pair of boxer shorts she liked to sleep in, freeing her legs from the tight denim. She watched as knowing hands opened gauze and prepared a bandage before wetting a clean cloth. Embarrassed eyes watched the Queen kneel before her and gently begin to dab at her knee. Chewing her lip as guilt began to settle in as the last of the blood was wiped away and she squirmed as an alcohol wipe was opened.

“Hold still. This might sting a little.”

The second the cotton pad wiped across her knee she squealed. “Ow! A LITTLE?!”

Regina simply fanned red exposed skin and Emma visibly relaxed.

“I’m sorry.” Uttered as the gauze was placed over the cut and taped into place.

“I know.” Full lips smiled tightly as the brunette stood and summoned a cup to fill with water. Taking two Tylenol from the cabinet and handing both to Emma. “Take this and drink all of the water.”

Tossing the pills back and draining the cup, Emma stood, stopping at the door as the bathroom was tidied up. “Gina I…”

“Off to bed.” Kind, but firm.

With a sigh, bare feet padded across the hall and once in the guest room, fell face down onto the comforter. She was almost asleep by the time brown eyes came to check, barely noticing as she was covered with a blanket and the room darkened.

Morning brought the rudeness of light to sleep filled eyes and Emma groaned into the pillow, popping one orb to see the time. It was nearly ten on Sunday and she was about to go back to sleep when the night before slammed into her mind, forcing a sore body upright.

‘My head should hurt more than this.’ She thought, and then remembered the Tylenol.

That had been accompanied by a look she’d been unable to read from the Queen last night. Hands rubbed a pale face and she went to the bathroom to wake up. Ten minutes later, clad in a black tank and her boxers with thick socks, she went downstairs to find Regina and hearing noise from the kitchen, headed that way.

A plate of eggs and toast was sitting on the counter, next to Regina’s empty placemat. The brunette was reading the paper, hair falling softly against a black sweater paired with relaxed slacks, and fresh faced. Glasses were removed; hand released the warming spell from a plate of food, and the paper set aside as the blonde approached.

“Morning Gina.”

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

A shrug. “How much trouble am I in?”

“A bit and then some. Eat while your food is warm. I’ll get you some coffee.” Rounding the counter and returning with a steaming mug.

“Thanks.” Wincing at that answer, Emma ate quietly as breakfast dishes were washed and put away, levitating her own to the sink once she was finished.

“Feeling better?” Wiping hands on a cloth, Regina eyed the somber blonde.

“Yeah, the food helped and sleep and the Tylenol. Thanks again.”

“You are welcome. Are you ready to talk or do you need some more time to wake up?”
"Now is good." Draining the mug and standing to follow into the living room, sitting on the end of the couch as Regina sat in the middle. "Can I start by saying I'm sorry and I know I was a complete ass?"

"You may, though that is redundant at this point. Let me see your knee." Gesturing for a pale leg. With Emma’s foot resting in her lap, she gently lifted the bandage to check the cut, nodding and repositioning the tape over the wound. "This needs to be changed in another few hours, but it looks clean and less red than last night."

"I feel really awful about the things I said and did...What I remember anyway. The details are fuzzy, but I know I argued with you about going upstairs, falling, and you helping with my knee."

"That about sums it up, aside from you mentioning the fight with Snow."

Emma winced. "I'm sorry. I think she’s jealous we are spending so much time together. I told her off after she told me off and then I went to the Rabbit Hole to cool off." Pulling her foot back and hugging her knees as the look she remembered from last night returned to the Queen’s face.

"It is one thing to have a drink or even a few on occasion. It is a completely different thing to be so out of it that you show up in the middle of the night, belligerent, stumbling about to the point of hurting yourself, and disrespect me in my home, one I have opened to you as your own."

Pink lips rolled inward, eyes glassy. The silence was stifling as she processed the truth, fear creeping up in her heart. "So what happens now? Are we still... a we?"

Regina softened considerably. "Come here, dear heart." Arms opening as Emma fell into her. "Just because you make a mistake doesn’t mean what we have will change or go away."

Sniffling as she chewed the edge of a thumb in angst. "But that’s what it usually means with people." Closing her eyes with relief when lips pressed against the top of her head.

"That may have been your past experience with other people, but I do not work that way and I know you are still learning that. You will not be ignored, or made to feel less than. I will however, hold you to our agreement for as long as you are willing."

"I'm willing."

The Queen smiled at the eagerness. "What we have is incredibly special and not something I would trade for anything. You are going to make mistakes and I will too. We just have to talk about them openly and without judgment of each other or ourselves."

Sitting up, Emma sought forgiveness in russet eyes. "I really screwed up."

"You made some choices I do not like, that caused you harm, and disrespect is something I will not tolerate. That directly breaks our third rule. We have also been discussing the need for a new rule about asking permission before you drink and we have gone back and forth on that quite a number of times. I am beginning to think it is one we need to come to an agreement on very soon."

Recalling the gathering they had went to last week where they had decided to use the permission rule as a trial. The agreement had been to ask before each drink and Regina had allowed two over the course of three hours. Even so Emma had been a bit hung over that next morning when they both had the discipline vs. punishment discussion about the do over spell when Emma would be six. There was still much work to be done for that spell, but for now they were here. "Since we have not come to terms on exactly what that permission rule will look like yet there is not a consequence to be had for it at this time. Just for the extremity of your disrespect. Due to that, you have earned your first correction session from me."

Emma paled and stalling what she knew was to come. "A time out?"

"Before your spanking, yes."

Blushing now Emma wondered. "Can we not call it that word?" One never easy to get past her lips. "I feel like we need a code word for it, something unique just between us, like Henry and I had for Operation Cobra."

Regina considered the request though not too keen on a cutesy name for something that should hold deeper meaning. After a moment an idea came. "How do you feel about calling it a reminder?" Simple, to the point, and exactly what it was.
“Yeah, that’s good.” So that’s what they would call it. Shoulders bunched and she rested her chin on her knees. “Do we have too though?”

Brows rose. “You may use your safe word if you choose. Otherwise I’d like you to go to the corner over there and think about what we talked about. I’ll call for you when your time is up.”

At the security and warmth in that no nonsense tone, Emma slowly obeyed, safe word tucked far away. Her heart pounded in her ears as toes tried scrunching the wood floor, wishing for carpet to grip. Part of her was grateful to be facing away, to have the privacy of her thoughts before such an intimate and vulnerable act took place. Another part only wondered at the difference between the reminder that was about to take place and the few other stress relief sessions she’d had over the knee. For those she had ended up being sore after, but the process to build the release she sought with the goal of tears to clean her mind of negative thoughts and worries was well worth the discomfort.

She had yet to be on the receiving end of a spa—a reminder, a correction for behavior. The notion that it was finally a reality, one they’d negotiated, made her stomach knot. The choice was hers and the Queen had made sure to remind her of that. One word would release her from the wall she faced or the lap she’d be over soon. She wondered if she would ever use it and if so, what would make her. Minutes tangled with reflective thoughts and soon the sound of her name sent a heat wave through her body. Throat dry and anxious, Emma went to stand at the knees of the Queen.

“Why are we here Emma?”

Blushing harder and avoiding the eyes that sought hers. “I was disrespectful to you and I drank too much and hurt myself.”

“Eyes up here.” Waiting until she had green pools that said more than pink lips ever could. “While hurting yourself was unintentional, the choices you made led to harm befalling you unnecessarily.” She wanted that difference clear.

“I know.”

“Yes, you do know better don’t you.” A hard fact as she helped the blonde settle over her lap. Without ceremony she pulled the boxer shorts down pale legs and wrapped an arm securely around a slim waist as Emma wiggled into place. “Do you remember the rules we discussed?”

“No reaching back, crying is okay, and my safe word will stop everything.” Deep breathe releasing when a hand found her hair, brushing the length in easy strokes.

“Good girl.”

The quiet promise between those two words warmed her heart as a hand announced the heat to come, a sharp snap against the seat of her panties; an attention getter. Teeth found a lower lip as more came, a back and forth, but a rhythm hard to guess where the next would land. Hips rolled forward as her upper thighs were given attention she didn’t want, but the strong arm held firm.

Swats slowed as the peak neared and Emma fought the tears that needed to fall. “Gina, please…”

“Language aside, I do not appreciate how you spoke to me last night, or the fact that you were hurt because you decided to throw a tantrum to get my attention.” Pausing her hand after a crisp descent.

Salt rolled down a single cheek.

“You have my full attention right now Emma and your choices last night were unacceptable.”

“I’m sorry, really sorry.” More tears fell, closer to letting go as her skin was bared and that hand returned to guide her.

“I’ve already forgiven you, dear heart. It is time to forgive yourself.”

Regina continued turning pink flesh red and the crying softly began from shaking shoulders. Finally the Savior’s body relaxed into the cleanse. A few more well placed swats ensured the continuation of tears, before a hand moved to lose itself in blonde curls.

Limp weeping took over for a few minutes until sniffles prevailed and green eyes opened to the
light of the room. Helped to her feet, clothing was righted and she stood at that knee again unsure for a moment where she fit until she was pulled down into a tight hug.

“D-don’t let go Gina.” A whisper against dark hair.

“Never.”

———Present Day:———

By the middle of the next week they had fallen into somewhat of a choppy routine, but the predictability Emma had come to rely on was not there. The reason for shrinking was becoming harder to figure out and appeared to be more randomized as time went on. Uncertainty wore on her nerves. Just when they would get into a pattern she would grow or shrink again. On days Emma woke an adult she went to the station, on days she was six she went with the Queen and on days with both, they adjusted best they could. People still stared, much to Emma’s annoyance, but they were more curious than judging.

Emma still thought about finding an answer for the Queen’s lack of magic and the lost memories. She was also becoming annoyed that her Keeper’s priorities seemed elsewhere; like making sure she practiced diligently in the comprehension workbook or with magic when she was small and getting back into her routine as Sheriff when she was an adult, along with making sure she ate well and got enough sleep. The back and forth between the switches was exhausting for both of them. They had disagreed more than once over small, but important things and Emma was grumpier than usual most mornings, like today.

The alarm blared waking Emma from restless sleep and she hit snooze one too many times, resulting in Regina coming to coax her out of bed. She had grown over night and didn’t want to go to the station that morning. Their new hire Will was proving to be a much needed addition and feelings of inadequacy had begun to creep into the blonde head despite reassurances that he was there to help. She yanked the covers back from regal hands, refusing to get up until a warning nipped her butt into gear over the blanket.

“Gimnnnnaa!”

“Let’s go Emma. You are going to be late.”

“Fine I’m up. Don’t get your panties in a wad.” Emma flipped over and sat up, running her hands over her face.

“Care to rethink that comment?”

‘Shit.’ She thought and braved green eyes upward, finding her voice. “I said that out loud, huh?”

“And so eloquently before you have even had your coffee, which is the only reason, I am letting it go.” Regina kissed the top of blonde curls and left the room.

Grumbling on her way to the bathroom and then again to the kitchen Emma appeared long enough to stuff a bagel in her mouth and grab her lunch from the fridge. A to go carafe of coffee was offered and she softened, realizing she’d been less than pleasant that morning. That lasted all of two seconds before she was reminded to bring the station reports home that evening for the Mayor to look over.

“They are not done yet. I need more time.” Admitting she had been less than productive that week through no fault of her own rubbed her in the worst way.

“Will is supposed to be helping with that piece, yes?” Crossing her arms and leaning her hip against the marble counter, Regina regarded Emma with thoughtful eyes.

“Yeah, but we’ve been training him on deputy duties in addition and things got busy.” Most of the truth, but not quite all of it.

“Emma.” The Queen prompted gently.

With a sigh and an eye roll. “I can do the paperwork myself. I’ve managed this long without help, Gina.”

“You have, and amazingly so.” Letting the eye roll go and seeing the hurt hiding behind the annoyed expression Emma wore. “Though that is part of his job and he needs to learn how to do it.” She took the carafe and set it aside in favor of holding onto the Savior’s hands. “Accepting help so you can free yourself up to work through this situation we are in is necessary. I know you don’t like it and I respect your feelings on that matter, however it needs to be done.”
“I know. It just sucks.” Pulling away and picking up her coffee. “I gotta go.”

“I expect half of the week’s reports tonight and some of them, at least, in Will’s own handwriting.” A compromise.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

A tight smile and a mocking toast with the carafe as she poofed to the station. Landing near her desk, she sank down into the chair with a sigh, now angry at herself for letting her mouth get away from her. Regina didn’t deserve her sass and she made a mental note to apologize that evening, starting now with calling Will over to her desk to show him how to do the traffic violation write ups.

The day went by quickly and by late afternoon she was ready to call it quits. Putting on her jacket, she went to David’s desk for the incident file to bring home and couldn’t find it. Letting out an annoyed breath she called his cell and her heart sank when he revealed he’d forgotten it at home the night before in his attempt to be helpful with the mountain of paperwork that needed to be done that week. He was on patrol for another few hours and would not be able to bring it by.

She hung up with a dilemma; go to the loft to get it or try to conjure it. She was okay at conjuring, if she knew exactly where something was or if it was a personal item, but a random file somewhere in the Charming home was not going to happen. With a sigh she poofed to the front door of the loft and prayed to whatever god she hoped liked her that Snow was not home from school yet so she could slip in and out. Knocking once, then twice with nothing, she reached for her old key just as the door opened.

“Emma! It’s good to see you, come in.” Snow practically gushed at seeing her daughter willingly step into her home.

“Hi, um…thanks. I’m just here to get a file David forgot to bring to the station.” Guilt at the deflated expression gracing that pale face hit her stomach briefly until it was pushed out by the words that came next.

“Oh, so you are not here to explain why you’ve been ignoring my calls and texts for the last several days?” Hurt evident in Snow’s voice.

“I’m not ready to talk about the grocery store or your bow and arrow sh*t at my house.” Emma tossed her own barb back and closed her eyes, counting to five slowly before opening. “I don’t want to fight. I just want the file please.”

Snow sighed and gestured toward the living room coffee table. Emma spent a few minutes digging though the magazines and Neal’s comics before finding the manila file.

“He misses his sister.”

More guilt washed through her as Snow reminded about her little brother. “I miss him too. Maybe I can take him out this weekend for lunch or he can come over for lunch and a video game marathon. He likes those. Where is he, by the way?” Thoughts at playing games with the boy warmed her heart.

“I’ll ask him and let you know. He has basketball practice until six.”

The tingle indicating a shrink about to happen sneaked up on her and Emma sighed as it washed through. She caught sight of her six year old hands and wiggled her fingers. Little eyes dared Snow to coo or try to pinch her cheek as the Princess’ face took on the syrupy expression Emma noticed each time she was this size. Her hand automatically began to reach for her pendant.

“Wait! Please…” Snow stepped forward as little feet stepped back. “Can we just sit, together for a minute? We don’t have to talk. I just would love to spend a few minutes with you…” Eyes misty at the small face staring back at her.

...Like this.’ The words unsaid by Snow, screwed painfully into her mind by a drill held by the same hand that had slapped her. Emma shook her head to clear the thought. Snow wouldn’t hit her again, not after that night and the rift it had cost them, of that she was sure. Still the memory was there and Snow now lay fresh, like a cold white blanket across her heart.

Those teary eyes made Emma hesitate though and thoughts of her revelation to the Queen during the bedtime story that weekend about Snow being confused and unsure of how to navigate their complicated relationship came rushing back. Maybe this was Snow trying and maybe that meant she should try too, in spite of her size or maybe because of it. She wasn’t sure, but her hand
dropped without summoning as those feelings stirred circles of confusion in her brain.

Emma relented. “For a few minutes.”

Ear to ear grin. “Would you like some hot coco, with cinnamon?”

“I should ask first, but…” Mouth watering at the idea of sweet chocolate. “Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.”

Seeing as how she was staying a little while, Emma tried shrugging off her coat, hair tangling in her collar as it often did after she’d shrunk. Trying to yank her hair free, she struggled with the tight arms of her now small red leather jacket.

“Let me help you.” Snow rounded the counter and reached for the back of the jacket, tugging it down small arms.

“No, I got it.” Emma pulled forward. Wincing as hair caught.

“There you go.” Snow quickly took the jacket and hung it up by the door and went to the kitchen to make the coco.

Emma narrowed her eyes at the quick retreat and the sudden feeling of being naked, but followed when she couldn’t place why. She pulled herself up to sit on a stool, the counter a thin wall between them.

“So, how have you been?” Setting a warm mug in front of her daughter and leaning on the counter, hands rubbed her skirt.

“Busy, but good.” Emma sipped the drink, enjoying the warmth of the beverage in the coolness of conversation.

“This must be hard on you.” A gesture toward the little body.

“Yep, it is. Regina has been an amazing help.” Another sip. “We are doing okay, though.” A brief nod, wanting to validate what was said. “It’s hard on us too, you know.” Snow, unable to help herself, went to sit on the stool next to the child she struggled to see as an adult.

“Especially between us. I miss you Emma.”

“I miss y…” The blonde stopped, remembering that she was not responsible for Snow’s feelings, only her own. Lying right now just to keep Snow at bay wouldn’t help either of them mend their past. “I miss what we had and how we used to be. I miss our… friendship.” Honest little hands set the mug down as her stomach churned, now regretting her decision to stay. She was not ready for this conversation and not in her small form where her emotions often got the best of her and words got tangled. “I can’t talk about this right now though. I’m sorry. Not like this.”

“Okay… Then when?” Wanting nothing more than to reconnect with her daughter.

“I don’t know, but we will. I’m sorry, but I don’t… can’t right now. I need to go.” Having Snow’s willing ear was unexpected and she felt unprepared for a talk she knew they needed to have. Emotions exploded behind Emma’s eyes and were much too big at the moment.

“Please stop running from me.” Earnestly trying to see through the veil covering green eyes.

Emma reached for her necklace wanting to summon and paled when fingers came against skin. Naked skin. “My necklace? Where—”

“It’s safe on the counter there.” Snow nodded towards the far end of the kitchen. “Your hair got tangled in it.” It had and had broken unintentionally, falling into a pale hand that saw an opportunity in a desperate moment to connect.

Green eyes flashed. “So you just took it? I want it, right now.” Emma went to move, but was stopped by hands on holding the stool on either side of her legs.

“Please Emma… We need to talk, like really talk.”
Snow insisted, planning on giving the magical item back after they had some kind of real conversation. She felt like she was grasping at straws with her daughter and hoped that by quelling Emma’s ability to run for a few minutes by holding the spelled necklace they might be able to get somewhere.

“I told you I don’t want to talk right now. We will, but not right now.” Panic hitting. “I want my necklace...” Voice cracking as her hands found her throat. It was a security of sorts, a gift from her Keeper and right now the only way to get Regina to know where she was.

“Hey, it’s okay Emma. I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to talk and spend time with you.” Softening and now concerned that her plan might not be the best course of action when she saw the girl begin to get teary.

Little thoughts and emotions took over. “I wanna leave now. I wanna go home.” Wiggling out, Emma’s feet found the floor and rushed the door. She jumped, trying to catch the top bolt, fingers just shy of reaching it. She eyed her jacket with her phone in pocket; also too high up.

Heart ripping in half. “This will always be your home too, Emma. With David, Neal, and I... We miss you and love you so--”

Emma spun around, back against the door as tears fell. “If you love me so much then let ME GO!” A foot stomped and stilled, but wanted to stomp again. If Snow saw her as the upset child she now was then was no way she was getting out of there soon. Fists wiped her eyes and she took a deep breath, back straight, fighting to hang onto her adult rational thoughts. Also trying to remember what she’d been taught. Regina’s soothing tenor washed through her mind.

“You always have the right, without putting conditions on others, to politely ask for or state what you need. Others cannot understand or make amends or fix what they are unaware of.’

A hard lesson at the time of learning it and one she’d been taught well. So she did. “Please let me go.”

Emma didn’t just mean literally, but of the version of her inside Snow’s head that didn’t exist. Breathing became harder, the adult bravado slipping away. Walls moved and she grew hot, skin beginning to itch beneath cotton. The feeling of being trapped stirred resting dark memories of the past and these were waking up.

Silence and a break. “You are a part of this family Emma. Always, but if that is what...” Snow slowed her approach when she saw that little chest rise and fall quickly. “Are you okay?”

“Noooo.” Drops of sweat began at her hairline. The urge to move compounded and yet she was frozen. “I n-need Gina.” She knew what this was, these feelings popping inside, and they terrified her. She had a minute, TWO at most before they took her completely away. Lips parted, sucking hot air in to try and calm the nausea boiling in her stomach. The start of a trigger hurt like hell as her little body stiffened, tight like a rubber band stretched to near breaking.

“I’m here for you too.” Snow tried her own hurt surfacing.

Over the fact that her daughter, her little princess, wanted, maybe even needed, another woman’s love. That punched Snow in the gut and she curled in on herself slightly with realization; this is what Regina must have felt with Henry after the curse broke. Understanding of that pain and what it meant stilled something inside of her. In that moment she knew what she was doing with Emma, to Emma, was not the way to get her daughter back.

Snow wasn’t here, not in the way Emma needed her to be, not yet. And in this moment, through no fault other than hers, was the Queen. Panic snapped her spine, turning muscles loose and Emma bolted for the bathroom; the one room in the loft she knew had a lock. Her sweaty fingers struggled to twist the latch securing her inside, the clicking bringing brief peace and giving her the space from Snow’s eyes she needed to try to breathe.

But she couldn’t.

Snow’s incessant knocking and pleas for understanding didn’t help her calm down anymore than not having her necklace to palm or the closed space did. The door between them helped give her the feeling of control when she felt anything but. It also created another problem entirely; she was trapped and she had done it to herself. Desperate to run and hide, it now dawned where she was. Like the closets she’d been shoved in or the most damning, a cabinet.

The cabinet.

Thoughts pulsed in a blonde head. It had been more of a linen pantry in a bathroom of a former
foster home like she was in now. No, not here now. That was before Emma. Not right now. It was an accident Emma had said before, no it really was her lips pleaded now. Broken not breaking, something belonging to a foster mother. A necklace, like hers was now broken.

Emma is in the cabinet breaking apart inside.

She begged the woman on the other side of the door to let her go. Or tried. Her words blurring with other much louder ones pleading on the other side of the door. To open the door she now clawed at. Little nails had ripped in the past and again as they did now. Splinters under them for her efforts. Something sharp in the present cut Emma’s finger and she jerked back out of the past.

Emma blinked and looked at her hands. Little hands like before and now this moment red and shaking, a single finger tip bleeding. Blood rolling to flood her palm.

Time fell away as the past took over pinching behind green eyes and surrounding her lungs, squeezing as her vision blurred. Emma stumbled back to the only place farthest from the door, the bath tub, she closed the curtain as a cover, hugging her knees as sobs started. In that moment she couldn’t separate herself from the memory; what was real right now and the past eclipsed, tugging her mind apart.

“Emma! I’m sorry! Please open the door. I’ll give you your necklace… It was an accident… I didn’t mean… “Tears of longing and regret hit the wood floor on the other side of the door; new knowledge of the real barrier between them a great weight. “I didn’t know. Emma…”

Those wet words fell on little deaf ears, already full with cries. The stress of the last few weeks finally caught up then and Emma’s little shoulders shook violently at the mess she was in and the lack of a way out. All adult rationale was gone at the moment. Gasping as she began drowning in a full ocean of emotions too big for her to handle and was left with the single desire she voiced before her throat closed to words.

“I w-want my M-mama!”

The knocking stilled abruptly and a blonde head popped up at the sound of silence.

“I’m right here.” A sweet plea for acceptance.

Vertigo pumped black water from emeralds.

Not said with open knowing arms or the parted red lips of a life jacket to rescue. Emma’s crying intensified as she spiraled down into the whirlpool of her core at a sickening speed. Bile crested and lips vomited lunch pushing her back to the surface for air. She cried harder still before another wave crashed against her face. The rock of despair chained to her ankle forced her under, but the buoy of hope, of a promise, kept her lips above the waterline. A few minutes later as waves tossed her about another much deeper voice came rolling through the loft, her ears buzzed with the echo of her own wails as the door to the bathroom was forced open. Green hope met pacific blue and couldn’t tell who they belonged to, but she knew who they didn’t belong to, so she screamed, beginning to drown all over again...

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A/N - Thoughts?

Next time - Emma is brought out of her trigger and the pieces are picked up. Regina makes a promise to Snow. A set back for Emma ensues and David gets a new understanding.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A/N - Aftermath of the trigger, some healing, but the road is still curved ahead. Last chapter was the bottom of the Snow barrel, time to climb out - for both of them. Happy ending for all at end of story is still my goal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regina tapped her pen in annoyance as she listened to the repetitive drivel out of the mouth of the newest elected councilman. Brown eyes flicked to the clock and back to his slow mouth. Unlike the other returning members of the council since the most recent election, one she went unchallenged in yet again for her efficiency in running the town after so many years, he had yet to learn that she preferred concise and to the point updates on the departments he oversaw. She offered a patient nod as he wrapped up a particularly long point and the flash of her phone caught her eye. Before the spell she was never one to keep it on the table near a quick hand in meetings, but since returning home it had become a necessary habit. David's SOS text followed by Emma’s name flashing across the screen had her jerking out of her chair while simultaneously adjourning the meeting, phone ringing before she could swipe to call him.

Words from the Deputy arrived jumbled in ear; strangling racing thoughts as the familiar wailing of a child, of Emma—her girl, cantononed in the background. Red lips asked, “Is she hurt?” As heels jogged.

The answer Regina received said not in that way, but in a way that still had a hand grabbing a purse and a rush to a car that wouldn’t go fast enough. Thoughts of posting came and left; she could, but would be in no condition physically to help Emma upon arrival from the strain of that complexity. Lights, cars, and people blocked her from one purpose. Too many; brake-beats, door-beats, running-beats, stair-beats to another little heart beating on the other side of a door her fist pounded on. One that David opened.

The man paled at what he saw in russet depths; well kept fire fueled by fear snapping to break a chain held by love. He had seen that look in Regina’s eyes a few times, whenever he’d felt Henry had been threatened before and after the curse breaking. The Queen was riding the dark edge of her nature; for a brief moment it flashed teeth at him, assessing him as a threat before it was hidden away again. Anxious, but knowing eyes appeared after another blink and David immediately began sputtering.

“Emma came here to get a file I forgot about, shrank and locked herself in the bathroom. I broke the lock when I got here and heard her crying, but she only screamed louder when I tried to get near to help her, worse the closer I got so I backed off. She doesn’t recognize me.”

Regina slipped into the loft around David, clear now in his sincerity he had no role in whatever this was. Dark eyes brushed over, then through, assessing a very white Snow sitting well outside of the bathroom door on the floor and Regina turned sharply to move that way as another sob broke the second of quiet. Purse slipped a shoulder, landing at heels that paused at the door frame; a parking brake against a hammering heart at the sight. Emma lay curled up in the bottom of the tub in a fetal position, shaking with the signs of sickness clinging to clothing and hair. That tangled blonde hair puffed up and down over a little mouth. Much too quickly.

“Emma…” Her voice slipped in between the breath of little cries, soft verging on inaudible, but enough to break the spell that wet eyes opened. Green hidden by swelling red. Careful to move toward the girl slowly until full recognition took place, least the attack began anew.

“Ma-ma?” Small cracking in the middle of missed comfort as another wave of gasps came on without the sobs from before.

“Ma-ma?” Small cracking in the middle of missed comfort as another wave of gasps came on without the sobs from before.

“I’m right here, baby.” Title quickened Regina to kneel next to the tub, a hand reaching to smooth back damp curls and she turned halfway to David waiting restlessly in the door frame, though not breaking eye contact with the child when little hands took hers in a vice. “I need a cup of water and a wet cloth.” Her eyes caught red streaks against white plaster and swallowed hard. “And a first aid kit.”

Grateful for direction and anything to help calm down his daughter David hurried off. He returned with the items to see that in the half minute he was gone, the Queen had gotten Emma to sit up in the tub. The girl appeared to be choking on words as speech tried to come forth from stuttering lips. Careful to move toward the girl slowly until full recognition took place, least the attack began anew.

“No words, just breathing baby.” After a quick, but through assessment Regina noted where the blood was coming from and wound tissues from the counter top around the bleeding finger, applying pressure as she moved to remedy the hyperventilating. She was purposely slow in her speech. “Nod if you feel my hand.” Placed over a little thundering chest. “Put yours on my heart.” One step directions to distract and calm as blood stained her blouse. “We are going to breathe, just like we practiced. In for five and out for five.” Modeling and encouraging the girl to mimic the pattern.
It took a few rounds for Emma to find her breath, the fist she held over her Keeper’s steady rhythm slowly opened, returning color to white knuckles. Panic attacks were rare and she hadn’t had since early on in the spell of their other life. Regina insisted on practicing a calming routine very first time, years ago when one had been witnessed, at the time the royal had been inexperienced on how to best help her. When Emma was an adult these were more easily managed, but one accompanied with a trigger was something else entirely. And at six the combined experience was daunting.

‘Damn.’ David thought as he marveled at their exchange, how quickly Emma calmed under those hands. He startled when Snow’s arm carefully, almost in question of being wanted, brushed against his. Quick to tuck his wife under his free arm in answer, he pulled her close. Together they continued to watch, transfixed.

“Slower for this last set, in through your nose and out through your mouth.”

After another minute of focused breath work, Regina lifted Emma out of the tub to stand, wobbly legged in front of where she knelt. Brown eyes flicked over the couple. Finding blue she gestured for the cloth with one hand, keeping the other firmly on Emma to give the girl an anchor. Taking the washcloth, she turned back to wipe the snot, tears, and traces of sickness from the pink little face. Reaching again for the water, she held it to wanting lips.

“How did you know what to do, at first I meant?” David whispered, loud in the calm suddenly engulfing them all. His mind swirled with the transformation from hysterical child to passive one in awe. He had experience with Neal’s nightmares, tears, and tantrums, but nothing even close to this, to this level of pain coming from his daughter.

“Small sips… Good girl.”

Water dribbled down the girl’s chin after several swallows. Regina set the cup aside to open the first aid kit at her feet where David had set it. She shifted, kneeling up on one knee and used the other as a makeshift bench for Emma to lean against. Her arm was a steady support behind a little back as she used both hands to begin cleaning a little hand. Concern grew when green eyes watched passively as dried blood was wiped away revealing a pale palm and when the child didn’t pull away from the alcohol wipe that followed. A clear look at the cut on a finger had her heart sinking. It would need a few stitches, but the child in her arms could not handle that idea at all. Emma hated hospitals and doctors on a good day. Taking her now would only induce trauma. A fine stream of purple sparkles closed the deep cut enough so stitches wouldn’t be needed as a wave of nausea ebbed at her gut, use of healing magic surely the cause of that and a headache that would rip at her skull later. Wonder and a quick look around the space gave no indication as to exactly what the cut came from, metal of some kind to be sure. Regina made a mental note to check Emma’s medical file for the last time a Tetanus shot had been had, hoping that wasn’t needed, and even so that could wait a day or two. As a band-aid was applied, Emma immediately put the freshly wrapped finger near red lips, which kissed in return before moving to a now very pale cheek to match the affection. The little girl fell quiet and exhausted into the Queen, hiding in dark hair. The room was too full of eyes watching. Emma was simply held; hair stroked, ears listening, spirit feeling the murmuring of reassurances.

Regina realized too, Emma was unaware of words passing and only of the heart beating against an ear. David needed to fully understand the connection; theirs. Maybe then he could help Snow comprehend what was refusing to be seen so this wouldn’t happen again. Keeping her promise from a few days ago, she took the reins from little hands that could not hold them at the moment. Speaking for Emma was not something she took lightly and she was careful with her next words.

“The trigger is also why she did not recognize you, both of you at a point. She couldn’t, not when she is this size and was so deeply lost in it. ‘The Queen answered just as quiet and stood with the little girl nestled against her hip.

“More details, a few missing ones that seemed to be hiding anyway, were needed before they could leave and she could even approach the idea of giving this experience words with her girl.

Regina adjusted her arms when the little body in them went ridged at that name. Wanting nothing more than to just take Emma home, but the child Emma was fully now could not verbalize just yet. More details, a few missing ones that seemed to be hiding anyway, were needed before they could leave and she could even reach for giving this experience words with her girl.
apart when her jacket came off and I...” Fumbling under the eyes studying her, feeling for just a moment, like a young girl again when she’d done something wrong under them. Regina had held her a few times early on in their relationship, the same way that those arms now held Emma in another world before things, people, and choices fractured them. Then something else was looking at her, into her and she stumbled with the recognition. “I was wrong, I just wanted to talk to her and I’m trying to reconnect with her... I didn’t know she... I’m so sorry, I had no idea what I did would cause this until it was too late. I never would...” Snow snuggled her hands.

Emma’s accusing hiccup broke in unexpectedly. “Si-hee m-my neck... w-wouldn’t let... give it or let me g-go... Wor-ra g-go hooome.”

Red. The Queen’s eyes flashed red. At Snow’s words. At the pain within whimpering ones uttered at her neck. Room buzzed with one vibrating color. Red she bathed in for a few hot beats as she straining chain holding the door shut within her mind cracked. Closing her eyes to the room painted with her anger, nose filled with blonde melon and cinnamon, giving the chain enough slack so she could close the door to clear thinking.

At one point she would have done anything she could to get close to her son again after their rift before and after the curse broke. She had done selfish, hurtful things, blinded by desire for her son, her child to want, even need her again. Fortunately, the woman she was at the time had realized what she’d been doing to Henry, but not without great cost to that relationship and years of a hot and cold ache between them. Emma had been their bridge to healing as she now was between Princess and Savior. There was only so much she could help them through, both had to take the walk across the planks she set down. Willing to walk and with little feet dangling from a board of trust ripped away by Snow’s hand, the bridge would break with the next.

Regina knew this incident was the final line before Emma would pull completely away from Snow’s attempts; the thread between mother and daughter, the last trusted one of white spider silk on what was now a black poisoned web would dissolve beyond repair. Opening her eyes to the Princess was like looking into a mirror of the past, Snow’s eyes screamed understanding, screamed promises to do better, and for one more chance tord so. Red lips parted to breathe, to center, and settle. Instead of ripping out the bobbing throat in front of her, as a dark but primal instinct to protect the one in her arms was pushing her to do. Regina forced calm into her veins, waiting for it to reach her heart, and frame her voice before speaking. The child whispered in her arms, seeming to sense the tension in the room, but once again was lost to the words about to fill it.

“Not your best move, Snow, and one of many you seem to keep making.” A pause of grit in a royal threat. “But ones I all too well understand as you now seem to and for that, I will walk away. This one last time.” Appraising the Princess. “I promise you I will not walk away, however, if there is another and I will have words with you.” The little girl wiggled in her arms and she ran a hand down golden curls stilling the child. “She is everything and there can be no more selfish or self righteous attempts like this. You will lose her, not David or Neal, you. By her choice and there will be nothing more I can do or say to change her mind... and I will not try to again if that comes to be. Am I clear?”

A gift.

White lips parted. A sniff and a knowing shudder. “Yes. It won’t ever happen again. I promise.”

A deserved line and a boundary Snow wouldn’t cross, not again, and not just for who and what would be waiting on the other side to consume her. She understood there was no further room for errors, none that would be forgiven.

The Queen nodded once. “We are leaving right now.” She shifted Emma into one arm and held out her hand expectantly to Snow. A few moments later the broken silver chain and pendent rested in her palm. She pocketed it and summoned her purse to her shoulder.

“Let me know if I can do anything.” David reached out passively, processing the Queen’s promise and his wife’s.

“You called me and that is enough for the present moment.” Regina rested eyes once more on the cracking face of the Princess.

A decade ago she had been swallowed by the same pain she saw in those eyes and there had been no one to help pull her out of the throat of darkness after she’d lost Henry’s trust, until Emma stepped up. For Emma and Snow to have a chance at healing the melting mess in the pot of past and present, the breaking woman against the wall needed glue quickly. Regina gave David thankful eyes, seeing him torn between wife and daughter.

“Snow needs you. Take care of her.” When he shifted in his wife’s direction she added. “I know you will take careful care of her just as I will of Emma.” The Queen promised, stopping at the loft door to wrap a red leather jacket around little shoulders and giving a small gift to the man on behalf of the child in her arms that couldn’t for his help today. “She will not be at the station in the morning regardless of what size she wakes up to be. There are the weekly files she was supposed to bring home today I still need to look over. Bring them by my office sometime tomorrow and I’ll give you an update on how Emma is doing.”

Emma squeezed heels into her Keeper’s hips at her name as one would a horse to urge it along. “Hoomie n-now!” The demand gained gentle pats to her bottom under the Queen’s hand. Emma
tucked her face deeper into the warmth of a neck at that soft comfort as they moved out to the car. More tears fell at the loss of contact during the ride home, but the humming from the front seat settled nerves enough to get them both through the drive and into the safety of the mansion.

Regina carried the little Savior right upstairs into the bathroom and managed to get Emma washed up from being sick and dressed in a swan print PJ set. After a quick change of her blouse with the wave of a hand and she led the girl into the lavender room. Coxing of liquid Tylenol into a pink mouth came next without the usual fuss it used to have, further indication of how tired Emma was, to ease the ache in strained muscles and in small red hands. They lay together on the white bed with Emma’s back nestled against her chest as sleep took the child to rest and a new pain settled behind dark brows.

With the girl in dreams, good ones she hoped, Regina allowed her mind to begin processing what had happened with Snow, the triggered panic attack, and what may yet come from it in the blooming headache at her brow. The little girl the Savior was emotionally had taken over that day in the trigger. They had much to talk about when Emma awoke, but for now she let her mind wander amid thoughts. It was an hour long wandering and close to six o’clock when little green eyes finally cracked.

Emma yawned, rosebud mouth stretched, and turned over to snuggle into the arms holding her. “Hi Mama.” Small and sleepy.

“Hi baby.” Smiling in welcome. “How are you feeling?”

A tummy growled. “Hungry, but I’m comfy.”

“I see that. How about I make your favorite for dinner and some of that soup you like so much?”

Emma licked her lips. “Tomato basil?”

“With the cream topping, too.”

A small grin. Then Emma blinked.

Grin stolen by a bigger frown as the fullness of self awareness came back. She twitched as if waking again as the day ran through her mind and the realization that she’d lost time in the bathroom loft up until this point. A memory she should have, wasn’t there. Her finger hurt, all of her nail beds pulsed. Her throat felt raw like she’d screamed at some point… The rough morning they’d had also knocked against her teeth and it was there her thoughts sat when she didn’t have words for anything else.

Regina leaned up, using her elbow as a brace when she saw clarity mixed with confusion in Emma’s full return to the present. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Green blurred. “I was awful to you this morning. I’m sorry for being a brat. For sassing. I did what you said though and taught Will how to do some of the reports.” Biting her lip, hoping that was enough to be forgiven.

Of all the places Emma could have started, this was the furthest from Regina’s mind, but it mattered to Emma in this moment, so she joined her. “You were not brat. Cheeky, but not a brat.” Sitting up fully and pulling the small girl up with her. “I think the stress of the last week and a half since being home had something to do with it, yes?”

“Yeah. The back and forth is hard.” More than just the shifts she realized, but the sudden polarities of her parents, mainly of Snow. Agreeing as her feet found the floor and her hand was taken, Emma followed her Keeper downstairs and into the kitchen.

“What would make it easier on you?” Running a thumb over a small hand.

Emma shrugged as she hopped up onto a stool and watched as ingredients for their meal were pulled out of the fridge. “Being able to control the shrinking, but that doesn’t seem possible anymore.” A hand went longingly to her throat, seeking the comfort of her necklace.

“I have it here.” Regina rounded the counter, fishing the silver out of her pocket. Purple mist surrounded the chain, repairing the clasp and she fastened it on the child. She added a small protection spell so it would not ever break again, doing the same to the charm bracelet in the same breath. More ache at the base of her skull and her stomach, for her effort. Eating would not be ease tonight.

“Thanks.” Whispering as little hands caught the Queen’s before they left her shoulders. “I blacked out Gina… back at the loft. I panicked when she wouldn’t let me leave.”
“What happened exactly?” Massaging the tension away as Emma told her about David forgetting
the files and going to the loft, shrinking and going to summon, but getting distracted. Then the
feeling of a trigger starting, then nothing, but black.

“I remember going into the bathroom and locking myself in, and then just flashes.”

“If you are able to give any of those flashes words, something you saw or heard, maybe smelled.”
Any clue to what memory sent the little one spiraling would be the tool to start putting the girl
back together.

Curls shook, eyes dropping to hands and then her nostrils flared. “Wood polish. Maybe.”

Regina moved her hands down little arms and cupped Emma’s pink ones, the child suddenly
fixed on them. “And these? Do you know how your hands got this way?” Little finger tips had
started to bruise.

“I felt trapped so maybe I tried to get out?” Uncertain, brain hurting. “I cried for you.”
Knowing that much. “Then I don’t… Then you were there and we were leaving and then we
were talking about the soup.” Emma shook her head, dipping her chin to wipe her cheek against
her sleeve. “I should have summoned you right away and none of this would have happened. I’m
sorry…”

Shaking her head at where that blonde head went. “I’m not mad Emma or upset with you in
anyway.” Regina stood and turned the stool to face her, catching a wobbling chin. “Not one little
bit, do you hear me?”

Emma sniffed, chewing her lip. “But I was mean this morning and at the loft I didn’t listen to
summon right away. I wanted to and…” Words got lost.

“You meant to listen and I know that Snow can be off-putting when you are upset, especially
when you are small and your emotions are harder to control. You can not help triggers or a panic
attack, baby.”

“But…”

“No buts. You did nothing wrong, my sweet girl. You are not in any kind of trouble.” The Queen
accepted little arms around her waist and after a long moment gently redirected, sensing
understanding was close to the surface. “You said you felt trapped, wood polish, crying for me.
Your hands look like you were… Emma?” Questioning as she watched a tear of clarity fall, one
that cut her heart for the pain it held.

“I was in the… cabinet or thought I was… I think. I wanted to get out and I tried to.” Looking at
her hands and fisting them.

Regina remembered when Emma had shared that memory in their other life just as she was sure
Emma did now when their eyes met. She’d just taken Emma from a bath and they had been sitting
in the rocker getting ready to read when it just came spilling out, no reason or prompt to cause the
story but a simple trusting moment to share a memory. There had been no preparing for it, but
Regina, mistress of masks, had kept hers in place that day much like she did now as little lips
spoke and little eyes cried.

Her first response upon hearing about the cabinet several months ago in their spelled life and the
foster mother who had put Emma in that confined space as a punishment for a day, was to use her
influence and physical strength to find the fiend that had done that. Visions of bones breaking
came to her mind, but they would oh so slowly and with calculated precision to cause the most
pain. Tools she would have used; a hammer and a knife, tar to stop one from bleeding out, and a
few days would be enough to extract the price of pain from that beast who called herself a mother,
foster or not. Her darkness that led to violence, to cause harm to someone who had hurt the one
she loved, was not a door she closed easily that day or now as the memory resurfacd. It was
something she would always fight to push down; it was in her nature and the balance of light, her
ability to love and be loved, kept her from going hunting that day.

Regina revealed nothing in her eyes but that love, darkness at full bay. “That must have been
terrifying for you to re-experience.”

A nod. “It was, but I don’t remember all of it. Just the pieces I said.”

“That is perhaps a gift.” The brunette thought and now they could move away from it together
now knowing what had started the trigger within panic.
“Mama?”

“Yes baby?”

After a deep breath, nose filling with apple vanilla, “I had hot chocolate without asking.” Green met brown, needing something light and done with the harder talk for now. One she knew would continue another time.

Small knowing smile. “You did?” Then feigning shock. “Was it good?”

“Not as good as when you make it?” Question with a willing grin.

“We will have to test that theory after dinner.” Red lips found a damp cheek.

“Yes please.” Finding peace in that kiss for now.

Later that night after Regina put Emma to bed, not an easy task nor one not fought after the stress of the day, the Queen spent several hours combing through what magical books she kept in the study. They were mostly factual ones about the inner workings of magic and its properties rather than spells. Desire to give her swan some sense of stability and control over the shifts that, while welcome for the experience Emma wasn’t ready to let go of, put the girl in uncomfortable situations and potentially harmful ones. That outweighed the one she had for sleep at the moment. The random shifts also further delayed their progress to get back into a much needed routine. One Emma had come to rely on in their other life to manage her emotions and stress. She didn’t want anything like today to happen again, sensing that there would be a setback they were likely to experience in the morning for the intensity the trigger caused today.

Swirling the shot of cider in a low ball crystal, her mind wandered briefly to the people who had been helpful upon their return. Archie, Ruby and Granny along with Ashley had been kind and considerate of Emma. David too, in his own thoughtful way and Snow… Snow was starting to try, but failed today, though she didn’t think the Princess would so drastically again. That situation needed her attention as well as this one. She sighed at that monumental task. Taking a small sip to clear her head, she continued moving through the musty pages.

It was near midnight when Regina promised herself she would turn in that one page in particular that caught her eye. She read it twice and then summoned the Storybook that Henry had left in his room and one that hadn’t been touched in years. Running her fingers across that dusty leather cover brought a mix of memories. Rather than sit in them, she thumbed through the book looking for one particular story and after reading it had a theory on a way for Emma to have some control over her own shifts. Tabbing the page with a bookmark and after making a few notes, she closed the book and rubbed her face briskly.

An appointment with Gold was in order. She’d have to try and time it right with Emma’s shifts, hoping to be able to do it while Emma was an adult, but that might not be able to be helped. Now that she had a promising theory to work towards to help her girl it was time to let the Imp know she was on to his game while she continued to play one of her own behind his back.

Much more research, crafting, and testing would have to be done before she was certain, but her theory just might work. Emma would be elated when she heard, but that thought quickly left, some doubt about how accurate her thought was crept in. If she was wrong that dashed hope would wreck the blonde, especially now, yet she knew Emma held on to hope like a toddler did a security blanket. It was an endearing strength, but sometimes a devastating one to have. She decided to keep her theory quiet for now, like she had done with the do over spell until she was 100% certain it could be done before she had shared that with the Savior.

Also, more so now since their journey, to protect the little heart she was responsible for beating upstairs. One that belonged to a pair of wet green eyes apparently not in bed and instead watching her from the doorway of the study, a fist clenched Stitchy’s blue fur and another dragged a blanket behind little feet coming her way. Emma crawled up into her lap, sitting breath to breath, and sleep soon found the little one in her arms. Save for the Keeper and Mother now one, framed within the glow from the hearth and shadows cast by the master of night that was far away from her closing eyes.

Regina knew the moment her eyes opened to wide green ones staring at her in the master suite the next morning what kind of day it was going to be. The six year old body Emma was in lay right on top of her, a little knee pressed uncomfortably into her stomach, and she noticed a thumb firmly in mouth. She expected it due to the trauma of yesterday and still she wondered at the shift in her girl, realizing again this wasn’t one Emma had control of. One thought they would be talking about at length when Emma was able to be an adult again, in mind if not when her body grew. The Savior appeared to be deep inside that blonde head and this child version looking at her was not playing, nor acting. For now Regina went with what her girl needed and little body or not, that was Mama.

“Good morning, sweet one.” Kissing a little nose and gently pulling the thumb from a puckered mouth. She didn’t mind the habit Emma sought for comfort on occasion, but could tell by the cramped hand that it had been in place far too long. “How does an apple cinnamon pancake for breakfast sound?”
Quietly. “In my tummy.”

“This tummy?” Brief tickling hands earned a watery grin that didn’t reach green eyes, but little arms did reach around her neck as she sat up.

Emma was clingy, edging on disagreeable, and quiet the rest of the morning during breakfast, but Regina was patient and thoughtful with her words and expectations. The girl was fully gone in her experience; no sign of the adult mind she still possessed even in the little body was present. It reminded Regina of the shifts that used to occur between little and big Emma when the two halves had epic battles for dominance in their other life and she wondered if something similar was happening now.

The girl attempted to eat the pancake and berries as Regina summoned and skimmed Emma’s medical file, grateful that Tetanus was up to date and shot for the cut wouldn’t be needed. A wave of her hand sent the file away and she sipped her coffee as the child mashed the pancake with a fork. After yesterday the girl had eaten very little at dinner and though worried, the Queen understood why, but when hands pushed a full plate away now she set down her mug with growing concern.

“Would you like me to make you something else?”

Curls shook and a chin dropped to the counter.

“How about some of the coco-puffs you love so much?” A brow wrinkled when the offer of Emma’s favorite sugary cereal was met with another head shake. “You need something in your stomach baby.”

“Not hungry.”

Those words never came from that mouth and worry filled her all over again. A hand grazed a brow automatically for a fever that didn’t exist. “Are you feeling sick to your stomach?”

A shrug.

“How about a smoothie?” Regina’s offer earned a considerate head tilt, then nothing. A sigh. “A popsicle, at least?” There were some of the Pedialyte ones that would give some electrolytes and a few calories Emma needed. She’d insisted on getting those along with the children’s Tylenol at the grocery store a few days ago when they had went just in case.

Emma lifted her chin up an inch in thought. “Grape?”

Hopeful. “Whatever flavor you want.”

A sniff. “I’ll try.”

Regina quickly prepped the frozen treat, pulling the wrapper aside to give to Emma. The child sucked on it and the Queen went to clear the breakfast plates, happier when five minutes later another was requested. As the second one was consumed she went to mix a berry smoothie in one of Emma’s travel cups for later along with a few more popsicles in a small cooler to take with them to Town Hall. When she suggested Emma go up to dress a few minutes later the only answer was two arms shooting up in her direction. She carried the girl upstairs, offering choices on clothing that were met with blinking green eyes without words. So she chose a red sweater and legging combo she knew Emma liked, hands tying last purple converse on feet. Something seemed to snap in Emma when those shoes found the floor.

“I don’t wanna go anywhere please Mama.”

The longest sentence said that morning was the most cutting. “I know baby, but it can’t be helped. I have to go to the office today. Tomorrow we can stay home, just you and me.” Several deadlines rested in her hands this morning before the looming of winter break ahead when Town Hall would be shut down. As expected tearful whining ensued.

“But I want you and home!” A stomping demand. “Now Mama!”

Patient, but firm. “None of that tone and still those feet.” Softer. “You will have me baby and we will bring some of home with us today: your blanket, Stitchy and Wonder Woman, too.”
Emma seemed to warm to that idea and lost most of her pout. “You’ll stay with me?”

“You can play right by my side at the desk.”

Thoughtful. “You’ll play with me, too?”

“Some, yes. Mama has to get a few things done though so we can have the whole day together tomorrow. Let’s pack up those things I mentioned.”

She summoned a red tote they had been using to carry items when Emma had been small and the girl helped gather the things she wanted to take. At the promise of proximity and of tomorrow the girl relaxed enough to accept the smoothie to drink in the car on the way. Stomach full and happier than she had been Emma sat on her blanket and played next to the desk Regina occupied.

The Queen decided to forgo requiring Emma to practice in the workbook like she usually did when the Savior was this size, enjoying the closeness of the child as she handled the calls and paperwork of the town. Near noon, she took a break to color with Emma and a half hour later just after she was redirecting the girl’s attention to a basket of blocks so she could order in lunch, Ashley’s voice came over the intercom, announcing the Deputy’s arrival. A glance at Emma, who was now beginning to build a block town, seemed unfazed by the interruption and she stood from her desk to meet him at the door of the office.

David knocked twice before opening the door and held up the files in his hand. “I brought these by like you asked.” His eyes caught a brief glimpse of the child’s body his daughter still appeared to be in over the Mayor’s shoulder. “How is she?”

“Quiet and still processing, but she will be alright in another day or so.” Regina accepted the files and followed the Deputy’s eyes to the little girl.

“Can I say hi to her?” Hesitant when the Queen’s eyes assessed him thoroughly.

When she’d made the offer yesterday for him to ask after Emma, Regina had not meant it as an invitation to engage, right away at least, given the extremes of yesterday and the girl’s current emotional state. Still, he was trying. Maybe Emma needed him too now. She saw the surprise she caused in his face by walking over to the child.

“Emma would you like to say hello to David?”

Green eyes leapt up from a fantasy and with a tight arm around Stitchy, she in turn surprised them all by accepting her Keeper’s hand and following heels toward the man. She waved shyly, leaning heavily into the hip next to her cheek as David knelt down.

“Hi Emma…” Unsure for a moment at how to talk to the child his daughter clearly was in that moment. He hesitated, but went with it after an encouraging nod from the Queen. “Who is your friend?”

“Stitchy.”

“Like Lilo and Stitch?” His signature half grin appearing when the barest hint of a nod came from the little chin.

He knew the movie from when Neal had been this age and marveled at how both his children had found affection for it. That feeling welled in his throat and heart. He stood up, watching as Emma scampered back to a block town with toy in hand.

“She is still herself, just much younger at the moment.” Regina explained when his eyes questioned. “It is difficult to describe the exact intricacies of the side effect and how it affects her mind at times. We are still trying to figure it out, but it is becoming clear that she cannot control it all the time, like now.”

“I gathered that… I just never imagined seeing her this way. She’s so…”

“Free?”

“Yeah. That’s what she is.” His hand found the back of his neck, as it often did when he was thinking deeply. “That’s what it is isn’t it?”
Regina tilted her head. “What is that?”

“What she gets out of this… with you.”

“That is a question you’ll have to ask her.” Turning when she heard a little voice across the room. “What is it Emma?”

“Mama, I’m hungry.” Then unexpectedly. “Can David have lunch with us?”

Both brows rose with a smile, glad of the return of appetite and of speech. “If you would like, sweet one, and he is able to of course.” Returning her eyes to the stunned man in front of her.

David stumbled taking in the invitation and the word his daughter called the Queen. He remembered thinking he’d heard it yesterday in the loft, but in the commotion it never processed.

He swallowed. “I’d like that.”

Regina stepped back, allowing him into the office. Watching as he slowly approached the girl and sat on the carpet a good distance away, but close enough for Emma to shove her block basket his way. A small smile spread across full lips watching father and daughter interact, knowing this was a big step for both of them, and hopefully another towards healing the gap still between them. She called in lunch and by the time it arrived Emma lost her shyness and talked both their ears off between bites of food and a verbal prompt to not speak with her mouth full.

David was in a kind of heaven he never thought possible, precious and willing time with his daughter as a child. He took moments to note the tenderness in which the Queen cared for the girl, preparing the food for little hands to eat, the brush of a hand on a cheek, and the gentle correction of the girl’s manners; the fluid affection between them. It fully clicked what this was and what his daughter gained from the love and attention, longing to be a part of it, grateful that he was for the hour that included him that day.

He stood to clean up their lunch plates when he noticed Emma yawn and eye the couch with want, surprised when the girl offered no argument at the suggestion of a nap as Neal had often done at this age. Keeping himself occupied as his daughter was tucked in and kissed, he wondered if he or even Snow would be allowed the same opportunity one day. Brown eyes found his and flicked towards the door. He gathered his things and stepped out of the office with the Mayor.

“I didn’t think you’d say yes to her request for a moment there.” David’s grin though tight, held hope.

“For a moment neither did I.” Honest since he had been.

“Thank you and for more than just lunch.”

“Emma wanted it and I will not stand in the way of her desire to spend time with you or Snow when she is ready. It just surprised me, especially after the events of yesterday.”

“Still you could have said no.”

“I could have.” Not a threat, but simple fact when Emma was this size.

“So you are… I mean she called you…?”

“That was her choice of terms in our other life, yes and one that transferred here, especially on days like today.”

David licked his lips. “I’d like to spend more time with her regardless of her size, if she wants and when she is like this with your approval.” Starting to understand he may need just that and surprised to find he was grateful to the Queen for protecting his daughter at her most vulnerable.

“When she grows again, I will discuss it with her. Thank you for the files.”

He nodded, and with one more longing look at his daughter’s sleeping form, turned to go.
It was Friday night and the adult Emma was returned in size and mind upon waking that morning. They had both taken the day off work to rest and reconnect, cooking together, reading, watching movies and just talking. Emma was reminded of their life before the spell and was grateful for the closeness the day had brought them.

“Gina, I still can’t believe I did that!”

Emma hid pink face in her knees as she tightened her arms around them. The chuckle behind her and the brush running through her curls helped distract from her embarrassment. She nearly purred again as the bristles of the brush scratched her head as they sat in the master suite on the bed.

“You were quite adamant about him using, and I quote ‘the monster voice that Mama does’ when you gave him Stitchy to attack your block town.” A pillow was thrown over Emma’s shoulder, nearly catching the top of her head. “Almost, but not quite Miss Swan.”

Emma turned around, a smug look on her face. “I never miss twice.”

Wiggling fingers had every pillow on the bed magically soaring at the Queen, drowning the brunette against the headboard. Bravely she crawled up to the mountain of pillows and pulled one down to catch a tan flushed face.

“See I told ya.”

“Brat.” A breath blew dark hair off her face as Regina sat up, pushing the pillows away.

“Yes, always my brat.” Pulling the blonde close.

Emma sobered as she thought more about yesterday. “Gina, do you think he understood or that he thinks I’m weird for… you know.”

“I think he is trying to make sense of things and no, I do not sense that he finds your behavior strange, just not something he was prepared for. I also made it clear to him it was something you are not able to help.” Remembering the man’s request, Regina decided to open that door for discussion. “He is trying and expressed that he wants to spend time with you, if you want, no matter your size.”

Emma looked up through lashes. “What’d you say?”

“That I would talk to you about it when you grew. That is also your decision to make up to a point if you are small and I see a reason to postpone that request.”

Nodding in agreement. “I might want to try that again… spending time with him, but not by myself when I shrink. Not yet and not with Snow just now, anyway.”

“We will move at your pace. You just let me know when.”

Emma reached a hand up to play with the fine gold chain at her Keeper’s throat. “I didn’t mean to disappear yesterday. I was completely present mentally, but I couldn’t keep hold of my adult thoughts and emotions. I wasn’t pretending either, like I used to when we first got to our old life in the spell just to blend in. This was different. More like when the shifts between my two halves used to happen, expect now there is no internal voice from mini me I can talk to.”

Regina adjusted them both so she could see the pale face better. “You needed time in that the freedom that space allows you to get to.” Recalling how rapid the shifts used to be and when they finally go to the point where the little girl inside of Emma had control.

Emma blushed and sat up, crossing her legs with her back to the Queen. “Do you remember the first time I willingly went there, to that space and allowed mini me to completely take over?”

Full lips cracked a smile. “You had taken Jasper on a field trip from his tank and he nearly lost his head in the disposal.”

Green eyes peered back. “You didn’t even get upset at me.”
“How could I?” Leaning forward and resting her chin on the Savior's shoulder. “Your face and the ‘he jumped ship’ comment when I asked you what happened when you didn’t follow my instructions were priceless; the perfect combinations of mischief, hope, and need.”

“I don’t mind the shrinking, but I fight it when it’s so sudden. Maybe if I stop trying to fight it so much it will help stop the randomness of it or give me better control over it.” Yawning with a shrug, she turned to curl up against the pile of pillows.

“Perhaps.” Though Regina suspected differently. “We will talk more about that another time. For now it is time for sleep. I have a few early morning appointments in town.” She kissed the blonde’s cheek and moved across the room to the ensuite.

By the time she had completed her nightly routine, Emma was passed out on the far side of the bed. Shaking her head at the sweet sight, she draped a blanket over the slumbering form before climbing into bed. She summoned the magic book and notes she was using to work out her theory for Emma to be able to control some aspect of the shifts and worked for an hour before she came to a good stopping point.

Magic filled the air suddenly and she looked over seeing that the Savior was now six, sleep once again brought a shift. She made another note before closing the book. That meant a change of plans in the morning. Grabbing her phone off the nightstand she sent a text with a request to a mutual friend of theirs. As much as little eyes would plead with her in the morning Emma could not be with her, in either size, for the appointment she had in mind with Gold.

Chapter End Notes

A/N - I tried to get this chapter just right, so much to convey. Thoughts?

Next time - Emma's upset upon waking the next morning. Regina has a much needed chat with Gold and several things come to light. Twists and turns ensue. A flashback gives clarity on one of them and begs another question entirely. Emma gets a welcomed surprise and realizes the possibility of something she's been missing.
Chapter Notes

A/N- For this A/U plot please try to ignore what you know about the town line (except that it takes people's memories) before it was destroyed. I've made adjustments to that plotline and in general about Gold's journey out of darkness. In this fic the town line was destroyed two years ago and under different circumstances/terms. It'll make sense at the end of this chapter.

Lots more little Emma to come and something else is hinted at I'm curious to see if you figure out what it means in the conversation with Gold.

Thanks as always for your comments and those that voted on the poll. Results are in and Ruby will seek Regina's and Emma's support to come out of the closet and tell Granny. I appreciate you all. Before you enjoy chapter 10, check out the story's new write up, in case you missed it below.

'When the author of The Do Over spell makes himself known as a threat Emma and Regina's relationship is pushed to the ultimate limits; lines are drawn, must tested, love questioned and all caused by a twisted game of words, a proposed deal, and a promise made by the author. Will a unique bond forged in another life and in their real one be enough to see them through?'

It was supposed to be magic in her mouth. That's what the box said. Supposed to bring a smile to her face like the stupid bird and the poster child in the picture, but the bobbing chocolate orbs forming sweet milk in Emma's favorite yellow bowl was not bringing the smile it normally would. She scowled into her cereal, taking the last bite and stirring what was left of the milk with a little finger complete with band-aid, eying the brunette for a reaction. She didn't want to be in trouble, but she also didn't want those eyes off of her.

Regina didn't disappoint. "Emma." She pulled the bowl away, reaching for a small hand to remove the stuck band-aid. "You are still healing. Do you want an infection?"

Eyes rolled dramatically. "If it means you'll stay with me this morning, then bring on Gangrene." Grumbling under her breath as she was lifted off the stool and instructed to wash her hands. She half expected a swat for her less than agreeable attitude all morning up until this point, but none was given. Emma sighed a minute later as a new band-aid with Neosporin was put on after her hands were dried. The sweet milk she tainted was poured down the drain as she hopped back up on her stool.

Epic loss.

"I don't need a sitter. Just take me with you. Please?" Emma begged, little hands clasped over the plate of cut up banana still in her place. Pout returned full force as it had at hearing the agenda for the day upon waking. Deep down she knew Regina would take her with if it was possible and she wondered at the nature of the appointment her Keeper had that made it so she could not go.

"Baby, I told you I cannot take you with me this morning. I know you do not like that idea and quite frankly I do not either, but sometimes this will be unavoidable." It pained her to see the glare that followed her words on that little face. "I will be one hour, tops and I trust Ruby and Granny with you or would you rather I ask David?"

"I'm not ready for that yet." Sulking even as she eyed the box of chocolate cereal still on the counter, now she understood had been a gesture meant to ease their conversation over being left that morning.

"I thought as much." Finishing her coffee, and eying the blonde's lack of enthusiasm. "When I pick you up at the diner later we will go to the park. How does that sound?"

A little nose twitched. "Like a bribe."

"Did it work?"

"Kinda..." Small smile before the scowl returned, remembering she was supposed to be annoyed with her Keeper. "But Mama... I still want to go with you. Why can't I?"

"There is something I am working on, a surprise, I want to keep a surprise for a bit longer and the main reason is personal, which I will share with you once I know more about it and I am certain of some things." The first would take but minutes, the latter needed her complete focus without having to worry about the child's safety.

Two appointments then. Emma vaguely remembered Regina saying such before she'd fallen asleep last night. "Ugh! That doesn't tell me anything and I hate not knowing stuff." She pushed her plate away and dropped her head on the counter.

Wrapping an arm around those little shoulders, the Queen gently turned Emma's face toward her. "Do you remember when you asked me the first time about the price I paid for the spell in our other life and how upset you were with me until I explained why I couldn't tell you yet?"

Emma fidgeted, but didn't sit up. "Yeah, you said that it was too soon for me to know."

"I did and also that it was my right as your parent in that life to not give you all the information at one time, but always the truth. This situation is like that and with you being small right now, it is my choice. I need you to trust me to make these types of decisions on your behalf when that is the case and if you do not then we need to stop right now and talk about why."

"She hadn't expected the child to shoot upright suddenly, grabbing for her hands.

"Trust you! That's not it, at all." Emma assured, moving eyes to their joined hands. "I'm just being stubborn and I want you with me; so I'm a little cranky about it." Leaning her head on a strong shoulder.

"I want you with me too and I respect your feelings." A grateful kiss that trust wasn't the issue, though she hadn't really suspected it was, but had to be sure. "I will go as quickly as I can and then we will go to the park together. Try and have some patience for me until then my little swan."

"And hand through loose curls with a nod to the fruit. "Finish up please." Regina allowed the continued pouting to go unchecked as she cleaned up the other breakfast.
dishes, knowing it was anxiety from the last time they were apart when Emma had been small creeping in. Since returning home she'd been finding it much harder to say no when Emma put up fight and to correct when she normally would for misbehavior. Her girl was having such a hard time of it and her heart hurt to see Emma struggling to accept their current reality. If her plans came together as she thought they would, then that wouldn't be a problem in a few weeks.

"Go up and get your shoes on baby and anything you want to take with to do at the diner."

Huffing and muttering under her breath Emma slipped off the stool, stomped upstairs and back down a few minutes later in purple converse, black wool leggings with a long green sweater and empty hands.

A dark brow rose. "No Stitchy or Wonder Woman today?"

Emma shifted from foot to foot. "Don't need them." Arms crossed.

"Perhaps a book to read?"

Lower lip stuck out like a shelf. "No… thank you."

"You may work on some math comprehension sheets then and maybe do some coloring after if you like."

Taking the decision away at the stubborn face looking up because Emma needed her to. She was entirely understanding of the reluctance staring at her, but also knew that the longer they didn't address the elephant in the room, the harder it would be for the child to accept that there would be times when they could not be together. It was a hard but necessary decision and one she hadn't made easily or without great consideration to Emma's comfort. Regina summoned the worksheets with a coloring book and crayons. Those and the special pencil with grip were bundled into a small red tote, offering it to the child who stared at it like it was poison. Another subtle flick of her wrist summoned the beloved action figure into the bottom of the bag, thinking Emma may want it later.

"Please get your coat on."

Emma snatched the tote and shuffled to the foyer, response to direction from that voice a soothing balm to her discomfort even when she didn't want to obey. She fumbled with the zipper. A groan of frustration escaped, but she gladly accepted the Queen's help a minute later and they were soon on their way. As the Benz rolled to a stop in front of the diner a while later little eyes shot daggers into dark ones as they met in the rear view mirror.

Regina sighed and turned around in the seat after killing the engine. "Are you alright to stay with Ruby and Granny or is there someone else you would prefer?"

'I want you Maammaaa. There's no one else.' Bitter over the fact, knowing that out of everyone in town, her Keeper had chosen well, if she had to be left with anyone at all.

'I know you do." Wanting to validate when those eyes pulled at her heart. "I don't like leaving you when you are upset about that idea. We cannot avoid it forever, but I can attempt to reschedule my appointments for later today…." She paused to think through the possibility of her next words. "Or tomorrow if you need more time to wrap your head around it."

Timing had to be right for the discussion with Gold. She had a small window of opportunity to later test her theory on Emma's shifts if he gave her the information and a promise she needed to do so today. Every day counted on the timeline she set herself to complete the tasks she had in mind. It was inevitable that at some point Emma would be small and need someone to watch her if Regina couldn't during that time frame.

Emma's face relaxed at that offer, but she shook her head. Better to get it over with now, but she didn't have to like that fact. She was six and unhappy, so kicking the seat in front of her seemed like a good response. A quick hand caught her foot from making a second attempt and she shook it off easily with a huff.

"No… Gooo, I'll deal."

Considerate eyes. "I don't want you to 'deal' Emma. I need you try to be a big girl for a moment and tell me if you are really okay with this idea."

Green flashed upwards, little temper getting the better of her. "That's impossible right NOW, thanks for reminding mee!"

"Emma Swan." Quiet and firm.

A clear line, their code, before her and one she wisely stepped back from. A deep breath. "I don't

"Let's get this done then baby." Regina knew what Emma was doing and she would not feed the budding tantrum, but also sensed something deeper was off with her girl.

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Emma unbuckled herself and stepped out of the car, shutting the door and leaning against it, eyes down a few minutes later in purple converse, black wool leggings with a long green sweater and empty hands.

A dark brow rose. "No Stitchy or Wonder Woman today?"

Emma shifted from foot to foot. "Don't need them." Arms crossed.

"Perhaps a book to read?"

Lower lip stuck out like a shelf. "No… thank you."

"You may work on some math comprehension sheets then and maybe do some coloring after if you like."

Taking the decision away at the stubborn face looking up because Emma needed her to. She was entirely understanding of the reluctance staring at her, but also knew that the longer they didn't address the elephant in the room, the harder it would be for the child to accept that there would be times when they could not be together. It was a hard but necessary decision and one she hadn't made easily or without great consideration to Emma's comfort. Regina summoned the worksheets with a coloring book and crayons. Those and the special pencil with grip were bundled into a small red tote, offering it to the child who stared at it like it was poison. Another subtle flick of her wrist summoned the beloved action figure into the bottom of the bag, thinking Emma may want it later.

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"I don't think you do, dearie." Dismissive.

"I still have something you want, a few things actually." Deciding now was the time to reveal a smooth move and sound, eyes piercing.

"Ahhhh, yes. My spell. Tell me dearie, feeling a little more vulnerable without all your magic?" Turning, the Queen went back toward the booth and knelt to be eye level with the little blonde who ignored her presence. She rested a patient hand on Emma's head, trailing it softly down to a shoulder. "Listen to Ruby and Granny, alright?"

Emma didn't take her gaze off of the page of math problems, trying to ignore the eyes she knew were on her and gave a nod. Words impossible. Regina would understand that.

"I love you baby. I'll be back soon."

Green eyes blurred when she felt a lingering kiss on the top of her braid and a hand squeeze her shoulder gently before both were gone.

Brown eyes took in the red and yellow paint job on the two wheel bike. It wasn't exactly like Emma's other one, but it was close enough. The size of the spelled trunk didn't allow for the bike the child loved to return with them and she had been on a mission to replace it as a surprise. A text yesterday evening confirmed it was ready for pick up and she was looking forward to gifting it today when she and Emma went to the park later.

"This is fine. Did the helmet I ordered arrive?"

"Sure did Madame Mayor." The shop attendant held up the box containing a replica of the Wonder Woman helmet from their other life.

"Time for a chat dear." Regina paused at the door, flipping the open sign over to closed.

"I need to ask you both for another favor soon, depending on how today goes." The Queen gave a quick nod at Ruby passing them. The waitress had a pained look hidden by a tight smile as she breezed past Belle. "I will get back to you on the details when I know a little more, but it involves helping Emma."

"Anything for her." Granny smiled, tilting her head. "She's the reason we were able to put the past behind us and be friends. Just let us know what you need."

Regina regarded the French girl for a moment through veiled lashes. They were friends, but something had changed between them in the last few years and in her focus on her relationship with Emma and the do over spell she had missed what caused it. Belle had been distant, though not unpleasant to both her and Emma for... a few years now. Another piece of the puzzle moved into place in her mind. That speculation would be confirmed soon enough. She shook her head to clear the thought and gave her attention back to Granny.

"I love you baby. I'll be back soon."
Regina's jaw yearned to tense at his doubtful tone, but she smiled back menacingly as she followed his slow pace to another counter. He was an experienced and skilled predator, but so was she. And the female kind, especially ones with young, were always much more ruthless in their pursuit and much less forgiving upon the catch. "Not many know about your power to foresee the future, fragments of it anyway, but I do. You knew I would cast that spell for Emma and pay just about any price to do so."

"Course I did. It's what I do." His oily voice was met with flashing eyes. "Tell me something I don't know. Or. Get. Out."

"Patience Rumple." Tsking as she chided. "It took me a while, but I figured out why you set the price you did."

The Dark One leaned his elbows against the counter, the faintest hint of curiosity getting the better of him. "Oh you did, did you? Well then, do enlighten me." A gold-toothed snarl.

Regina took her time pacing the main room before walking up to him. "There is one thing you and I have in common and that is we will do anything to protect the ones who are capable of loving us in spite of ourselves or what we have done. We tend to hold them close, sometimes too close. Mutually, if they desire the same, is one thing, but when the line between consent and non-consent is crossed there is a price to be paid and I am here to collect on behalf of a friend who can not from you. She was and so much more. Her tone took an evil edge from a much darker time. "Ring a Belle?" And she did, finger tapping the one on the counter between them. The eerie pitch pulled forth from him what she knew would appear.

A flash of the monster he still was in the shell of a man eclipsed across narrowed eyes as his hand slapped glass cracking it. The room turned frigid. "You leave my Belle out of this."

Feigning sympathy as Regina carefully oh so carefully drew him into her web. "Oh, but I can't have it. This pesky little thing called a conscience now. You should get one, or should I ask Belle to be yours?" Fingering a priceless artifact before sparking eyes bore into him.

Now she had his undivided attention.

He snarled. "So what if I knew you'd cast the spell. You'd do it again even knowing the price."

"Yes, I would. However, my memories of true love and my magic were not meant to be for you to use for your own twisted games." Lips parted revealing perfect white teeth, ready to grab a throat if needed. "It is no secret she was going to leave you a few years ago. She had her bags packed and ticket purchased for her grand world adventure."

"Take caution dearie…." His teeth flashed, but he paused for a moment when he recognized the difference between the Evil Queen at the height of her reign from Enchanted Forest past to the mask in front of him that had learned to love again. Ice crystals formed on the glass between them not of his doing. So cold it burned his hand and he jerked it back, further validating the level of wrath he toyed with.

Brown eyes glanced briefly at the ice crystals, not expecting them. Even without her full powers it seemed she had retained some of her natural affinity for elemental magic. Anger was a very rare stew she let herself sit in now a days and she wondered if it somehow fueled the ice appearing. She'd figure that out later.

Their eyes met in the middle again.

"You Belle, Rumple… Really? She came to me of her own free will, asking to be sure that if she left Storybrooke over the town line that her memories would remain intact. I assured her they would with certain precautions, a certain potion of mine and talisman to keep her safe." She let her teeth sink in, and took another step forward. "Curious how she decided to remain at your side, now your sweet little wife once again and sooo suddenly. I wonder if memories of true love had anything to do with the decision she made… When was it? Oh yes, almost two years ago when mine were absorbed in your spell."

Standing ridged, the Imp unfolded his hands appearing indifferent, but for his growl in return.

"Give me one reason not to blast you across the room." Two years ago had been hell for him and he did not like being reminded of the fact or what he had done.

A red smile. "One; the price I collected from Belle in exchange for my knowledge about the town line. …You taught me to take payment up front whenever possible and I did, or have you forgotten that she confronted you with her idea of leaving and how much she wanted to get away from you. "Those words were a small gamble in a complicated game and when the truth of them flashed in his eyes her smile grew. She had been right, the morning at the diner and of a memory past further confirmed it. Her price was nothing that had hurt the bookworm, but a certain courtesy she’d asked for in return at the time two years ago for her helpful efforts.

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His twitching fingers stilled, vanishing a palmed ball of dark fire. The Queen was smart, too smart and he spiraled around it. He had not forgotten Belle's words, her talk of leaving him, and of needing time away to explore something. Rage had filled him along with despair and after learning how the beauty was going to accomplish leaving town with her memories intact he had taken out his anger as vengeance on the Queen while securing his happiness. He hadn't hesitated learning how the beauty was going to accomplish leaving town with her memories intact he had taken out his anger as vengeance on the Queen while securing his happiness. He hadn't hesitated learning how the beauty was going to accomplish leaving town with her memories intact he had taken out his anger as vengeance on the Queen while securing his happiness.

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"That doesn't have to be the case dearsie, and I could throw in a sweetener on my end. What if there was a way back to the life you created with Emma? So much easier there, wasn't it?"

"Our life is here and will remain so." Invisibly swallowing that desire, one she knew Emma shared. She was waiting for something else...

"A pity." Not so easily bought, he saw. "Then how about we trade for a potion for your precious little swan? One that would give her control over her size so she desperately wants."

Almost there, but not quite. "That and my magic for my silence about Belle?" Wanting to be sure of what he was offering to trade.

"And whatever price my Belle paid for that help when she was going to leave. I want not a word breathed to Belle or anyone, including Emma, about what you know or the deal is off the table."

There it was, now for the counter offer. "Include our assured safety; deal or no deal and I'll think about it." Regina would think, but wouldn't even consider making that deal, not if it meant keeping Belle, another friend of theirs after many years of work to get there, lost in memories that did not belong in that French head. Emma wouldn't want that, promised potion or not. Regina could craft words as well as him and she suspected a bit better at the moment. Her revealed knowledge had put him off kilter and that's exactly where she wanted him.

Not expecting that additional condition from the Queen, Rumpel's jaw twitched. He relented none the less with Belle’s face in his mind's eye, but not before countering once more with one of his own. "You do that, but tell Emma or Belle, anyone, the details of the deal I'm offering and you forfeit this promise of safety I am making now."

Regina held up a hand. "I want a blood oath. A promise you can not twist."

Promises and deals with the Imp were two very different things. A promise she would make. The more important one of the two had to do with honor and the Imp would hold onto his until his last breath. Oh she knew him well, his fear of being seen as a coward, to go back on his sworn word and he saw that. She’d been counting on that when she’d stepped into the shop this morning. Emma would be safe and so would she as she quietly carried out the next part of her plans.

"Fine." Eyes sparkled as he called in his dagger, slicing his hand with the tip and a crimson line flowed. Blood dripped and sizzled on the ice still lining his counter top. "I, the Dark One, agree to not mention or Emma physical harm unless you fail to think on my words or reveal them to the ears we have discussed. I will even give you a deposit of good faith in the form of answers to the other questions I know you want to ask me. Do you accept my promise and in return..." Dagger whipped with a flourish into the air. "You no physical harm to me by your hand or Emma’s!"

Regina conjured her own ceremonial knife from the crypt, a much smaller curved blade with a jeweled handle. The knife nicked the palm of her hand, less dramatic than his long one and she placed it to drip over his red mark on the ice. When hers connected it glowed.

Promise sealed, he spoke.

"The tether keeping your swan in her adult form broke on your return, hence the shrinking in this life. There is no way to mend it." He grinned. "I made sure of that, but a potion I know of, my version of it anyway, will give her more control than she has at present to switch back and forth at will. And yes, the little body she is in will continue to age as time goes on though slower, and not just as you have thinking. There’s a few fun little back and forth," he spun around, voice edging on a nasally tune, "twists to that I’ll reveal your Majesty. One being heartache or should I say someone, that wasn't mended is coming soooonnn." He giggled, tapping his fingers together as the darkness rolled through him, watching heels storm out of his shop. The Imp he was wondered if he had, indeed, underestimated his greatest student.

As the Evil Queen mask slid away, back behind the door in her mind, in the light of the cold bright day Regina smiled to herself knowing that he had. She gained what she had come for at the moment. Now armed with knowledge and a promise that Emma would be safe from his hand, it was time for the next steps in the two plans she was working. His last words swirled around her victory; of heartache or someone having it coming soon... She could help Emma with that, they did that well together. She suspected he meant the little girl in Emma and he had no idea of the bond they had forged in their other life, how deep their trust went in that world and in this one. As she walked back to the Benz she let her mind drift to the memory that had reminded her of the piece of the puzzle she'd been missing until that morning in the diner.

---Flashback – About two years ago before the Do Over Spell and before Emma moved in---

The doorbell interrupted Regina's train of thought and she rolled her eyes at the invasion with a sigh. That bell had been rung more times in the last week than it had ever been and she was strongly considering putting a ward on the house and forbidding the next person who happened to wake Emma up from the sleep the Savior so desperately needed. With a glance to Emma's slumbering form she shut the door to the guestroom quietly and went downstairs into the foyer to to wake Emma up from the sleep she so desperately needed. With a glance to Emma's slumbering form she shut the door to the guestroom quietly and went downstairs into the foyer to wake Emma up from the sleep she so desperately needed. With a glance to Emma's slumbering form she shut the door to the guestroom quietly and went downstairs into the foyer to answer the ring. Framed against the dark of night, a hooded figure stood on her porch. It spoke. "Are you alone?"

A dark brow rose, relaxing her wrist on the hidden fireball she palmed when she recognized the voice under the hood. "Creepy. I’ve heard of the French being blunt, but excuse me?"

"Sorry I didn't mean that how it sounds." Belle removed her covering, letting go of the tension in her voice and smiled. "I just need to ask you something private and I don’t want... I'm in a bit of a hurry."

Curious now, Regina stepped aside allowing entrance. "In that case, please come in. Emma is upstairs resting as I was, so you may have my attention but for a few minutes." She tightened the sash on her grey robe and led the way to the living room, gesturing for the brunette to sit across from her on the couch. "What may I do for you my friend?"

Hands twisted. "I heard that you have been working on a spell."

Regina stilled. "How in Hades name do you know about that?" Thoughts spun. They had been careful to keep their work on the do over spell quiet. No one should be the wiser, she was sure of it. Emma would be devastated. How had...

"Uh... It's kind of obvious..." Belle swallowed at the heat filling the room. "I mean Paige leaving Storybrooke to go to Boston, to finish college with Henry, is kind of a big deal with the town line and all." Just as quickly as the heat came it left with an alarming speed. "I wondered if you were planning on sharing how you did it with the rest of us?"

"I see." And now that she did breathing was easier. "I am working on another batch of that potion, a bigger one that will allow everyone the opportunity to travel outside of Storybrooke
freely, memories intact. However, I've been a bit distracted lately caring for Emma since the accident as you and the whole town knows, so that spell or potion rather will have to wait until Emma is fully recovered from her injuries." Pain lined her voice.

A sympathetic nod at the reminder of the accident. "How is Emma doing?"

"She is healing. Quicker than expected, with the help of magic." Mouth tight. "And she needs my full attention, so if you don't mind getting to your point."

"Sorry, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. I know your hands are full, but I was wondering if you happened to have any of the potion you used for Paige to be able to leave town with her memories? I need to figure out a few things for myself and I can't do it in this town. Not with... I just can't."

"Some, but it is not nearly enough for everyone..." Head cocked. "Is there trouble in paradise?"

Wondering if the Imp and his leading lady were having issues. Belle was their friend and she would help if she could, especially if the Imp was a threat. He hadn't been for years and she wondered if something had changed.

"Hopefully not for long." Blue met brown pleading to be understood and leave well enough alone.

Hint taken. "You need to be discreet as I will be least ears get wind of our exchange that shouldn't... be careful with that, but I will help you. Come by the house tomorrow and I'll have it ready." She waited for the response she expected and when it was not forthcoming she added. "There will be a price, and I prefer payment in advance—"

Bubbling excitement interrupted. "How much for two potions?"

The Queen narrowed her eyes at the beauty missed her implied meaning entirely. "For you and...?"

"You can't tell anyone or my plan won't work, but..." A dimpled half smile. "Let's just say all that glitters is not Gold, its Ruby. Now about your price. What do you want for the potions?"

Regina smiled knowingly, brow arched. "Two words will do."

Belle blushed at how she'd forgotten herself and smiled back. "Thank you." Price paid in full.

A/N - What do you think?
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A/N - Little fluff, big feels & a mighty reveal... or two.

A pointy tongue poked out of a little mouth as Emma watched the cool cookies being dished onto a plate. She pointed to the biggest one when Ruby asked which she wanted and bit into the gooey confection when it was placed in her hand, moaning in pleasure.

“Good?” Ruby tasted her own treat, smiling at how happy Emma looked. It had taken a lot of coaxing, but the promise of a cookie for helping bake made the little girl the Savior was forget why she was upset to begin with.

“So good!” Taking another big bite as the chime of the diner door caught her attention, beaming at the person who entered.

“I see someone managed to earn a treat.” Regina opened her arms as Emma ran into them. “Oh, sweet one, it is good to see you smile.” Kissing a little cheek and turned her grin to Ruby. “How was she?”

“Great! She even got done those math sheets you left with her.”

Those who had confused the wolf at first until Emma explained the purpose behind having to practice. Smiling now as she watched them hug. She knew her friends were really close and seeing their interactions with this side effect the last few weeks answered some questions about how close that was. Having observed the nurturing aspect of their relationship for a few years now, it made even more sense when Emma had willingly shared a few details of what the purpose of the spell was. That only further solidified the respect she and Granny shared for them.

At Emma’s happy giggle over the Queen’s affection Ruby marveled at how good it must feel for them to be so open with each other and she couldn’t help feeling a little envious of them. Thoughts of almost having a taste of that freedom for herself at one point in the past returned. Stomach rolled when she recalled how it felt having that ripped away so suddenly and by the hands she least expected it to come from. Maybe it was time soon to consider taking a step outside the cage she kept herself in. Maybe that was the first step to healing her broken heart...

Regina studied the waitress wanting to question, but a quick glance at Emma had her reaching for a napkin instead for chocolate covered fingers. “Go wash your hands baby and get your things.”

Eyes followed little feet as they went to the restroom before finding the Ruby’s again. Something raw there gave her pause and so she asked a different question. “How was Emma really?”

Grateful for the distraction. “Swan was bummed for while, but I bribed her with sugar. Seems to do the trick no matter what size she is.”

Resigned to the fact that she was about to have a hyper six year old Savior on her hands the rest of the afternoon, Regina nodded still smiling. “Thank you for keeping an eye on her and Ruby, if you ever want to talk... about anything, let us know.”

“I’ll do that and hey, I meant what I said earlier. Granny and I want you to know that you both can count on our support.” She put a reassuring hand on the Queen’s shoulder. “We’ve heard some things from Snow. She’s hurting and as her friend too, I get that, but it is obvious Emma wants to be with you even when she pretended to ignore you before you left earlier. She cried for like the first ten minutes.”

“I appreciate that, more than you know. I’ll be in touch, like I said.”

Emma squeezed between them with Wonder Woman in clean hands a moment later. “Appreciate what?” Reaching for another cookie and sighing when the plate was pushed away by a royal hand.

“Appreciate Ruby and Granny’s support. Say goodbye, the park is waiting and a surprise.” She picked Emma up to her hip a moment later.

“Bye Ruby and thanks! What’s my surprise?”

“Oh you will have to wait and see. I heard you were very well behaved while I was gone.”
Beaming. “I was! I did all my math sheets and I even let Ruby check it. She helped me on a few I messed up, but one I right got all by myself.”

“Such a hard worker you are. When we get home you can pick a sticker and we will put it on the fridge.” Fishing out a new Marvel Hero pack from her pocket from the toy shop counter when she’d gotten the bike. Grabby hands took them happily.

“Mama, how come Ruby was sad today?” Asked as hands buckled her into the car.

“She was smiling when I picked you up.” Then remembering earlier before the chat with Gold. “You didn’t ask her?”

Green watched as the Queen got into the front. “I tried, but she said nothing... then I tried again and she still said nothing... and thereennn a bazillion more times and she told me to put a little sock in it.” Shoulders shrugged with a grin.

“Perhaps she will come to you when she is ready.” Reaching over the back seat to tap a little nose. “Regardless, being cute when you are being noisy will only get you so far in life little swan.”

Emma sneezed and they both laughed. The girl tried to guess the surprise on the way to the park and squealed with delight when the trunk was opened and her beloved bike, a similar version of it, was taken out along with a matching helmet. Happy tears fell down little cheeks as she hugged her Keeper, override at the gesture. It took longer than she would have liked to have the helmet fitted and to get her balance on the bike, but the wind rushing at her when she pedaled off was worth the wait.

Sitting on a bench to watch, the Queen followed Emma along the bike path with a smile. The girl slowed down upon seeing a group of kids playing soccer on the frozen field and Regina noticed Gabe among them and Neal. She wondered what the child was thinking and more so when Neal approached Emma. They appeared to talk and even smile at each other for a few minutes before the girl continued riding her bike around for another half hour before braking back in front of the bench, content and pink cheeked.

 Neal says hi Mama.”

“I noticed you talking with him earlier?” A gentle inquiry.

“I told him it was me and he said he knew already, that Snow had told him.” Emma popped the buckle under her chin releasing the helmet. “He liked my bike... Can he come over tomorrow to play video games? He doesn’t care what size I am... he’s one of the only ones who seems to feel that way aside from you.”

“And Granny, Ruby, and David, even Archie and Ashley.” Reminding of the people they had in their court. A gentle test. “And when you are ready to consider it, I think Snow too.”

Emma dropped her chin chewing on that idea. “Maybe.” But not wild on how it tasted yet. “I saw Gabe too.” Shifting gears and plopping down next to her Keeper. “I know it’s not the version of him from our other life, but I still miss that friendship.”

Regina draped an arm around small shoulders. “I know that hurts you, but you’ll make some new friends and maybe he will be one of them. When you were talking with Neal, why didn’t you say go say hi to Gabe?”

“I don’t know when I’ll be this size and it’s not fair to him if that friendship can’t be something he can count on.”

Big knowing words from such a small mouth. Regina wished Emma wouldn’t over think things so much. “Well... we will cross that bridge when we come to it.” She’d make sure they would. The little girl beside her deserved friends. “Until then we will call David and see about Neal coming to visit tomorrow. That’s a start.”

Eyes bright over that idea. “Thanks for my bike Mama. I was really surprised. That was your appointment, huh?”

“One of them, yes.”

“And the other one?” Curious still.

Sighing. “Mostly successful for what it was, but complicated at best.”
Emma’s nose wrinkled. “Is this one of those times I need to not bug you to tell me something cause I can’t know yet?”

“Yes. I need to think some things through. I will explain it all to you one day, though that may be a while away.” Thinking over the oath. There were a few things she could share, but that could wait a little while.

“Take your time Mama.” Turning eyes to the cold pond as the wind picked up. Her Keeper didn’t ask much from her directly and she wanted to start doing a better job at giving the same courtesies afforded her in return.

“How about we go home and try another magic lesson? You are getting quite good at levitating things.”

“Sticker for my paper and TV first?” Always trying to negotiate tube time first.

“If you like.” Relenting to TV in exchange for the smile she knew was waiting to pop up with her affirmative.

“I do like! Let’s go!” With a handle bar in one hand and the other in her Keeper’s Emma led the way towards the car.

Her one show ended up turning into two and at the closing credits of the second Emma wondered, as she had that morning, at the patient permissiveness of her Keeper that day. First she’d gotten her request for sugary cereal for breakfast, tested with the band-aid in milk, was pouty complete with foot stomping and hadn’t gotten a time out, the cookie she consumed went without comment, and now being granted another show thirty minutes more than she was usually allowed. Not that she was complaining about the extra treats, but it was unlike the Queen to allow so much leeway.

“Emma.” Regina peered into the living room. “Time for your lesson.”

“Coming.” She turned off the TV and skipped into the kitchen after heels, sighing at the familiar fruit on the counter she normally practiced with. “More levitating?”

“To warm up and then I thought you could try some summoning.”

“What about poofing?”

“Not for a while yet, sweet one.” The very idea of Emma flubbing that while this size and with powers so unsteady made her sick to the stomach. It was complicated magic, but she was confident they could work up to that in time with practice. “Now, extend your hand and image a string connecting from your hand to the object.”

Emma sighed at the familiar words, but obeyed.

“Keep your arm straight… that’s it, now lift slowly.” The apple floated a foot off the counter and moved with the child’s hand. “Good, now add another with your other hand.”

Sticking out her tongue to concentrate at this new addition, Emma managed the second apple, though with some strain. Receiving a nod, she slowly brought the fruit down to the counter.

“Repeat that for me again.” And Emma did three more times before adding a third piece of fruit and repeating the exercise again before she was satisfied and they moved on. “Now to summon. Hold out your hand and close your eyes… See the apple in your hand with a magnet on it, imagine the weight and shape resting in your palm where the other magnet is… now open your eyes and pull it to you.”

The apple wobbled on the counter and scooted an inch toward the blonde. Emma let out a frustrated huff, but tried again, and again, until it finally fell on its side and rolled towards her palm. Not quite a summoning spell, but close.

“Good girl. I want you to practice that three more times and then you may be finished for today.” Regina moved to put the rest of the fruit away, save the one apple.

Little eyes narrowed, wanting to be done with the idea as a thought crept in. “I did it though.”
“Yes you did and thrice more won’t hurt.”

Practice was necessary and not something she was willing to compromise on, especially given the new information from Gold today on this being a permanent fixture in their lives. She sighed knowing she’d have to have that conversation soon. On little ears, it would be too much and instead she wanted to wait until Emma was an adult.

“But I’m tiiirrrred.” Emma tried for an out wondering if she would be able to get her way one more time.

“Would you like a nap after you practice? It’s still early enough for you to get some rest.” Calling the child’s bluff.

“No… but I don’t wanna practice anymore.” A lip stuck out.

“You need to Emma or your powers will not develop properly.”

“But who know how long that’ll be a problem. What’s the big deaaal?” In her whine she missed the brief flash of knowing cross her Keeper’s face.

Quietly. “Please do as I ask of you.”

“Nooo. I’m done.”

“Three more and then you may be finished.” Regina restated her expectation and placed a hand on hip regarding the girl.

“NO.” A little fist pounded the counter.

“Emma Swan.” A familiar warning against further argument and one Emma knew meant she did not wish to be pushed further.

Green eyes shimerred and she hopped off the stool. “Not my name.” Mumbling and trying to physically push past her Keeper, who stepped in front of the doorway. “Move.”

Leaning down and catching a chin. “That is not how you speak to me, nor do you tell me no, and what was that about your name?”

“Nothing.” Emma tried to side step again, but her shoulders were caught gently and concerned eyes came into view.

“What is this about Emma?” Little lips were tightly pressed refusing an answer as they often were when Emma was angry with her. Regina sighed and let go of shoulders. “Go up to your room then to calm down and we will try again in a little bit.”

Emma hesitated, wondering why she wasn’t standing in timeout at the very least for her tone. It wasn’t often that the Queen misread her cues and she wondered if she had miscommunicated somehow. Being sent to her room didn’t mean the same thing. Between them it was a quiet acknowledgement of her need for space when she was mad at Regina and needed alone time to process while still keeping true to their dynamic, but she didn’t want space just then and she wasn’t mad; she didn’t know what she felt and maybe that was the problem.

“But Mama…”

The brunette waited a long moment for an explanation and for little eyes to meet hers, but Emma wasn’t giving her either to read off of. When neither was forth coming, she gestured to the doorway. “Go on. I want you sitting on your bed to calm down, no playing.”

“I wasn’t gonna anyway… Geez…” Grumbling as she slowly passed and a love tap quickened her feet.

Up in her room Emma plopped face first on her bed, reaching for her blanket to cover her head with, the scent of lavender and faintly now of apples soothing. She thought about her Keeper’s words, the sense of urgency in the request to practice and wondered where that was coming from and also about her name.
In their other life she’d written it in full several times a day at school. At first hating it, not having her memories at the time of the conversation they’d had before the spell that Mills as an addition was needed for the relationship they’d have. Then slowly over several months of use she came to own it as hers, especially once her memories were returned and the sacrifice Regina had given on her behalf to grant her a do over was revealed. She’d come to love the familial connection it meant coming from red lips, even if she was in trouble. Also of the connection to Henry who was a Mills.

And she missed it dearly.

Her mind moved to her first conversation with her parents about the spell. Snow had added White to her name and it had jarred her ear to hear it. There was no attachment to that name and she wondered why Snow had used White, but there was a pull to better understand the woman who said it and to mend the friendship that had once been between them. Even after the incident earlier that week in the loft. She had done a lot of thinking since then. After she had asked Snow to let her go, the Princess had started to say the words she needed to hear, the deeper ones that needed saying between them, but the trigger took over leaving them unsaid. Eventually she had to try again with Snow. One last time. That was a conversation for another day and she forced her thoughts back to the present. The wait on her bed didn’t last much longer. A few minutes later there was a gentle knock on her open door and she sat up, pulling the blanket off as she was expected to do.

“Come in.”

“Are you ready to talk or do you need some more time?” Regina sat on the edge of the bed, close to the child who shrugged, but seemed willing. “Why don’t you want to practice?”

“Why do you want me to so much?”

There was no attitude attached to the question, just genuine wonder so the Queen allowed the slight deflection. “For a few reasons, namely for the routine you need when you are small. You are not in school, but you need schooling. Also, because I want you to be able to use your magic efficiently no matter what size you are.”

Emma licked her lips sensing something more. “And what else?”

“That is attached directly to what I need more time to think about and what we discussed at the park that you said I could take my time with. I wouldn’t ask you to do something if it wasn’t a necessity, especially if you have such an aversion to it. We talked about that this morning, remember?”

“Oh… right.” Emma dropped her head, now feeling bad for being stubborn about it. “I meant what I said about giving you time and about trusting you to make the decisions when I’m small. I’m sorry and I’ll practice when you tell me to.”

“Thank you. We will go back downstairs so you may in a few minutes. What else had you upset? I didn’t quite catch what you said about your name.”

Blushing and tearing up. “I said ‘not my name’ when you said Emma Swan.”

Concern wrinkled the brunette’s face. “Baby, why would you say that?”

“Cause it’s NOT!” Snapping like a stretched rubber band when she didn’t mean to.

Regina observed the child, replacing her ready scolding remark with a softer question when those hurt eye met hers. “Where is this coming from Emma?”

Brown eyes closed, filling with her mistake, both of them. Emma hadn’t needed space in the fit downstairs, her girl had been asking for consistency that was expected when misbehavior occurred. Being as liberal as she has been today because of having to leave the upset girl and the unsettling chat with Gold hadn’t helped matters. Emma always tried to take an extra cookie when one was given and today, figuratively and literally, was no exception with her allowances. And the name… That hadn’t come naturally after ten months of another one’s use. She’d assumed upon their return Emma wouldn’t want the attachment of Mills and had been trying to respect the real name Emma had in this life.

Breathing was harder as sobs shook little shoulders. “I finally gots a last n-name that m-meant something more, and-and-and——.”
Regina pulled the girl into her lap and rocked as Emma calmed in her arms. "I made a mistake, a few of them and I am sorry for missing your cues downstairs and not thinking about how the name difference would affect you. I should have. I’ve also been distracted today and I wanted to give you some extra treats when I know you have had a hard time as of late."

Little nod as the day made more sense and a yearning whispered to completely belong. "I like my name the way it was before."

Dark eyes closed on the precipice of possibility. "What do you need from me Emma?"

A sensitive root was exposed. "I need it for reals. In this life, our life now, and I don’t care what anyone thinks. It’s my name."

Touched at the conviction coming from the little girl, Regina felt her core flutter. "There would be paperwork involved, but changing your legal name as an adult is doable. People do it all the time for a variety of reasons."

A hiccup and sniffles. "I need to."

"Alright, I’ll see about getting the necessary papers together for you next week."

Green looked up as the root soaked in the rays of hope. "I really get to share your name?"

"Your desire is a gift I will cherish always and an incredible honor, baby."

The little girl shifted up to wrap arms around the heart she called home. "Until it is official will you say it like it’s supposta to be?"

"Emma Swan Mills." Red lips wrapped around the name, again feeling as if it had always been there waiting for the breath of life and maybe in some ways, it had.

Late Sunday afternoon brought some much needed companionship for Emma with Neal’s visit. David dropped him off and the girl dragged him into the living room for a video game marathon. He was amazed that his older sister was younger than he was at the moment and enjoyed the camaraderie while they played round after round of Mario Cart on Henry’s old gaming system. The girl was able to negotiate extra game time in exchange for more time spent practicing her magic before Neal arrived. The trade off was worth it for Emma’s third win in a row. Neal buried his head as his sister jumped around the living room in a classic victory dance that would put any NFL receiver to shame. Even with size some things never change.

"I win again! Pay up Neal!" She grinned up from the split she was in on the floor.

"Fine, here." Neal broke his cinnamon cookie in half and gave it over in reluctant payment.

Emma moved back to the couch and happily chewed her winnings as Neal reset the game. She felt a familiar tingle and smiled, looking forward to being an adult after a few days in her half pint suit.

But the tingle didn’t last as long as it normally did.

"Woah…” Neal’s blue eyes bugged.

Wide green doe ones blinked rapidly at new hands and feet. Wiggling her limbs felt gawky and heavy. Panic hit and Emma yelled. "GIIINNNAAAA!"

Heels echoed from the study into the living room, halting at the archway, a hand going to a regal throat. ‘So this is what Gold meant… Damn his riddles.’ Regina thought and moved quickly to sit next to the teenager Emma now was. "It’s okay. Take a deep breath."

"H-how is t-this…?" Emma’s shaking hands covered her foreign face as she struggled to breathe as instructed, eventually finding a rhythm with her Keeper’s gentle coaxing. The shock was like reliving the first moments of the do over spell all over again.
“We will talk about that soon just keep focusing on your breathing.”

The Queen kept a hand on Emma’s knee while pulling her phone out to send a text to David to pick Neal up early. She gave the boy instructions to gather his things. Within the next ten minutes it took to calm Emma down fully, the doorbell rang.

“Are you alright for a second while I talk to David?” Standing after Neal ran to the door, the teenager’s hand still firmly clasped in her own.

Emma blinked a few times processing and let go of her Keeper. “Yeah… I’m good.”

But she wasn’t.

The Queen saw Neal out while giving David a brief update on what happened before returning to her charge. When she entered the living room Emma was standing on tiptoe and peering into the angled mirror over the fireplace, fingers poking her face.

“This is too weird and how… I don’t get how this could happen.”

“I think I might.” Regina sighed and sat down on the couch.

“What’d you mean?” Green reflected brown in the mirror.

“I didn’t know you would be a teenager again, but I had a suspicion that your little self would continue to ‘grow up’ so to speak when you shrank, only I thought it would be like how you aged and grew normally in our other life over the course of ten months.”

A pale jaw dropped. “B-but to go from being six to…” Emma thought for a moment how old she felt and based on her current appearance. “Thirteen… Barely I think… is like a huge jump.” Spinning around, she finally joined the Queen on the couch.

“I wanted and needed more time before telling you some of the details about my appointment yesterday, but now…” Reaching out to take the teen’s hand once more, she sighed. “I went to visit Gold to get a better sense of what he knew as the author of the spell and for a few other reasons we will discuss at another time.”

Emma paled, mixed on her feelings about that. “You said we would do that together.”

“No, you implied that.” Recalling clearly their conversation at the diner after Gold interrupted their lunch. “I told you I didn’t want you anywhere near that Imp no matter what size you were and I still mean that.” Lifting the teen’s chin when green eyes tried hiding. “Am I clear?”

“Yeah, I get you.” Pulling away and letting attitude edge along her tone.

Catching a chin fast when Gold’s malicious eyes pierced her mind. “You need to more than get me Emma. I mean it. You are to stay away from Gold, all of you.” Searching green, new green she’d never seen before. One version she hadn’t counted on when she sealed a promise in blood.

She wasn’t worried about managing the six year old version or the adult Savior, but this girl, this sparking ember, looking in her eyes was the unknown.

“Yes, I understand… But what’d he say? Did he say this would happen?” Emma fought not to roll her eyes as she nodded, wondering why that urge was there at a moment like this at all.

With what was at stake with the deal that needed to remain hidden least their safety become forfeit Regina chose her words with great care. “Things were said. That the tether that was meant to keep you an adult upon our return to this world broke and that is causing your shrinking.” Pausing for a deep breath when her heart hurt. “And there is not a way to mend that.”

Pink lips parted, eyes filling. “So… I’m… gonna randomly grow and shrink forever?” Emma really didn’t mind the change of sizes between being an adult and six, just the unpredictability and lack of control over it. But now there was this to go with it… She hadn’t been the easiest to deal with at this age and she could feel the beginnings of a dark voice, a self doubting one she thought she had put away, creep back into her head telling her such.

“Yes, I understand.” Regina explained, pulling the foreign body into her arms.

Emma blinked, slowly following the trail of bread crumbs she was being given. “He has
something doesn’t he? What is it? A spell or a potion? What does he want for it?”

“Not everything is worth pursuing.” Firm in that not being an option for them.

The girl guessing wouldn’t break the promise she had sealed, but she couldn’t confirm anything. She was confident in her magical knowledge and even with her limited magic to find a way around the oily man’s offer, to ensure their safety, get Emma what she needed, and free their friend from a marriage the beauty had no say in.

Emma pulled back. “But if he has something then we can fix this now. I need to be able to control this Gina!”

“I know and we will. I promise.” Holding up a hand to stop the barrage of questions pushing to spill from the blonde. Seeing the need in green eyes for something more she relented. “I will make a trip to the vault and get the book we used for this spell—”

“You never let me help.” Emma interrupted, crossing her arms.

“I’m sorry if it feels that way to you, though that is not the case as you will see if you don’t interrupt me.” At the annoyed shrug given she continued. “I plan on having you help me research a solution, starting tomorrow if you are still this way when you wake up.” Sensing that would probably be true. “You can come to Town Hall and begin the task there, after our stop to the mausoleum for the book in the morning.” It wouldn’t hurt to have another pair of eyes looking for another option if her own theory didn’t pan out and this way she could supervise Emma’s eagerness to help.

Dropping her sour expression for a more hopeful one, the new teen offered a small, but game smile. “I can do that… but, how will this work now? I know how to be six and how to be an adult with you and our dynamic, but…” Frowning as more uncertainty flooded her life.

Regina paused in reflection. Before the spell they had each had a few years to wrap their heads around how Emma being six would work between them and ten months of that actual experience not to mention years together as they were with their dynamic as an adult. This was new territory, or was it? The Queen wasn’t sure, but the crestfallen version of Emma sitting here needed her to be.

“It will be something in between. My expectations and rules for you are the same. We will have to be patient with each other though. I imagine at this age you felt quite independent. Then there are the start of hormones and the ups and downs that come with emotions at this age.” Feeling a bit overwhelmed with the idea of her girl being a teenager, she took another deep breath.

“Will I ever be six again?” Longing rested there.

“I definitely think so.” The words Gold had given her about Emma’s shrinking hadn’t been a condition of her end of the promise so she could share them freely. “Gold specifically said you’d shrink and grow, but that the age between was a ‘back and forth twist’ we would have to figure out. He also said heartache not mended or someone was coming soon. I never thought…” Hands gesturing.

“This sucks. I don’t wanna be a teenager again. Puberty once was enough!” Her eyes felt hot again with tears and tired already with the wide range of emotions she’d felt in the last twenty minutes; panic, shock, anger, and hope. She just wanted to sleep and for the first time the idea of a nap sounded amazing.

“Why don’t you rest for a while and let this soak in. I’ll come get you when dinner is ready.” Reading her girl like a book.

Emma leaned in for one more hug, smiling softly when a kiss was added. “Can we have carbs? Like deeeeep dish pizza carbs?” She stood and stretched. “I need to indulge.”

“Pizza and salad, yes.”

Rolling eyes found the ceiling, but chose not to fight a battle she wouldn’t win. “Deal.”

By the time the Queen conjured up a set of PJs her new size, comfortable flannel pants and a sweatshirt, her nerves settled. Emma was able to rest for a little over an hour before being awakened. Groggy, irritable, and starving the teen blindly followed her Keeper downstairs and blinked at the silverware bundle she was handed before it clicked that it was one of her chores to set the table. She inhaled the pizza and even her salad before going back for seconds, then thirds having forgotten how much she could pack away at this age. With her stomach hosting a food baby, she leaned back in her chair with a sigh and caught amused brown eyes watching from across the table.
“What?”

“You remind me so much of Henry right now.”

Emma grinned. “Kid’s swag like that, what can I say?” Then remembering the Queen’s lack of slang awareness at that confused look. “It means cool or hip.”

“I was referring to your appetite, but I can see that too.” Regina smiled back and stood to clear her place as the teen followed, helping with the rest of the dishes. The hot water came on and plates were added with soap to soak.

“Can I watch some TV?”

“It’s getting late and we have an early morning. Would you like to continue our book or do you want to read on your own before bed?”

Rocking back on her heels, Emma thought about that offer; internally battling teenage desire to be on her own with what she needed to feel better over the sudden switch up that happened that day. “Can I do both?”

Full lips smiled. “Tonight, yes. Go get ready for bed and read for a bit. I’ll join you when I am done here.”

Emma wandered upstairs, splashed some water on her face and did a halfway decent job at brushing her teeth. She took a long minute to study herself in the mirror and eyes she never thought would be looking back at her again. Pain, need, anger, and mistrust rested in their depths. ‘I’m back.’ It said and she shook her head to clear the dark picking voice from her mind.

Padding across the hall to the lavender room, it took a second to find the book they were reading together, 10,000 Leagues Under the Sea, and a new Harry Potter spin off she’d picked up at the store before the spell was cast. She dug her I-Pod out of her nightstand and flopped face down on the bed. With ear-buds planted Emma became so lost in the fantasy and music that she startled fifteen minutes later when a hand crested her shoulder.

“Geez! Knock, you scared me.” Blowing out a hot breath as she yanked ear-buds out, missing the raised brow at her tone.

“I did, three times and when I saw you couldn’t hear me I came in.” Knowing Emma was sensitive about her space.

“Oh... sorry.”

Green eyes finally caught up with her Keeper who came to sit near the head of the bed. Emma turned off the I-pod and made a mental note to keep the volume lower next time. She awkwardly tucked herself into the Queen’s side, limbs still too new, as she handed over their book, but like almost always, eventually fell asleep against the shoulder supporting her.

After settling Emma in bed and completing her own routine Regina decided to begin making her theory on a solution for Emma’s random shifting a reality. The ingredients were some things she already had on hand and she’d pick up in the morning at the vault along with the promised book for the teen to look through. Crafting the spell would take a few weeks. Pouring her magic into the spell a bit at a time instead of all at once wouldn’t drain her like it had when she’d delayed Snow’s labor in their other life. Careful and precise, she’d be able to function almost normally if not a bit on the tired side. That was crucial due to Gold’s current involvement.

As she stared at the notebook page in hand her mind went back to his words. He had been right when he said Emma was a handful and she was in the best way Regina wouldn’t ever trade. She wondered though how much more that would be true now that she had a feisty teenage Savior to look after in addition to a six year old.

A/N - Totally taking ideas, quotes, and prompts for this new version of Emma. Hope you liked the chapter!
Emma woke the next morning as if from a drugged haze. She stared at the ceiling, brain fuzzy and tried to register three sets of thoughts before they blurred into one. The pillow under head found her face as the last half of yesterday span like the sheets around her legs; a confused tangle of foreign familiarity. Memories she’d forgotten came knocking, lured by a fresh hole in her heart. Flashes of group homes, faces, and voices came and settled on one in particular as her breath hitched. She yanked the pillow from her face and threw it across the room.

"It's not fair." Emma thought. This dirt, these lesions, were supposed to be scraped clean. "Never clean, never for me." The self loathing voice countered. Once dead, now a lingering ghost turned a zombie in a new thirteen year old ear.

Rolling out of bed, Emma made her way to the bathroom, avoiding the mirror as she passed in and out. Hearing humming down the hallway she went toward the warmth it promised and knocked on the open door. Regina peered around the closet frame with a smile, beckoning.

"Good morning, how did you sleep?"

Emma shrugged, stepping into the room as she went to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling apart the spare blanket to wrap around her shoulders. Concerned eyes. "Dreams?" Regina paused in the doorway of the closet, dress for the day draped over arm.

"A memory."

"Would you like to talk about it?" The dress hanger made it to the back of the closet door as royal feet traveled to the bed. A shrug, but scooting over to make room. "Different day, same story."

"Hhmmm... What does the page say this moment?" Regina sat behind Emma and pulled the girl back to lean against her, arms snug, lips brushing the fuzz of curls from sleep.

Green eyes glassed then cleared as an old mask sipped into place. "That there's more to heal, a lot more and I thought I was done with that, mostly anyway." Looking down at the arms that held her. "There's this new hole, real or not, I don't know, but it hurts." Deep breath as her hands were taken.

"Where does the hurt start?"

"Always with him, number seven... his words." Licking lips. "Anyway, I feel like I'm starting over again, like at the start of the spell in our other life... but I have my memories, I have you, our family, so maybe it won't be so hard this time. Maybe it won't hurt so much." Anxious as self assuring failed, she turned and scooted down on the bed to hide in a lap, head resting there as hands she loved began to stroke her hair.

"Will you tell me a little more about him... number seven. You've mentioned that house and him before, but not much." The idea of referring to any of Emma's foster situations as home held great distaste.

"Um, sure... He was a real piece of work and a racist son of a you know what. But things were fine at first, he was nice even. She ran her fingers along the blanket. "Until I saw him ripping this poor old man a new one at a gas station. He was taking me and his son to school and this old guy tripped spilling a soda on his shoes. The most hateful names I'd ever heard, and I... stepped in, told him to knock it off, and he knocked me off instead. Back hand chpped my teeth and he called me a depraved worthless little shit. All because I called him out on his hate speech."

Rage. Regina shook inside with it. Another faceless foster phantom to join the trunk she was storing for Emma. She realized with growing concern that never once were there names in any memories shared. This whole time too, Emma had been speaking in a state of detachment, like when reading the back of a cereal box. They had worked on not doing that, to instead feel the words coming to life, yet this girl in her arms wasn't feeling anything and for as raw as the details of the moment were she couldn't, wouldn't speak yet; just listened as Emma continued, growing sicker with each phrase.

"His ring left six stitches. That's how I got this." Fingers patted hair behind a left ear revealing a fine raised scar. "And this later." Lifting a chin to show a small scar underneath. "And this on another day." Lifting a foot and pulling off a right sock to trace a curved one on the instep. "Broken glass he shoved into my foot for dropping one of his hunting trophies. Otherwise it was just words."

Regina pulled Emma back into her arms. Just words that rolled too easily from a pink mouth like a show and tell, no weight to anchor them to reality. She cradled the girl with dry eyes and a throat hitched. She yanked the pillow from her face and thrust it across the room. 

"Gina?"

Thick. "Yes baby?"

I didn't mean to cuss... its just what he said."

"Mmmhm." Regina rested her cheek atop a blonde head ready to help draw out what was
missing. “He has a name that needs saying.” Body stiffened in her arms.

“But… I don’t wanna say it.” Pitch rising.

“You need to.”

A shudder, stalling. “Real or what he made me call him?”

“Whichever has the most hold on you.”

“I…”

“I’m right here baby. Let me help you hold this.” Kissing a scar behind an ear. “And these,” Under a chin and her fingers to place on a sweet curve of step.


“My sweet girl… That choice should never have been taken from you, but you do have choices now and by giving these… numbers and people who hurt you names or taking back what you were forced to give allows you to reclaim your power. He cannot hurt you anymore.”

Cracking. “Then why do I hurt so much right now?”

“Cleaning a wound does that, especially an old one like this that’s infected. You have not dealt with it until now.” Sensing where Emma would venture if not redirected. “Back then you were in survival mode trying to get by moment by moment. He was an adult. You were a child. None of what happened was your fault. At all. Do you understand that?”

Sniffing hard. “I do, but believing it all the way is hard.”

“Belief can be like that and sometimes faith comes along to help, coupled with hope and you dear heart are overflowing with hope. Trust that the rest will come along with time.”

“I’ll try.”

“Such a brave start, my love and I am so proud of you for taking that step.”

Emma soaked in those words and used them as strength to replace the number in her mind. After a long squeeze she sat up, wiping her eyes and rolled off the bed. “I’m gonna go get my I-pod, but can I sit in here while you get ready?”

“I’d like nothing more.”

Emma left and returned quickly, finally settling on the floor of the closet as Regina went in and out getting put together for the day. After listening to a few rounds of Dido she pulled out one ear bud as her stomach growled.

“Can we go to Granny’s?”

“Today?”

“No tomorrow. Yes today.” Smirking as she got the brow. “Please can we go for breakfast?”

The teen was not beyond begging like her little self, not when there was food involved and one particular kind she suddenly wanted to sink her teeth into.

Regina finished zipping her dress and took her matching taupe blazer from the hanger. “We have plenty of breakfast food here and I have turkey bacon defrosting in the fridge to make.”

“But it’s Bear Claw day.” Morose over the idea of missing out on her typical weekly treat she indulged in when in her adult form.

“A town holiday I seemed to have forgotten.” One that occurred weekly in the blonde's head it seemed. The Queen moved out of the closet to her vanity, quickly selecting earrings and fastening her Apple watch. Somber feet trailed after and her heart melted at the puppy dog look, one she seemed. The Queen moved out of the closet to her vanity, quickly selecting earrings and fastening her Apple watch. Somber feet trailed after and her heart melted at the puppy dog look, one she seemed. The Queen moved out of the closet to her vanity, quickly selecting earrings and fastening her Apple watch. Somber feet trailed after and her heart melted at the puppy dog look, one she didn’t usually fall for in the other versions of Emma, but this was new and a longing of a different kind rested there, something in her wanted to satisfy. “Tell you what. If you can be ready in the next ten minutes we will go, but you must have some kind of protein with—”

Quick as lightening pink lips turned into a smug grin. “I knew I still had the cute pout down! See you in ten downstairs!” Almost able to dodge the teasing pat that sent her out of the room.

Emma dug around her closet and realized she faced another problem; none of her clothes fit. In the continuation of yesterday they’d both forgotten that needed attention. With a sigh and the promise of Granny’s overhead she dug out a pair of black leggings that she rolled up at the ankle followed by socks and her boots, which had some wiggle room, but not much. A bra wasn’t needed, but she didn’t want to wear her sweatshirt from the night before. Suddenly a sly smile crossed her face and she darted down the hall. Five minutes later with her hair and teeth brushed she trotted downstairs, accepting her green jacket from an offered hand.

“Is that my shirt?”

“Might be.” Emma tugged at the hem of the silk plaid, more of a tunic on her current frame and one of the only things Regina owned that was even close to casual. “Nothing fit right and I like this.” Fingers rubbed the softness.

Regina chided herself for not thinking sooner. She waved her hand, adding a drawer of items this size to Emma’s dresser and magically adjusting what the teen had on it fit properly. “I just put some clothing in your room that should fit. Good girl by the way.”

The teen accepted the kiss to her cheek and stumbled over the praise. “What was that for?”

Warming over the term of endearment she loved hearing and one not overly used. After all these years together it still held the same special quality as the first time she’d heard it. These ears she currently had were not used to hearing it yet and she longed for more praise from that mouth.

“For not using your magic to conjure as I have not taught your little half that yet.” Pausing when she realized it was more like thirds now. “We will try some conjuring this afternoon along some more summoning to get a feel for your abilities at this age.”

“But… I don’t wanna.”

“Don’t wanna what?”

“Believing.”

“You need to believe.”

“Belief can be like that and sometimes faith comes along to help, coupled with hope and you dear heart are overflowing with hope. Trust that the rest will come along with time.”

“I’ll try.”

“Such a brave start, my love and I am so proud of you for taking that step.”

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Muttering about having homework Emma shuffled to the Benr, cheering up that she was able to ride in the front seat. The first stop was the mausoleum and she waited in the car for the Queen to retrieve the book, which was stored safely in the trunk along with another smaller bundle Regina managed to keep easily away from green eyes that were scowling through an I-Pod again before they were on route to Granny's.

From the moment she stepped out of the car Emma could smell the freshly baked treats and her
mouth watered as they entered the diner. It was like the second day home all over again with people staring, but Emma ignored them, making a beeline for the glass pastry case and a wide-eyed waitress.

“My, what big eyes you have, wolfy.” Emma cheekily cocked a half-smile at the red brows that shot up. “It’s me Ruby, chill.”

“All the better to see you not eating the Bear Claw I know you must want.” The redhead teased back as she took tongs to remove the donut from the case and onto a plate, handing it past pale, waiting hands to the Queen.

“Mean. Who brushed you the wrong way?” Missing the teasing tone Emma stuck out her tongue and went to grab a booth before she got an answer.

Regina gave their breakfast order to the still gaping wolf and an apologetic summary of the latest in Emma's current shrinking saga. She followed the teen a few minutes later, placing the coveted donut to the side when hands reached for it as she sat across from a post. Apparently all three versions of Emma had that look down well.

Emma didn't bother asking if she could have the donut now, knowing whatever else was ordered for her was expected to be consumed first. Coffee for her Keeper and OJ mixed water for her arrived a few minutes later. Those simple routine things reminded of how things should be, but she wondered how she fit into that anymore. A sour scowl down at her hands, not knowing what to do with them, had the Queen reaching across the table palm up.

Open and easy.

'So why am I fighting her?' Whispered of now against the grain of the past floated in a blonde head. Because I don't deserve her.' Emma studied the offer on the table and slowly gave over one hand. Some relief came as the curves of them synced, a perfect fit and that only further confused her.

“What's on your mind baby?”

Shrug. “Just stuff.”

“More than stuff, I think?”

“Yeah… but I don't want to talk about it right now.” Pulling back from her desire to share as their food arrived.

A plate of scrambled eggs with sliced avocado and a side of cottage cheese was set in her place as a matching one with fruit was in front of the Queen. Emma inhaled her meal, but happily took her time with the sweet treat after, already feeling the sugar rush hitting her system. Green eyes looked up at the door chime and found her brother's, excited boy dragging David with him to their booth.

“Hi Emma! Ya feeling better?” Neal leaned in to hug his sister and moved to do the same to Regina in greeting.

“Hey buddy, I'm getting there. Hi David.” A smile for both of them.

“Emma, Regina. This is… different?” He gestured and hooked his thumbs in his belt with brows raised in question.

Slumping in the booth and losing her smile, the blonde grunted. “Y'ah, another comical piece to this whole thing. Thanks for noticing Sherlock.” Sarcasm crept in and she sighed.

“Emma.” Regina sipped her coffee, offering Neal the bowl of strawberries the boy's hand was hunting toward in her place while eyeing the girl patiently. Eyes then flicked up to David. “I was just about to text you that she would not be in today. How is Will coming along with his training by the way?” Smiling when Emma's hand went to join Neal's. Between the two of them her breakfast side was demolished within seconds.

They talked and shared updates about the town functions as Emma looked on, becoming more irritated that she felt out of the loop even though they both included her in the conversation. She rolled her eyes when asked to request their check from Ruby several minutes later and all but stomped back to the booth with the crinkled paper in hand. The self-deprecating voice she'd heard in her head returned full force.

David's eyes widened briefly at the temper coming from his now thirteen year old daughter. He was not at all envious of the Queen having to endure what was quickly becoming obvious to him as typical teenage mood swings. “I'll let you two go. I've got to get a quick bite and get Neal to school.” Excusing himself as Emma's request for a second donut was denied and an eye roll battle ensued.

Moving her focus back to the sullen blonde Regina reached a hand out across the booth, taking up the girl's hand again. "Stop with the eye rolling. You'll lose them in your head if you keep doing that." Her soft humor had the desired effect of gaining the teen's attention to her point without coming across as scolding.

Open and easy.

"But it's hard to help when you make it sooo damn easy.” Shrugging, taking back a hand, and rolling again to make her point.

Words not heeded flippéd a switch. “Enough. This attitude is not amusing. You were rude to Ruby earlier, David, and now me. Our rules for respect and how to treat others still stand. You know my expectations and different size of not those are the same as are your consequences when they are breached.” Searching green for understanding, she shook her head when it flushed and hid again.

"I knowooow.” Whining as shoulders sunk in the booth. "Get off my a-case.”

"Clearly you do not because you are pushing me when you normally wouldn't. I am prepared to go over all the details our rules and consequences right now if you need me to, but I do not think you want to have that conversation here. Am I correct?”

Blushing, sinking further. “Yeess.”

"Then take a moment to adjust your attitude.” She slid out of the booth and stood. “I am going to take care of the bill and when I come back I expect that to be done. Understood?”

“You… When heels didn't move, Emma lost her post as she thought about her actions and tried again. “Yes Ma'am.” She wanted to say another affection entirely, one lingering behind lips, but was swallowed by the confusion of why it wouldn't come.

"Good girl.” Wann and genuine.

That praise further eased Emma's mood and when heels returned she slid out of the booth with a
The rest of the day at Town Hall went too slow for Emma's liking. She spent most of the morning poking at the magic volume, tabbing pages to discuss with the Queen later, but saw nothing promising. Lunch was sandwiches ordered from a local deli and then a lesson in magic that had the teen pleasantly surprised she could manage better than her six year old self, but not much more. She practiced as her Keeper got on a conference call. By the time five o'clock rolled around the teen was bouncing to get out of the four walls surrounding her head all day. She stewed her iPod in her pocket and sidled up sweetly to her Keeper for a side hug who was packing up for the day.

Regina knew that buttery look. "What is it you want, sweet one?"

"How do you know I want something?" Caught Emma slid away, hopping up to sit on the desk.

"You forget how well I know you." A gentle tap to a hip to move off a pile of papers she needed.

"Fine." Getting down. "I wanna get out of here for a while, like to take a walk on my own."

"That is alright with me. Do you have your phone?"

Emma leaned back in genuine shock. "Yeah, right here… But really? Just like that?"

"You are thirteen, not six. So yes, just like that." A soft smile offered for the one she was given. This would be a trial run on the girl's ability to follow directions this age and it would give her some time to look into another surprise she had for Emma to help with the adjustment home.

"Keep your phone on, be careful, and dinner will be ready by 7:00. I expect you to be back to the house by then. Call me if you want a ride back."

"You got it warden. Mess hall by 7:00!"

The brow rose.

Emma scratched her nose. "It sounded funny in my head."

"Hysterical." Cracking a smile. "Now scoop."

With a cheesy grin, Emma quickly planted a kiss to the Queen's cheek and bolted out of the office, only slowing down when she was a block away. Inhaling the frosty air woke her mind up and she enjoyed the chilly walk to the park. She loved her time with the Queen, but found herself needing some time on her own since most recent development in her aging and she was suddenly grateful that she had been so well understood. Pausing at the edge of the pond she loved so much, thoughts shifted back to yesterday afternoon, bummed that her time with Neal had been cut short due to her panic.

Sounds of laughter drifted across the murky water and a few teenagers who seemed to be close to her age were lounging on a blanket on the frozen grass. She was surprised when the boy waved to her and she surprised herself by waving back and more so when her feet moved in their direction. It took a few minutes to make it to the other side of the water.

She learned their names, kids from families her adult mind recognized in town and the desire to just pretend she was any other teenager out for a walk hit her heart with yearning. A few hours of normalcy away from the thoughts of magic, her current problem and some peer companionship couldn't hurt she rationalized. Offering an old nickname when asked, reminded her of what she used to do when she moved to a new foster home or school. A fake name or only a part of her own left no attachments and didn't allow her to form any.

"So Em, you're new in town?" A dark eyed girl with impossibly glossy hair asked with a skeptical tone. No one just moved to Storybrooke.

"Nah, I've been around, but you could say that. What are you guys doing?" Emma sat on the edge of the wool blanket, taking the offered bag of chips tossed her way.

"Blowing off some steam… you know from finals starting next week before winter break?" The same girl, Justina implied and pulled a partially smoked cigarette out of her pocket, lit it, and blew the smoke straight up, coughing. "Want one?"

Wrinkling her nose as she chewed, Emma shook her head. "No thanks." She'd tried cigarettes once as a real teenager and hated the hot ashy taste it left.

"Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing you at school. How come?" The boy who had waved smile the bag of chips back, laughing at the tug of war it ended up being, bag bursting all over the blanket.

"Oh, um… I'm kind of home schooled." Thinking that wasn't really a lie as she helped eat the scattered chips hands were diving for.

"Lucky duck. I bet you get to sleep in everyday."

"Blushing, but enjoying the warmth of sharing something so simple that others could relate to. She had never had this chance before this age, to share everyday stuff about her family or life that other kids got to experience. Being shuffled from group home to group home hadn't allowed any real friendships to form at this age, the one she'd had with Lily being the closest in a foster placement she'd had such hope for only to have it ripped away. Justina definitely had the sweet edge that originally attracted Emma's attention when she had been a teen the first time around. 'Maybe I shouldn't wait to try and make some friends…' She studied the mischievous dark eyes watching her. 'I wonder if this is a second chance to go about things differently than how they ended with Lily.' Another tom piece inside flattered.

Time flew as they exchanged stories and eventually a bottle found its way into Emma's hand from someone's backpack as evening crept in around them. She took an unknowing sip, gagging at the sharp taste flooding her mouth before it registered what she had in her hand and what she just did. Fingering the bottle of decent scotch no doubt swiped from some parent's liquor cabinet as the heat seeped into her gut.

She hadn't had a drink since they had returned from their journey and she knew she needed permission to have one because when left to her own devices she tended to overindulge. The last time she'd had been granted a small one was to toast Henry's marriage the night the spell was cast, a special occasion as the Queen had deemed it. While she'd experimented with alcohol when she was thirteen the first time, she also knew there was no way in hell she should be having any while...
Regina flipping a gasket would be an understatement; the whole engine would explode.

And the Queen would be in the right for a few different reasons. Admitting she’d had a problem with her drinking before the spell hadn’t been easy, but they had worked to establish healthy coping skills that made the desire to drink, to run, when she got stressed nearly disappear, especially once when a certain spoon was brought out a few weeks after Emma had slipped into old habits. It had been more than a slip, actually. One that had nearly cost her life. She shuddered at the memory of that night… of opening her eyes after… of seeing the fear in the Queen’s. More of a blonde hot headed self destructive roller coaster that had left them both in tears that day and again two weeks later when it was time to make it right between them.

Still they worked through it.

Emma got back on track because Regina had put her there, expecting no less than her best attempt coupled with loving understanding that this would happen on occasion. Their life continued without judgment or the bringing up of old transgressions because that’s what they did and how their dynamic worked. And Emma flourished. The bubble question of whether that would be true again popped in her mind.

A buzzing from her pocket brought Emma's thoughts back and she pulled out her phone, seeing the time and a text from her Keeper reminding her she needed to be home in ten minutes. From where she was in Storybrooke that would easily take twice that. Fingers flew on the screen in response, the heavy feeling of angst sinking in. The bottle kissed her mouth again, an old habit once started hard to ignore. More than habit, she realized as heat burned going down. More of a text for the heart she loved.

"Who's that?" Justina inquired.

"My… I gotta go and I'm gonna be late as it is." Stealing one last sip, wishing the old bravado from the past would come with it, but it just made her sick. Cheeks flushed as she handed it back to Justina and stood up. "Thanks for letting me hang out."

"Hey text me your number." Justina began to gather her stuff and rattled off her phone number to the blonde.

"Want a ride?" The boy, Mark, offered.

Seeing the blonde's hesitation, Justina jumped in. "He's not a perv or anything, just my dorky older cuz."

Emma debated, not wanting to give away where she lived least there be questions, but also wanting to shave off as much time from her eventual lateness as she could. The fact that they all had been drinking, albeit mildly, didn't factor into self preservation mindset. Her brain as it was did not even go there.

"You gotta car hub?"

"For my birthday last week." He pressed the button to unlock his truck, lights flashing.

"Maybe just 'til the start of Mifflin street. I'll walk from there."

"Suit yourself, let's jet then. Justina, you coming?"

The dark beauty put out her cigarette and gathered the blanket up. "Yep, I'm not letting you and blondie ditch me."

Together they sat in the truck, Emma squished in the middle. She nervously eyed the dash clock, now starting to kick herself as she thought her actions through. Testing M-Gina was a stupid idea, why am…? Suddenly the truck slowed bumping her out of thoughts and began to pull off to the side of the road. "Hey! What are you doing?"

"Cops!" Mark hit his hand against the steering wheel as red and blue lights flashed along with a siren.

Emma spun around violently, catching site of the familiar cruiser and man exiting the vehicle. "Shit—oot!... Look I know him, maybe I can get us out of this." Licking her lips and trying to think of a fast excuse for whatever they had been pulled over for.

"License and registration pl—" David did a double take as he peered into the driver side window at the wide eyed blonde in the middle seat. "Em—?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Interrup—OUCH!... Look!" Mark glanced over at David with all the souvenirs he had from his last run in with M-Gina. "Who's that?"

"Right brake light is broken, no signal back at that corner either." He narrowed his eyes at the blonde.

"What? You pull him over for?"

"Ouch!... Look I know him, maybe I can get us out of this." Licking her lips and trying to think of a fast excuse for whatever they had been pulled over for.

"License and registration pl—" David did a double take as he peered into the driver side window at the wide eyed blonde in the middle seat. "Em—?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Interrupting and forcing a smile to cover up the rest of her name. "What'd you pull him over for?"

"Right brake light is broken, no signal back at that corner either." He narrowed his eyes at the blondie.

"Are you alright?"

"Never better." Nudging Mark hard. "Give him your identification and registration now."

"Uh, right. It's in the glove box there." He took it from the blonde and handed it over to the deputy whose eyes never left nervous green ones.

"Does Regina know where you are?" David squinted in the twilight to read the paperwork.

"Hold up." Justina turned hard, poking Emma's arm. "Like Mills? You adopted or—?"

"No, but it's complicated." Emma swallowed hard, happy bubble bursting around her. "Are we good to go David? And yes, she knows I'm on my way."

"Shes out of exasperated breath she didn't know she was holding—right in his face. Biting lips stole her voice not believing her mistake as a knowing look registered on the man's face.

He pocketed the paperwork, his mouth a hard line. "Alright. All of you need to step out of the truck."

"Damon it!" Emma thought and kicked the underside of the dash, earning an annoyed look from Mark, but she didn't care. She stepped out of the truck after him. The two other teens were questioned and sent to sit in the cruiser after the half empty bottle of scotch was confiscated with a few other cigarettes. Emma was left with David’s disapproving look. She crossed her arms, feeling defensive. She didn't answer to him and she wasn't going to start now.

"How much did you have to drink Emma?" Concern evident in his tone.

He'd always worried about his daughter's excessive drinking, a habit that seemed to have disappeared in the last few years, though he could recall Emma sometimes drinking socially,
The man ran a hand through his hair torn between wanting to respect Emma's space and keep her safe. "Right now it kind of is, as Deputy I mean."

Emma huffed, rolling her eyes. "Maybe so, but I didn't have to take your inquisition as an adult and since I still am, technically, an adult I don't have to take it now." Her lips zipped after that.

David sighed. "You're right." The surprised girl's eyes trailed the hand that moved to his pocket and he pulled out his cell phone. "Maybe there is someone else you'd rather talk to." Before Emma could protest he dialed the Mayor's number and under glaring protest from his daughter gave Regina a run down of facts that had happened.

Emma's nostrils flared, but she paled when the phone was offered for her ear. With a sigh she took it, giving David a dirty look while she did so. "Hi?"

"Are you alright?" Worry came through the ear piece.

Teeth abused a lower lip. Of course that's the first thing out of the Queen's mouth and Emma's eyes misted at the inquiry to her well being. "Yeah, but I have a feeling I'm not gonna be soon."

A long pause, then a soft voice. "We will be having words when you get home."

"Please tell me there is more than that for dinner because I'm starving." Hopeful her joke would cut the tension.

"Emma... Do you need me to come and get you or are you alright to ride along with David?" A tight voice that easily ignored deflection.

"You don't have to."

"Now wanting time before seeing what she thought would be disappointed eyes. She could handle a lot of things, but not that.

"Baby, that is not what I asked. Do you need me to?"

Emma relaxed at the consideration. Regina wanted to make sure she was comfortable being alone with David while in her current state and she surprised herself that she was. He wouldn't hurt her, he never had really, and in the few minutes of speaking with her Keeper she'd come to realize the man had simply wanted her to feel safe and had called the one person he knew that made her feel that way. Her anger left and was replaced with something she couldn't identify.

"I'm okay M—Gina, really."

A pause of wonder when the affection was exchanged. "Alright, sweet one. I'll see you soon."

Emma said good bye and hung up, handing the phone back to David. It didn't take long for two other phone calls to be made and two drop offs, each at Mark and Justin's house before the cruiser turned onto Mifflin. Eyes grew at the familiar street sign and the balloon in Emma's gut bobbed up into her throat.

"She's gonna kill me David, you'll be an accessory to murder." The first words out of her mouth in an attempt to save her skin since she'd gotten into the cruiser twenty minutes ago.

Blue eyes caught the nervous fidgeting in the back seat and sighed. "It will hard to arrest myself, so I think I'm covered, you on the other hand are lucky you were not driving and are not old enough to be in the detention cell tonight."

Eyes rolled for the hundredth time that day. "Actually I'm not so lucky. Bars between Gina and I sound really good about now." She hunched down in the back seat as they pulled up to the front of the mansion. "Seriously, I'm burnt toast! Scratch that, crumbs!"

"After the stunt you pulled, drinking at your age right now and getting to a car with someone who has been drinking, I bet. You guys probably have a lot to talk about." He was sympathetic to a point, but not with this and he was surprised he actually hoped that Regina would help Emma understand that she wouldn't hear from him. Even so, he couldn't help himself. "We've seen what that does first hand Emma... The accidents, scraping people off of the concrete—"

"Don't lecture me! I get it, okay? I screwed up again, like always!" The thick silence that followed made her sick with guilt. She knew she'd been stupid, but she didn't need it rubbed in her face.

Pulling the cruiser over, David twisted the key off then turned around in the seat. "I'm not trying to. I just... I lost you once and almost again and now that we are starting to get on good terms... I'm just worried about you. I love you Emma, you're my daughter. Just let me in a little bit so I can show you." He stepped out and shut the door, letting the cool air calm his nerves before rounding the car and opening up the back. A much more subdued version of cool blonde stepped out.

Emma blindly started down the walk, freezing when the front door opened and her Keeper waited in the doorway. She looked back over her shoulder at David and then again toward Regina, cradled between two people who had her best interests at heart. A whisper of great understanding in the doorway. She looked back over her shoulder at David and then again toward Regina, Emma didn't even consider the possibility of Regina helping her. She had said she'd done her job and that was it. She knew that Regina hadn't meant it when she'd said that, but she hoped...

"I'm sorry." For exactly what Emma couldn't say, but the arms returning her hug said enough for her.

"I'm just worried about you. I love you Emma, you're my daughter. Just let me in a little bit so I can show you."

"Good luck." A small smile came to his face as he watched his daughter turn to go. "And Emma?"

"Yeah?" An ocean of smooth green glass gazed back.

"Thank you."

A/N - Thoughts?

Next chapter will pick up right where this leaves off...
A/N - Thanks for your comments last chapter! This one picks up right where the other left off. Fanart on Tumblr under Littleswanklover.

Emma, Emma, Emma... Sighs.

::: :::::::::

Emma looked at her boots, feet housed in black leather that had carried her on many adventures in another life and now in this one. Feet belonging to steps of the past that did not have a family or home and that ran down a blind trail with no end. Sometimes little feet that told stories of ice-cream at Granny's, a school yard fight, meeting Jasper, picnics, and walks. They knew how to make pedals on a bike spin so fast flying seemed possible. Dancing was another talent learned on the top of blue silk heels in the diner on New Year's Eve. New feet cherished just this morning when a scar on the instep of one had been kissed.

Ten foot-steps.

That's all that separated her from the heart hers belonged to at the end of the walk. With a deep breath, Emma braved the short walk up to the front porch as David left in the cruiser, ducking chin when she couldn't read her Keeper's face. Green welled as she was drawn in for another hug, this one much softer and complete with understanding for the moment she'd just experienced outside. Resting there, breathing in the comfort of home, a nuggling raw piece of broken past moved into place.

"I'm so..." The rest of her apology fell away as arms squeezed her gently and a kiss brushed her temple before brown eyes found hers, usually unreadable, they held love and aching shadows.

"We will talk soon. Go into the kitchen and eat your dinner. Then come to the study. You have twenty minutes."

"But..." Pausing as a hand was held up.

"Emma, I need a few minutes of quiet, just as you do before we talk. Go on now."

Gaze found the floor. "Yes, Ma'am."

Emma side stepped into the house, figuring being respectful couldn't hurt. She found a warm plate of chicken marsala and asparagus on the counter with a glass of milk, eyes wincing when she caught the time on the oven clock; 45 minutes late on top of her current trouble. The food tasted amazing, but with her current guilt pad she only ate half before cleaning up her plate. She had exactly three minutes before she was expected in the study and pulled out her phone to shoot off an apology text to Justina. A minute later a small smile hinted up at the reply.

Maybe she'd made a friend after all.

With some lift in her step she went toward the formal office, knocking once on the open door before stepping into the room. Brining her lip again at her inability to read her Keeper as well as she was read. Dark eyes opened again, offering warmth and the couch was gestured. Shuffling over to sit, Emma hugged her flipping stomach as glasses were removed and the Queen joined her, their knees touching.

"Did you get enough to eat?"

"Too much, I couldn't finish, but it was really good." Fidgeting. "I'm sorry I missed dinner and for everything..."

Emma nodded, biting the inside of her cheek.

"Words my dear."

"The ones I'm thinking will get me in trouble."

"Not as much as your actions have, I guarantee it. Answer my question please."

Emma settled on the second thing she was thinking. "Yeah, we've been working on it."

"However, getting into a car with someone who has been drinking is a whole other level by itself. Right now, you are capable of making better choices than that, despite your size or emotions. So I am wondering if this was some sort of a test on your part like this morning?"

"I didn't drink and drive though!" Ignoring the truth in question, Emma paused at the hard look she was getting and swallowed, but stubbornness won out. "Look, I know what I did was stupid. I don't NEED you to tell me that!" Eyes glassed at the mistake of sass as her chin was quickly caught.

"No. You are anything but that, young lady. Reckless, irresponsible, and dangerous are more appropriate adjectives to describe your misbehavior and you will mind your tone with me."

Regina's voice took a sharp edge, worry over what could have happened now and what had happened in their past flashed in mind. Quieting, with a deep breath, she shook her head.

"Drinking, getting in a car with strangers who were drinking, a newly licensed driver without an adult, coming home in the cruiser... Did you think I would not figure this out? Your eyes give you away every time Emma. And obvious with the smell of smoke, alcohol, and your face, it is quite clear that you want or maybe need a reaction from me."

"I-I wasn't..." Stammering as hiding from those knowing eyes suddenly became impossible. "Okay, I was... but I didn't mean to at first and I'm not trying to get in trouble. I wanted a chance to blend in and just hang out." Emma's voice shook as thoughts spilled. "I just wanted a few hours of normalcy and to pretend I was just another teenager hanging with my friends. I never got that experience at this age. Once almost with Lily, but you know how that turned out. I miss that from our old life and it got out of hand."
The thought of requiring an essay, as she would have assigned Henry, was short lived with
you will be redoing until it is.”

questions to make sure you understand the material. Anything less than 100% we will discuss and
underage and being in a car with someone who is under the influence along with comprehension
slip into this habit, though both go along with some hefty reading about the dangers of drinking
time, otherwise we will be together. Early bed, extra chores. Or the reminder we use for when you
outings. No screens except your phone if we are apart, only home and work, if you grow in that

"Look at me please." Clouds of green gazed over. "You may be grounded for a week. No

"I hate it when you make me pick and I hate it when you pick." Unhappy with either option at this
two options." She could see the need to be free of the guilt that resided in those eyes clearly
responsibility for your actions. You chose to test me and so you will choose your consequence
"You did Emma and yet you still made those choices. Your body and emotions are young enough
as a test or not."

"I knew it..." Emma sank further into the couch, boot rubbing against the friction of the throw rug.
housing the Savior. When she had raised Henry she had stopped using that well before he turned

Emma winced. "She was..." Eyes widened. "I didn't think!"

"I believe you." Regina nodded reassuringly knowing that Emma personally found the habit as
disgusting as she did. "I'm glad you made a friend. Really, you need and deserve them. As for
almost being late, your text telling me where you were and that you were on your way was a good
choice on your part. You are not in trouble for that." Praise where it was due brought light to
green eyes before moving on. "Now, what did you drink?"

Another wince. "Scotch, but if it's any conciliation your cider is waaaay better."

"Emma, I'm well past jokes or any banter. If you need time to understand the gravity of the
conversation we are having right now before we continue, then the corner is just there."

"No thank you." Shoulders dropped. "Sorry."

"How much did you have to drink?"

"Barely any..." Frown deepened when she saw the brow. "Three sips and I didn't mean to take
the first one. That was an accident. A bottle was passed to me and I didn't look at it before I had
some. We were all sharing snacks so I didn't think about it. I was sucked into what was
happening. But the other two I knew not to and I... sorta, maybe did them on purpose." The
silence that followed was unexpected and a knee began to bounce.

"Why?"

"What?" Head jerked up in confusion.

"You heard me clearly."

"But... you know why."

Regina nodded. "I do, but do you?"

"I... I think so." Blushing. "I guess maybe I wanted to see if our dynamic, how we work is still
the same, like you said in the diner this morning." When said like that, it sounded so childish, and
she was embarrassed of the fact that further confirmed how deep she was wrapped up her new
emotions.

"I think you will find that very much the case. It seems actions need to speak louder than words
for you to understand that, but words we will finish having first." Turning and resting a hand on a
jitterbug knee as green eyes met hers.

"I'm sorry though and I know what I did was really messed up."

"Your adult self and I have talked about this, but your ears need to hear these words too." Taking
the nervous fingers between cool palms. "I don't expect there will be for you, not after we are
done tonight, but if there ever is a time when you are tempted to drink, or under the influence, or
an uncomfortable situation you call me and if not me a trusted adult. I don't care how late it is or
what is happening, your life is too precious to gamble with. Do you understand me Emma?"

"Yeah and I will, promise, but there won't be another time like this." Teeth tore dry skin from pink
lips, unable to hold back anymore. "Are you gonna... you know?" Growing nervous as
the silence stretched. 'Come on don't make me say it."

"Am I going to what?"

'Gulp! Of course you are..." Emma thought pouting as her mouth tried to work. "Are you gonna
give me a reminder?"

Regina regarded the girl looking anxiously at their joined hands, her girl, despite the teen body
housing the Savior. When she had raised Henry she had stopped using that well before he turned
six and even then sparingly. He didn't need it, temperament and being brought up from infancy
under her careful care as he had been.

"It didn't cross my mind initially when David called earlier." Recalling her first instinct to make
sure Emma was safe, emotionally and physically.

Hopeful green eyes flashed up, batting lashes twice.

"Then I had time to think about the ramifications of what could have happened. You and I have
rules and agreements don't we? Two very important ones you broke tonight, weather you meant it
as a test or not."

"I knew it..." Emma sank further into the couch, boot rubbing against the friction of the throw rug.

"You did Emma and yet you still made those choices. Your body and emotions are young enough
that the decision about you having a consequence at all is mine, but old enough to take some
responsibility for your actions. You chose to test me and so you will choose your consequence
from two options." She could see the need to be free of the guilt that resided in those eyes clearly
and thought Emma might too.

"I hate it when you make me pick and I hate it when you pick." Unhappy with either option at this
point, Emma leaned forward placing elbows on knees, eyes on the floor. "What are my choices?"

"Look at me please." Clouds of green gazed over. "You may be grounded for a week. No
outings. No screens except your phone if we are apart, only home and work, if you grow in that
time, otherwise we will be together. Early bed, extra chores. Or the reminder we use for when you

The thought of requiring an essay, as she would have assigned Henry, was short lived with
"Are you sure?"

Squirming. "Yeah." Growing hot at the reality.

"I can see that sweet one. Is a reminder your choice then?"

Side of it. "I'm sorry… For everything."

Emma dropped her arms with a sigh, the line again clear once she was put in her place on the right consideration. "A brief gesture towards the spoon.

"I gave you two choices to consider; exactly else she needed to make clear. "I know exactly what you need. We set the rule we have about"

"I did not say I wouldn't." Regina, while respecting those words, realized there was something easily tossed the spoon between them on the coffee table, glad to be rid of it and quickly crossed to get into a car with someone who had been drinking. My mind did cross using the spoon for a shared, I am not sure how much you were able to help yourself. I am more upset over your choice Rounding the desk, Regina wrapped an arm around the girl, leading her to the sofa to sit. "You ask her to fetch it so it would do the job on stopping this impulse she seemed to have right now. The onslaught of tears they had been prepared for changed a piece of their hearts and their relationship since. That was the fine beauty to their dance; Regina set the bar high and Emma was expected to reach it, with plenty of loving support provided, but the expectation was clear and attainable. The line or

Emma slowly left the room, returning to the solitude of the kitchen to ponder her options. They both sucked in her opinion, but were also fair and expected for what she did within the confines of their relationship.

Being grounded when she wanted space at this age wouldn't be fun, nor would not being allowed TV, her I-Pod or video games to help distract her from stress. She didn't like lingering consequences. She much preferred to face it and be done. Yet the closeness of being tied to her Keeper the times she had been grounded always brought the authoritative comfort she often sought, even when she was bored out of her mind with nothing to do, no matter what age she was. Then there was something satisfying in general about having decisions made for her knowing she would be held to a higher standard for behavior than she would have ever set for herself if left to her own devices as she had been her whole life before their dynamic. Then there was idea of a reminder. Those always made her blush with embarrassment, and right now her cheeks were crimson. Though the need it satisfied, sometimes for being able to get out of her head and back into the present or righting her wrong and starting over clean, always outweighed that emotion. She found healing through tears, the physicality of processing her feelings that way was a gift discovered at the suggestion for stress relief one afternoon, a long time ago, from red lips in the birth of their relationship. Much reading and discussion had happened before hand and the more Emma had learned about this thing people did the more hope had grown inside that it might work for her too.

The ten minutes Emma had spent across her Keeper's knee the very first time for stress relief brought the finality of understanding what she needed to begin feeling again and learning to let go of the guilt of her actions, the weight of the past. In this way she had learned self forgiveness and the dark voice that often ate at her inside her head began to go away. The onslaught of tears they had been prepared for changed a piece of their hearts and their relationship since.

"No, but stay close. I'll call for you when your time limit is up." She'd considered having Emma Groaning Emma fell back on the couch. "A whole week! You know anything more than a few days is pure torture for meee.

"Keep whining and we can add on to either side of the two choices."

Straightening up. "No thanks."

"Your actions have weight and they affect others. You need to feel them, own them, one way or another. For the situation at hand I've offered you a balanced scale to pick from."

"When do I havta decide?"

"You have fifteen minutes. Either way whatever you choose goes into effect tonight, reading inside, which you can start on tomorrow, as it is getting late. "She pulled the girl into her arms, stroking curls. "I love you, more than I have words for… Think about it."

Emma closed her eyes, lips rolling in at the affection she craved, but fought. "Do I have to think here?"

"No, but stay close. I'll call for you when your time limit is up." She'd considered having Emma reflect in the comer, but in this moment decided the girl needed a different kind of quiet to consider the choices offered.

Emma slowly left the room, returning to the solitude of the kitchen to ponder her options. They both sucked in her opinion, but were also fair and expected for what she did within the confines of their relationship.

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That was the fine beauty to their dance; Regina set the bar high and Emma was expected to reach it, with plenty of loving support provided, but the expectation was clear and attainable. The line or how far Emma was allowed to stray was also set and would hold firm no matter how many times she attempted to step over it. Being safe and protected, noticed and cherished, accountable and loved as she was now fed her soul after being starved for those feelings for so long. Her name softly called from the study pulled her back to the present and after taking a moment to confirm her choice, she left the room with decision in hand. Emma entered the formal space quietly her arm outstretched in offering just as the brunette stood from the desk.

A dark brow arched in surprise as she walked toward the blonde, eyeing the small wooden spoon in a pale fist. "A reminder then?"

Emma shook her hand with emphasis. "I drank without asking." The reason clear enough in her head and back into the present or righting her wrong and starting over clean, always outweighed that emotion. She found healing through tears, the physicality of processing her feelings that way was a gift discovered at the suggestion for stress relief one afternoon, a long time ago, from red lips in the birth of their relationship. Much reading and discussion had happened before hand and the more Emma had learned about this thing people did the more hope had grown inside that it might work for her too.

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Emma wrapped an arm around the girl, leading her to the sofa to sit. "You did drink three sips as you said, but not necessarily with the intent to do so, at least initially." A green question found her. "Make no mistake I am not alright, at all, with the choices you made.

Rounding the desk, Regina wrapped an arm around the girl, leading her to the sofa to sit. "You did drink three sips as you said, but not necessarily with the intent to do so, at least initially." A green question found her. "Make no mistake I am not alright, at all, with the choices you made.

"I did not say I wouldn't." Regina, while respecting those words, realized there was something else she needed to make clear. "I know exactly what you need. We set the rule we have about drinking together and the consequences when a slip occurs." She tucked hair behind Emma's ear. "I gave you two choices to consider; exactly how either of those is carried out are not your decisions to make right now, as per our agreements, though I will take your feelings into consideration." A brief gesture towards the spoon.

Emma dropped her arms with a sigh, the line again clear once she was put in her place on the right side of it. "I'm sorry… For everything."

Squirming. "Yeah." Growing hot at the reality.

"Are you sure?"
Thoughts moved back to her time in the kitchen and again to their previous conversations, all of them through the years. She wanted to feel better and own her choices. Like it or not, and she knew it, she needed that spoon right now. “Yes, I am.”

“Thank you for taking responsibility for yourself. Go take a shower and get ready for bed. You are going right to sleep afterwards. I’ll be up soon.”

Regina watched the blonde scoot out of the room and returned her gaze to the spoon. Skin on skin during a reminder session was usually all Emma required to get to where she needed to be emotionally, to let go of the tears and guilt of actions and for self-forgiveness to take place. Aside from the one consensual use of the spoon during a full blown relapse of their rules, she’d never spanked Emma with anything other than her hand, preferring to feel exactly the kind of heat she was igniting on the pale flesh beneath her palm. Yet Emma’s expectation for it without having to ask for the implement to be gotten spoke to the respect, effectiveness, and impact it had left behind.

Reaching for the wicked wood Regina tested it against her palm and again against her thigh at measured levels of light to moderate strength as she had before using it the first time. The water turning off overhead reminded her of where she needed to be shortly and with a sigh she set the spoon back on the table, taking the next several minutes to think.

Upstairs Emma towed off and ran a comb through damp hair, glad to be rid of the cigarette smoke that clung to her curls. She padded across the hall and found a pair of blue flannel star pattern PJs in her dresser, wearing that and a pair of matching socks. With nothing left to do, she sat on the bed and waited. Eyeing Sitchy with sudden want she allowed herself the comfort of running fingers through his blue fur. The knock on her door brought glassy eyes up and then down accompanied with a hard swallow at what rested in her Keeper’s hand. The bed sank next to her and the spoon was set behind the Queen out of sight.

“I thought about your request and we will see if that is needed or not as we go.” She decided that the girl’s response and ease of letting go or of fighting the release would determine if that extra push was needed.

“Okay.” A whisper.

“Turn around for me.”

Emma let go of her knees and scooted around, back to the Queen and relaxed into the fingers feathering strands of hair into a French braid. Another simple routine that brought great comfort and she was grateful still the same. The end was tied off and hands rested on her shoulders softly before leaving. With a deep breath she looked back into brown eyes.

“Come here.” Gently coxing with a finger pointing to the spot in front of her. Regina allowed the girl to take her time standing to attention. She took sweaty hands in her own. “You are about to go over my lap for a few different reasons. Tell me what those are please.”

“For drinking in general without asking and underage and being in a car with someone who I know has been drinking…and testing you.” Squirming as she was brought forward to stand between the Queen’s knees.

Saying the words her transgressions was never a missed step in their ritual and did a few things for both of them. For Emma it helped her own her actions and prepared her mind to let them go. For the Queen it confirmed the blonde understood the reason they were there as well as provide another opportunity for clarity if needed.

“Not for testing me, no. The result of that being you having to choose, to take some ownership over your actions and consequence. While testing is not something I like, I realize you will do that on occasion and I know where it comes from. Do you understand that difference?”

Quietly. “Yes Ma’am.”

“That aside, you are correct. You could have been seriously hurt today and we will be talking in more depth about what that could have looked like over the next few days as you complete your reading assignment.” Pulling on both hands, she guided Emma across her knee. Emma hid her face in a pillow as she was adjusted, upper body resting on the bed and her legs left to dangle, toes still short of brushing the floor despite her in between size. She hoped for a quick session, but tummy fluttered when her PJ pants were not taken down before the arm tightening around her mid section signaled the beginning. That was never good news.

Her breath caught at the firm attention getter that was followed by lighter hand. Dropping her head as the slow pace was set she knew she wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. A drawn out session had both pros and cons; much less intensity initially, but more time in that position, to remember her place and why she was there. She’d gotten few of these for different reasons and they never failed to leave the impression intended. After a minute she couldn’t help but fidget as the steady warmth was beginning to build into some discomfort.

As her blue PJ pants were slipped down to mid thigh she let out a long whine of protest and threw her hand back to cover, refusing to move it when asked. Once eluded out the way defiance was rewarded with firm attention, one each to the crease of a thigh with a quick hand.

“Oowww…. Sorry!” Eyes smarting, as her hand was released to join to its mate.

A minute later Emma’s toes curled when she lost her last layer and tears of remorse started when she was shifted forward, and the pace increased, but not the strength. This type of session always made her legs give a life of their own and the moment she began kicking there was a brief pause as she was turned slightly and pulled further over the left knee of her Keeper, freeing up a toned leg. The Queen’s calf caught both of hers, pinning them gently against the side of the bed, so she wouldn’t accidentally buck off that lap. Though the tears had started, the damn had yet to break and after a steady hand raking the heat was here, but Emma’s mind struggled to get go of what she’d done. Her hand crept back again to cover and then shot to grab the blanket instead when there was a pause at her movement.

“Give me your hand please.” Instructed Regina, not wanting the accidentally nip delicate fingers.

“T-t’-e can do it, you don’t have to.”

“Now Emma.” The girl slowly obeyed and she took up the strap, holding it in her own. “Listen to me very carefully my girl. Drinking without permission or underage, driving or riding along with someone who has is not a conversation I want to have with you again, but I will each and every time if you need me to. If there is a next time, and I hope for your sake there is not, this will be a much longer part of our session.”

Emma stiffened she felt cool wood press into her right cheek. “P-please nnoo. I don’t need t-that.”
"I'm beginning to think you do, dear heart."

Plea sincere, the crocodile tears were not what they both were after and Emma was fighting the release. The beginnings of a cathartic cry rested there between syllables, waiting to be let go. And they were within two moderate cracks with another two keeping open the walls of a heart and mind to drain. Spoon dropped, hand and legs were freed, and skin to skin returned for a few additional swats, providing the contact needed for Emma to lose herself in feeling.

"That's my girl." Free hand massaging tension away from the small of a back. "Let it all out baby."

Emma cried harder at those words, her left arm tucked under her chest uncoiled and she wrapped it around the back of her Keeper's waist in a half hug. Her test given earlier earned a perfect score and she had no desire, no need to push in this area again. After her breathing settled she leaned up and was helped to her feet. Hands found her Keeper's knees for balance, allowing clothing to be righted for her, too tired at the thought. Arms guided her to sit, with some discomfort, and held the tears slowed and sniffles began. Tissues made it into pale hands and a forgiving kiss to cheek made Emma lean into the lingering affection. After the day filled with choices and tests, accountability and forgiveness, she was left deeply loved and wanted; the dark voice in her head was there, quieter for the moment, but still hungry for her insecurities. For now, safe in those arms, she could not feed it. Wet eyes found the key to the locked door of feelings this time around resting on her bedroom rug.

"That thing still bites the same." Emma pointed an accusing finger at the little spoon, and tucked up further into the Queen.

Soft laughter agreed with that assessment and Regina helped Emma stand as she pulled down the duvet. Thoughtful orbs watched as the girl curled up underneath, looking younger with pink cheeks and sleepy eyes. She returned to sit on the edge of the bed, gently tucking stray curls back from that sweet face.

"I love you, Emma."

"Love you too and I'm sorry again." Emma yawned, the breadth of the day made lids heavy.

"You have said your apologies and consequences are done, sweet girl. It's time to move on from this." Tucking blankets. "I want you to know that while you were having your adventure earlier I looked into some classes for you." Smiling when green eyes brightened. "There is a mixed levels martial arts class at the studio where you took Kung Fu that is offered to all ages I thought you might like." When she'd crafted the Do Over spell she had gone to great lengths to keep what she could, and would work for Emma's second chance, the same as their real life. A few jobs for people had been rearranged and memories for all, but the core of Storybrooke had not been shifted.

"So I can take a class, no matter what age I am and still be in the same group?" Hopeful of having that be a part of their routine again in this reality.

"Yes, that is the idea."

Emma wrinkled her nose briefly. "You'll talk to the instructor so it is not weird and maybe… you can come watch me, like before?"

"I've already called and had the discussion. Mulan is eager to have you just as she was in our other life and yes, I would love to watch you. Shall I sign you up and get a range of uniforms ordered?"

"Please and thank you." Mumbled sleepily into a neck as she popped up for one last hug. "Stay with me…" Whisper left unfinished, Emma became tangled over the affection wanting to come again and needed far more than she had words for.

Regina dimmed the overhead light and turned on the swan lamp with a wrist flick, slipped off her shoes and curled up along the girl's back. As Emma snuggled into sleep fingers tamed stray curls and lips found a sweet temple. "Rest now. Muma's right here, baby."

A/N - Hope you liked it. Please comment if ya want.

Next time - Lighter chapters ahead. Many requests for the awkward conversation that often comes with this age Emma is will occur along with a shift back to adult Emma for a chat on next steps in the Snow saga. Until then *cheers!*
Regina leaned closer into the mirror of her en suite, wrapping a burgundy ring around full lips. Pulling back, she assessed the color choice with the matching pin stripes in her black suit jacket. An incessant tapping drew her eyes to the thirteen year old balancing on the edge of her claw foot tub watching her.

“How do you get it so flawless?” Emma leaned forward, wincing as the edge of the tub caught a tender spot from last night.

“Practice and a steady hand.” The Queen started to put the cosmetics away, but noticed the girl’s unasked question in those longing eyes. “Would you like a little demonstration?”

She had no intention of letting the teen paint her full face, but a little make up lesson might be just the thing to perk Emma up. Fingertips tapped the counter in gentle invitation. The blonde beamed and hopped up to sit. This put them eye level as Regina went through her cosmetics, selecting the palest tones she owned of blush and lip gloss.

Emma had never been one for much makeup, finding the hassle not worth the time or energy. That and she didn’t have the patience for precision nor anyone to teach her how as a teenager the first time around when she’d actually been interested. A happy bubble formed in her mind.

Swirling a brush into a soft pink and tapping the excess off, Regina brought the brush up to a fine cheek. “The key with blush is blending and into the apple of your cheek, fading upwards, like so.” Turning a pointed chin so Emma could see the motion of the brush in the mirror as she did the other cheek.

“Like painting?”

“In a way, yes, or blending how you like to do with your charcoal pencil set.”

Recalling Emma’s insistent need lately to draw and process through art. She’d made sure the art kit she’d gotten in their other life made it to the spelled trunk and glad of the fact as it seemed to be helping fidgeting fingers work through some unsaid emotions. Hands put away the blush and a finger dusted a bit of highlighter on cheek bones and Cupid’s bow. She then reached for a nude lip gloss with a hunt of shimmer, showing the girl how to set her mouth and apply it. Lastly, the Queen conjured a new tube of brown mascara and gently flicked the wand once over already long lashes.

“And with make-up, less is more, especially when you are young. Take a look.”

Emma turned, and broke into a glowing grin. Her face was subtly different, brighter even. She wrapped arms around her Keeper’s neck. “Thank you… I don’t think I want to wear it every day. But I appreciate you showing me some tips.” Swallowing at the new memory she now had and one she didn’t think she’d ever be able to get. Maybe having a chance to be this age wasn’t all bad.

“You are most welcome and I agree, not every day. You will need to ask if you’d like too.”

“Hey Gina… You were really patient with me last night, after everything I did and I want you to know I won’t mess up like that again, not on purpose.”

Regina paused her task and cupped a pale cheek. “I have confidence that you will make different choices going forward. Even so, I expect you to make some mistakes along the way. That is a part of growing up. When that is the case we will work through it together.”

Rubbing lips together. “I never feel punished with you though. Like I mess up, we talk, and there are consequences, then it’s done, but this is different than what it used to feel like when I got into trouble as a kid in my past. Back then it was always about shame and I felt so worthless afterward. Now I don’t, it’s the opposite.”

“Why do you think that is?” Hands moved again to continue cleaning up.
Heels swung gently, tapping the cabinets under the sink in thought. “Maybe cause I know what to expect and you’re firm, but never yell at me or go outside of what we agreed on.” Deeper feelings swirled inside. “I know you love me and want what’s best for me, even when I can’t see what best is sometimes…” Last night she had been trapped in tunnel vision until Regina helped her process the sequence of events to widen her scope to resolution. She tended to go head first into everything she did with a two step action plan; dive in, sink or swim. Consequences be damned. It was the before and during of those steps she needed help managing and slowly but surely she was learning to.

Brown eyes took in the pensive girl after stashing the caddy of makeup away. “You are thinking loud enough for both of us sweet one, will you share your thoughts some more?”

“Hmmm?” Becoming present. “Yeah, um… I was thinking back to the first talk we had about nature of self and what you get out of our dynamic…” Lashes lowered as dark thoughts took over. ’I wasn’t planned. We had no agreements to deal with this version of me and I am such a pain in the ass. Why…’

“Try to be mindful baby, trust yourself to speak without over thinking.” Another active listening and speaking component they were working on to help Emma’s words not tangle up. Little Emma struggled with this more so it seemed than this version, but the same shut down cues were present; trailing off, loss of eye contact, chopped phrases and fidgeting.

Deep breath. “I was wondering since the spell is done and this was all unplanned, what are you getting out of this?” Gesturing to self. ’Unplanned is unwanted. Gina’s a planner, I’m not—’

“Eyes please.” Regina stilled the brush through her hair and set it aside to take Emma’s twisting hands in one of her own as green returned to focus. “I get to love you in a way that is unmatched and insurmountable, unlike anything I have ever experienced.” Placing a palm to Emma’s chest. “I get a place in this beautifully big heart of yours in spite of the darkness in mine. I get your love, trust, vulnerabilities, hopes, joys, fears, smiles and tears. I get you Emma.”

Sniffing. “But I’m…”

“You are enough.” Kissing doubt away.

That simple, yet it wasn’t. Emma sat drenched in meaning before starting to wiggle on the countertop. Emotions too big to stay there for long. “We’re gonna be late.”

Supple, understanding smile and remembering. “Wait here a moment. I have something for you.”

Perking up. “Oooh, my own makeup bag?” Eager hands took the offered gift.

“No, you won’t because you don’t have to. Like it or not, your health is my responsibility right now.” Regina caught the bag Emma tried shoving off the counter with a raised brow and set it between them, opening the top completely. ‘This was so much easier with Henry. I had to practically pry him away from the shaving cream and razor aisle at the store with a crowbar when he still only had duck fluff on his upper lip.’

“I can’t believe you went to the pharmacy here! For this!?” Pointing to bag as embarrassing visions of Doc the dwarf touching the items inside made her skin prickle. “Everyone knows about this new shift and—OMG I can’t ever go in there again. Boycott for life… Bury me now, I’ll die!” Hands hid red cheeks.

Nose wrinkled and arms crossed. “Embarrassing and unnecessary things! I figured out stuff before on my own and I can do it again.”

“No, you won’t because you don’t have to. Like it or not, your health is my responsibility right now.” Regina caught the bag Emma tried shoving off the counter with a raised brow and set it between them, opening the top completely. “This was so much easier with Henry. I had to practically pry him away from the shaving cream and razor aisle at the store with a crowbar when he still only had duck fluff on his upper lip.”

“Emma, dramatics are not necessary. He was not phased in the least and I’m sure he sees quite a variety of items pass that counter that are way more embarrassing for him than for the person buying them.”
Peering through fingers. “Did anyone else we know see you?”

“Emma.”

“Seriously! I need to get a ski mask next time I go out in public.”

“Would you have rather I took you with me to get these items?”

Blinking. “No that would have been committing social suicide.”

“Right.” Massaging a temple at the spiraling teenage logic before her.

“Do we have to do this?” Groaning.

“Yes we do and we will be going into Town Hall a bit late today in order to do some shopping that you do need to come with for. You need training—”

“LALALALA!” Emma shoved fingers in ears and snapped her eyes shut. A moment later her hands were taken and she cracked open an eye, deflating at the serious look she was getting. “But I don’t neeeeed a bra.” Grabbing chest. “There is nothing here to support!”

Regina fought not to crack up at the histrionics, but a gentle smile came anyway. “That is not the purpose of a training bra. You do not have to wear one right now if you do not want to, but that could change as time goes on and I want to have things on hand so you have what you need when that is the case. We’ll get a few different sizes while we are out.”

It had been spans of decades in two worlds since she’d been Emma’s age and she had known little to nothing of this world’s milestones for young women. As she had with Henry in the past, a lot of reading over the last few nights had been enlightening and daunting. Rehearsing this conversation had come to mind, but with the events of last night that opportunity had been lost.

Brown eyes found green. “I realize this is a sensitive discussion. That is why I took part of the morning off to have it with you. I suspect no one ever took time to sit and do this with you the first time. Am I correct?”

Dropping hands back into her lap, Emma shrugged rolling her eyes. “Not really, just the typical school segregated lessons on the difference between a vagina and a penis, complete with outdated visuals and props.” Grimacing. “One actually had this button to show how sperm worked.” Then paling. “Please tell me you don’t have a PowerPoint or any horrible brochures about sex I have to look at?”

“Your eyes are safe today.” And Regina’s widened at Emma’s reveal. “They taught you all that in school?”

“Yeah…” Eyes gaining a hint of mischief. “How do you think the kid got the basics of sex before we sat him down for the talk? Remember all those detailed questions he had?” Grinning as it was the Queen’s turn to blush. “I swear you were beet red for a week. Little stinker he was kept on asking at the most inconvenient times. Remember the one about erections at the banana display in the grocery store? But my favorite was the one about blue balls in front of Granny at the diner.”

Jaw dropped, brows pinched considering. “You put him up to that didn’t you?”

“Me!? Nah…” Winking.

“Mmmhhmmm. Back to you my dear.”

“Aaaaawwww… fine.”

“It’s important to me that you have support, knowledge and the necessary things for what your body will be experiencing again.” Deep breath. “Cora never sat me down for the sex talk and she was very adamant that it was not something ladies discussed. My poor father was clueless half the time on how to talk to me about anything, but he tried in his own way.”

“But, I don’t need that talk. I know what happens and I’m not gonna have sex. Right now that sounds G-R-O-S-S!” Pink tongue stuck out with a head shake.
Smiling softly, “That is good to hear and for the record, sex is not gross. With the right person, when you are much older and ready it can be a beautiful experience and that is not what I am getting at with the talk we need to have. We will save that one for another day as these ears you have need to hear it eventually.”

Squirming with some relief. “So what talk today then?”

“I had to figure out the intricacies of becoming a woman mostly on my own and your adult side did too, but you won’t this time because I have a say about it. So today, we start with self care and getting you a few training bras.” Fishing two items to hold up out of the yellow bag.

Emma nearly choked taking in the packages of pads and tampons made specifically for teenagers. ‘OMG this is real. We are actually having this conversation.’ One had a picture of a smiling girl wearing a white workout outfit. Rolling eyes found the image asinine.

“When did you get your period the first time?”

‘Way to jump right off the high dive into the Red Sea, Gina.’ Emma thought and swallowed, croaking. ‘Thir-teen.’

“I figured you would prefer pads at this age and there were a ton of options. Wings or no wings, sizes, different textures so I got you a variety pack, but I was not sure what type of flo—.”

Emma nearly popped. Snatching that package and tossing it aside. “You’re right. Next!”

A pack of twin blade razors and a small can of shaving cream were held up. “I know you prefer the four blade kind and soap normally, but your skin now is very sensitive so these will work better. You’ll have to take your time as your hands are not used to doing that motion and cuts could happen. Be careful.” She set those aside and held up the last two items. “Acne wash kit. You have beautiful skin as it is, but hormones can tamper with that, so this will help. And last but not least deodorant for sensitive skin. That one goes without explanation.”

Breathing again. “Oh thank you god.” Emma dropped her head backwards in mocking prayer. “Please say we are done?”

Red lips rolled in stifling a laugh. “Almost baby, with this talk. Do you have any questions so far?”

Blonde curls shook rapidly, forehead wrinkling when a roll of measuring tape was summoned.

“Last thing.”

Emma hugged herself. “Nuh-huh.”

“We need to know your band size unless you remember. Would you rather a stranger at the store measure you for that or me?”

“I never got it checked at this age. Just guessed.” Rolling eyes with a gut sigh. “And if I have to, then you.”

“Then lift your sweater to here for me.” Regina brushed a knuckle just above the base of Emma’s sternum. She wrapped the tape parallel around pale ribs, joining both halves in front. “28.” Emma was naturally petite, but she wondered about getting a check up for the girl at some point.

Alright, take everything to your bathroom and go get your shoes. We need to leave soon for the store.”

Righting her top, Emma pouted. “Wait, can we at least go to the outlets on the far side of town? I would D-I-E if I saw anyone I know right now.”

“I already planned on it.”

“Oh… good.” Slipping down from her perch, Emma gathered all the items quickly back in the bag and scuttled in the doorway. “Hey Gina…” Catching brown eyes in the mirror. “Thanks for stuff and talking to me.” Fidgeting. “And I know you have that reading assignment for me to do later because of last night, but if I have time after can I draw this afternoon?”

“You are most welcome and yes, bring your art kit.”
With pep to her step, Emma went to finish getting ready, grabbing her kit, and donning her favorite Converse shoes before heading down stairs. Getting her feet from the car into the outlet store the Benz pulled into a half hour later was much more of a snail crawl. She trailed behind heels into a fairly uncrowded shop. Eyes darted around looking for any familiar faces and sighed with relief when there appeared to be none. Pausing near a rack in the lingerie section she began thumbing through some cute PJ sets that caught her eye. 'This won’t be so bad.'

"Emma, what do you think of this?"

Green eyes flicked up to catch Regina trying to get her attention across racks by waving a white bralette like it was a surrendering flag on a battlefield. "Giina." She darted over and snatched the item down.

"No on white then. What about purple?" Grabbing a different one and holding it up to Emma.

Hands ripped that one away too. "Giinaa!"

"Blue?"

"OMG!" Blushing furiously and twisting away. "Rule one of teenage shopping, I pretend I don’t know you and you don’t know me. Rule two, no holding up stuff where people can see it! Rule three, no holding stuff up to ME!"

Hand to hip. “Check your tone.”

A huff. "Sorry."

"Better, thank you." With those wide green eyes looking up at her, it was hard not to see Emma as much younger than she was. “You look here and find some you like. 28 AA or A should work for you, but grab a B to try in case. I’ll go through the racks over there. “ Pointing to the opposite end of the department. “Meet me back by the dressing rooms in ten minutes. Sound alright?"

"Peachy."

Emma ducked down grateful for space and began thumbing the bottom row. There were actually some decent color and cut choices once she let herself start to enjoy the experience. No one had taken her shopping for intimate apparel before this age and she started to feel a little bad about how she’d just treated her Keeper. Hand-me-downs or a pack of Hanes were the only things in the past tossed her way. While they worked fine, she’d never been given choices. Hands ran over many of them now, and selected a dozen or so range of colors and prints. She found Regina at the dressing room area and slipped into a stall to try on the three different sizes. The B was too big and she dropped down to the smallest of AA.

"Do any of them fit?"

Emma rolled her eyes at the muffled voice on the other side of the door. "Yeah, I think the AA, maybe." Biting a lower lip. It felt ok, but… Turning to see the back in the mirror. "I don’t know, sure."

"Would you like some help?"

"Not really…" Though, the sooner she figured this out the sooner they could leave. "Fine. Come in." She undid the lock and crossed her arms as Regina slipped in.

"Turn and let me see." At the twirling motion, Emma dropped arms and spun once quickly. She hooked a finger at the top of a blue strap and shook her head at the overall snug fit. "The band looks right, but the rest is much too tight, try the A." Regina turned back to the door to give privacy, waiting until Emma said she was ready before turning again. "That is much better. How does it feel?"

Wiggling shoulders and swinging her arms, Emma nodded. "It’s weird and it bugs me kind of. Like a harness, but good." The color she had on flattered her skin tone and she started eyeing the pile on the hook now with want. These were brand new and well made. It would be hard to pick just one. She reached to begin sorting through them.

"Try a training corset and suffocating layers of crinoline, those were pure torture. You couldn’t breathe in the corsets and often had to sleep in them. Very uncomfortable." Chuckling at the grimace Emma gave. "Pick which ever ones you like and grab some in a size up. I’ll meet you out here when you are finished."
“Wait. Like more than one?” She’d been lucky in the past just to have one, maybe two at most.

“Of course.” Pausing at the door. “Next time you are this size, we will do a proper shopping trip. You need more than just conjured or adjusted clothing. Things you pick and would enjoy wearing.” Cupping a wandering chin. “I want to give you all the experiences you should have had, those firsts, and just like the other parts, you are deserving of love, attention, and the best I can give you.” She rubbed a small circle along a cheek, before kissing that same spot and leaving through the cracked door.

Emma moved to pick out what she wanted from the pile as she considered Regina’s words. Like she had in another life when they had gone shopping the first time for her six year old side she looked in the mirror and really assessed herself. Still on the short and skinny side, body a straight wash yet to have curves she knew would come. More scattered scars than six. Eyes deeper, thicker veils to hide behind, but already softer than she remembered them being the first time around. With a sigh she redressed and picked two bras and one in a larger size and joined Regina outside of the dressing rooms.

“But… it’s a lot.” Suddenly remembering the breakfast purchase the other day too.

“You need a variety.”

Emma scuffed her shoe, wanting to cross her arms, but couldn’t. “I’ll pay you back when I’m big again.”

Wrinkled brow. “Is that what you are worried about?”

Nodding. “You paid for everything in the spell and I know it wasn’t real money, but here it is and I have my own… just not on me right now.”

“If you feel that strongly about it we will discuss it when you are big again. Until then, let me take care of you.” Taking the items from overflowing arms.

Emma shifted from foot to foot, but allowed Regina to take everything up to the register to pay. She eyed the total and made a mental note and tried to remember what her half of breakfast had been yesterday, when a bag made it into her arms. “Thanks. I mean it. I’m giving you back every cent.”

“We will discuss it later.” Regina wrapped an arm around hunched shoulders. “Baby, I enjoy doing this for you. It gives me great pleasure to be able to provide you with things you need, even things you want. I have plenty stashed away and then some. Try not to worry so much, alright?”

Shoulders dropped as they walked out to the car. “I’m just not used to money being spent on me at all.”

“You have never had money really spent on you, from what you’ve told me anyway. I want and need to do this for you.” She clicked the button on her keys, popping the trunk and Emma stashed the bag.

“I didn’t think about it like that or how it fit into what you get out of this.” Remembering now their talk long ago about the need to nurture and she wanted to respect that. “I’ll try to let you. Thank you for these.”

“My pleasure, sweet one.”

The drive to town hall was quick and Emma spent the rest of the morning on the reading assignment, a thick bundle of articles with questions to answer after reading each one. After an hour her head hurt and she begged a break to do some drawing as they finished their lunch.

“You may, though I have a feeling you would rather work on this.” Regina stood from the sofa to get rid of their take out containers and returned with a thin folder.

“More papers?” Emma frowned as she was handed the folder, mouth gaping when she actually opened it. “These are…”
“Name change papers.” Regina smiled as the girl processed. “Once you fill them out, we will go to the bank and have them notarized; then we can submit them. I have a lawyer in Boston—”

Pausing as arms nearly choked her.

“I know you meant it, but it’s like happening, for real! I get to share your name!” For a moment she couldn’t breathe. The reality of what that meant made her heart pound with excitement and then something much darker. After everything they’d been through, after everything she’d done… Regina still wanted her, was still here… She shook the dark voice off and squeezed the Queen harder.

Returning the hug and adding a kiss. “And Henry’s, yes dear heart.”

“I wanna do these now.”

When she’d requested this from the Queen after her tears a few days ago, a long forgotten piece of her heart had doubted it would actually become a reality. Too many broken promises had been made to her, but never one by her Keeper. Choosing her name, this name, to be hers further solidified that they were a family and she couldn’t wait until it was real.

Regina summoned Emma’s special hand grip and a pen from the table across the room. “Then you may. We will stop by the bank on the way home.”

As her girl began to complete the papers, with some help and additional summoned personal identification effects belonging to Emma, Regina took the stack of articles and questions to read through the teen’s answers. She was glad to note they were well done and thoughtful, making a few corrections and clarifications in ink for them to go over later. Another few hours of equal effort and Emma would be finished with the lesson she assigned. Returning to her own work as Emma finished the name change papers, the Queen thoughtfully looked up at the blonde on occasion, seeing the ease return to a pale face as the charcoals were brought out, wondering what the drawing was of.

Hours later as they were packing up for the day, a familiar tingle pulsed through Emma returning her to adult state. She happily stretched her full sized limbs, grinning back at her Keeper. “Guess this means I can stay up for that Star Wars marathon on TV tonight after all.”

“It does and since you are an adult you can be on popcorn duty.” The Mayor had full intentions of enjoying that time with Emma.

“Awww, no fair! The air popper never works as good for me as it does for you.” Whining despite her size as they walked to the car.

“All you have to do is press the button, the machine does the rest.”

“I know, but still… it tastes better when you make it.”

Getting the papers notarized was a quick affair and the conversation had with the clerk about keeping the Savior’s personal business quiet went unsaid. Dark eyes sweeping over the man was enough to ensure privacy. Once home Regina readied the papers with copies of the appropriate identification for mailing. Her lawyer was easily coaxed into completing things very quickly when the correct amount of zeros in a check accompanied it.

Emma went to put her art kit away upstairs and quick feet returned wearing leggings and Regina’s own plaid shirt, never having returned the garment she’d borrowed. Grabbing the phone she ignored that day from the foyer, Emma thumbed through her texts, returning one to David and Henry. Frowning when she didn’t see what she expected at the end of her text feed.

Making her way to the study, she knocked on the open door, catching brown eyes before entering. Holding up her phone. “Snow hasn’t tried to text or call since the loft. I just realized that.”

Shoulders slumped with confusion. “Isn’t that what I wanted?” Emma’s thoughts circled as she sank onto the couch. “Space to breathe and not deal with her?”

Regina set the envelope aside and leaned thoughtfully against her desk. “Do you remember when the curse broke and how desperate I was to get to Henry, to reach him when he wanted space from me?”

Blonde curls bounced in acknowledgement.

“Snow and I, at least that woman I was years ago, are not that different in regards to that point.” Regina saw the flush of disbelief and then of confusion pass over green eyes. “Back then it took some time for me to realize that in my attempts to draw Henry closer I was pushing him further away. I had to let him go so I could do the necessary work on myself to be a healthy parent for
him." Clarifying and moving to sit near the Savior.

"But you’re not her and this is different, Gina."

"Is it really?" Pushing back against the wall Emma had up. "How?"

Fumble with nothing. "It just is."

"Hhhmmm." Regina took a pale fist that had balled and eased open that hot palm, massaging the center with her thumb. "I think Snow finally realizes on some level what she’s been doing."

Listening intently as her other hand was attended to, Emma began to relax. "I don’t get how she just now suddenly understands that. I’ve been telling her for years."

"You did not see her face or hear her when she attempted to explain what had happened in the loft when you had that black out. I know some of what she must have been feeling because I was in her shoes for a time. By trying to get close to you, she has pushed you away and you have a tendency to run from anyone reaching to know you, especially when they’ve hurt you." Shifting between considering green eyes. "When she was just Mary-Margaret she couldn’t hurt your heart, but when she became Snow, the woman who gave you life, that changed things significantly."

"Yeah, it did." Emma pondered those words and wondered if she was self sabotaging her chance at a connection with Snow by avoiding the woman as she has been since their return and even before then. Maybe it was time for another sit down, maybe with just the three of them. "Do you think we could all talk again? I want to begin to try with her like I said I would, as a friend."

"We can do that, but I don’t know if my being there will help or hinder your efforts." Regina shifted, accepting a blonde head in her lap as Emma curled up on the couch.

"It will help because you won’t let me hide or run from what I need to say or let me be a jerk doing it. The first time we all talked in the loft was good, it opened a door for her to hear me, but I don’t need you to defend me this time like I did before. I need to start doing better at communicating in a way she can understand and using the strategies we created to get through tough conversations when they don’t go my way." Now realizing she may have more responsibility for the rift between them than she thought.

Fine fingers stroked loose curls. "Well said and a reasonable goal to set for yourself, my girl."

Emma smiled softly at the praise and at the willingness inside to try one more with Snow.

...............:

A/N - Please comment and thanks!

Next time - Adult Emma asks for stress relief and a chat with Snow follows.
The rest of the week Emma remained her adult size during the day with a few short lived shifts in the evenings. Returning to work consistently during the day felt empowering and with Will’s additional help, now that he was trained brought relief to a workload Emma hadn’t realized was there before. She willingly accepted that he was needed and between his addition and the Mayor’s secretary taking on some of the filing for the station things were running smoother than they ever had before. The level of work related stress was lessening and she enjoyed her time at the station. Between that and researching the old spell book for answers about her random shrinking, time had flown by. Henry and Paige were now home in Boston from their honeymoon and confirmed their plans to spend Christmas in Storybrooke at the mansion. Emma was looking forward to another holiday like the one she’d experienced in their alternate reality and now only a little over a week away. More so time with just family to relax and reconnect. The prize of it all would be time with her Keeper, away from the duties of town and life.

They had set up a time on Saturday afternoon to talk with Snow when David had plans to take Neal out Christmas shopping. Emma’s nerves were flaring over the broaching meeting. She’d almost asked for a stress relief session upon waking, but held back. Her Keeper had also been stressed the last week, she was sure, over the talk with Gold and something else that was left unsaid. The blonde hadn’t prided as she was prone to do, trying to give respectful space where it seemed to be needed and didn’t want to add to that by asking for something she knew took a lot out of them. Though the effects of not dealing with her stress by asking for relief was not helping either. She found herself moody and trying to behave, but struggling to maintain the attention to detail needed to stay out of trouble.

Regina could see the anxiety building over the course of the week in her girl with little things like tone, body language, and inattention. She was patient to a point, but was losing it the morning of the scheduled talk as Emma questioned her instructions again for the third time in ten minutes. Tapping fingers on top of a stack of half finished articles, she put her hand on her hip regarding the sullen blonde across the kitchen counter.

"If you had started when I asked you earlier instead of arguing with me, you’d be nearly through an article by now.”

Scowling, “Why can’t I just do it later after we get home from Snow’s?” Not understanding the request to finish the assigned reading she’d been given from her teenage misadventures earlier that week. She’d been unable to finish the darn thing since she’d grown because of work during the day. “For a few reasons, one being you told me days ago you’d do it this morning if you could have the week to focus on returning to work and the other because it is part of your consequence for the choices you made.” Pushing the articles and a pencil with grip back to the irritated Savior before softening her tone. “Also because I know how you tend to be after a talk with Snow and you will be in no condition to attempt this then, no matter how well it goes which this time I think it will.”

Emma grabbed the pencil reluctantly. “I hate it when you’re right.” Grumbling as she found where she left off.

"Then that must be quite often.” Regina teased with a smile.

The blonde worked as the Queen cleaned the kitchen, noting how the brunette seemed to sense she needed the proximity she couldn’t voice. A mug of tea was placed at her side an hour later as she finished the last question and dropped the pencil.

“All done?” Regina sat on the stool next to Emma and skimmed last few papers, noting the answers were of the same quality as earlier in the week. “Next time you are size again we will go over the answers together. Thank you for finishing this.”

Emma warmed at that, dropping her chin in palm after sipping the tea. She let the hint of added honey roll on her tongue and needing the sweetness at her next words. “I think I need a stress relief session and I’ve tried to deal with how I feel on my own for a few days now, but… I just didn’t want to bug you with it.”

“I suspected as much and it is never a bother Emma.”

Green eyes noted the label on the tea bag she was fiddling with; Calm Chamomile and smiled
softly at how well she was understood. “But you’re tired and stressed too, I can tell, even when
you think I can’t.”

“I have been, though less so today,” Regina tasted her hot drink with a nod. The spell she had
been crafting to give Emma back some control over the shifts had taken some of her energy, but it
was nearing completion. Thinking through Emma’s words some more, she realized they needed to
have another conversation. “Have you ever considered that those sessions are a way for me to
relieve stress as well?”

“Yeah, kind of. I know what it does for me inside and I can see the effects on you after we do
one, but is there more?” The idea had crossed her mind, and every time it had didn’t feel like the
tight time to ask. There had been well over a dozen such sessions between them over the years,
most at Emma’s request, and each time after her Keeper seemed calmer, tranquil even for a long
time after.

“It gives us a chance to reconnect, to get to the primary root of what it is that we are to each other.
Balance is reestablished between us and sometimes I need to simply be in full control without our
 customary banter, especially when I feel unable to control my current environment and sometimes
you just need to give in without your usual fight.” Wrapping an arm around her girl. “Then there
is seeing your bright eyes looking up at me when we finish, so open and loving. You get this
peace about you I’d do anything to keep there.”

“That’s beautiful Gina.” Emma laid her head against her Keeper’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t
ask you before exactly what you got out of it.”

“I could have easily told you, though I think you knew already.”

Emma nodded at that truth. She’d had known, but had no words to describe it before now. “Can
we please, before we go see Snow? And can we do a little percussive with music to start with?”

“I would like that.”

A half grin graced a pink mouth and Emma took her Keeper’s hand. Regina stood and led the
blonde upstairs to the master suite, needing to hold space in her own domain. She took her time
settling against the middle of the headboard before instructing Emma over her knee. Unlike a
reminder session where she always began with asking Emma why they were there, that was not
needed. The reason and goal were always the same. That lithe frame dove across her lap and she
took care to make sure Emma was comfortable, no limbs dangling and with a pillow. These
sessions were not about discomfort and though there would inevitably be some, it was always
about ritual, connecting, and balance.

“Are you comfortable Emma?”

“Heck yeah! Let’s get this show on the road…” Eager to feel better, her first response slipped out.
A gentle hand squeezing her shoulder reminded that this was a time for softer words and respect.
“Yesss, Ma’am… I’m comfortable.”

Regina stroked soft tresses, running her nails on a pale scalp. The blonde was practically purring
and she laughed softly at how cat like Emma was in moments like these. Since it had been nearly
a year, including the spelled reality, since their last stress relief session she felt obligated to ask.
“What is my expectation of you right now?”

“To let you lead me where I need to go.”

“Good girl.” She felt Emma sink into her at that affection and she rewarded those relaxed
shoulders with nimble fingers that worked the muscles briefly to relax before peeling the layers of
fabric away. These sessions were always bare from start to finish, nothing between the receiver
and giver.

Emma shivered as the cool air and a warm hand swept over her skin; the contrast waking the need
inside her to let go and to give up control freely to the one person who knew how to wield it over
her. Faint music from hidden speakers began and she recognized the melody, an old favorite of a
purely instrumental version of Rihanna’s Skin. Two royal palms began to move in a hand over
hand fashion rhythmically on flesh, dusting the surface of alabaster in tone to the beat. Fur gentler
yet just as authoritative, a warm up for cool skin. She was never granted a warm up for reminders,
but always for these sessions, ones that grew with intensity as they went. She was a tightly
stretched drum being softly played by hands that knew how to ease the tension well.

Regina painted the pale canvas shades of pink that blended to a rosy blush over the course of
several minutes, a slow and heady buzz building for both of them. As Emma sighed with relaxed
contentment, she took her pace and strength up a notch, just barely, but enough for fingers to
twitch on the bed spread and toes to curl one by one. The music faded a minute later and she
shifted to wrap her left arm around a slim waist, pulling Emma closer as her hand began to take
the blonde far from the present.
Another level up with skin ringing brought the walls down brick by brick in Emma’s mind as she visualized herself opening for release. Hips were wiggling now in discomfort and an arm wrapped around them kept her close and still, the warm up clearly over and broaching into a deeper space only they occupied. The worries of the world fell away as her skin began glow, and saltwater brimmed blonde lashes as the pace was set. Emma focused on breathing as she’d been taught and sweaty hands fisted the duvet, now wet with her tears. Yet the hand did not stop. She knew it wouldn’t until she gave all of herself; to break open in such a way that she became whole again over that knee.

Built up emotions pushed from pores, and breathing gut deep. Two words escaped. “P-please Ginaaa…”

Regina upped her strength a fraction at the plea. Her palm stung as did the skin she worked. “Let go for me Emma.”

Obeying, Emma went limp and did the only thing she could: cry. The hand guiding her slowed, but did not lessen, ensuring the tears continued. When sobs turned into acceptance with no wiggles left the only sound was their breathing. The blonde floated on wave after wave of relief soothing her mind, limbs noodles as she tried to move them. She curled inward, drawing her knees under her and rolling onto her side, head in her Keeper’s lap facing the Queen. Calming down was easier with a regal hand cupping her cheek and one stroking her hair.

“Thank y-you. I really needed that.”

“Me too.” Regina bent to brush a kiss to damp hair catching the green eyes focusing on hers and the beauty of trust rich within. They stayed that way watching each other as hearts slowed and the room grew cool around them.

Emma yawned feeling incredibly present with fresh yet sleepy eyes that fluttered as they often did after a session like this. Mind at peace and endorphins filling her veins brought on a much needed nap. As she dozed off she heard the faint traces of humming, their song leading her ear to sleep.

Waking after such a deep rest was a rude experience and Emma dragged herself to the shower to get ready after being woken a few hours later. As hot water made trails on her skin the ghost sting from their session surfaced bringing blood up to skin level, irritating the still pink flesh. Emma ran her hands over the buzzing, kneading the muscle to relax and deciding that wearing jeans then and there was out. She let the water take the last bit of tension down the drain and moved quicker to clean up.

Wrapped in a towel, damp feet padded across the hall and after rummaging through her clothes found a pair of soft wool leggings and a long white sweater, socks and boots followed, comfort hugging her skin. Leaving her hair loose, she hurried downstairs and found the Queen in the foyer with a brilliant smile in greeting. Emma lived for that look and returned it with one of her own.

“How are you feeling, dear heart?”

“Sore, but really good. You?”

“The same.” Regina shook out her hand for emphasis, brow arched at the blonde’s amused look.

“What can I say? All those squats and lunges I used to do paid off. Buns of steel!” She slipped on her jacket and held out the black pea coat for the Queen.

“Speaking of exercise, your uniforms for the martial arts class should arrive by Monday and you may start classes then, if you’d like.”

Emma bounced once. “That’d be awesome!” Then hesitated. “Will you still come watch sometimes, if I’m big?”

“I’d love too and we may have dinner out after your first class as a treat.”

The car ride was quiet and Emma fidgeted nervously in the front seat, more so when the Benz rolled to a stop outside of the loft. A deep sigh escaped, another as the car was shut off. Regina made no move to exit, waiting for Emma to be ready.

“Ohay, I got this.” Emma coached as fingers released the buckle of her seat belt. Then just a quick, “No… I don’t got this. Gina this was a bad idea.” Now, snapping it back into place, as if it would anchor her from the waves crashing against the rocks protecting her heart.
“Emma, look at me.”

Green eyes snapped shut.

“Emma.”

Blonde curls shook.

“One… Two…”

Opening and meeting her match, knowing better than to hide, the Savior sighed. “Sorry.”

“You are ready for this.”

Deflating, “But what if I’m not? I could before, so easily go in there and spout off what I felt. Why is this so different now?”

Never one for subtlety when something hard to hear needed to be said Regina cupped Emma’s cheek. “Because now she is ready to listen and there is a part of you that never thought that would happen. The ball is in your court now. This is your serve, sweet one, and I’m right here to support you.”

Emma bit her lip nodding and taking another breath undid her seat belt again. They walked hand in hand up the walkway, upstairs and stopped before the rough door. Green eyes sought brown for one more push.

“Trust yourself and the words will come.”

A pale fist knocked and the door opened a moment later. Snow smiled softly, hesitating as if it might not be wanted and invited them inside. Emma looked around the space, stiffening as the memory of the last time she was there came back. She acknowledged it for what it was and tucked it back away. Right now she was an adult; Regina was with her, and no harm would follow. As she self assured, coffee was offered and taken for distraction to open the floor for niceties. The three generations of women sat at the round table, a perfect triangle.

Snow sat rigidly, expecting to be led to a slaughter for her actions the last time they had all be in the same room together. She waited for Emma to start, determined not to interrupt her daughter and to show respect to the woman that sat between them. Regina was the reason, she’d come to realize, Emma was even willing to be in the same room with her. Her daughter’s opening words gave her heart pause.

“I think I blamed you for my past and our current relationship because it was easy.” Emma shifted forward in her seat, nails raking the tops of her leggings. “If I learned anything from the spell Regina cast for me, and there was a ton of learning, it’s that there are many sides to a story and sometimes mine isn’t the only one to tell or that needs telling. Sometimes I have to let others have their say even when it is not what I want to hear. Your experience deserves the same respect I’d like to get in return.” She swallowed at the look of pride coming from her Keeper and braved the green eyes across from her. “And, if you are willing, I’d like to hear yours?”

Jaw gaping, Snow stuttered, ready for anything but that question. “I—I’m not sure what to say.” She had been prepared to be yelled at, told off for what she had done and to beg for her daughter’s forgiveness. Not this open and understanding perspective coming from Emma.

Regina, despite the sincerity, internally rolled her eyes, thinking, ‘That is a first.’ Still she offered a helpful opening. “Perhaps start from the night of the curse. You two have not really talked about it in detail and that is your beginning.” Emma squirmed beside her and she eyed the blonde with a small head tilt to encourage active listening ears as the Princess spoke.

“I was terrified… You were so small and crying. Your fist wouldn’t let my finger go…” Snow began to weave the night she wanted to forget, all of it, the terror, the fighting, the curse blowing through the castle, the loss and heartbreak. “…And you were gone. I carried you under my heart for all those months only to hold you for a moment and I never wanted to let you go. I did what I thought I had to do to keep you safe and ensure your destiny as the Savior of the kingdom. That killed me inside. It still kills me, but I had to Emma.”

As much as those words hurt, from the woman who gave her life no less, it was Snow’s experience. The next words didn’t choke Emma as much as she thought they would. “I believe you. I didn’t before, but I believe that you did what you felt you had to do to save everyone… It still hurts, but it’s your truth and I respect that.”
Snow chewed her inner cheek, making sure Emma was finished before continuing. “You need to know that while I would do it all again, once we woke up from the curse I would have gone about things much differently. I wouldn’t have tried to force a relationship between us you were not ready for. I would have let you come to me. Once I realized who you were I just wanted to connect with you in that special way mothers and daughters have. I am so sorry for pushing you and trying to be a mother when you needed me more as your friend.”

Emma blinked back tears, nodding. “I did need you as my friend and I felt I lost that when the only world I knew exploded in my face and you suddenly wanted me to call you mom while I was still coping with the idea that you were all fairy tale characters from another world filled with magic.” Green lingered on the untouched coffee between palms. “My mind kind of cracked that day and it was too much to process all at once. And things just kept coming like portals to other worlds, fighting villains, learning I had magic all while trying to learn how to be a daughter I thought I never be and a mother to Henry. I had some bad habits that took over through all that stress and I knew I was not easy to deal with when those got out of hand. I didn’t feel like I could talk to you like we used to before the curse and then it became easier not to rip open old wounds.”

“You seem to be doing better though with managing your stress and drinking. Regina is helping you?” Snow hesitated, wanting to understand, but still on shaky ground.

“I am doing much better.” Glancing at her Keeper then back to the nervous woman. “Regina and I have a good system in place, especially since the accident and it works for us.” Emma studied Snow and decided now was the time to open up a bit more with an encouraging nod from Regina. “You can ask us about it if you want. I can’t promise you answers to everything, but we are willing to give you some insight on our relationship. I just ask you respect our responses if they are not what you want to hear.”

Hopeful at the grace being shown, Snow leaned forward eagerly. “I do have a few questions… Uh, you said you don’t label what this… relationship is, but what exactly is it? I’m not sure how to ask that another way.”

Emma nibbled on her upper lip briefly. “Well, it varies, especially if I’m small or not, but it is primarily based on my needs for accountability, direction and to belong to someone who understands me….” Faltering and looking for help.

“Alongside mine to nurture, guide, and for control.” Regina stepped in on cue as Emma released a grateful sigh. “We have mutual agreements and rules to ensure a healthy relationship where we each get our needs met. There is open communication with a system of checks and balances if there is a breach or lapse on either side.”

“So, is that system you have… Is that what happened that evening in the graveyard with what David saw and on the porch when you came outside talking about a timeout when we came to check on you Emma?”

Blushing. “Yeah… I screwed up and Regina set me straight. I knew my actions were wrong and I feel a lot of guilt and self loathing when that is the case. How we handle it, helps relieve that in a huge way for me. When I’m small my behaviors are harder to control and I’m really impulsive. My emotions and actions are the age my body is for the most part.”

“Will you explain what happened between you exactly? I’m not trying to pry or embarrass you. I am just trying to understand this better.” Realizing this was sensitive for her daughter and to ease her mind over the visions in her head. Google was not helpful when she had tried looking up information on what this relationship possibly was and she gave up after nights of searching for something she didn’t understand. Better to just ask the source and see.

“Gina can you take that one?” A plea to explain as words became tangled inside.

“Sure. Yes Snow, that is what happened. Emma did something she knew better than to do and that put her safety at risk.” Shifting as the room grew warm. While she and Emma had agreed to shine light on certain aspects of their relationship in hopes of educating, actually having the conversation about a private piece of their life wasn’t easy for her. “Actions have consequences and when Emma makes certain choices we talk and corrective action follows. Sometimes natural, sometimes physical.”

It was Snow’s turn to redder. “By physical you mean you spank her?”

“I do.”

A very long pause as eyes darted back and forth between the women. “And Emma, you’re okay with that?”

Rubbing her face and trying to meet those staring eyes. “Yep, I already told you that. I need it and it’s not always for when I do something wrong. It’s amazing what a good cry will do for stress relief.”
“Wait.” Struggling to process the visual in her head, Snow licked her lips. “So this happens when you’re an adult, too?”

Shrugging as words returned. “Doesn’t matter what size I am that need doesn’t go away and we spend a lot of time communicating very clearly before, during, and after on that.” There was a freedom in voicing how she felt about this to another person that was unexpected and Emma sat up straighter, suddenly proud of herself. “And now that you have some answers I need to close this door right now.”

“Of course.” Snow blinked rapidly and tried to refocus on the main reason they were there as she gave her eyes back to Emma.

“I meant what I said when we all last talked about forgiving you and wanting us to have a better relationship. I realize I have some responsibility for how far off track we have gotten and I’m sorry for how distant I’ve been.” A shaking breath in then out, she continued. “I will share the reasons why another time, but I want you to know I’m working hard to put them behind me.”

Regina was beyond proud of how far Emma had come. Throat solid with feeling, she looked away briefly to keep her emotions in check as Snow responded.

“I never wanted us to be so fragmented and I’m sorry for not respecting your choices and your need for space. I’m working on doing better with that.” The week without calling or texting her daughter for a response had been horrible and she fought the need to keep reaching out while she learned to let Emma approach her.

“Thank you.” Emma dropped her head, fingers toying with the coffee mug.

“Can I ask you something else? If you don’t want to talk about it or answer I promise to respect that.”

Blinking hard and focusing on that offer. “Yeah, go ahead.”

Snow wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to her next question, but she needed to know. “Why Regina for your second chance spell and not us?”

It took a full minute for Emma to remember to breathe. “I…”

The Queen reached a hand under the table and her girl’s quickly came to rest there.

“There were a few reasons.” Emma’s voice gaining strength as she tried again to trust herself. “I didn’t want to share you with Neal and even though it wasn’t our real life, I didn’t want to take him from you just so I could have you to myself. It’s selfish in a way, but I needed to be selfish, to be someone’s main focus for once in my life and with Henry grown and how well Regina knows me. This,” squeezing her Keeper’s hand, “made sense. And I couldn’t do that with you.”

Waiting to be sure her daughter was finished. “Oh Emma… that’s not selfish, not at all.” Snow whispered.

A tight smile. “And… because our relationship was so rocky. To get what I needed out of the spell the little girl in me had to learn how to trust again and me, too. I already have that with Regina and I knew I could get there again in the spell with her.”

Just as Snow’s truth had hurt, Emma’s truth burned, but both needed to be said. They stared at each other for the first time with some understanding and the beginnings of respect for the other’s experience.

“You got what you needed too then from the spell, really and truly, with Regina?” A question without edges or judgement.

Emma’s lips hinted upwards, and eyes passed over the silent Queen at her side. “Yeah, I did and little me did.” Thoughts brushed over her new third part and trusted that eventually they would get there with that version too.

Snow’s eyes blurred, tears slipping, and she regarded her former enemy; the woman who had killed her father, who had cursed them all for a chance at a happy ending. She in turn had stolen a secret, and killed the brunette’s mother. Each at fault and each redeemed through Emma.
And Emma had paid the price for both of them.

At the loft last week when her daughter had cried out for Mama, Snow held out in brief hope that the word had been for her. When it was clear that it was not so, something inside let go. Emma was not the baby she and Charming put in the tree. She was not their little Princess and clearly did not wish to be and Snow realized it was unfair to expect it of her. She hoped to get to know the woman her daughter had become, be friends again as they once had been and if it wasn’t too late, to get to know the other parts of Emma as well.

"I wish it would have been me Emma, I will always want that, but I’m grateful you got the chance you needed to feel loved… as a child.” Wet eyes found the Queen who also had tears brimming. “Thank you for being that for her, when I couldn’t be.” The affectionate title she wouldn’t say, that price still too much and was one she was not sure she would ever be able to give.

Red lips parted then closed, words couldn’t express what she felt. Instead Regina reached to take two pale hands into her own. Emma took Snow’s free one and for the first time they were all connected.

Emma smiled and sniffed hard, dipping her head to wipe an eye on her sweater sleeve. “Look at the mess we are.” Trying to lighten the heaviness in the room. “Um, Henry and Paige are coming for Christmas and we are thinking of hosting a brunch at the mansion.” Her eyes flicked to Regina in question and receiving a nod to confirm, continued. “Do you think you guys would want to come for a few hours that morning?”

Snow’s heart swelled. “We’d love to… Can we bring anything?” Very aware of the weight that invitation carried and the beginnings of trust it took to ask.

“That cheese quiche you make so well.” Emma smiled and softened with the need to voice one more thing. “And an open mind, please. I don’t know how I will wake up that morning, size wise, and it’s sometimes hard to control my emotions. I’ll need you to be patient and respectful of our relationship. I’m not going to hide what we have or mask it for anyone. We deserve to be ourselves.” Eyes flicked to the Queen and back again, lips rolling in, half expecting rejection to the boundary she’d defined.

“I can do that; I will do my best to do that. Please just tell me if I overstep and I’ll give you space.”

“That’s all I ask. Thank you.” There was more to say, much more, but for another time.

They stayed a bit longer talking of inconsequential things and Regina was the one to close the conversation, noting the weary look on the blonde’s face. As they stood to go Emma willingly accepted a hug from Snow and much as the ride to the loft had been quiet the one going home matched. Heads and hearts full. The adult Emma was vanished inside their home behind the safety of the strong white walls and in the Queen’s open arms as the tingle swept through leaving her six years old.

Regina half expected a change in size, due to the heavy emotions of the day. That was one pattern she had grown to observe. “Let’s go upstairs for a bit. How does our book and the rocker sound?”

"The best Mama.” Their little piece of heaven was exactly what she needed.

She kicked off her boots and followed upstairs to the lavender room, fetching her blanket and their book as her Keeper settled into the rocker. Emma crawled up, resting her head under the Queen’s chin as the blanket was laid over their legs and the book opened. As the lyrical prose of Jules Verne floated between them the blonde hoped the words of the day were sufficient to see them through. There was more to heal, more to say, but today the promise of hope and the love she was cradled in was enough.

A/N - My vacation is over so I will be back to max twice a week posts, usually mid week and the weekend. Hope you liked this chapter.

Next time - Henry and Paige visit, Christmas Eve, and Emma inadvertently pulls one of Regina's known triggers which is very different than how Emma goes through one of her own.
Their little piece of heaven
was exactly what she needed.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Just gotta say Regina is such a beautifully strong woman and Emma has the sweetest heart.

That's all.

>)

="But Mama I wanna see them!"

Emma whined with a six year old mouth at being tucked in for a nap Friday afternoon before Christmas Eve when Henry and Paige were due at the mansion any time now. She’d woken little that morning after being an adult all week. The excitement of the holiday was filling her up to the bursting point and though her body was tired, her mind was wound.

They had spent any time away from Town Hall and the Station shopping, readying the house for guests and decorating for the holiday. The blonde had been able to attend two Martial Arts classes before the studio closed for a week following the holidays. The physical classes had helped take the edge off the stress of the coming weekend. Emma had also, under Regina’s eye, spent time in search for a way, in no less than a dozen spell books with nothing yet as a promise, to give her control of her shifts. A spell or potion she desperately wished she had now to avoid the nap she was being told to take.

Unbeknownst to Emma the Queen had been working on a spell of her own, one she hoped would work. She’d be testing that idea early next week with the help of Ruby and Granny. If she was correct and the test worked the gift she would have to give Emma would be worth the last few weeks of long nights and tired days. Her girl needed predictability and she would do just about anything to ensure Emma had what she needed. And right now that was a nap.

“You will see them when you wake up.” The Queen patted the sheets where she held the duvet up expectantly. “This way you can stay up later tonight.”

“Ookaaayy.” Little feet shuffled over from the pile of Legos on the floor at the promise and climbed in. Emma settled down under the covers, accepting a kiss and biting her lower lip as her Keeper sat on the side of the bed.

“Why the worry sweet one?”

“I know we talked to them lots about the spell and what’s been happening, but what if it’s too much for them?” Blonde brows knitted, fear of rejection beginning to cover her heart. “What if I’m too much?”

“Henry understands Emma and he assured us Paige does too. You can’t help what size you are or your feelings right now and no one expects you to.” She ran her fingers soothingly through wild curls.

“I know… but I meant how we are with each other.”

“We will be ourselves, especially in our own home. This is our haven away from the eyes of the world. If there are questions we will answer to the best of our ability. However, I am sure Henry will be more concerned about winning the Mario Cart tournament you challenged him to. He has a record to defend; a three to one winning streak I believe.”

Little grin with teeth. “He’s going down Mama. My fingers are quicker on the remote when I’m this size.” She turned into the hand cupping her cheek and snuggled down.

“Time to rest, now. Close your eyes.”

Regina stayed a few more minutes and darkened the room as she left. With a quiet house she began prepping dinner, deciding to make Henry’s favorite version of lasagna with the red pepper flakes. As she worked, she felt a twinge of anxiety over Emma’s worry. While their immediate family was accepting, she wondered about the brunch coming up in a few days and how that would go with a house full of people. She enjoyed entertaining, but felt the need to have everything even more perfect than normal for Emma. There would undoubtedly be a set back if Snow didn’t behave. She made a mental note to call the Princess to check in and confirm their plans, possibly answer any questions left in that pixie haired head.

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at the door and Regina’s heart fluttered as she smoothed
her apron. The second the front door was open she meshed with their son, breath catching at the
length of time since seeing him, the real him. A hug for Paige came next. She ushered the young
adults into the kitchen, getting them settled with drinks as she continued to cut the vegetables for
their meal. Easy conversation flowed between them, Henry of course beginning with wondering
where his other mother was.

“She’s sleeping at present.” A thump from upstairs caused them all to look up. “Or is supposed to
be... She woke up this morning and being that size takes a lot out of her, much as it did you at
that age.” The sound of feet on stairs had Regina rinsing her hands and drying them quickly, ready
to receive the little body that slammed into her legs when she went to the entry way of the kitchen.

“Are they here yet? I thought I heard voices...” Emma hugged red slacks.

“They are. A quick hello then it is back to bed.” Regina tapped a little nose gently.

“Awwwww!”

Henry laughed at the whine, one he was still getting used to whenever they happened to
FaceTime when his Ma was small. A blonde whirlwind came at him, kissing his cheek and
choking his neck with strong arms.

“Hey little Ma, I missed you!”

Emma sniffed, fisting a damp eye. “I missed you too kid.”

Paige reached for the blonde. “What am I chopped liver? Come here Emma!” Laughing when she
got the same treatment Henry had.

They’d been told about the other versions of themselves in the spell. The interactions they’d all
had, the significance of what they must have meant for Emma was not lost on either of them. It
warmed Henry’s heart to see the blonde so happy and carefree. Ever observant like his other
mother, he took in the woman who had raised him for half his life. A weight rested between the
shoulders where nearly black hair rested and some weariness behind brown eyes that concerned
him. Then the Queen smiled. Brightness he’d missed seeing lit up that face watching Emma show
off a move learned in Kung-Fu.

After a few minutes more of demonstrations Emma reluctantly and with much coaxing not lost on
the young adults in the room, went back upstairs to finish her nap. Regina returned only after she
was sure the girl was out. In the time she had been gone, Henry had finished chopping the
vegetables and Paige had begun to wash the dishes used for prep.

“You don’t have to do that you two. You both are guests.” Regina tried to take back the prep job,
but Henry was having none of it.

“Mom, you got your hands full with Ma, enjoy the break for a minute.” He smiled knowingly,
having heard stories about little Emma’s shenanigans that always had him in stitches. “How are
my grandparents doing with all this? Ma said you guys had a break through last week.”

Regina gave up and sat on her stool, conjuring a sparkling water and sipped before speaking. “We
did. They are coming over Christmas morning for brunch.”

“Wow, must have been some conversation.” He was well aware of the tension between his
grandparents and his birth mother and glad that they were starting to get on good terms again.

“It was. I’m sure Emma will tell you all the details about it when she’s big again.”

“How are you, with all this? Must be a lot.” He worried as he always did about his mothers and
the one in front of him always pushed to make sure everyone else around her was happy without a
second thought to herself.

Brown eyes shined at the sweet inquiry. “We are getting to a good place. Returning home again
has had its challenges. Balance has been hard to achieve, but I am working on a remedy for that.
Emma is settling in, but it has been difficult on her.”

“I know Ma is bonkers with all the shifts and stuff. She says you make it so much easier on her
and that’s great, but how are you Mom? Are you feeling okay with everything?” Pausing a knife
on the side of an onion as their eyes met.

Realization of what their son was asking hit her stomach and she broke that imploring gaze.
“Emma told you about my memories, didn’t she?”

“Only that you gave up some precious ones so she could have a second chance in the spell. She didn’t tell me what they were of. When were FaceTiming last weekend she brought it up.”

Sensing he had said too much and that something was way off with his Mom.

A flash of hurt and then anger crossed Regina’s eyes that her explicit request to keep that detail between them had been ignored. Another rock flipped in her gut as the reminder of the Imp’s revelation that her memories were indeed gone forever. She had had the faintest bit of hope before then, but now it felt like those memories were being stripped again. All she had left was her privacy to heal, in her own way and Emma had been trusted to keep that quiet. Closing her eyes as her blood quickened, she gripped the glass in hand firmly as to not lose it with her rolling insides. Her confidence had been broken over something extremely intimate and that never sat well with her, triggered too many dark moments of the past.

Regina sighed remembering leaving that FaceTime conversation and her phone in six year old hands for a few minutes when she had went to check on dinner. She let go of the anger wanting to surface, never being able to dwell there long when Emma was involved, but some hurt remained that her request had not been heeded. She’d be discussing it with the little blonde later; needing to understand the intent and logic behind that reveal.

Strained. “I’m feeling better, but it will take time. How was the drive from Boston?” She needed to turn the subject to something neutral. Henry’s voice helped distract from the one spewing in her head.

Her heart was a very private thing, and parts of it still to their son. So few knew the tangled depths of it well enough to navigate without a map. One of them was long gone by her hand and the other a blur of a memory. Emma knew enough to move from chamber to chamber freely; a trusted cell. The dark door in her mind cracked open again, old words and rationales escaping from past demons before she could slam it shut. Quickly she excused herself to the restroom where she was quietly, but thoroughly sick over them, memories twisting her core. Running cold water on her wrists helped being down the burn rising under her skin and she took her mind through a set of breathing exercises to help slow her heart. When the nausea passed several minutes later she wiped her eyes and returned to the kitchen.

Nearly an hour later and much calmer, Regina heard feet once again overhead and she went to intercept Emma, needing a moment to process what Henry had said earlier. She caught a running blonde at the top of the staircase, lifting the girl to her hip. Going back towards the lavender room for privacy as a green question stared.

“Mama, downstairs is the other way.” Stating the obvious and squirming to get down. Going still once the hand supporting her patted in warning.

“Be still please. I want to talk to you for a few minutes before we join them.” Regina pushed the white door open with her hip and closed it behind them once in the room.

Emma paled. “Are they okay with me? It was too much, huh?”

“No, no, nothing of the kind.” Regina reassured with a kiss, Emma’s feelings her first priority as she sat on the purple bench with the girl sideways on her lap. “Though Henry and I did talk. He asked me how I was, really was, and shared that you told him I gave up some memories for you to have your second chance.”

‘Oops.’ Emma thought as she registered the heaviness in her Keeper’s tone and she remained quiet as russet eyes studied her.

“Emma?”

Teeth chewed a thumb and wide guilty eyes stared up. “He did?”

“He did and I specifically remember asking you to keep that piece between us for more reasons than him not needing to be worried with it.” Regina ended firmly and tried to soften her tone with her next words, knowing how sensitive her girl could be. Cracking. “You gave me your word.”

Emma fidgeted again. “I didn’t tell him what they were, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Still you told him something more than you should have.” Pain was evident now, failing to keep it away from little ears.

“I thought I was helping.” Whispering as her mistake took hold.
Regina sighed, hand automatically going to stroke the child’s back. She’d come a very long way from the woman who had sought revenge for a secret told, but traces of the betrayal that had cost her so dearly still nipped pieces of her mind. Seeking to understand what she might have missed, she asked for clarity.

“How were you trying to help exactly?”

“I thought maybe he might be able to help us search for a way for you to get them back. He’s smart like that and he always knows what to say to help you feel better when you’re sad in a way that I never do.” Fingers played with the hem of her shirt.

Intentional, but for reasons meant to ease her pain, not add to it. She suspected as much. Still Regina struggled to be understanding of Emma’s logic. Keeping something private when she was assured it would remain so was a sharp line to cross in her brain, no matter who it was.

Eyes closing. “That is a nice thought and I appreciate you wanting to help, though that was my choice to make, not yours.” Swallowing tears down. “What I needed was your confidence until I was ready to share with our son.”

“I’m sorry Gina.” She caught the drawback between the syllables of her Keeper’s voice.

“And you may show me by obeying now.” Falling back on their dynamic and their love for each other to settle her need for balance. Regina lifted the blonde off her lap to stand between her knees.

“Please…” Sucking in a lower lip. “I will Mama.”

Studying that little face, the Queen took a mental step back making a decision. Emma needed to think, not a reminder, a full one anyway. Turning small shoulders, she sent the child towards the corner with a firm swat. “Six minutes to think about what I said.”

Little eyes glassed, though not from the deserved spank. Emma quietly completed her think time, realizing the full extent of what she had done; pulling one of Regina’s known triggers. Breaking confidence or trust was the one thing on the Queen’s list of taboos to avoid. Even done with the best intentions, it was still sacred ground; one simply didn’t trespass there.

She felt sick.

Having done this only once before in their other life over the lock box, the gravity of her actions made breathing hard. There she hadn’t realized the significance of what she had done, not having the memories of their discussions about limits and triggers. Regina had been patient with her misadventure, having dealt with the hurt over it in private.

Here Emma had no excuse and right now she was not the adult she should be to help the Queen process that trigger. She was six and would be treated as such until she grew. Heavy feet returned to the brunette’s side as she was called. The next question was a formality Emma didn’t need, but one Regina did at the moment.

“Do you understand why I put you in timeout?”

“I told Henry something that was meant to be private and that’s a trigger for you.” Daring though to call it was it really was. Emma reached her hands up to take her Keeper’s face, a little thumb wiping a single tear that fell. “I know sorry is not enough, but I am. I’m so sorry.”

Regina broke allowing Emma to see the hurt falling down, not something she often did especially when her girl was this size. She was the adult right now, her little girl’s Mama, the Keeper, Mayor and a Queen; all those roles, but still at her core just Regina. As raw as that was to experience this moment she couldn’t help but sit in it with Emma cupping her wet face. It took several minutes for the tears to stop, conjured tissues helped and hugging arms.

“I accept your apology, thank you.” Regina ran a forgiving hand down the length of blonde curls, resting to gently pat a small behind in comfort as Emma squeezed tighter. She stood with the girl in arms, needing the closeness. “We need to get back downstairs.”

The blonde was somber even with the ready forgiveness from her Keeper. They returned to the kitchen and soft music from someone’s phone was playing. Henry had put the lasagna in to bake and Paige had started a salad. Emma sat on her stool watching all of them while Regina opened a bottle of wine, pouring three glasses and a separate one of milk, handing it to the child with reassuring hand to a shoulder. Henry tried to set the table, but Emma took the silverware from him eagerly looking for a way to help. A good home cooked meal, like always drew the girl out of her shell and she chatted happily to everyone as plates were scraped clean. Emma cleared her place and everyone else’s, the need to move at that point tickled her feet.
A game of Monopoly was suggested and in teams they played; Henry and Emma against Regina and Paige. Teasing, gentle banter ensued and Emma was reminded of their time in Boston during the spell. The game went on into the night and a final roll by a little hand won Park Place from the opposing team.

“We WON!” Emma high fived Henry and bounced in circles around the coffee table of the living room where they all sat. “That’ll be…” Mentally counting and then looking at Henry.

“$1,200 dollars.” Laughing at his young mother dance like the hyper six year old she currently was.

“$1,200 SMACKEROOS!” A hand shot out, catching the fake money from Paige and kissing it. “We’re rich Henry!”

“Filthy rich!” He agreed and threw the rest of their money into the air.

They all erupted as the girl dropped to the floor to roll in it, her giggling magic for all of them.

“Well, I’m beat.” Henry caught his Mom looking at the clock and noted the time.

“Awwww, stay up with me kid.” Emma turned over on her stomach; a fake $100 bill clung with static to her hair.

Regina began to clean up the game, playfully tickling Emma so the child rolled off the pile of money. “I think we are all turning in sweet one.”

Little hands helped at that statement, and they made quick work of putting the game away. “I wanna show them my room Mama.” Emma waited until the game was away in the closet off the kitchen and leaned into her Keeper’s hip, enjoying the way that hand rested on top of her head.

“You may quickly before your bath.”

Emma didn’t need to be told twice, she dragged the young couple upstairs and introduced them formally to Jasper and showed off her treasured space. They both indulged her, asking questions and enjoying her descriptive renditions of the adventures she’d had in her other life. The Queen came to get the girl ten minutes later, catching the end of the story about the time she had walked across a bed of Legos accidentally when Emma jumped out from the closet to scare her.

“Her face was as red Granny’s when Ruby wears that thigh high—”

The brunette interjected. “Alright, time to get ready for bed. Say good night Emma.”

“Good night Emma.” Parroting with a mischievous grin, she hugged the couple and went to the door.

Regina shooed the child across the hall, pausing to catch Henry’s eye. “Let me know if you two need anything. It is supposed to snow tonight, you know where the extra blankets are.”

“We’ll be fine Mom. Good night.” He kissed her cheek and walked hand in hand to his old room with his wife.

In the bathroom Emma started to disrobe, although slowly as the Queen returned, starting the water for a bath. “Toys and bubbles?”

“Not tonight baby. It’s very late and we have to do your hair as it is.”

Pouting, but complacent Emma stepped into the shallow bath and readily took the soapy sponge offered and ran it over her limbs. Two bottles of shampoo were held up a few minutes later and she automatically pointed to the green one. “Why do you always do that?”

Regina poured a quarter sized amount into a palm and began to work it through damp curls. “Do what?”

“I choose the same melon one almost every time, but you always have me pick.” She leaned into
those fingers, enjoying the scalp massage before the sprayer was brought down.

"I like giving you choices when I can. Tilt your head back for me."

"How come though?" Emma closed her eyes as the suds were rinsed and matching melon conditioner followed.

"You never had a lot of choices when you were this age or thirteen and it is important to me to offer you opportunities, even over small things, to have them. Sometimes I will make some choices for you that you do not like, but may need or are best for you, and I never do that lightly."

Thinking back to her promise with Gold and the spell she was currently crafting. After a second rinse of curls she beckoned the child to stand up. Emma went quiet when lifted out, dried and wrapped up in the swan towel. She began a braid and gently questioned. "Why so quiet all of a sudden?"

"I… I'm just thinking about what you said and thank you. I don't always say it or know when you do that stuff, but it doesn't mean I don't appreciate it when you do." She ducked her chin, looking at her toes as thoughts about their earlier discussion of memories returned when she was turned around by the shoulders.

"Give me your eyes please… You could have chosen anyone in the world to give that gift of trust to and you chose me."

Feet and arms sprung forward, launching into the comfort and strength of warm arms open to her. Emma didn't have words just then, but she knew the heart pressed against hers didn't need them; spirits of belief, love, and hope a quiet trinity. Carried to her room and dressed for bed, sleep came quickly after she was tucked in. Their song sung her ear to the path of dreams.

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Hours later the girl bolted upright from a nightmare tugging her guilt ridden mind apart. Flashes of her Keeper's tears fell in her mind against sharp words. Ones that were meant to remain private cut the sinew that bound them together. Emma slipped from her bed, Stitchy in arms and traveled down the hall to the master suite seeking comfort, peeking into the dark room through the crack in the door. She heard the sound of crying before she saw the shaking silhouette huddled on the lounger across the room near the empty fireplace, Queen framed in moonlight. The hall was cold, but the room more so as she stepped in.

"Mama?"

Regina turned abruptly at the unsure murmur. Wiping both eyes quickly, she flicked her wrist towards the fireplace turning on the gas burner to bring light and heat to the room. Suddenly the chill she'd allowed to take over caused a violent shiver.

Weary. "I'm here baby. Did you have a bad dream?"

"Uh-huh. Are you okay?" Emma hurried over as her Keeper pocketed something.

Hesitating, but honest. "No, I'm not, but it has nothing to do with you, sweet girl."

Assuring that worried face and opening her arms as a warm little body snuggled into her chest. Each was content to soak in the presence of the other. They watched the moon quietly for a several minutes, winter's white tears falling softly outside amid the patches of sky allowing stars to wink through.

"In the Enchanted Forest I used to try and count the stars at night. Sometimes I was able to sneak out to the stables and we'd sit together under the sky. He knew all the stories behind the stars by heart."

Emma stilled at that rare insight, understanding then just who 'he' was and it hit her what day it was; three years since the first step of the spell had been completed. Three years, if she counted the time spent in a spelled reality, of heart suffering for the beating one against her back.

"Do you want to talk about your dream, sweet one?" Shaking curls answered and the Queen rested her lips against a head in quiet understanding, having an idea of what had brought the child to her room so late. "I'm sorry if I was too firm with you earlier. I know your heart was in the right place."

"You weren't and you had a right to be upset." Fingers brushed the pocket of a grey robe. "Can I see? Please?"
Dark eyes blurred, but retrieved the small golden band from the silky depths, holding it in her palm for little eyes to take in. Emma kept her hands to herself, simply looking at the metal circle that seemed to bring comfort from a time long ago.

“It’s a ring?”

“More of a saddle ring or link for a bridle.”

“I’m sorry Gina, for more than just what I said to Henry. I forgot what day it was.”

“I didn’t realize it either until Henry said anything and that is a good thing.” Reuniting the ring to her pocket and wrapping arms back around her little swan.

“How?” Brows knit in confusion.

Regina cleared her throat. “It means I’m healing.”

“But you were crying.”

“I was. Then you came in and reminded me that I am not alone.”

“Being alone sucks.” Eloquent as ever, Emma looked up as she felt soft laughter rippling from the belly at her back. “You won’t ever be alone again Muma. We’re a team.”

“We are. Will you stay with me tonight and keep me company?” Regina asked for both of them.

“Yeah, but you gotta share the covers this time.” Green eyes teased.

“Speak for yourself.” Her girl was a cover hog.

“Last one in bed hasta use the spare blanket.”

Emma jumped down from the lounger and dove under the duvet rolling to cocoon in the feather down just as the Queen caught up and rolled in from the other side. They nested into each other for the night, the fire low in the hearth easing the chill from the edges of their minds.

Brown eyes watched her little girl sleep, thoughtful at how far they’d come from their spitfire roots over a decade ago. Had someone told her back then that in ten years she’d be curled up with a blonde heart that had taken over hers she wouldn’t have believed it possible. Being home again forced her to look at the span of her life with a new lens. Her past was gone and here Emma breathed beside her.

Regina loosened her fist from where she clutched the ring through the fabric and drew it out of her pocket. Uncurling from the blanket slowly as not to disturb the girl she went over to the vanity, opening the bottom drawer of her jewelry box. With the ring nestled inside among her casual pieces and not in the hidden depths of her lock box, she began to let go of a piece of her past. Turning away after closing the drawer, she returned to her present and future resting there in that bed.

A/N - Thanks for reading and commenting!

Next time - Christmas day with the charming couple. Regina and Snow talk about memories past. Gifts a plenty and a significant promise is made.


Chapter 17

A/N - Enjoy some fluff and feels. Hope you like the scene with little Emma and Granny. I'm about to throw a big wrench into things and the next 3-4 chapters will be angst filled and rough after this. Details at end. Fan art for chapter on Tumblr.

https://littleswanlover.tumblr.com/

“Emma, please be still.”

“But Mama, it’s Christmas!”

Quick fingers reached again for the buttons on a red shirt and once again little feet pulled away. Regina sighed and threw up her hands giving up on the blouse. She reached for a green sweater from the dresser and corralled an excited Emma into the corner of the lavender room and managed to get the blouse off and a sweater over a blonde head, sending curls to float in a static state.

“What time is it?” Emma stopped moving long enough to step into the red leggings being held out, using the Queen’s shoulders to balance. Green socks followed.

“It is nearing 11:00.” The Queen began to work the tangles from a blonde head into a high ponytail with a hairbrush. “Your parents and Neal will be here soon.”

Feet stilled at that and Emma remained such until she was finished being fussied over. Taken in hand, she was led to the purple bench where the Queen sat and her chin was lifted.

“Talk to me sweet one. What are you thinking?”

“I’m glad we invited them, but what if it goes bad, like before?” Remembering back to the Christmas before the spell when they’d been invited to the loft for dinner and how quickly things had gone south.

“Much has happened since then, a lot of healing and understanding has taken place. We are also on our own ground. This is our home and we make the rules here. They don’t have to like that, but they must respect it within these walls.”

“You make the rules Gina.” Emma smirked.

“Only because you gave me that gift baby.” She kissed the child’s forehead and leaned back. “At any time if you are uncomfortable or need a break, you come tell me.”

“I will… Can we open more presents now?” Twinkling eyes.

Regina chuckled. “You already opened several, at the crack of dawn I might add.” Recalling the frenzied fever of the morning; wrapping paper went flying and bright eyes all around. Unlike their last Christmas with Emma waking her quietly the blonde had clobbered her with kisses and laughter in her excitement. “The rest can wait until after brunch so everyone has something to open. Snow said they were bringing a few things by for you and you have yet to give your gifts.”

Feet bounced again. “I have one for you too from all of me, but I wanna give it to you later in private.”

Regina smiled softly. “We will do just that.” A knock on the door caused them both to turn and permission to enter was granted.

Henry popped his head around the door. “Mom the oven beeped. Do you want me to take out the cookies?”

“Cinnamon cookies?” Green eyes widened with delight.

“They might need a few more minutes. We are coming down now though.” Standing to smooth her black slacks, Regina took in the joyful little face. “Yes cinnamon cookies. Frosting and sprinkles are downstairs. They need to cool before you decorate them.” She finished on deaf ears as Emma bolted past Henry.
“Last one downstairs gets the smallest cookie!”

Henry followed just as quick calling out after. “Hey! No fair I helped make them!”

The Queen just shook her head and followed the pair and nearly burst when she made it to the kitchen, a hand covered her mouth. Paige had beat them all to the cookie pan, cheeks pink with the warm dessert in her mouth while two shocked faces looked on.

“W-whft?” The young woman asked when all eyes turned to her. Swallowing, she smiled sheepishly.

“Alright let’s go.” Regina shooed them all away from the stove as she plated the remaining cookies to cool.

Emma looked on with want, drool practically leaking down her chin. She jumped up to wash her hands when asked and returned to her stool as a bowl of homemade vanilla frosting and an assortment of sprinkles was put in her place.

“You may decorate only for now and have one after brunch.” Regina stated her expectation in exchange for little hands taking the plate of cookies to adorn.

“But Paige got one… Look at Henry!” Her finger pointed and caught their son about to take his own forbidden bite.

Henry caught his Mom’s raised brow and set the cookie back on the plate. “Way to snitch Ma.”

Smiling smugly Emma stuck her tongue out playfully. The gesture was returned and she began to smear white cream onto each cookie as the Queen worked preparing the last dish for brunch. The doorbell ringing fifteen minutes later stilled little hands.

“I’ll get it.” Henry’s voice rang out from the living room and joined three other voices that wafted in from the foyer.

Neal was the first to dart into the kitchen, his hands holding a wrapped glass dish. He greeted the brunette with a side hug and handed off the food, finding his sister’s eyes. The fact that she was smaller than him didn’t even phase him at this point. She was still the one who laughed at his jokes and rolled around playing games with him.

“Hi Emma! I brought my new vintage Game Boy so you can show me how to play it.”

“You got it buddy.” Emma slid off the stool, accepting a damp cloth to clean her hands from her Keeper before she tried to squeeze the life out of her brother, giving him a half noogie to boot. She squealed when he attempted to do the same to her as they chased each other about the kitchen.

“Walking feet you two.” Regina reminded, again to deaf ears, but noted that they slowed down some.

Snow entered the room at the Queen’s smiling invitation, watching as her two children romped in jest. Her hands went briefly to her stomach and dropped quickly as brown eyes studied her. “So this is what it would have been like…” She was caught between wanting the moment to never end and longing for a past that never was.

“They are both here right now and the day is just beginning.” Regina took in that grateful nod and brought the blonde’s attention to their other guest. “Emma.”

Giggling slowed as did feet. Emma crossed the room leaning into her Keeper, suddenly shy as she looked up. “Hi… Merry Christmas.”

Snow smiled nervously at the willing gesture. “Merry Christmas Emma! Thank you for inviting us.”

A little nose twitched. “You brought your cheese quiche, huh? I can smell it?”

“Yes, just for you.”
“You hear that Gina? Just for me.” Her smile all teeth. “I call dibs! I’m gonna tell Henry.” Emma dashed out of the room, Neal following at her heels.

The Queen and Princess were left alone. They looked at each other as David’s deep tenor could be heard greeting his daughter and Emma’s happy hello followed.

“Need help with anything?” Snow asked automatically and gestured to the immaculate display of petite sandwiches, cold salads and vegetable platter laid out on the island. Emma’s frosted cookies lay in the middle, the crowning glory. The woman’s eyes settled uneasily as they always did on the apples. These were diced and arranged around a dipping bowl of caramel.

“Thank you, and no those are not poisoned. Emma likes that combination.” Gentle teasing.

Cheeks turned pink at being caught and a small smile followed. “How long has she been this size for?” She’d heard about her daughter’s teenage adventure and wondered if she would get to meet that version.

“A few days now.” Regina moved to set out a pile of dishes and silverware, noting the woman’s uncertainty.

“We brought her a few gifts, one for each size she might be. Thank you for your suggestions. I want it to be perfect for her and… I just wanted to be prepared.”

“I’m sure she will appreciate that thought.” She hesitated as hands began folding cloth napkins into a fancy setting, but it needed to be said before Emma picked up on it. “Snow you don’t have to try so hard with her.”

“With all due respect Regina, yes I do.” Green eyes flashed up and moved to help finish folding the napkins, a complicated pattern that formed a rose. One she’d learned long ago from young version of the woman next to her.

Regina welcomed the help, and mitigated her direct approach. “I just meant that she is the same person no matter what size she is. She will not stop liking you if a gift she receives is not what she wanted.”

Snow finished the first napkin and a hand again went to her middle at a flutter.

“I have a ginger tea in the cabinet above you there if you need something to settle your stomach.”

“Thank you, I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself, but it will help with the nausea.”

“How did you…” Pink mouth gaping, Snow regarded the brunette in shock.

“The way you keep touching your mid-section. You did the same thing when you were in your first trimester with Neal.” The truth and her desire to find common ground they used to have outweighed the current discomfort in the room.

“We haven’t told Emma yet or Neal.” A plea for silence. “I wanted to wait until it was a better time, but with everything going on I don’t know when that will be.”

“Emma is more resilient than you might think, even in her current state. But may I give you a piece of advice?” She was unable to help offering it, for Emma’s sake.

A hesitant, but curious nod came.

“When you are ready to share your news with her, tell her quietly and in private.” Her former step-daughter pondered over those words.

Emma’s laughter echoed in from the living room and Snow smiled softly. She watched the regal hands next to her folding with precision and remembered more from the past they never really spoke about. Something nostalgic inside pushed the forming memory from her, ready to share something more with the Queen.
“Do you remember when you taught me how to do this setting fold?”

A corner of red lined lips curved up. “I do. It was after I came across you in the kitchens covered in the linen napkins the wash woman had just folded.”

“You were coming to remind me about my riding lesson and I was trying to hide so I wouldn’t have to get up on the horse.” Recalling her fear of the animal until Regina had coaxed her back into riding. In the early months at the castle before the wedding the young woman had stepped up to care for her well being.

Regina added a finished napkin to the growing pile between them. “She was so upset that you’d ruined her perfect folds for the banquet that night.”

A pointed chin dipped. “I remember how patient you were with me and how you helped me fix my mistake.”

“We finished the setting folds rather quickly, once you got the hang of it.” Taking another square to fold.

“In the loft after her melt down when Emma was little and she was in your arms you gave me the same look you did when you discovered me in the kitchens under the linen.” Snow peered sideways through lashes, noting how hands paused briefly before continuing next to her. “David said that you told him to take care of me that day before you left with Emma... I wondered why?”

Regina turned, ducking her head to catch green eyes and when she had them smiled softly. “I knew you didn’t mean for what had happened to happen. I understood why you did what you did, to want to hold your child close even when they pull away. It is not my intention to keep Emma from you, quite the opposite…” She left the rest unsaid as the little Savior ran in the room and arms wound around her legs.

“Gina is it time to eat yet?”

“Almost.” She handed the silverware to little hands and caught the wanting look on Snow’s face from that hug. “Please set the table for me. Snow will help you with the napkins.”

“I will!” Snapping out of it. “I will, of course. Lead the way Emma.” She followed her daughter into the dining room and she gently placed the napkins in each setting so they would not lose shape as girl marked with flatware.

“I’m looking forward to that quiche. I actually had a dream about it last night.” Emma cut the silence in half as they moved around the table the nerves in the room were drawn too tightly for both of them.

“You used to say that about Bear Claws every week when we would go to Granny’s for breakfast.” Responding easily until teeth caught her lower lip. The reference to the time reserved especially for them as friends before the curse broke slipped out and she worried about Emma’s reaction.

The blonde froze for a fraction of a second, hand hovering with a fork over gleaming wood before moving again. “I still say that about Bear Claws... Maybe we can go again one morning, all of us, I mean.” She wasn’t ready for a private breakfast date with Snow, but she was ready to begin engaging again with Regina by her side.

“That would be really nice, Emma.” A genuine smile began to close the gap between them. Laughter and conversation flooded in from the kitchen as everyone was called to serve themselves. Regina dished Emma a plate and one for herself after all hands had taken what they wanted. Henry offered a toast to the hostesses before they all dug in. Silverware scraped plates as jokes were passed and stories told. Emma was reminded of another Christmas in a different life where she’d felt the same sense of wholeness envelop her and the feeling was just as overwhelming then as it was now. No tears fell as she worked through them, brown eyes questioned if she was alright and a comforting hand was offered up under the table. Reassurance was quietly passed through a simple look and touch.

As the meal wound down an hour later, Emma and Neal couldn’t help but fidget as the promise of presents loomed near. The girl begged with her eyes to be excused, boring her gaze into the back of a brunette head, but the Queen was focused on Henry telling about their new Boston apartment. The blonde sighed, unable to help her own impatience. She impulsively began drumming her fingertips on the table edging closer and closer to her Keeper’s plate until a patient hand rested over her own. Emma sighed loudly and when nothing was gained she cleared her throat with great exaggeration.
Henry gave pause to his story with a breathy laugh and nodded toward his little Ma. “I think she wants to ask you something Mom.”

Regina flicked her eyes over the empty plate and gave her attention to Emma with a raised brow. “Yes, you may, but wait for everyone before you start unwrapping.”

“Yes! Finally!”

David chuckled and stood to help clear the table as Emma darted into the kitchen with her plate. Brother and sister made a mad dash for the living room, and began sorting boxes for everyone into neat individual piles. The girl had opened most of hers that morning, but she still had some to unwrap. As everyone found a spot to sit, Emma settled at the Queen’s feet as Regina took the winged chair by the tree.

Presents were easy and Emma’s brought smiles to everyone. She in turn delighted in the Marvel action figures, latest i-pod and leather boots from her parents and brother. Each part of her had been considered and honored earning the couple a joint hug from little arms. Snow clung a little too long, when the girl went to pull away, but Emma didn’t make a big deal about it.

The early afternoon was spent over coffee and dessert, the children playing between bites of cookies and milk. Emma pawed through her loot as she caught the fresh snow blowing hard outside the window. She finished her cookie and went over to wait patiently at her Keeper’s side as a conversation with David was wrapped up.

“What is it, dear heart?”

“Neal and I want to build a snow fort.” Her chin was caught and she allowed the Queen to wipe her mouth free of frosting.

Regina set the napkin aside and looked out the window as the Charming couple did the same at the snow storm beginning to come down. “It is a bit too wild outside for that right now Emma.” The pout that followed was expected, but she did not expect Snow’s supporting chime.

“She’s right. Maybe tomorrow we can all meet at the park and make a snowman if the storm is over by then.”

Ignoring the pixie haired woman, Emma tried again. “But it’s Chrisstmaaas.” The emotional high of the day had exhausted her and she gave into the impulse to whine for what she wanted.

Regina shook her head. “Snow mentioned something we may consider if the storm stops, but not today.”

At her name Snow couldn’t help herself. “She said no, Emma.” Playing outside was not a reasonable request, but she wanted the day to keep being perfect for her daughter. “How about we all play a game instead?” Unaware that she was making the situation worse.

Regina didn’t need help in redirecting the child who was becoming irritated, noticeably so, over the interruptions. She eyed the Princess, silently suggesting to drop the attempts to help just now.

Little green eyes shot arrows aimed at Snow. “Since when are you on her team?”

“That’s enough, there is no need to be rude.” A soft rebuke and the Queen lifted the little blonde up to sit on her lap, the proximity calming the agitation in the tired girl almost instantly. She shifted the topic back to her earlier conversation with David about the new deputy as Snow stared at them, a mixture of thanks, want, and understanding.

The afternoon came to a close shortly after, the incoming storm, reason to head home. Emma was thoughtful, but quiet in her goodbyes, resting her back against her Keeper as she watched her parents with Neal depart. Henry and Paige excused themselves to head out to Jefferson’s for the rest of the day, promising to be careful when they drove back that night. Emma sought direction from brown eyes.

“Would you like to have your last few presents from me now or later?”

“Now please and I wanna give you mine.” Moving to the stairs, she looked over her shoulder. “Meet me up in my room in five minutes?”

“It’s a date sweet one.” Heels went into the study to retrieve the gifts hidden away in her desk and she headed upstairs. A crisp knock on the white door brought scrambling on the other side and a
husky chuckle as the door flew open.

“Come sit on the bed and close your eyes. No peeking!”

Regina did as she was bid, setting her own gifts aside. She covered her eyes as something flat was set in her lap. Getting the go ahead to look, she wrapped her hands around a picture frame, taking in the charcoal image so lovingly sketched by the woman child standing at her knee. It was a drawing of a circular mirror holding the many faces and layers of who they are to each other. Emma on the right a shell spiraling back to show the child within and herself on the left; a metamorphosis of Queen, to Mayor and finally, simply Regina, a softness not many knew had been captured in her eyes. Lips curved up catching a tear at the signature scrawled underneath.

‘With love,
Emma S. M.’

“Do you like it?”

“More than I have words for.” Pulling the child in close for a hug with a free hand while she held the portrait with the other.

“I wanted to make you something that showed our journey.”

“We have come a long way haven’t we my girl?”

“Mmmhhmmm.” Emma accepted a kiss and gave one of her own in return. “My turn now?”

Hands set the frame behind on the bed, and gave the child a small box. A ribbon was tugged and a lid lifted. Inside, nestled on a bed of cotton was a new charm for her bracelet; a mini replica of their home with diamond chips sparkling for windows. Regina clipped the charm in place and smiled as Emma shook her wrist, getting a feel for the new weight.

“I love it, thank you Mama.”

“One more.” For now, Regina thought until her other one was ready to give.

A large envelope was handed over and the fullness of knowing stilled Emma’s heart. It was too soon and how had…

“How did you do this so quickly?” Emma whispered, taking that chance to ground herself.

“I have a lawyer in Boston who was very keen on a Christmas bonus I promised him if he pushed this through.”

Little hands shook as Emma opened the top flap and gently pulled the papers out from inside, stopping as her brain caught up to her skimming eyes on the first page. Fingers traced lightly over the embossed seal of the court of Maine. It was official. She couldn’t breathe, she dare not. Reality had been cruel before in the ill humor of her early life.

“My n-name…” Teeth sucked a lower lip as air returned to her lungs. She wanted to taste the sounds together now that it was real, now that she was finally real. “My name is Emma Swan Mills.” The tingle came and went leaving the adult version present in body and mind.

“And it is a fine name.” Catching her girl as Emma sank down to kneel at her feet, blonde hair spilling across a lap as a cheek came to rest against her knee.

“My name?” A question needing one final answer.

“Yours forever and no one will take it from you.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”
Green eyes closed, sinking into acceptance. "Thank you Gina."

The morning after Christmas became a blur and not just from the snow that kept falling outside. Emma had remained in her adult body until the tingle took over returning her to her six year old size when tearful goodbyes were said to Henry and Paige as they left to catch their plane early that evening.

Regina was confident that the choices she was making on Emma’s behalf, to pursue her theory in quiet as to not give false hope and to begin exploring another idea she had been considering, would work well together once her spell was finished. There were two more stages to complete and one would be carried out tonight and the other would need to process over the next several days if her test worked before she could give it to Emma.

Quiet returned to the mansion until dinner where Regina began to broach a subject she knew Emma might not be too keen on, but was a necessary step if her plan was to work and not one she could wait to do another time when Emma was an adult. She smiled fondly as the little blonde scrapped the last bit of spaghetti off a plate and sucked the red coated noodle down as she began to speak.

"I need to share something with you and I need you to be open minded about my decision."

Emma stopped licking the sauce from her fork and set it down. The way her Keeper stated that comment meant there was no room to be had if she did not like what was mentioned. Not in her current size anyway. "What is it?"

"There is an errand of sorts I need to do later this evening and through the next morning that requires me to be elsewhere so I asked Granny to come stay with you. She should be here by the time we finish up your bath. She will stay the night in the guestroom and be here when you wake up for breakfast. I should be home shortly after that." An eye studying the blonde before adding what Emma was going to ask for. "Ruby has plans already and I trust Granny same as her to watch you.” She trusted David too, but Emma had made it clear more than once she was not ready for one on one time with the man when she was this size.

"I don’t need a baby sitter. I’m not a baby.” Whining as her foot kicked the chair.

"We don’t have to use that term and I purposely did not, but you need support close by when you are this size. That is not negotiable."

Taking a sip of water as she watched Emma process her words. The longer they’d been home the more Emma was starting to slip into old argumentative habits and she knew it was due to the instability of their current routine. She took a breath to remind herself they were almost to a good place to reestablish that.

Pouting Emma slouched. "Why can’t I go with Mama?"

"You need your sleep and I won’t have what routine you do have interrupted."

"But you need sleep too."

"I do and I slept in late along with taking a nap after lunch while you and Henry had your comic reading marathon.” Patient with Emma’s attempts to change her mind.

Gears spun and a lower lip stuck out, not ready to give up. "Part of my routine is a story. Besides I wanna know what will happen in the next chapter."

"Granny will read to you before bed and we will read two chapters together tomorrow what I get home."

A foot kicked the table leg. "But Maaammmaaa, she doesn’t know the voices…”

"Emma, it is not up for discussion.” Standing with dishes in hand and beginning to move to the kitchen. "Bring your plate."

With an exaggerated sigh Emma followed, setting her dishes on the counter near the sink. She hadn’t gotten to the point of being in trouble yet and she really didn’t want to be, but the emotions ruling in her current state wanted Regina to stay. She pushed again. "But what if I wake up and need you for something?"
The Queen recognized that plea for what it was, Emma’s fear of the uncertainty sleep often brought. The blonde always fell asleep easily, but staying asleep was sometimes harder, and the recent dreams over the last several weeks hadn’t helped. She dried her hands from beginning to wash the plates and knelt down to take little ones.

“You will have nothing but sweet dreams tonight. I’ve made the special tea for you to have before bed that will make sure you sleep all the way through the night without nightmares.” It wasn’t one she used often, frequent use tended to have the opposite effect, but once and a while to help Emma rest soundly she allowed.

Her Keeper always thought of everything. With nothing left to make her case she let her frustration show with a foot stomp.

“Now none of that little miss swan. I expect you on your best behavior. Granny will be a guest in our home and she is doing us a favor by being here.”

“She’s doing you a favor, not me.”

“A favor for us, at my request on your behalf.” Restating for clarity.

Regina stood, catching a chin. “Emma Swan Mills do you need a time out to reconsider your attitude or to help you mind me?” Warning clear if her directions were not followed.

Emma wisely backed away from the line her name had drawn, not expecting it to be laid out so soon. With a sigh she shook her head and then remembered to use her words. “No, I’ll be good.”

“Your are always good baby that is never in question.”

Regina corrected running a thumb along a cheek before leading Emma upstairs. She allowed a few extra minutes for the girl to play in the tub before helping Emma into a Marvel print nightgown Henry had gifted at Christmas. Just as she was tying off a single French braid the doorbell rang. “Go feed Jasper and then come right down to say hello.”

With a wave of her hand the bathroom was tidied and she hurried downstairs with a quick peek in the lavender room as she passed to ensure her directions were being followed. Eugenia was all smiles when the door opened; complete with overnight bag with what looked like knitting needles peeking out of the top.

“Thank you so much for coming. Here, let me take your bag.”

Reaching for the bundle and leading the way into the living room. They sat together on the sofa making small talk about where the guestroom was as Emma came shuffling in from the foyer. The girl went right over to Regina and leaned heavily into the Queen as Granny’s wise eyes swept over them. Regina finished her thought and turned with an expectant look to green eyes.

“Hi Granny.” Emma gave a small wave with a yawn.

“Tired I see.” The old wolf smiled softly at the cute state of the Savior. “What time do you usually go to bed when you’re like this?”

Emma frowned thoughtfully when the question had been directed at her and not her Keeper. She’d expected Granny to treat her like any other kid in Storybrooke the wolf sometimes babysat. And the way some other town folk have in the past when she’d been six and out with Regina. People couldn’t seem to wrap their head around the idea that she was still herself inside the little body, well mostly. She didn’t appreciate being talked down to or having things simplified when they needed’t be. Though her emotions and sometimes desire to enjoy the freedom of being a kid did get the better of her and so her behavior was sometimes juvenile. That mostly occurred between her and her Keeper when she didn’t feel the need to be on guard and could enjoy her experience by just letting herself be cared for. She couldn’t do that with just anyone and Granny might just understand that, she realized.

“Eight, but that’s only cause my body wears out too fast, kinda like a battery.” Offering explanation where it wasn’t needed.

Blue eyes sparkled kindly with amusement. “Regina tells me you both like to read before bed. I do to, helps this old bag of bones sleep. May I join you in that tonight?” Again speaking directly to the Savior.
A little smile blossomed when she confirmed her earlier thought. “We’re reading The BFG. It’s about a giant...” And on Emma went about the plot so far.

Regina excused herself to heat up the tea a minute later once she was sure Emma was comfortable, as it would need about an hour to kick in. She returned with a warm mug and gave it to the girl who now was sitting on the couch next to Granny listening as the woman told a short story about her crossbow and an encounter with a real giant.

“Both hands.”

“Thanks Gina.” Taking her favorite yellow mug and a big sip. She sighed with pleasure at the generous amount of honey added to mask the bitter taste of herbs. Now that she was drinking the promised tea, realization that it was near time for her Keeper to leave hit. “When are you leaving?” Biting her lip at the thought.

“In a few minutes.” At the news she watched Emma chug the drink and set the mug aside in favor of curling up in her lap for a quick cuddle.

“I don’t like that idea Mama, but I know you wouldn’t if you didn’t have to.” Whispered into dark hair.

A nod along with a strong desire not to have to go. “I will explain everything to you soon.” With a gentle squeeze she stood Emma up. “Come see me off properly.”

They made their way into the foyer and little eyes watched as a heavy leather coat and glove set was put on with high boots for the weather outside. Emma tried not to lose her composure as she was hugged and kissed goodbye with the promise of return by the time she was done eating breakfast. After the door closed she lost a bit more of her grown up self that was present in mind and stared up at Granny with glassy eyes.

The she wolf, with plenty of experience with little tears, offered her hand with a soft smile and distraction. “I hear you have a fish?”

A small chin wobble. “His n-name is Jasper.”

“I love Jaspers. The stone is so pretty. Does he look like one?” Beginning to lead the girl towards the stairs.

Emma nodded, wiping her eye with her free hand and perking up at the mention of her pet. “He does. Wanna meet him?”

“I’d love to.”

The rest of the evening went smoothly and Granny proved to know how to read a story nearly as well as the Queen, complete with voices and a particular squeaky one Emma found hysterical. By the time the tea kicked in she was snoozing just as the book closed and Eugenia quietly left the room to go find her own place of rest.

Just as Regina had promised she would Emma slept through the night with nothing but good dreams. She woke feeling well rested and still in her pint size suit. With a wave to Jasper she all but forgot the night before and trotted down the hall to the master suite to rouse the Queen. Finding perfectly made up sheets brought back the fact that her Keeper wasn’t home and a scowl as disappointed feet went downstairs. Emma peeked around the corner of the kitchen, seeing Granny at the counter texting, sipping coffee. She sighed making her presence known and went to take her usual seat.

Eugenia smiled at the fuzzy braid the girl had from sleep. “Good morning Emma.”

“Morning.” A miserable mumble, then interest when she smelled cinnamon and realized something was cooking on the stove. “What are you making?”

“Apple cinnamon pancakes.” Setting down her phone and mug to flip a flapjack high in the air and catching it with a skilled hand in the pan.

Pink lips parted at the entertainment, but little arms crossed. “I only like the ones M— Gina makes.”
With a wrinkled grin over a shoulder. “Who do you think taught her the recipe?”

Blonde brows shot up. “You?”

“Well the cinnamon ones anyway, she decided to get creative with a perfectly good recipe and added apples and something else she won’t tell me. The Queen wasn’t always the marvelous cook she is now. Nearly burnt my kitchen down the time we tired baking a cake for Henry’s first birthday.” Granny moved to the fridge and took out the saran wrapped glass of OJ and bowl of fruit Regina had prepared in advance for Emma. The old woman had found it amusing to hear the night before that Emma would only eat melon if it was balled with a mini ice-cream scoop. “The Mayor had to have the best for her baby boy and she was determined to do it herself. So we spent a week in the diner kitchen working to get the cake perfect and do you know what Henry did the minute it was set in front of him in the diner?”

Emma sipped her juice mouth turning up, noting it was exactly how she usually took it and smiled in full with contentment. “What?”

“He grabbed a handful and threw it right at the Mayor’s white suit. You could hear a pin drop in that room. Everyone was staring and waiting. For a moment I thought she was going to be upset, but she surprised us all by laughing and kissing that chubby chocolate cheek Henry was sporting. It was the first time I remember hearing her do that. Even without our memories from the Enchanted Forest it wasn’t hard to see that wasn’t something she often did so openly then.”

Loving the story as a plate of pancakes was set in her place, but wondering where it was coming from. “Why are you telling me this?”

Granny rested her elbows on the counter, glasses slipping down a nose. “Because it’s nice to hear her laugh like that again after everything we have all been through in this nutty town.” Tapping a small nose. “You, all of you, bring that out in her.”

Fingers fiddled with a fork. “I do?”

“You do.” Standing to dish a few more pancakes on a new plate. “Maybe you can help me make them next time you visit the diner when Regina has another errand.”

“That’d be awesome! I like to cook. When did—”

The front door opening interrupted Emma’s next question. Her name, sweet music, coming from the foyer made blonde curls fly like a golden flag as she ran out from the kitchen and into open arms.

“Mama!” A little warm nose met a cold pink one as the girl gave Eskimo kisses.

Regina scooped up the chatting bundle after taking off her winter garb and with a peppy step went to greet Eugenia in the kitchen. A tired, but content gaze took in the plate of pancakes and fresh cup of coffee sitting in her usual place next to the child’s half eaten one. Red smile locked in place as did eyes between the wolf and Queen, each asking their own question and each gained an affirmative answer without words. Emma watched with curiosity as something passed between them.

Wiggling to get down Emma pulled the brunette over to sit at the counter, letting her Keeper get a sip of coffee in before she questioned. “How’d your errand go?”

“Well, thank you.”

“You were gone a long time.” Rolling a melon ball in her mouth and fishing for details.

“I was.” Regina confirmed and took a bite of fluffy pancakes as Granny raised brows her way. She gestured with a full fork. “A pinch too much cinnamon and no I don’t add nutmeg.”

“Yours have too many apples.”

“Yet, they still win over your cinnamon ones every year at the Annual Breakfast Bake.”

Granny harrumphed good naturedly. “You may have your secret ingredient, but I have a new secret weapon this year.”
“Oh?” A single brow arched in question and Regina followed the old wolf’s gaze to the child giggling beside her. 

“Me!” Emma puffed up her chest and took a big bite. 

Regina chuckled. “Traitor. You are supposed to be my sous chef.” Said with great affection and a kiss. 

“I ca do doth.” Talking with a full mouth and then waiting to continue when she got the look. “That way I’m on the winning team no matter what.” 

An approving grin from Granny. “You think like a wolf.” 

Beaming the girl shoved another huge forkful of fluff in her mouth as the adults sent further smiles her way. 

A/N - Hope you liked, please comment. 

Next time - Ruby has a flashback revealing her history with Belle. Teen Emma is drawn into a dangerous game of words with Gold. Trust is questioned, boundaries pushed, and a promise seemingly broken. Regina has to control the flames before they both burn and Gold gets the upper hand and something much more precious.
Snow continued to fall heavy and deep consuming the town with winter’s icy kiss the next day. It was the kind of cold that couldn’t be chased away with extra blankets or hot chocolate, which seeped down into the marrow of bones to ache. The power held out until Tuesday night when down lines caused pockets of homes and businesses to begin freezing over. The town’s emergency generators kicked in, providing some relief, but not enough. Their home had yet to be affected and Regina had her own small generator in the basement along with plenty of stored wood to use in the mansion’s many fireplaces to keep them comfortable.

Regina had been called to duty Wednesday morning before first light when she should have been off just as Emma regained her adult height upon waking. The Queen had spent the night prior prepping the last step of her spell. The test, with Ruby’s help, had worked and now she just had to wait for what she’d purchased to absorb the spell over the rest of the week. Meantime she worked organizing a weather relief center in the school gym for families whose homes were without power. Cases of water, food, and blankets were brought in from local business donations. The door of the Mayor’s office was ever revolving. Just as one issue was solved two more occurred.

Emma logically knew it couldn’t be helped, but after the busy Christmas and being left in Granny’s care Monday night, she had wanted time with just them, without the interference of the town or duties of life infringing on them. Again she was heart sore for their old life where each other were the only things they had to worry about. Henry was establishing his own life and didn’t require their constant hovering. Though he too had been in their alternate reality he had not been Regina’s sole focus; she had. That wasn’t the case here, not as much as she would like.

Emma had a vision in her head of what this week should have been; full of sleepy mornings mingling over breakfast, watching movies, messing around in the snow and just talking during winter break when the town was usually self sufficient. That had been getting her through the last few weeks. Life had been busy and unsettling lately. She was sorely out of a routine, one she had come to rely on to help her manage stress when things were overwhelming. Regina had seen to that expertly in their other life and they were trying to find a similar pattern here, but there were proving to be fewer variables within their control. This week threw them off again. Nights had been late, schedule full, and the demands on both their time wore on Emma’s already worn nerves.

Though, the blonde did dive in head first to do her share. She helped by cooking meals and cleaning their home, running errands, and handling the phones at the Sheriff’s station and Mayor’s office when she wasn’t poofing around town to check on the residents. By Friday morning she was exhausted and so was Regina. They were supposed to have lunch together that same day, but there was a small emergency that needed immediate attention the Mayor just couldn’t step away from. With her duties completed for the moment Emma sourly stopped by the diner to grab lunch on her own and say hi to the Lucas women.

As she ate thoughts of the coming New Year’s Eve weekend broached and with it the hope for some time with the Queen. That desire drew forth the tingle singling a shift, starting at the roots of Emma’s hair and washing down to her toes when she was mid bite in a most delicious burger. She sighed at the size of her teenage hands.

Ruby’s jaw hit the counter as did the other patrons nearby not having observed the Savior changing forms yet. The wolf blinked hard at the green eyes rolling from the stares about the room.

“Does it hurt?” The red head wondered out loud.

“Nah.” Emma swallowed the last bite of her burger and wiped her hands with a napkin. “It’s like when you get shocked with static electricity when you shuffle your socks too much on the carpet.”

“Do you need me to call Regina?” Ruby took the plate, moving quickly to bus the empty seat next to Emma. The diner was packed, people seeking warmth and a hot meal in the social hub of town.

“Nope, I have my phone.” Emma pulled it out and dialed. The Queen picked up on the second ring, as she always did.
“Emma, how are your rounds going?”

“Good. I’m at the diner now. I shrank though. I’m safe and figured calling was better than
summoning you while I’m this size, but can you come get me?” Regina could tell by the girl’s tenor what
age she was right off the bat and felt the thirteen year old could handle a half hour waiting with
friendly eyes as a look out from Granny and Ruby.

Those words popped Emma’s yellow hope balloon and she frowned. “Okay.”

Noting the change of tone. “I won’t be long dear heart. Did you eat lunch yet?”

“Ohhh yeeaaah.” Her Keeper’s ready chuckle that followed made her mouth twitch to smile.

“Do I even want to know what artery clogging monstrosity you consumed?”

“Nope!” Lips popping the ’p’. “But I did have one tiny slice of tomato between layers of cheese,
meat, onion rings, and bread. I had milk, too.” Purposefully leaving off the shake part of the
compound word.

“That hardly counts as a serving of vegetables and no more sugar today.” Knowing Emma
wouldn’t order milk by itself as an adult.

“Counts in my book.” The blonde tossed her own jibe right back. “And don’t say I eat like a kid,
cause right now I am one.”

Regina laughed again. “So you are. Are you alright to stay at the diner with Ruby and Granny for
a bit until I’m done?” Checking one last time to be sure.

Emma wasn’t, but not for any reason that needed the Queen’s attention more than that conference
call to get people the warmth and water they needed. “I’ll just hang here. My phone has plenty of
mind rotting games on it.” She sadly said goodbye ending the call and pulling a ten from her
pocket to leave on the counter. Quick thumbs shot off a text to David letting him know she was
off duty until further notice due to her size, in case Regina hadn’t the chance yet.

She looked around the diner then with a pout. People were waiting by the door and eyeing her
spot, so she got up and stood back by the jukebox. After playing three rounds of Candy Crush on
her phone, the limit in one sitting she was allowed boredom took over. The room was even more
crowded than it had been fifteen minutes ago. With a huff she pocketed her phone, deciding to
step out and get some air in the little court yard out front. Pulling up the hood of her thick coat, she
got outside.

Frosty air snapped against warm skin, waking her up after such a heavy lunch. A nap sounded
amazing, but home was a ways off. Emma paced the small area, snow crunching under foot. Her
thoughts drifted to the last time she had suddenly been this age and memories of the conversation
about why she was a teenager rushed in.

‘Gold and his stupid tongue twisters.’ She simpered and kicked at the skeleton of a shrub. Flakes
of white rained to the ground.

Emma was grateful that he wrote the spell, but irritated that he seemed to know a way for her to
control the shifts and wanted something in return. She’d been able to put together the clues her
Keeper hadn’t been able to say the first day this new shift as a teenager had occurred. What she
wasn’t sure of was the reasons needed for such careful speech from red lips, but knew they were
beyond the Queen’s control. It also pissed her off that he had taken the price of the spell for
himself; memories that were not his and magic that should be the Queen’s. That hadn’t been hard
to figure out if he was the one who created it, but still; why did he set the price he did? The fiery
anger burned in stomach.

‘Who does he think he is? After all the shit he’s put this town through, my family through, the least
he can do is hand over a spell or potion to help me and return what doesn’t belong to him!’

Emma percolated as she paced, snow melted under her boots and those boots moved out of the
court yard and down the block at a furious pace a minute later.

Inside the diner Ruby watched out the window as Emma sped off. The girl seemed agitated and
she wondered what. She moved quickly through the faces filling the space around her to go
phone Regina, but nearly tripped when a hand held a mug out for her to refill. It took a long
moment to fully register that hand and her eyes trailed up the arm it belonged to, up into the blue
eyes of the past. She’d avoided those eyes, that face, and lips that she wanted to nip and suck…. Like they had avoided her. Swallowing, she automatically lifted the coffee pot to the rim of an empty mug.

Belle nodded. “Thanks. I’m sorry if I startled you.”

Old heat came back to big eyes as the melody of that voice took hold in heart. “Are you sorry? Like really sorry?”

Blue confusion. “About startling you? Yeah, I am.”

“That’s all you have to say? Your first words directly to me in two years! I can’t believe—Never mind. Enjoy your cup of betrayal.” She rushed passed customers pushing in the door and outside into the cold air to breathe. Remembering Emma and her promise she sent a quick text to the Queen and sunk onto the frozen bench as the night she had worked so hard to bury came back to bite.

"I can’t believe she just gave it to you.” Ruby grinned as she continued to stuff clothes into a duffel bag on the bed of her room. “Actually I take that back. Swan’s Regina totally would. I’m just so happy right now.” Pausing as slender arms wrapped around her waist from behind.

"We won’t know it. We’ll be long gone by then babe.” Shivering as lips trailed her neck to collar bone. Ruby turned, cradling dimples in her hands. “I’m a little worried though with the full moon tonight. Are you sure we can’t leave tomorrow?” Frowning when Belle deflated.

"I’m sure. Gold knows something is off with me. I wrote him a letter, asking him to let me go. Ever since the time he and I talked at the well and I broke it off with him, he’s been relentless. It was my fault. I didn’t trust my better judgment and I gave him another chance. He is really hard to say no to.”

"Don’t beat yourself up so hard. You were still trying to figure out who you are and he can be a manipulative prick. You told me enough stories over the years that I could write volumes on it. He’s been gas lighting you or something.” Ruby kissed each dimple, resting their foreheads together. “It’s your turn now. Belle, this is your chance at a happy ending. It’s not your responsibility to be his.”

"I feel like I led him on though Rubes. I did that and it will crush him. Maybe…”

"He’s a grown ass man. He can take care of himself. You deserve a chance, away from him, to explore the world like you have always wanted to and what we have together.” Sighing. They had been over this too many times. Back and forth on what needed to happen.

Belle relaxed and leaned again into those full lips, sucking gently as possessive hands found her hair, breasts and… pulling back. “As much as I really need to continue this, we have to get moving if we are going to beat the moon. I’m ready.”

Flushing with unrelenting heat, Ruby groaned. “Right.” Kissing again. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you? For moral support?” Longing resting in those blue pools for skin on skin as her fingers feathered over sleeves teasingly. This was really it, after years of waiting they were finally going to put themselves first. Belle over care taking and herself over the diner. Freedom was close.

"I’m going to drop the letter at the shop. I have to give it to him in person. I would never want someone to break something off with me without a face to face. He’s a person and I owe it to myself to do the honourable thing. Then I’ll grab my bag with the potions and meet you at the town line before dusk.”

"I’ll be waiting.”

Belle grinned, catching big eyes and she was gone.

And Ruby waited and waited. Dusk slowly approached as a brilliant blue sky, so like those eyes was consumed by the pinks and golds of twilight. She’d called twice, texted feverishly with nothing in return. Worry twisted her gut as her skin began to prickle, hairs rising as darkness crept in. Lights flashed in the distance and she pocketed her phone abandoning the car with the duffel on
her shoulder as Belle’s approached. Boots halted and big eyes narrowed at who was driving. Smile lost on the man who stepped out and the woman who remained in the passenger seat.

“What the fuck are you doing here Gold?” Shifting from boot to boot.

“I’m here to support Belle.” He sneered, rounding the car and opened the passenger door.

The woman she thought she knew stepped out with an apologetic grin. “Ruby, I’m sorry, but—”

“Seriously.” Tears bloomed. “You’re going back to him? After everything—”

“I love him.”

Three words that did not belong to her. Never said yet in her ear from that mouth. She stumbled back, dropping the bag as each one brought the stinging back hand of reality on her face. Three cuts with shears to separate her heart.

Running. Boots pounded wet forest earth until paws took over. Panting. As the full moon rose in the empty night fall of a betrayal she didn’t understand, Ruby was consumed by the certainty blue had held. Howling. She learned too that even canine eyes could weep and in pain, the wolf bayed at the moon for answers in questioning heartache.

:::::::::: Present Day ::::::::::

Emma didn’t realize where she was going as feet traveled a sidewalk she knew by heart. Not when her hand took the handle of an old door, or when a crisp bell sounded overhead. Only when she was standing wild eyed at the glass counter in the musty shop of antiques and relics did she realize where she was and whose eyes stared into hers.

“My, my you are a sight for sore eyes Ms. Swan.”

Emma slapped her palms on the case in front of her hissing. “Don’t call me that.” Regina was the only one allowed that pleasure and green eyes sparked. “It’s Emma to you Goldie Locks and right now, I’m gonna talk and you’re gonna listen.”

The Dark One grinned at the show of bravado and continued to polish the top of the glass case around those smaller hands. The Queen hadn’t broken their promise after all, his dagger would have alerted him if that was the case and he would have gone hunting. Since their talk he’d realized how well the Queen had been able to play him, but a promise, especially one made in blood, was a promise. Still…

“Manners dearie, little fingers on glass and all.” Maybe he’d get to play with some fire today of a different kind; emotions belonging to a teenage girl would do nicely. The growing smirk on the Savior’s face was beginning to irritate him.

Emma swiped her palm across the glass top, leaving a grease streak from her lunch. “I want the spell or potion or whatever you have and the stuff you took from Regina.”

“Manners dearie, little fingers on glass and all.” Maybe he’d get to play with some fire today of a different kind; emotions belonging to a teenage girl would do nicely. The growing smirk on the Savior’s face was beginning to iritate him.

“Nothing you have to give. It’s not for sale.”

Emma faltered. That was unexpected news. “But it was for sale a few weeks ago. What changed?”

“I already told you.” Gold gave his eyes to the Savior in all seriousness. “You have nothing I want.”
Swallowing and trying to remember her Keeper’s careful words. “But Regina does?”

Gold eyes flashed and the slick grin returned. “Ooh yes. Perhaps you can convince her to give me what I want in exchange, Emma…”

He paused as his layered thoughts spiraled. On his end, giving details about the promise wouldn't break the oath sealed in blood just his harm of them would, but it might work in his favor when the Queen arrived if the Savior begged with those big green eyes. Oh… if this pissed off version broke the promise he knew the Queen wouldn’t dream of. An idea worth pursuing. Then this whole charade would be over… Their lives forfeit in a nasty accident he could construct. He was good at causing those…. Belle would remain his, no one wiser. Time to light the fuse, but some fun first…

Emma frowned at that knowledge as Gold’s attention seemed to stray. What did her Keeper have left to give that he could possibly want? Regina had already given up so much for her. The door chiming from behind didn’t register as quickly as the thundering of heeled boots did.

“Emma.” Name rolled with authority from a red frown.

The teen closed her eyes, silently cursing her existence which she was sure was about to be obliterated, but glad to hear that voice all the same. She spun around, arms going to her middle as her stomach cramped. Dark, heavy eyes swept over her; reproachful, but still on her and that desire for attention was back full force. Emma hesitated as another surfaced. Adult thoughts trying to squash rash thinking slipped away, as wind of a past filled of group homes, broken trust and being sent away started spinning her emotions violently. The dark voice in her head began to chant.

“Gina I can explain.” She couldn’t, but she wanted to turn down the heat coming her way a notch.

“You will be doing more than explaining when we get home. Go to the car please.”

Brown eyes swept to the man with crooked eyes watching their exchange. He raised a brow and for a moment Regina thought he was asking if she’d remained quiet about the details of his offered deal she was supposed to be thinking about and of their oath. The fact that his fingers were curled in wait around an invisible fireball if she had said anything was not lost. She wondered though. The Imp would know if she’d broken her promise… the daggers would have alerted them of the other’s failure. Why the threat if he wanted their oath to hold up?

Dawning came accompanied by a wicked and oily leer across the room as his eyes eclipsed.

There was a new game afoot and Regina realized with a sick stomach as sweat pooled at her hairline that Emma was the dice he was using to play it. She shivered. He wanted the oath broken and that only meant one thing; he’d force her into a deal damning Belle and gaining his right to retaliate once she got her magic back from him. He’d finish them or try, but Emma, unable to defend herself, would be caught in the crossfire. His words from before in the diner, a warning to them both, flashed through her brain; ‘sentiment is consequential so use yours to your advantage.’

What he hadn’t said was that if they didn’t, he would.

The Queen swallowed hard, trying to focus. Words he twisted and a version of Emma she hadn’t counted on had trapped them in a ring of fire he just lit and they both would burn if she was not careful with her words or her girl lost words completely… and attacked him. Her chin dipped a fraction, mirroring his, acknowledging the game to be played. His magical gun was tucked away, while Emma remained unaware of their exchange.

“Leaving so soon?” Gold chimed, clasping his hands together. “Because I think little Emma wants to ask you for something. Go on Emma, you know you do.”

Regina ignored him, gesturing to the door for the girl to go ahead of her as the teen further bristled at his words. When the blonde didn’t move, she paled. Of all the times for the girl to push…

“Emma—”

“But he has a potion or something to help me and he’s willing to make a trade.” The weeks of changing back and forth wore on her and tears threatened now that she was so close to an answer. She pushed again knowing she had her Keeper’s full attention, negative though it was, she didn’t want to let it go. “He says you have something he wants. At least tell me what it is!” A boot stomped in frustration.

Game turning dangerous with Emma pushing, Regina closed her eyes to think. She needed a few precious seconds to in order to get them out of this mess, but that boot stomped a second time a moment later in growing anger at her pause as Gold began to tease Emma in her silence. He would provoke and wind Emma up until one or both of them slipped.
Pressure pulsed between her heart and head. If a promise broke or details of a deal revealed they would be dead. Malice in his eyes said so. His voice etched between her thoughts and Emma’s pleas as concentration became harder.

She couldn’t poof Emma away, not another body outside of her own limited magical signature.

Cracking eyes, a glance at Gold, he was calculating, lips spinning words. If Emma was six, it would be so easy to pick up the Savior and walk out. The fully adult version wouldn’t even be standing here to begin with. But this emotional teenage cyclone was a completely different story and though petite, too strong to be simply pulled along. She was still working to understand this side of Emma, to seal the delicate trust between them. In those sparking green eyes she realized as the color drained from her face, this hurting girl, was testing her. So, she relied on the one thing that held Emma’s leash; their dynamic.

“We are leaving right now. Pick up your feet and go to the car.” Interrupting a begging pink mouth and Gold twisting words. When the blonde did not budge she began to lay the line that would make those feet move. “Emma S—”

Gold slipped between them again. “You deserve to know Emma!”

“…NOT until you tell me what the price of the potion is!” Emma cut in as she lost herself in the moment. “It’s my life and MY choice! I deserve to know.” Stubborn to a fault. Emma’s eyes narrowed and a tear slipped down her cheek. Anger at Gold and now at her Keeper clouded rational thought.

Gold slithered in. “Tell her your Majesty…”

Brown flashed against emeralds talking over the Imp. “No, it is our life and affects both of us. Stop pushing.” She had already said too much, almost, and was willing to give Emma some insight within the confines of the parameters the Imp set, but not within his hearing distance. Hope held that veiled words were enough. Trying again. “Emma—” She reached for a pale hand that jerked away.

“No!” Emma faltered for a moment at the words ‘affects both of us’, but moved her gaze back to Gold in her heat. Too many words around her, tangling, blurring and his sneer was really pissing her off. “Then YOU spill. Tell. Me. Your. Price!” A biting demand.

The Imp shrugged, flashing bullion teeth their way. “Oh, but this way is much more entertaining. It’s not my choice, nor yours, dearie.” And it wasn’t. The Queen still had some control, until red lips broke the oath or pale hands went for his throat. “It’s hers. Maybe if you say pretty please with a cherry on top. Are you afraid of the answer little one. So many fears in that pretty head. I’ve got something right here that will make them all go away, ask her.”

His mocking, knowing or not, of their dynamic and of her size further fueled Emma’s temper. Pursed lips, knuckles white and face red, again forgetting herself and to whom she was accountable to as she turned to challenge her Keeper, one last time. “I’m NOT moving until you tell me!”

Regina found the opening and held green eyes she needed to give the final line for Emma to back down. “Emma Swan…”

But she lost the sweet finish of the new name Emma was expecting as thoughts raced between three breaths, his ill eyes locked on them. The damn Imp had a long history with names… He used and abused them… And Regina couldn’t, wouldn’t give him that hard won name to use against Emma. Lips closed and her heart broke. The wet grass of green glaring back almost made her say it, just to quell the rising pain there. That response was instinctual. She had to get them out of there now.

Pink lips parted in askance of her name being unsaid; like the pages of her story without a title. A clearly defined line in the book of Emma missing and left unfinished was so wrong on that red mouth. The Queen knew what she needed… Promised no one would take her name away, so why had it been by Keeper of her and promises never broken? Emma lost more than eye contact with the Queen as words fell away and Gold’s voice drilled over her thoughts and Regina’s pleas.

“Baby look at me… You have got to stop fighting me, stop pushing…Please…” Regina’s begged for compliance. For the step she took closer then, Emma backed up one toward the Imp, blonde hair heckled. She froze as pale hand slapped the glass and a boot stomped.

Gold glittered.

YOU/ promised me!” Shouting, Emma ducked her chin as her Keeper’s face pained in blurred peripheral vision. Walls torn down began assembling again. Yet something knocked at the bricks starting to surround her heart; trust deeply ingrained screamed that she needed to think, not to move further back and to be still for a just moment for doubt to leave. “You said…”
Regina closed the space between them in that precious pause of still feet as the Imp continued to taunt Emma, lifting the girl’s chin forcing those green eyes on her as her free hand tried to hold onto the squirming girl. With a grave voice she spoke between his growing one.

“A promise to you I have to break in order to keep. Full name or not this is the line. I have reason, Emma. Trust me.” The chin under her hand quivered, but emeralds flashed stubborn as boots struggled to move back against her and for that she added. “Remember our first rule. Trust it and me. We need to go now.”

He teased louder, closer, luring… “Don’t trust her Emma.”

“Shut up GOLD!” Emma’s brain scrambled between his words, the dark voice of her past and Keeper’s plea for trust, trying to reach for a rule she’d forgotten and one her whirling teenage brain could not grasp in the chaos. Too many words. Stubborn turned into an angry blaze as Emma gave up that route and turned sharply to the acidic man, throwing the Queen off balance. Regina stumbled back. “You already took her memories and her magic. The LEAST you can do is give her the potion!” Her fists clenched to go at him and both were snatched by royal hands and she used all her strength to pull against them, Regina’s arm braced across her pounding heart.

“You, dearie.” His yellowing pools snapped. “You mean give you, not her. You selfish little brat.”

Emma found footing, a fist escaping to fly and lunged.

“Emma STOP!”

The blonde froze within the red shout. Regina never yelled at her. In her brief hesitation before she could smash his grinning face in she was spun quickly, lifted bodily as feet left the floor for a moment and landed to face the door. She wasn’t sure which was faster; her mind shattering out of the glass bubble of self-righteous anger or Regina’s firm hand once against the seat of her jeans. Immobile and smarting. Emma swallowed, choking on words as she finally registered clear fragments of her Keeper’s in ear; go… car… march.

Words sealing compliance, but the price paid when emerald flashed into russet was blinding.

Emma blinked rapidly as thoughts stilled. Voices quieted and her chin bobbed as sting over everything that transpired set in more than just her behind. Attention gained to lines crossed, too many, maybe broken in her anger and need to test. And a further reminder was not something she wanted. Boots shifted. Flushing, confused, but losing the will to fight Emma finally obeyed her Keeper. The gold shop bell piercing overhead signaled an ill timeout to the unfinished match with the Imp as ripping tears stripped more than one tender heart walking out the door...

A/N - Thoughts?

Next time - Keeper and girl begin to process, but dreams invade and a dark voice gets stronger.
Chapter Notes

A/N – First – Thanks so much so sticking with me. This work has truly become something special to me and I appreciate you reading along, your comments, and kudos.

I wanted to take a minute to comment on Emma’s reactions in the last chapter. This teen side of her has not had the time or attention of care the six year old version has had with Regina in the spells life or enough of it yet in this one. Hence why she has yet to call Regina Mama. It’s there, almost, but not quite. Emma is very much her teenage emotions and mindset right now. In her first go around at being a teenager in life was full of loss and heartache and a desperate need to belong. Less and less of the adult rational mind she has remains with each shift. The effects of the spell, like in the do over, made sure of that. She’s reacting the only way she really knows how at this point. She’s mistrusting of adults still and hurt over more than she can verbalize right now. Some of it comes to light in this chapter, but more is brewing in her head.

That said enjoy… Fan art for chapter is on my Tumblr and at very end.

“Another day your Majesty.” Gold cackled as the royal slammed the shop door closed.

Regina hurried after Emma to the curb and waited until the teen was securely in the passenger seat of the Benz with the door closed before going to the driver’s side. Heat blasted through the vents in the already hot space, as the car moved quickly a few blocks away. Composure began to crack as head pounded; she pulled off onto a side street to park and catch a breath.

The teen shifted in her seat at the roar of silence. That one swat had snapped her out of her defiant emotional state and with her brain working again she cast a questioning side glance at the Queen who was digging through the black purse between them on the seat. Guilt tugged as a bottle of Excedrin was brought out, lid popped and two tablets were dry swallowed by a shaking hand. She wondered if she was the cause of the headache, the shaking, or if it was the long hours of the last few days. Perhaps it was both and her stubbornness hadn’t helped. Without thinking, as the dark voice in her head carved away at her esteem, she went to turn on the radio to fill the space and fingers caught her hand on the knob, taking hold in a soft squeeze.

“I need quiet… I’ll explain, but I need a minute…” The rest of the truth failed as Regina leaned forward resting her hands and head against the wheel as her eyes closed. She breathed through the rush of adrenaline ripping through her body ebbing against the left over flames of terror scorching her skin.

“I’m sorry.” Emma whispered and she was for more than just her Keeper’s apparent headache.

Then she saw those tight hands and trembling shoulders. Tan throat working choked breaths and silent tears. Something was way off, haze lifted now Emma felt it, could register the anxious white caps crashing within the usually steady Queen. Maybe there was a reason, maybe several for what her Keeper had not said and did. Her mind could now, in the calm, consider that possibility. They sat in silence for a few long minutes and royal shoulders stilled and hands loosened. Emma ducked her head as the engine finally started, wanting nothing more than to hide in her room, away from the conversation she knew they would have, away from the shame of her actions that caused the ache in the next seat and eyes that knew her well. She’d pushed, tested and maybe it wasn’t her Keeper that failed it.

“It’s my fault… it always is, I ruin everything I touch.” Bubbling bile made breathing hard as that dark thought ate at her.

Not hearing her name today had reminded her of the significance of that gift, what it meant, to whom she belonged and what it had cost her Keeper to realize she needed it. As they turned onto Mifflin Street, the hammering doubt said one day she would go too far, push too much, and lose...
far more than she could survive.

'Maybe today is that day.'

Tears rolled as home came into view wondering if it still would be after her actions in the shop. The past taunted in mind. Other people had given her away for far less, shut the door and given up. She began to wonder what the Queen’s final line was. "Difficult. Stubborn. Defiant. Delinquent." Words painted the picture of who she was in a thick file with adult testimonials to back the damning adjectives. Never mind what she thought or what had actually happened to have her yanked out of one house and forced into another. Emma’s hands flew to her seat belt and legs ran down the walk towards the door. She let herself in with her key and feet pounded the stairs. Wet face found her blanket, fists white knuckled in a pillow as the regrets of day fell down her face, out of her mouth and bled from a soul wound freshly torn.

Emma wasn’t sure when the bed dipped or when an arm wrapped around pulling her close, but she felt the safe warmth in the room followed by consoling murmurs of love. After several minutes of hard crying she turned her head, teeth holding a lower lip captive as her eyes found the Queen. Regina lay within a hand span, their faces just as close. Fair and dark hair crossed each other on the blanket.

"I’m sorry." In unison.

Regina closed her eyes and opened, starting again. "I am. So much for what I did not say, but we need to start at the beginning and work our way through so you understand why." A deep breath. "I need you to tell me what was going through your head."

"I d-didn’t mean to go his shop today. It j-just happened." Emma sniffed.

"Ruby texted me and said you stormed off after walking around the courtyard." Regina stroked blonde curls and sat up on her elbow wiping her eyes. "I was worried, but I figured you were close and then I got a feeling of where you might have ended up."

"I’m sorry… For that and not listening when you asked me to go." Green meadows shined seeking forgiveness.

"That was not a good choice on your part." A shudder. "Especially when I told you not to push me, name said or not." Her thumb found a cheek, wiping away a tear not her own. "Still, I know my girl well enough that you must have had something running hard through your head driving your actions, aware of them or not as you were."

The teen curled up tighter, chin worrying again. "Don’t be mad."

Softer. "Baby, I’m not… Back there I was terrified. Talk to me please."

Emma winced at that reveal; sure she had heard it wrong. "You’re gonna be mad though when I tell you why I acted how I did cause I do know better, but I couldn’t help all of it, I couldn’t it." Emma started crying all over again; the price of tears was exhausting and felt she had more than paid her due many moons over.

Shifting to the head of the bed, back against the headboard Regina drew Emma up into her arms. Parts of these tears were the far end of the spectrum of emotions and hormones the girl couldn’t completely control. It was the rest of what they were, the fearful ache and what she was recognizing as the birth of another self destructive cycle, that she needed to understand.

"Try for me." A blonde head shook against her arms and water continued to soak her blouse. "I need to know so I can better help you baby. Take a breath… one more… and try again from the beginning. What were you thinking before you left the diner?" Starting to coach a logical sequence for Emma to follow.

"I w-was thinking ‘bout when I was this age before and your appointment with Gold and I figured it out, what he had to help me and that he was holding onto your magic and memories. I’m tired of not knowing when I will change. I got angry too…” She went on to explain her discussion with him and asking to know the price he wanted for the potion and stopped suddenly, biting her lip again.

"Why wouldn’t you come with me, not the first time I asked, but after?" Emma did well with direct questions when upset and she asked in such a way that each piece of the puzzle to her girl’s emotions was laid out to deal with one at a time. She already knew some of the answers, but she was not sure Emma did.

"I was gonna, after you started to say my name, cause I know that means you’re done and I need to stop. But you didn’t say it right and I thought… You promised and you…” She shrugged hurt
returning to her eyes as she left her fear unsaid, breath quick at the possibility of what that might mean.

Regina ran her hand along Emma’s arm for a moment as the girl calmed from the assuring motion. “There was a reason for that. To keep it I had to break it in the moment. I tried to explain what I cou—”

“Not a good enough one.” She mumbled pulling away sharply from the affection she wanted, needed, as feelings of self doubt and anger returned, hiding her face in her knees.

“Eyes Emma.” Clicking her tongue when the girl didn’t move and the Queen leaned forward, physically turning hunched shoulders to face her. “What is our first rule?”

Missing a beat, pink lips floundered. “Safety…” Followed by hesitation where it didn’t use to be. “Safety first and then communicate.” Finishing when Emma couldn’t realizing she needed to be sure to take time over the weekend to go back over the most basic of their rules the girl seemed to have forgotten in the commotion of the last several weeks. Today that was a rule Regina had followed to the letter and it had saved their lives, but she couldn’t yet tell Emma all of why she’d been terrified in the shop, but she could tell her some things. “There are two reasons for my choice not to use your last name. The first being I didn’t want to give Gold any knowledge he shouldn’t have. He has a perversion with names, and has used them in the past to get what he wants or to hurt people. He would have used it against you Emma. I wasn’t about to give him that leverage.” A pause to allow processing. “I put safety, yours, first and now I am communicating what I can right now of my choice.”

Emma lost wrinkles in brow, anger leaving swiftly at those carefully phrased words. More bread crumbs… Ones she realized Regina had been asking her to follow in the shop with the trust they had between them. Trust she had doubted. Promise broken to keep it and her safe. Lips rolled inward to be abused by teeth clutching as the consequences of what the knowledge of her name might have cost them had the Imp gotten it registered. That floated behind her eyes next to the dark voice picking at her. The rules, established together so long ago, applied to both of them. And that first one was ordered the way it was for a reason.

The reason paled. “What else?”

“You haven’t told anyone about your name change yet. I didn’t want to be the one to spoil that moment for you. I know you wanted Henry to be the first one you told. And he can be, but no one else right now.” She felt Emma deflate under her hands. The girl was still settling into that big change, the specialness of it a private murmur in heart Emma wanted to hold onto for a while.

Hurt was now replaced by guilt dripping downhill. Emma leaned forward fully into her Keeper. “I didn’t think about that, any of it… I’m so sorry for doubting you and forgetting our rule, for pushing, for testing. I know the rule is there for a reason the way it is.” For Regina to be terrified meant… Swallowing as understanding became clear that they were not as safe as she once thought and that the Dark One was holding a torch to their feet. She drew back, her chin was lifted in return and she tried to brave the russet eyes studying hers. “This side of me… it’s different, harder to shake off old memories, old ways of thinking. He wound me up and I couldn’t think… He wouldn’t shut up and my head… I made a mess of stuff.”

“Not as much as you may be thinking, dear heart. He’s in the dark about your name and nothing was… shifted today. The rule we have did its job.” Serious hands cupped both cheeks, eyes inches apart. “Regardless, you cannot do something like this again. Stay away from him, his shop, if he is walking down the street you go the other way. Do not engage. You are not to be alone with him, any of you. Promise me Emma.”

Clear eyed. “I promise.” One all of her now understood the gravity of.

“Good girl.” Kissing a forehead to seal it as she shifted gears to the next point. “You said you thought I would be mad at you because you knew better. What was that comment about?” There was more in that blonde head stewing she needed to help draw out.

“I wanted attention.” Blushing hard as she tried to explain. “With the storm and us being so busy this week… I missed us and time with you. Christmas was great, but I had to share you with everyone and…” She trailed off, ashamed at the childishness of her explanation, true as it was.

“You have been used to my attention and my focus being on just you, or the little side of you, for quite a while.” Regina leaned back against the headboard, taking Emma with her, hugging the girl, who now snuggled under her hands. “I can see how you would be frustrated now that we are home and our time isn’t our own so much anymore.”

“I know we can’t be together all the time, but I still want to be.”
Regina nodded. "Emma, you are making up for a lifetime of inattention and getting a taste of the complete opposite as you did in our other life is addicting. I respect your feelings and I share them. However, your attitude, defiance, and tone were completely unacceptable and we nearly…" 

Trailing as a shiver ripped her, pulling the girl in tighter. 

"I know." 

A considering kiss to temple. "Yes, it seems you do. We will remedy your actions in a few minutes. I want to make sure you understand a few other things first." 

Emma squirmed, but gave her eyes to the Queen. 

"I need to be discreet right now on a few things." Being very mindful of phrasing to keep the Imp at bay, but also to give truth where it was needed. 

"Is that why you didn’t tell me? Cause you are still thinking about if you want to make a deal or not?" Emma puzzled over that. 

Careful crumbs for pale hands to pick up. "No and I want my conscience clear." 

"Oh." Not realizing in midst of her tantrum earlier the extent of what she had been asking her Keeper to do. She still didn’t, but that unyielding tone spoke volumes. More guilt. 

"The next thing I want you to understand is that I am upset at some of your choice of words today. You said this was your life, your choice, and that’s why you deserved to know. Those words were a little bit on the selfish side, when you are anything but." Regina let her words sink in as she thought about how to explain her further reasoning and not wanting them to be mistaken for Gold’s cruel ones earlier. 

"I didn’t mean to be." 

"I now baby and that is why I am pointing it out to you." The Queen rested chin on top of blonde, lingering to speak. "The decisions we make affect each other because we are a team. You have spent most of your life operating on your own, but now that is not the case. We need to be careful and considerate of our choices when other people are involved. This situation is like that. I need to be considerate and prepared before I make a choice." 

"I could help you though." Emma perked up, tears ceasing as an idea came. "I still have my magic and you have a lot of books with spells that could knock his crotchety socks off and loosen those gold teeth of his. He might sing a totally different tune then and give you your memories and powers back." 

Stiffening at the very idea Regina pulled back, quickly bringing green up to her level. "No, his focus needs to remain on me. You will not engage with him again. You promised and I will end any thoughts or attempts in that direction very swiftly. Do you understand me?" 

Backing down. "Yeah." 

A brow rose in wait. 

"Yes G—Ma’am." 

"I need you to trust me on that and let it go. Besides your magic is not as strong as it usually is with your shrinking." 

Gears continued to spin under disheveled curls remembering some of what she had been reading in magic books. "I know of some dark—defensive spells." 

Shaking her head at the attempted cover up, hand tapped a jean covered hip in warning. "You do and you don’t, Emma. You simply do not have the level of training I do or an understanding for the intricacies of the magical arts, dark or light. I have spent a lifetime learning and another practicing while you’ve but a handful of years in experience." Finger grazing a cheek softly. "You are very talented and we will continue to build your skills, for all of you, but I won’t have you dabbling in spells you do not have knowledge of, especially ones that hurt others. Period. I’m not keeping things from you because I don’t think you have a right to know, or that you can’t handle knowing. It is much more complicated than that. Does that make sense?" 

"Yeah." It did make sense, but her current state made that hard to fully understand and accept. "Can I at least still help you research magic stuff." Hopeful that her choices of that day hadn’t lost
her that privilege. “With you there, of course.”

“You may, if you wish, sweet one. You will have plenty of time to think about that and other things going forward.”

Emma winced. “I’m grounded, huh?”

“Oh yes, starting today and through the weekend at least.” They would start there and see what else if anything was required as Emma further processed. This conversation was far from finished, but she sensed a break was needed. “I understand that you did not have full control of yourself back there. He taunted you, your emotions spiraled, our cues and lack of one you needed were all fuel. Everything was too much and fast for you to process so we will be slowing things down for the next few days immensely so you can.”

“But last time you gave me a choice.”

Not that Emma wanted a reminder and she wouldn’t have willingly picked one, she realized then even if it was offered. Being this age made it harder to accept that need and made it far easier to ignore, but she had still been expecting a choice like last time. She remembered something else just then too; she had not yet used the term of affection the little girl in her did for the Queen. Want and need had both been resting there to do so and she’d been ready, before this afternoon, so ready, but she couldn’t, now feeling she didn’t deserve too. A thumb grazing her chin made her look up out of thoughts.

“Back in the shop I did not want to swat you, especially when you didn’t have full control or our cues to go by. It was my last resort to get you out of there. You don’t need a full reminder as of now. You need time to think about what we just discussed and will be speaking of more over the weekend. An early bedtime, lack of screens, staying close to home, to me, and helping with a few tasks around here will give you that time.” Her girl was exhausted and some extra sleep would help the fluctuating emotions. She tucked some curls behind Emma’s ear that fell forward when a pointed chin looked away. “Besides, you’ll probably be this size for that long anyway. David and Will can handle the station after the overtime you’ve put in this week and the weather is letting up so I will not have to work. We can rest and spend some time together.”

Green eyes popped up brightening the darkness. “Just us?”

“Just us.”

Emma smiled softly and popped a kiss on the Queen’s cheek. “I’d like that.” It wouldn’t be quite how she envisioned, but the closeness she craved would be there.

Me too.” Regina smiled back, starting to ease off the bed to stand. “Now, I’d like you lay down for a bit. You have to be tired from all that crying, but first I’d like for you to give me your electronics. You may have them back Monday morning. Take a minute to set your forwarding service please.”

Slouching, the girl groaned, but pulled a phone out of her back pocket. She thumbed in her code and forwarded her texts and calls to Regina’s cell. She had to do this once, a year before the spell, when she’d been banned from her phone for a day when she’d been playing Candy Crush during work hours. Several calls to the Sheriff’s station had been ignored and Regina hadn’t been amused to have been one of them. Emma went to her desk, unplugged her laptop and I-pod, and handed everything to the brunette with a sigh.

“Thank you for doing that without a fuss. I’ll be back to wake you in an hour, then you may help me make dinner.”

The praise warmed Emma and arms sought one more hug. “I’m sorry for everything...” Lips again leaving off the affection her heart missed.

“I know baby.” Regina used her free arm to return the hug. “Into bed, get some rest.”

Emma let go reluctantly, but with some peace that they were starting to get on good terms again and with the weight of new understanding. “Love you.”

“And I you.” Dimming the light as she eased out the door.

After a nap and a simple dinner, they ended up reading most of the evening together in the living room. A bowl of popcorn settled between them as they took turns finishing the Jules Verne novel. Emma had wanted to start a new book, but was reminded that bed was at 8:30 due to her grounding and not 9:00 for when she was this age. The girl started to argue and a firm look shut her down enough to opt for the hot water of the shower to erase her frustration. Regina tucked her in and Emma was out, dead to the world within a minute of the brunette leaving the room.
Around one in the morning Emma twisted hard nearly falling off the bed, heart with a wicked beat against her lungs as she struggled to take a breath. The dream had come again. A version of the same one she’d had all her life, much less frequent since she’d found her home with Regina, but with the same intensity as it always hit. In her mind’s eye she’d been sent away, hands she loved packed a bag and had shown her the white door. No social worker’s car waited to take her way this time though. The front porch ended with a drop off the side of a cliff and a pit of chaos filled with her own self doubt bubbled below, waiting to consume her.

Emma flung off her covers and her feet found the floor, intent to find solace in her Keeper. Hesitation chained her to the bed and she sank back down as the memory of the day before rushed in. She’d been a brat again, pushed too hard again, and yet the Queen had been patient and understanding through it all.

Again.

Realization that she did not reveal her fear of one day pushing too much or about the voice of self doubt that had returned to her head, during their talk earlier, hit like a brick. Tension drew her brows tight. Rubbing her face free of falling tears brought her mind to the present. Fatigue clung to her bones and she sighed.

‘If I’m this tired, M—Gina must feel like the walking dead. I can deal with one bad dream. Get it together Swan.’ That thought kept her from moving the rest of the night.

Emma knew the Queen never went to bed before her and of one late night, though she suspected many, had been spent by dark glasses reading through old magic books. With a heavy heart she tossed and turned the rest of the night, held captive by the emotions stewing in her psyche and her returning fear that the only open embrace waiting for her would be the cliff horizon.

Hope you liked this. More Tuesday-ish...

Next time - Emma pushes one last time discovering what her Keeper's final line is... Emma and Regina each remember the night of the accident two years ago when words were misused, lives threatened, and the foundation of their relationship was reformed.
A/N – Thank you for your comments and Kudos! Waves ahead in this chapter and a split memory flashback to the accident mentioned throughout the story.

The black I-phone vibrated on the kitchen counter next to the stove for the second time in a ten minute period. Regina rolled her eyes at the name flashing across the screen and sighed. Snow had been blowing up Emma's phone all morning, forwarded now to hers for a short period, with texts. The teenage girl Emma was finally made an appearance a few minutes later. Regina eyed the clock, mentally calculating that Emma should have gotten about ten hours of sleep. Going to bed early was meant to be been beneficial for both of them and while she felt rested, she noted a tense and heavy look about the girl.

"Good morning sleeping beauty." Regina flipped the spinach omelet in the pan and accepted a sleepy kiss on her cheek.

"I never liked that Disney princess." The blonde rubbed her eyes and snagged a piece of toast from a plate, shuffling over to her seat, munching as she went. A vibration caught her ear and she frowned when she saw her Keeper's hand clench and release. Emma knew that gesture; a fireball twitch. "So who do you want to roast this morning?"

"Snow is about to be slush. She has sent a plethora of texts this morning." Quick hands returned to cut the omelet in half, plating both. She set one in front of Emma, grabbed her coffee and sat in her place with the other.

"Awww. You had to ruin it with spinach." Even as she half whined, Emma picked up her fork, a small grin full of mischief.

"Only for you." A tease right back. "Did you sleep alright?"

Rolling eyes. "You sent me to bed when it was still light out." Emma shrugged apologetically when she caught the not so pleased look tossed her way at her tone. "Sorry. What did she say in the texts?" Deflecting to an easier topic, though not by much.

"I haven't checked those yet. I wanted to wait until you were up and if you are okay with me reading them." Regina explained, taking a bite of eggs.

"If she's been at it all morning then something is eating at her and you don't have to ask me M— Gina." Emma blushed and ducked her head. "I was a brat yesterday and I kinda lost my right to privacy."

"No, you lost your screens, not your right to privacy and you were not a brat. Would you like me to check to see what she wants?" At the nod she scrolled through the text feed. It took a few minutes to read through all the messages between bites of food. "She wants to meet with you this weekend to tell you something very important. She emphasizes just you if you are comfortable with that idea."

"Well I'm not right now, so no." Emma lowered her fork as her brain caught up with her mouth. "Wait… You don't think she… She wants to tell me about the baby? Is it New Years Eve already?"

"She might." Regina nodded, sipping her coffee. "And, yes it is."

Pinched frown. "In our other life they made such a big show about telling everyone the news. I expected her to do the same here."

"I may have hinted that might not be best for you when she was helping me in the kitchen on Christmas."

Emma's face softened and she leaned into the Queen's shoulder. "What would I do without you?"

"Probably stay up half the night watching mind numbing movies and rotting your teeth on sugar." Said with great affection and a side kiss to temple.

"That sounds right, but seriously… Thanks. I don't think I could have handled another public show like last time." Emma chewed on her cheek as she sat back. "Will you please text that I am off my phone for the weekend and that I will catch up with her on Monday?"

Regina nodded and quickly sent a reply.

"We are gonna go to Granny's tonight for the potluck, right?"

A head tilted in question. "We had discussed not going, last week, remember?"

Emma rolled her eyes, indeed remembering that chat, but now not liking it in her current state. "I'm sure you remember it that way." Mumbling, now cranky. "I wanna go, though, especially if Snow's not gonna air her bedroom secrets with the whole town." She pulled a particularly large spinach leaf out of her eggs with her fingers and a grimace to set aside on the plate, scowling when she caught her Keeper's eye.

"Please do not pick at your food."

"Not trying to. This green gunk is in the way of the cheese and eggs."

A patient brow rose. "I'm sure." The brunette turned in her seat to better see green eyes. "I thought we could have a quiet night in, play a few games, and order a pizza."

The blonde shrugged, secretly loving the idea, but a part of her wanted the social experience of the holiday. "I really wanna go out. It's New Years Eve M—Gimmee." The affection wanted to come again as it had yesterday and remembering why she wasn't letting it out, she shut down further.

Mouth firm at her stretched nickname when something else clearly wanted to be said. "Have you forgotten our talk from yesterday so soon?"

"Not trying to. This green gunk is in the way of the cheese and eggs."

A patient brow rose. "I'm sure." The brunette turned in her seat to better see green eyes. "I thought we could have a quiet night in, play a few games, and order a pizza."

"Holiday or not you are grounded dear heart." Regina began to wonder if she should have nipped
this attitude in the bud yesterday. "Part of that involves going to bed by 8:30. You need the rest, after this week and yesterday. We both do." Concern spoke for the dark circles rimming meadow eyes.

A balled fist rubbed against a thigh and Emma groaned. "I told you I slept last night." She flipped her hair back, resting her elbows on the counter, cheeks in hands. "Can we go 'til like 8:29 and then come home?"

Regina sighed catching the lift in tenor at the end of that first statement indicating a veiled truth and set down her mug. The girl was tugging their first three miles apart at the seams little by little. While that was not sitting well with her, she was still figuring out the intricacies of the teenage girl running in circles with scissors in front of her. It had been far easier to figure out how Emma's six year old brain worked and with time, the adult version. This one was a spinning cyclone and she needed to get ahead of now before it blew away with both of them.

"No Emma." Firm in their previously set plans. "That is not a choice today."

After Emma had specifically said she didn't want to go the Queen had made other arrangements to better suit the blonde's temperament. After the events of yesterday and their talk she was resolute in making sure they had the time the girl had been requesting to spend together mixed with some rest for both of them.

"Can we at least watch a movie then?" Changing her mood on a dime.

"Not this weekend."

"Then tell Snow I'll meet with her." Pushing her plate away, Emma slouched in thought. "At least I'll get out of the house that way."

"Deflecting does not work with me Emma and certainly not when accompanied with whining. Meeting with Snow is not one of your choices today either, especially when you are upset and already said you did not wish to."

A rush thought propelled through a blonde head. She hesitated on it, knowing if she was caught it would go well for her, but stubbornness won out. "Will you at least text her one thing for me...? Please?" Adding courtesy in a last ditch effort to possibly get her way.

In answer Regina picked up her phone, brow raised in wait. She didn't want to be the one to hinder any willing communication Emma wanted to have with Snow, that relationship was at a delicate stage, grounding or not. But she would put her foot down in exposing Emma to anymore emotional conversations the girl was clearly not ready to have while this age.

She spelled out her message. "Cya2nt me crib 5." Watching the Queen's face scrunch in confusion. For as brilliant as Regina was she knew nothing when it came to slang or SMS abbreviations and had refused to learn, finding it quote 'archaic'. Right now Emma was going to use that to her advantage.

"What does that mean?" Squinting over the butchered English.

"It's short for when I'll meet her next time so she can tell me about the baby." She licked her lips, a very twisted version of the truth, but still the truth she rationalized.

If Snow came knocking she might be able to sway the conversation after hearing about the baby to going out with puppy eyes and Snow bugging Regina, it just might work. No harms, no foul she figured. Craving distraction from her spinning thoughts and jumbled emotions, maybe then the voice in her head would shut up for a while.

Maybe.

"Does crib mean baby then?" Confused over why Emma would give any hint to Snow about already knowing about the baby. They had purposefully chosen not reveal that tidbit about their alternate life to allow the woman her right to share such personal news.

Emma took a huge bite of eggs, complete with spinach to avoid answering verbally, but shook her head no. She swallowed, a pout returning and flashed moody eyes to her Keeper.

Regina had used it interchangeably with her nickname whenever small and that wasn't the concern. It was the lack of it at all that indicated something was amiss. They had purposefully chosen not to share this information with anyone in the alternate universe. For as brilliant as Regina was she knew nothing when it came to slang or SMS abbreviations and had refused to learn, finding it quote 'archaic'. Right now Emma was going to use that to her advantage.

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time thinking about what had been said and unsaid between now and the chores needing done later. In the quiet of solitude in her space mind drifted. The girl's words and attitude ate at her. This behavior wasn't Emma, not at all. It belonged to a past without support, healthy coping mechanisms, or a family.

She traveled through the shop incident yesterday minute by minute then moved to their conversation after, reflecting on the girl's words, moving her mind next to this morning. Hot and cold in both speech and body language had been the vibe of both discussions. A sigh came next along with more confirmation; some kind of self destructive spiral was happening inside that blonde head and that would not end well if Emma got too far into it.

Regina lifted her head up from her hands and pushed away from the desk, mentally preparing to be patient for the day to come. When Emma got like this it was difficult to pull her out without some kind of re-balancing to their dynamic. Time and patience sometimes got her back on track. Other times tough love like the shock of a cold shower snapped her out of it. The Queen had a feeling it would be a combination of both due to Emma's current temperament and size. Though she sincerely hoped that was not the case. The last time something like this had happened, complete disregard for their rules and system of checks and balances they had between them, Emma became lost inside a whirling mind of damaging voices and nearly lost something greater. Glancing at the clock; a half hour left. Regina hoped Emma was using some of this time to think as well.

Upstairs in the lavender room Emma swirled charcoal in a spiral on a blank page, slow and light at first, then faster and darker. She didn't want to feel this way. Guilt thick like tar coated her tongue and throat over how she had acted this morning, words and those lacking between them and all while the voice inside her brain grew, pulling her deeper into the abyss like it had before. Fighting against the grain of it was exhausting and so she drowned in it. Closing eyes to a memory she wished she could forget when the dark voice in her head had rode her too hard one day. As flashes ricocheted between temples, Emma sank into that murky night...

Flashback... about 2 years ago before the Do Over Spell

"Cinnamon."

Emma had finally said their safe word and it tore her in half after she had. The word spat from her lips in an abusing fashion when she'd been called to task. They'd been doing this dance, their dance for a year now and lately she'd begun to corkscrew into a depression, as she often did, around the holiday season.

Regina knew that; had been more than patient of her back talk, pushing, and stubborn comments.

Stress relief had been offered and she'd pushed that idea away early in the week. Too stubborn to let go of the depreciating words in her head when she thought she richly deserved them. When a relief session was broached again a few days later, she'd still turned it down and rode the dark horse that pounded harsh words in her head.

Obstinate and alarmingly so.

One evening she'd pushed too much and the Queen had called in their agreements, rules she had been ripping apart that week, and called Emma to knee. Standing in front of Regina and being asked why she was there made her pause. She didn't want to admit her faults, yet she knew she needed to so desperately, wanted to feel better, to let go... The dark horse neighed, hoofs rumbling thoughts. Emma hadn't wanted a reminder. She'd wanted a drink, to run, and hide instead of allowing herself the reset she needed to come off that horse; sheeralded the one card that was sure to get her way. Not because she needed to, or because something was wrong or she wanted to, but simply because she could.

She could handle herself, dark horse rider Emma Swan, could handle herself.

Now she sat in the Rabbit Hole fingering the single shot of responsibility she had yet to take and talking in the stew of her actions. She'd run after the word, right out of the Study, to her car and bolted like she always did when things did not go her way. After three hours of staring at the drink she threw it back, burning as it went down her throat. It didn't use to, but tonight it did.

She felt terrible, sick over what she'd done and how she'd left that room, the Queen calling her name. They'd agreed on what that word meant, when it would be used and why. Regina only asked that she not abuse it, use when it wasn't something that needed using. That was the trust they'd agreed on what that word meant, when it would be used and why. Regina only asked that she not abuse it, use when it wasn't something that needed using. That was the trust they'd agreed on, the word

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Obstinate and alarmingly so.

One evening she'd pushed too much and the Queen had called in their agreements, rules she had been ripping apart that week, and called Emma to kne...
Boot missed, but the tree didn't and she was thrown from the horse, hoofs landing on her chest...

Present Day Storybrooke:

A light knock on an open door had green eyes jerk up from the sketch pad of memory; both paper and iris' held shadows weighted with the past and unrest.

"How is your drawing coming along?" Regina leaned against the door jamb just outside of the room in wonder of the spooked look on her girl's face.

"Fine. What do you want?" Emma sat up, closing the cover.

A dark eyebrow arched. "I want to check in with you. May I come in?"

"Sure." A halfhearted gesture followed and Emma sat up cross legged on her bed as the Queen approached.

"Are you feeling alright?" Regina frowned when a chin nodded once sharply, but green eyes said something else entirely. "I'm worried about you baby."

"Don't be. I'm fine." Emma pulled away from the hand that cupped her cheek. She didn't deserve that affection. "Are we done?"

"Talking? Yes for now." Deciding to shift gears and get fidgeting hands focused on something physical, but within close proximity. More space was not what her girl needed right now. "Get dressed in something comfortable and please meet me downstairs." She turned to leave, expecting feet to soon follow.

They did heavy and stomping five minutes later.

Emma glared at the bucket of cleaning supplies on the floor at the base of the stairs and then up at her Keeper. "Cleaning? We have magic for a reason."

"We do, but not today. Grab the dust spray and cloth. We will start with the living room and then the foyer. I'll lift and move and you spray and wipe." She pulled her short hair into a low ponytail at the base of her neck; several strands sprung free framing her face and gestured to the bucket.

The blonde shifted from foot to foot, expecting more than that from her comment. She puzzled as hands obeyed, surprising herself with the detail she was putting into the chore, knowing how particular Regina could be. They were both quiet as they worked. Taking their time, but being thorough they finished both rooms in about forty-five minutes. The Queen then moved to sweeping and gestured to the swiffer with a nod for Emma to follow after through the down stairs. Thirty minutes later had them both side by side in the kitchen at the double sink as regal hands washed the dishes and pale ones dried.

Purposeful in each chore she set them to do, every task designed to reinforce teamwork as well as her lead and Emma's follow in their relationship. The blonde seemed to relax a little more with each one and by the time the last dish was dry Emma leaned into her shoulder.

Regina dried her hands on a cloth handed to her and decided to test the teenager's willingness to talk. "Thank you for your help."

One shoulder popped up then down. "Welcome. Are we done yet?" Asked without tone.

"There a few more things to do, but we can take a break. Have a seat."

Emma obeyed taking her usual perch on the stool by the counter, attitude from earlier missing as she gave weary eyes to her Keeper.

"I noticed how tired you seemed this morning and the deflection that surfaces when your mind is sitting heavily on something." Hands poured them both sparkling water from the fridge adding a splash of OJ to one and handed it to the girl.

Knuckles rubbed the sides of the cool cup. "I told you I slept."

"Not well." Regina was matter of fact as she leaned on the counter, bringing her gaze level with green.

Another shrug.

"Use your words please."

"No, not good." Emma took a sip, bubbles dancing on her tongue the way her stomach began to. "That doesn't mean something's wrong." A push.

"With you, dear heart, it usually does." She sipped her drink, eyeing the girl. Sure Emma was hiding something that needed to come to the surface. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Cheeks flushed. "I wanna go upstairs." Anxious, palms began to sweat.

The moment Emma said yes it would all come spilling out and she did not want to relive those feelings or confirm her fears. What was the Queen's hard line? Where was the end of the circle called Regina that she spun in? And if she somehow found the line and crossed, would or could Regina pull her back in? And if yesterday in the shop and the night of the accident weren't it, what was? It was the ultimate question that defined the fundamental nature of what they were and one Emma suddenly needed an answer to, but she didn't know how to ask.

"Baby, please look at me. Was that why you did not sleep well?"

Uncertainty led to angry static staring at the counter. No answer.

"Emma?"

Drowning in mind again, she finally threw hard eyes at her Keeper. Thoughts spewed before her heart could catch up and nerves ripped words through lip blades. "SHUT UP!" Slapping hands on the counter, glasses rattled. "Quit asking me shit—stuff and leave me ALONE!" Pushing hard and fast as her chest beat against lungs of self sabotage. "Just STOP trying!" A pause. Within the moment of silence an internal voice added. 'I'm sorry… I don't deserve it, or you.'

Brows rose and Regina leaned back as if slapped. "Excuse me young lady?" Hurt then something else framed her mouth as green tilted rearing back from the edge, begging for help.
Arms crossed a cramped stomach. Eyes too full and paling with one final shove off the deep end.
"You heard me."

Silence.

Then calm within the blonde storm. "I did Emma. Far more than you are saying and have not been saying all day." Regina stepped out from behind the counter and turned the teen's stool to face her, hands braced on either side of the seat, eyes level. "And I am going to help you adjust your thinking by taking back control as I promised you. I would instead of talking or sending you to reflect, or to your room or taking you across my lap because clearly you are overly exhausted and far too upset."

"I am not tired or upset." Stubborn and thick, but quieter words as she began calming under redirection.

"That is quite enough Emma Swan Mills." Regina leaned back and held out her hand.

Emma winced and stood quickly to take the offered palm. She trailed the Queen upstairs to the master suite and pulled back slightly as they neared the bed. Royal fingers snapping had her jeans and sweatshirt replaced with PJs from this morning as the duvet was turned down. A hand found her mid back guiding to the warmth, a whine escaped.

"I'm too old for a naaaaap."

"You are not too old, for a few things as I will be more than happy to remind you of when you wake, if you continue to speak to me with that tone." The Queen patted the sheets, brow raised in wait, grateful that Emma only delayed a moment before heeding words. She drew the covers up and sat on the side. "We will finish our talk when you wake up." Confirming that the deflecting tactics were done and resolution would be attained one way or another.

"I won't sleep." Emma automatically turned on her side to better breathe in the comforting scent from her Keeper's pillow. Tension left as she was cradled in vanilla apples.

"Hush now." Regina ran her thumb across a pale brow, seeing that sleep was not far off. She stayed, repeating the soothing motion until the girl drifted off knowing bad dreams would not find Emma in her bed.

Brushing fingers softly down a cheek, she studied that brow, tense even now in sleep. With green quiet in rest she allowed mind to wander again. Remembering the price almost paid when Emma had run too far one night. Quickly her hand found the girl's heartbeat in gentle comfort as she was swept into the past…

Flashback… about 2 years ago before the Do Over Spell: 

"Please pull over." Soft plea.

"Gina I'm so sor—"

Words stolen by the tree between them. Breaking wood had been the quick part. The rest seeped like sap tears down the trunk.

Glass shattered and air bags deployed between lifetimes. Red lights flashed and a man shouted. Regina's skull hurt. Something warm dripped down her face into eyes and she rolled head left. The Savior was still, blonde hair covering face.

"Em-ma?" Time stood still.

Nothing.

She forced herself from the car, stumbling. Ground cracking as the pavement slammed into her knees.

"Reginaa!" Slow.

"Daaaviiid?" Even slower… Eyes moved up as his feet neared… He swam in sticky red.

"Emmaa."

And then Emma was there. But not.

Regina blinked. Awareness of the present slapped. Awake, time began moving as it should. "EMMA!"

David cradled his daughter, tapping what should be a pale cheek, blood covered his hands as he knelt in front of the Queen. He put his fingers to a neck and face to a mouth. "She's not breathing!"

He froze.

Regina didn't.

"Lay her flat!" Hands found a quick rhythm over a still heart and she breathed life force into pink lips. Over and over again.

Nothing.


Too much of nothing.

Regina continued pumping, adding a spark of magic under palm. "You don't get to run away. Not from me."

"Come back to me!" More breath. Another sparked pump. "Emma!"

A gasp of something. Lungs filled with sweet air. Coughing.

And green opened finding brown.

Time blurred.

Spinning to the hospital, the ambulance lights screamed. Pain throbbed. Troubled voices met and parted ways over a stretcher. Foreign hands prodded and poked. Faceless Doctors came and went. Gauze, syringes, medication, and IVs, too.
Finally there was only keening, a steady pattern of life and one royal eyes watched wave up and down on the heart monitor for hours. Snow came and went and came again as did David, Henry, Paige and Neal and so many others that night. Regina refused to move from the corner of the recovery suite the Savior was in where she held vigil.

Emma was awake and talking, well even, despite the sudden cardiac arrest from the airbag hitting at just the right moment, stack dead between beats of a heart. Blood from a cut, but not concussion along a blonde hairline had been the cause of the red river over a pale face. Regina too had been lucky with only a few scrapes and bruises. The beloved yellow bug was even recoverable according to the towing company. Lucky everyone had said. So damn lucky.

And they were.

But Emma had yet to hear a word from her gnawed lips. Regina had lost them. Her eyes said what she didn't want to and for that she broke when green bent under them. Alone the next morning finally, when Snow and David stepped out for coffee the tears came. Then more from green across the room. They met in the middle of the next beep. Emma was suddenly wrapped in her arms that wouldn't let go and together they cried.

"I h-have a problem Gina and not just with drinking... A big p-problem..."

"Shhhhh. " Kissing and squeezing. " We will work through it, talk about all of it, but not right now."

Emma stayed in the hospital for a few days, tests showing no lasting damage that a few weeks wouldn't heal with some magic to boost it along. Once released, the Savior went to the mansion with her, much to questioning Charming eyes. They didn't talk about that night for two weeks, promising to do so once the Doctor cleared Emma and they could each gather their thoughts. The morning of the scheduled discussion dawned pensive, but promising. Regina pooled them home from Whale's office after Emma's final appointment, more of a formality and testament to the Savior's perfect health under her care. Still she had needed to hear so with her own ears. Emma had been quiet during, allowing red lips to ask the questions a blonde head was thinking. Later, in the privacy of the mansion, on the white chaise they sat hand in hand and knee to knee, words flowed between them.

Regina offered assurance and squeezed a nesterly hand. "The rules we set together and the consequences we agree on won't work if you completely blow them off or mix use our safe word to get out a consequence for no other reason than being stubborn or just because you can. That is not what it is there for. We talked about that, agreed to it together and I will always respect its use, even when misused. You knew that."

"I did and I ran because it was easier than facing what I did. I won't misuse it again." Knee bouncing. "You were completely in the right to call me out on my bullshit that afternoon and I'm so sorry I let my stubbornness get out of hand." Kissing lips. "That voice was eating at me Gina in the worst way that day and in the days before. It's not an excuse and I'm not trying to use it as one, but it wouldn't shut up."

"Misuse was bound to happen at some point, it's in your nature to be stubborn especially when you need something you don't want, though I still do not like what it nearly cost us after the fact." Her fingers lifted a chin. "Your emotions did not get a reset and that led you run and to hide, to drink, it usually does. One shot is too much to be driving after. You have never even considered doing that before. Why that night?" Teeth cut the inside of her cheek, hot copper filled her mouth.

Emma chewed a bottom lip. "You were too tired to poof home at the vault and I wanted to come get you. I needed your eyes, your forgiveness and I couldn't get my words out. I wanted to save the day too, after I was such an ass. I rushed in, didn't think."

There was much more unsaid between words and lips pursed. "Our first rule, say it for me now."

"Safety first and then communicate."

A nod. "Why do we have that rule?"

Emma winced. "My hero complex and because I can't always say what I feel, but I felt awful about earlier that day and I needed to see you and I couldn't explain it to you on the phone..."

"That is why I put communicative second to safety because I know how hard explaining your thinking can be at times or your feelings. I can almost always tell what you are feeling by your eyes, Emma." Forcing back her sputtering tone with a deep breath. "If you could not tell me on the phone, you could have walked, called a cab, a friend, even skyped or poofed to me or taken a picture to text so I could see your eyes and help you find your words." Tears welled. "Instead, you chose to get in a 1000 pound machine and drive impaired... You almost died, Emma."

Stomach sounded in throat. "But you called me and after what I did... Words fell away.

Wiping spilled salt. "I called you instead of anyone else because I knew you didn't want anyone getting wind of the spell we are doing or why I was spending so much time at the vault. I was hesitant to even ask you to come get me because I thought you might have gone drinking. I never thought you would get in a vehicle after doing such. You never have before and sworn to me you never would or I would have yanked you from the bug so fast that night your head would still be spinning." A shudder. "But when you said yes on the phone and showed up in the bug I didn't..."

"You do and it cannot just come from me, no matter how much you may need that to be the case. We need help on this one." Heart pinching when that face crumbled. "Professional help, Emma. I know you don't like the idea, but you almost lost your life and our son... Our son almost lost one of his mothers." Bile rising at the hard truth needing said. "It could have been both and I refuse to allow that to happen."

"I'll go see Archie and I promise I'll never have another sip of alcohol again." Eager and heartfelt.

"It is more than the alcohol Emma and that promise, sincere as it is, is not one you can make right now." Pulling her girl into arms. "We will get you there, but that will take time and it will not be an easy road. There will be slips and I will be there to help you stand up again when you have them, I promise." Knowing the thought running under curls as her eyes welled. "Alcohol is but a small factor that influenced the accident, but it is not the root cause. Why you pushed too much, why that voice drove you to run, and why you got behind the wheel to begin with are the questions we need to dig into."

In order to release the pain they had to acknowledge the source, like breathing underwater,
unnatural until the gills had all along started working.

Emma nodded as crying took over for both of them. Pale fingers called Archie an hour later setting an appointment the next day. That evening they talked once more, regrouping with a meal and a long rest. It was then that her girl found the beginnings of absolution as the roots of what they were to each other became redefined. Together and whole again on that same chaise under a firm hand, the sting of a wooden spoon, and brown eyes holding a lingering promise.

A/N – Whew! Thoughts?

Next Time – Resolution from demons. Emma accepts what she’s been denying and healing comes full circle for both of them.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A/N – Resolution for them. New character introduction in a flashback toward the end. Enjoy! Fan art on my Tumblr and end of chapter. Thanks to Wannabebarbie for the idea - you know which one *winks*

The young teenager slept through lunch and woke late afternoon. The sun was low in the sky when Emma checked through the heavy drapes and she swallowed hard as words from earlier rebounded in her chest. Sleep had lifted the blind fuzz of exhaustion from her brain and shifted her mindset as the Queen said it would. She felt ready to attempt to explain her feelings. Emma searched the downstairs, finding the brunette in the Study. She knocked twice and receiving a welcoming wave stepped onto the room.

“Hi.” Short and sweet.

“Hello there, feeling better I take it?” Regina peered over the rim of dark glasses, now slipping them off as the girl approached and sunk down in a chair opposite the desk.

“Yes, thanks.” Mixed blonde trailed a finger over the edge of the gleaming wood in front of her testing for any sharpness. “I’m ready to try talking again please… if you are, I mean.”

“I am.” The Queen stood and rounded the desk, leaning against it with her arms crossed near her charge. “Before we do, I will give you fair warning now that you are rested and the line is clear for you that any sass or attitude from this point on will not be tolerated, nor will any more misbehavior.” Firm, but considerate as she explained her expectations, wanting Emma to be clear that her limit for such had been maxed out from the last two days.

Shrinking, but grateful for the warning. “I’m sorry. Really. I didn’t realize how much I was… I over did it, huh?” Biting lips.

An eyebrow arched. “Quite my dear.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Good girl.” Standing and offering a hand. “I think this conversation might best be had over some hot coco. I started some, thinking you’d be up soon. How does that sound?”

Emma gladly accepted the opening with the warm hand and trying a smile. “Great.”

Once in the kitchen two mugs were placed on the counter. Keeper set about stirring the promised drink over the stove as Emma watched. Easing in, Regina approached what she needed to know before choosing the direction of the conversation they needed to have.

“I asked you if you had a bad dream earlier. Was I correct?”

“Yeah.” Mumbled, but trying harder when there was a patient pause between them. “Yes, Ma’am.”

The Queen let the lack of detail go for the moment in exchange for that respect, one closer to the other affection she was used to, as she added a dusting of cinnamon to the mixture. They still needed to discuss the lack of its use, but first. “What is going through your mind, sweet one?”

Teeth pulled at cuticles as green eyes watched liquid chocolate poured into her favorite yellow mug. “When we were in the car outside of Gold’s yesterday and you were trying to find your headache medicine I wondered…” Pausing as the mug was placed before her and a gentle hand pulled fingers from an abusing mouth.

“You wondered…?” Regina redirected and sipped the coco. She wasn’t a fan of sweet drinks, but her girl always delighted when she shared in this treat, claiming it tasted better together.

“What you would… how much….” Dropping head in hands, Emma became frustrated as words tangled, but tension left her shoulders when a hand began massaging the back of her neck.
“You are doing fine. Try again for me.”

A nod. “What would it take for us… not to be us anymore?” Emma sucked her lower lip at the quiet connecting them. Eyes peering left through her lashes. Her Keeper’s loving eyes gave her bravery. “I don’t mean I want anything to happen or change… ever, but I need to know what your final line is. The end of what we are to each other.” The edge of the cliff from her dream rimmed her vision.

Searching wide open green. “You had that dream again last night, didn’t you baby.” Not a question as Regina tamed an unruly blonde curl to the side. “That is what this whole upset has been about then. How far is too far to push me and your fear of being sent away.” Worry from the last few days leaving in the clarity of understanding.

“She’s too close, I need to make her mind up.” Emma hissed with fear. “I want to show her I could care less.” Regina’s eyes found one that was already grass green. “You had that dream again last night, didn’t you baby.” Not a question as Regina tamed an unruly blonde curl to the side. “That is what this whole upset has been about then. How far is too far to push me and your fear of being sent away.” Worry from the last few days leaving in the clarity of understanding.

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“The Queen turned in seat, one hand taking Emma’s and the other lifting a wobbly chin. “If you hear one thing loud and clear today let it be this… Ah, ah, ah, look at me.” Waiting for green eyes. “I love you unconditionally Emma Swan Mills and there is nothing you could do or say to change that. No end or final line to my love for you, all of you. What we have together, us as a family, is forever.” She bent to kiss a now wet cheek.

Relief. “I’m so sorry.” A whisper. “For my attitude, whining, the shop… everything.” Emma leaned forward in full acceptance of that reassurance, wrapping her arms around her Keeper’s waist. For the first time this part of her gave into the complete solace of those arms.

“Thank you baby.”

After a long moment, Emma tilted her chin up meeting promising eyes. “Am I still grounded?”

“Yes.” Cupping a pale cheek with a raised brow. “Nice try though.”

“I had to ask.” Smiling sweetly.

Returning the grin, smooth hands traveled through blonde curls. “I knew that was coming.” More seriously. “I will never hold you too tightly, but I will also never "I you go so far that I cannot pull you back. We will make mistakes and we will come back from them together. Regardless, my love for you is a constant you can always count on.”

Emma sat in the weight of that promise, beginning to sip the coco, sweet warmth filling more than her stomach. “I’m actually glad we are staying home tonight. What you planned sounds perfect.”

Deciding to take a break from the last things that needed discussing, Emma’s lack of her title, she kissed the girl’s forehead. “Speaking of which, I should order our pizza. Go pick out a game or two you’d like to play.” Palming her buzzing cell phone and frowning at the screen as Emma slipped off down the hall. The doorbell ringing drew her away from a text feed flashing and she moved to the foyer to answer it.

A few minutes later Emma waltzed back into the kitchen. “I want to play Checkers and…” Emma trailed off not seeing the Queen and hesitated when she heard muffled voices in the foyer. Biting her lip, she peeked around the corner, her motion caught the start of a concerned question in brown eyes looking her way and a matching set of confused green ones not her own.

“Come here.” Regina beckoned Emma over to where she stood by the front door with Snow, waiting until the girl was close before continuing. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

A wince, action from earlier this morning hit Emma’s chest like a freight train she forgot was coming. “I told you the truth about the text message.” Shifting foot to foot.

“The truth or a manipulative version of it to get your way?” Hands found hips when the cyclone Emma was began spinning again and when the girl said nothing, adding. “Well?”

Snow tried not to stare at the young teenager her daughter was. David had told her, but she’d yet to see this version for herself. She looked between her blushing daughter and an austere Queen, knowing enough about their relationship to understand Emma had clearly done something she shouldn’t of. Wanting to respect their privacy, especially since she had made some kind of peace at Christmas with Regina and headway with Emma she leaned towards the door.

“If now is not a good time, I can come back later.”
Regina moved eyes to Snow and nodded apologetically. “That would be best—”

“Stay!” Emma blurted. The second Snow left she’d be in trouble and she had no desire to face the disappointed look she had coming. “I mean you are here already.”

The pixie haired woman caught her daughter’s obvious avoidance. She would not step in between them, but she would gently share her thoughts. “I’m getting the sense that this was not a good time for us to talk about my news and that you knew that before you had Regina text me on your behalf to meet at here tonight at 5:00.” Uncertain, but wanting to be honest. “You didn’t mean to, I’m sure, but that hurts my feelings Emma.”

Brown eyes closed for a long moment and opened finding a guilty pair. “So that is what the cryptic message was.” She’d been hoping there was some mix up, not deliberateness on Emma’s behalf.

Pale hands went up. “In my defense I was super annoyed and really tired and I didn’t…” The brief flash of hurt crossing Regina’s face before the mask returned was enough to shut down that rant. Shoulders dropped and Emma toed the tile as her fingers twisted her PJ top into a wrinkled mess. “I’m sorry?”

Red lips set in a firm line and directed her next words to the Princess. “It has been a very long week with the storm and all. Emma knew we were to have a quiet day at home when she asked me to send that message, which I thought to mean a meeting next week, not today. I am not up to code on the new lingo, it seems, and I was unaware of what she was inferring.”

“You owe Snow an apology.”

“Apology?”

“I’m sorry for inviting you when I knew it wasn’t a good time. You’re right I really didn’t mean to hurt your feelings or anything like that. I was wrong.”

Saying it out loud made her actions blatant. She’d used Snow and the woman’s eagerness to spend time with her as an excuse to get her way. Not to mention the fast one she pulled on M—. The weight was too much just then and a tear leaked. Looking up into russet eyes and begging with hers was enough to get her excused.

Firm. “Go on into the Study and wait for me.”

Emma paled. To the Study, to wait, and not her room where she’d hoped. The words said from earlier after she’d woken up came rushing back. “But M—Gina.” Losing her voice when she got the no nonsense look, she forced feet to move in the requested direction.

Regina waited until the blonde was around the corner before giving her attention and a tight smile to Snow who appeared to be trying to form her next words.

“Looks like you two have a lot to talk about?” Snow ventured carefully on new territory, not missing Emma’s less than eager drudge to the Study and was surprised that it didn’t concern her.

“Looks like you too have a lot to talk about?” Snow ventured carefully on new territory, not missing Emma’s less than eager drudge to the Study and was surprised that it didn’t concern her.

“Do. Like I said, it has been a very long week. Emma has had a rough go of it.” She watched as the woman before her rubbed hands over her jacket, a motion that her girl often mimicked when something wanted to be said, but unsure of the response it would yield. “What is on your mind Snow?”

Blinking rapidly as words tumbled out. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about you two and this whole thing recently and I realize how far Emma has come. With you, with… this.” A pointed chin tilted to the side. “She seems happier and even healthier in the last few years.” Her hands found her stomach. “I will always want to have the… that special closeness you have with her, but I also know I won’t, not in that way exactly and I’m learning to be okay with that.”

Whatever Regina had been expecting it was not those words. She was taken aback by the sudden openness. The acceptance being offered would not come freely and she wondered the price, knowing she would strive to pay it if it meant peace for Emma. Hopefully, for all of them.
"That is a very kind thing to say, especially after everything we have been through. We've discussed it before, but I will say it again. It is not my intention to keep Emma from you or David."

Green eyes filled, more than hormones getting the best of her. "There is a lot her and I still need to heal and I'm trying. She is too." Looking away, gathering the courage to let go. "Just do one thing for me, please. Keep doing what you're doing for Emma. Give her the absolute best you are. She deserves it."

Easy and simple. "I promise I am and will continue to do so."

"Gina?" A call from another room. "I think I'm getting gray hair waiting in here."

Heart full. "I'll be there in a moment Emma. Have some patience please." Rolling her eyes with a shake of her head. Even in trouble her girl couldn't help trying to be funny.

Snow smirked, wiping her eye. "She's a pistol at this age."

"That she is." A soft smile.

"I should get going. Happy New Year Regina." Turning to leave.

"We will make it a good one, for Emma. And Snow?" Waiting until their eyes met. "She needs all of us."

Grateful. Hope. Or something of a mix saturated the air they breathed.

Regina saw Snow out and leaned against the door in thought, chest heavy, much as she had done with David several weeks prior. She'd easily keep her word to Snow and slowly she let her mind muse over the time home since the spell. Through everything she'd been doing her best and realized Emma might need that to look a little different than she'd been going about things, especially the polar extreme version sitting in the next room.

Corralling Emma when she was an adult or six came naturally by now. She was beginning to see that the teenage version needed every bit of the same expectations and follow through that the other ages did. All were Emma at the core; same ember, spark, and fire that begged to burn, but needed to be contained to do so without destroying itself like it once nearly did. Her head rolled forward and took the deepest breath she could. Regina knew Emma was in such a space that she willingly wouldn't make the choice that needed making.

It was time for the tough part of love.

____________

In the Study the young teen sat on the couch bouncing her knee growing anxious the longer she was left waiting. Emma palmed her face and didn't look up when she heard the front door close. It was a few minutes more before the one to the Study did the same. She braved eyes upwards, teeth catching her bottom lip at the grave look coming her way, one that also held something else she couldn't identify.

Stomach fluttered as dark eyes swept over her, interrupting crossed thoughts. 'She looks so... This is gonna suck...'

"What do you have to say for yourself, young lady?" Regina asked directly, voice firm, as she settled in the middle of the couch hip to hip with the fidgeting girl. Well done with distance.

Emma winced. She hadn't been on the receiving end of that tone in a very long while. Not since the last time she'd completely blown up their rules, most of them anyway. Regina had pulled her back from the edge of the abyss when she had throw them both off of it in her own brass way. The Queen had that same set about the jaw now as had then. She squirmed. Little by little she'd been letting herself give into old habits, ones that hurt more than her. Thoughts were broken when the tone came again, not a request, when she hadn't responded.

"Emma."

"I wasn't thinking this morning and then I did, too much, and my mouth got ahead of my mind and by then it was too late." She rubbed sweaty palms on plaid cotton pants and stopped when another covered her own.
“It is never too late to tell me anything or to tell me the truth.”

“But it was the truth.” Emma stammered, blushing when she knew it really hadn’t been.

Thumb rolled softly over tense pale knuckles in hand. “If you honestly believe that then we need to have a long discussion on what being truthful means, but I think you already well know the difference. Isn’t that correct Emma?”

Heat stung behind green windows. Quiet. “Yes.”

“You manipulated words and their meaning, or rather misused them. In doing so you took advantage of my ignorance to get your way. That is not only disrespectful to me and our relationship, but dishonest and self centered. Snow’s feelings also got hurt in the process.” She took a deep breath to soften her next words. “And so did mine.” Then regained her former tone. “What part of that sounds acceptable to you?”

“None of it, but… it was just a text.” Trying to hide, but the hand now cupping her chin wouldn’t let her.

“On its own this situation may not seem like a big deal, but coupled with your behavior from the last few days and even weeks, there is no doubt in my mind that you need me to hold you accountable in a bit of a different way than I have been approaching things lately with you this size. I’ve been considerate and have given you chance upon chance to make adjustments. I’ve given you plenty of choices and time to make better ones when you’ve pushed back.” Regina watched green eyes start to fill, but kept her resolve. “You are within the beginnings of a self destructive cycle. I know exactly where this path goes Emma and I refuse to let you go running down it because I love you. Just like I belong to you, you also belong to me. And sometimes, like now, I have to make the tough calls when you are unable to.”

“What’s that mean?” Stalling as her toes curled.

Red parted after a long pause of certainty. “It means Emma, in part and for today, that you have some serious thinking to do and after, a much needed reminder over my knee. For tomorrow we will get to that then.”

“You don’t have to… Noo Ginaaa.” Deflecting and then repeating for lack of something better. “It was just a text.” It was so much more than that though and guts clenching, she knew it.

Regina moved them forward. “What did you hope to gain from your choice earlier?”

“Time out of the house after Snow dropped the baby bomb, maybe at the potluck if she and I both wanted to go and she was here already.” Bitterness over her actions filled Emma’s mouth. “I was upset when you said we weren’t going and I know I said I didn’t want to go last week, but that was last week and… I know I’m grounded, but I wanted the voice inside my head to stop, you know the one… and I wanted a distraction. I’m sorry.” Seeing too clearly now what she’d done in the entirety of the last few days. “I don’t want a reminder.” Covering her face.

Love resolute. “That may be, though I did not ask if you did.”

Snapping upright. “Noooo.” Then Emma’s heart moved to her temples. “Ma—Ginnna, I’m saying no.”

“But not your safe word?” Pausing a long moment for allowance as clear recognition came to green eyes. “And even so, as you are right now and per our agreement, your consequence is not your decision. It is mine and you have more than earned a reminder from me young lady. You need one.”

“I don’t want one though.” Arms crossed prepared to fight, but not misuse their safe word. Not again. “You can’t make me.”

Crossing her legs and leaning back, royal hands returned to lap prepared to wait. “This can be as hard or as simple as you choose to make it. I am patient Emma and you know that. You are stubborn and fiercely so, as am I and I’ve years on you in the determination department, especially when it is fueled by my love for you.”

A green tear fell.

Gesturing to the corner. “You need some time to reflect on your choices before we begin.”
Then more. “How long?”

“As long as it takes my sweet one.” Ending on the soft assuring affection that was needed.

Emma’s heart skipped, used to a set time and wondered what that meant. “I’m sorry though.” Standing and trying to stall the inevitable.

“Those words have been said a lot lately.” Heart pinching as it had before to say something other than what she had to. For both of them. “Now it is time to show me. Go on.”

Toes quietly touched the wall, scrunching within socks for several minutes before her mind focused on the task she’d been set. Emma could hear time passing; breathing and a heartbeat, no two, meshing with the ticking clock on the mantle. Time drug her mind in slow circles, but the longer she stood there the clearer it became. She would be looking at two joined walls until she accepted that this time, this one time, what was going to happen was not her choice. Right now, until she grew, Regina would put her on the right side of the line she’d crossed no matter how much fight she put up doing it or how much she didn’t want it to happen.

Need took up arms against want to battle in brain; her usual warring cocktail.

Want was a strange and dangerous word—to crave, desire, or wish for something to happen or not. It was also a secondary expression, one that followed the first spoken between the blink of a green eye. When she’d said I don’t want, what she’d been saying was I do need. Realizing then too what else her Keeper was expecting of her, pulse quickened. She would have to say what she needed clearly without prompting or redirecting from red lips, simply of her accord. That was not going to be easy.

And even if she did or didn’t say her truth when she stepped from the corner, it was still going to happen.

Given her size she could safe word, they would pause so she could step aside, process, but they would resume once she had, of that Emma had no doubt because her Keeper had promised they would at her own insistence and had promised something else a long time ago. She’d asked for this, wanted and needed the absolute loving direction only Regina had been able to give her. The battle of the two words ached between muscle and blood in her chest. Admitting her need would mean accepting that she’d been deceptive, hurt the one she loved, and had in fact been starting to spiral into self ruin.

Again.

Once in their other spelled life when she’d ran away the first time from Regina, a time without her memories of who and what held her leash, Ruby told her something she’d never forgotten. The words said in the diner before Regina came to claim her little running feet misted over her now, a soothing balm on the cut of her mind.

’If there is one thing I know about the Mayor is that she would go to the moon and back for you. She chose you. That is so incredibly special and unconditional love at its’ finest.’

At the time her little mind hadn’t known and eyes didn’t see the love in brown ones that had come for her. But her heart had felt it, whispered against the grain of doubt. A promise made in this life, to help her stand up every time she slipped, had transcended to another reality and had been carefully kept. She closed her eyes forcing them inward as more tears fell and then sudden, took a stolen glance over her shoulder. Emma’s head whipped right back around when dark brows rose with a question among them. Not ready to answer with her truth yet, she sighed shifting from foot to foot.

Being honest with her heart was a hard thing at times and now more so as she realized how her actions hurt others and how badly she needed a reset. Dwelling there made time slow down. How long she’d been standing here, she couldn’t tell. And it didn’t matter. What did, she knew now, is what she’d unconsiously been wanting the last few days and her actions further exposed that want as a need. Her mouth couldn’t say it and she wondered if a better word was wouldn’t. Sighing as that awareness took hold, feet twitched. There was only one way forward and she would do it with truth on her lips. She owed herself, Regina and the very fiber of their relationship that much.

Turning, she found perceptive eyes holding her.

“I…”

Regina studied that clear gaze for a moment and held out her hand, accepting Emma’s willingness, but not speaking at the pause.

Taking the open offer with a deep breath. “I was manipulative and hurt your feelings and Snow’s by doing so.” Her stomach loosened as she began to explain why she was standing on the right
side of a knee. “I feel all messed up inside ’cause of it and you taught me to be truthful, to not run, and I know I shouldn’t try to use others or miss use words to get what I want. You’re right too, I’ve been starting to be self destructive and… ”

Waiting.

A hesitant green blink of acknowledgment. “I need you to…” Cheeks flamed. “I need a reminder please.” A deep breath. “And I know it’s not my choice right now.”

Thumbs rubbed circles on white knuckles. “That was a hard thing for you to admit and I’m proud of you for being honest about that, not only with yourself but me.” That specific praise earned her a smile in return, but one that didn’t quite reach green eyes.

Looking at their hands, Emma moved hers so they were palm to palm. “I hate it sometimes that I need it to feel better and to put me on the right path. I still don’t want one.” A hint of whine. Then her eyes moved into the russet depths of absolution that she just realized had been resting there since the door of the Study had closed on them. She’d already been forgiven. Feet took a step closer. “But I won’t fight you.”

Acceptance.

With that finality Regina guided Emma over her lap, taking her time to adjust the girl forward so toes did not brush the floor. Securing her left arm around a slim waist she got right to the task at hand and hers ignited firmly with the presented backside six times on alternate cheeks before pausing. Fingers hooked inside an elastic band, drawing plaid PJ pants to mid thigh. Emma squirmed, breathless after that introduction and dropped her head as the next set of six started. Silent crying began halfway through, ending with a whimper as another pause exposed warm skin to cool air. She threw a hand back only to have it taken and clasped against her lower back. A small and secure comfort.

“Nooooo.” Now that Emma was on the cusp of letting go, she denied what she needed. She always did, but she was pulled from that quandary when the hand holding hers squeezed with reassurance as another began stroking her hair.

“Do I have your full attention?”

Nodding and sniffles.

“Use your words Emma.”

Another sniff and finally settling on what felt right; what she wanted, needed, and what this side of her fully accepted. “Yesss M-mama.”

Regina closed her eyes, water pushing to spill. There it was and the first time affection from that mouth another gift. “Look at me.” When she had wet emeralds. “Yes I am, always no matter how much you push, how far you run, or how stubborn you are. Do you understand me?”

“Yes Mama.” Easier, fluid now.

“I have been very patient with your misbehavior lately because of how hard coming home has been on you, and I’m realizing I’ve been inconsistent somewhat with my expectations of you, you as you are now mostly.”

As she reflected out loud, she felt Emma begin to relax under her hands and that admission. Within her defined boarders of patience and understanding, her girl had begun to run hard against the fence of them. Now they were here where neither one enjoyed being, but the need for balance won out as it always did. It had begun to become clear to her what Emma, all parts, needed during the lead and follow chore segment she’d planned that day; a set schedule and consistent expectations without wiggle room for mischief. Emma thrived under those two things. Her girl’s adept response during, after, and now further confirmed what had to be done going forward.

“It is time we revisit some ground rules and get you back into a solid routine like we had before the spell and during. We will talk more tomorrow about those rules and what that routine looks like with our current situation and I have something to give you that will support us greatly with that. For now, we will finish up this lesson and start fresh.”

Emma melted in receipt, grateful in the certainty and the even the hand that brought it. Sting mixing with another set of six washed her clean. The last set, with one extra to the crease of each thigh left her wrung out. Twice her current age, no more, no less and just what she needed.

Skin was as pink as her heart was light.
Emma lay over that lap, grounding the base of the tornado that had twisted her up, quieting the fuel of a dark voice to silence. When cries turned to sniffles several minutes later she felt her clothing righted. Hands helped her stand, only she fell into Regina instead, sitting where she’d just found peace. Curling her frame in that lap, she tuck her face into dark hair content to be held. She concentrated on feeling the strength and security wrapped around her, of what it meant and would continue to mean. Another tear rolled, one down a tan cheek. Emma felt it fall, watching as it flowered on a knee and knew it was for her not because of her and that made all the difference in her heart.

“I love you baby.”

“Love you more Mama.”

Regina smiled. “Shall we call it even?”

“Please and thank you and everything in between.” The knowing tingling sensation rippled through Emma causing her to shrink to her pint size. A little smile formed when another kiss on her head came, happy to rest to a simpler space for the moment. “Can we still have pizza?”

A deep laugh came forth and Regina summoned tissues to wipe Emma’s cheeks and her own. “Of course. Your misadventure or your size, do not change the plans we already have. What games did you pick out?”

“Checkers and Sorry.” Emma took another tissue, coming away from the comfort of her Keeper’s neck and blew her nose, shuffling with a sparkle in eye. “The last one seemed fitting.”

“Mmmhmm.” Agreeing and patting the little girl’s outer hip once, a silent signal for Emma to stand. “After I order dinner, let’s get you cleaned up.” Then adding to cause the smile she knew it would. “I’d still love to see you wear the new PJ set I got you.”

Emma narrowed her eyes, corners of her mouth fought not to turn up at how comical that would be. It had been the first present she’d opened Christmas morning and the six year old she’d been even scoffed at the joke wrapped in tissue paper while everyone bust a gut at The Christmas Story pink bunny PJs, though these were thankfully yellow, in the box. It was Emma’s favorite holiday movie and they’d often joked about the antics of the main character this time of year.

“I’m sure you would.” Not agreeing or disagreeing, but little smile dimples finally showing.

“At least be a good sport and try them on for me. You grew before you could put them on properly last time.”

Emma relented, it had been a funny present and she’d never admit that they were kind of cute, just barely. “Fine, but then they come right off and I’m n-e-v-e-r wearing them again, deal?”

“Deal. Meet me upstairs.” Regina ordered their usual pizza as little feet left the room.

Twenty minutes later she finished the second French braid on a damp blonde head and sent Emma to change. She stopped abruptly at the door to the lavender room a few minutes later. Her hand was quick to cover an earsplitting smile as she watched Emma bouncing in front of the long mirror, bunny ears on the hood of the PJs and the footed slippers flapping in unison.

Too freaking adorable for words.

Regina pulled her phone from pocket and caught Emma mid bounce before the Savior realized she was standing there.

“Hey! No fair!” Emma yanked off the hood and began fumbling with the zipper at her throat.

“Way fair. I have a right to capture your cute moments.” She put the phone away and tried to school her humor, red lips twitching to laugh again. “Here, let me help you.” Moving to assist little fingers and finding ribs to tickle instead.

“Ahhhhhh! Mama!” A high pitched giggle burst.

“Always.” Wholly content with a squealing happy girl in arms.
Later that night they rang in the New Year early with sparkling cider and pizza. Emma won both games of Sorry and almost beat the Queen at Checkers before they called a tie on their final round. Well before 8:00 rolled around Emma was fast asleep, little body tuckered out from the day. After, Regina went to the privacy of her room to make a phone call.

Within two rings Snow’s voice picked up, the noise of the diner festivities in the background.

“Regina, hi… is Emma okay?”

“She is fine, sleeping actually and six at the moment. I know now is probably not the best time, but I need your help with something for Emma. It’s time sensitive and I have most of it worked out, but I need you to ask a few questions before I speak with her in the morning. Are you able to talk for a bit?”

A pause then an elated answer at being included in something for her daughter. “Of course, let me step outside…”

They ended up talking for close to an hour, ironing out details Regina had wondered over. She hung up satisfied her plan for Emma would work and grateful for Snow’s connections to help with them. She stared at her phone for a long moment wanting to dial one more number she had deleted ages ago.

The Principal of the Storybrooke Primary School would be a good ally to have, but her relationship with that woman was complicated at best. They had been more than civil in passing around town for years, but now she would need to reopen that door to a working relationship at the least. But it never was that simple with the tall leggy blue eyed woman. With a sigh as the face of the Dragon crossed her mind Regina felt her heart lift in beat. Maleficent always had that affect on her, even when they had been at odds.

She had ended the relationship gently and with great regret, not yet ready at the time to open her heart to the romantic side of love. They had tried and she had failed. Now with Daniel’s memories gone and grief finally dealt with in full of his passing she had closure she never thought she would get. Mal would sense the difference in her. The Dragon was perceptive that way. Still it was a door she had to open for her plan for Emma to work as it needed to. Mal would be protective of the little Savior, extra eyes would keep watch for any foul play from Gold least he get brass balls and try something.

Heading to the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her face and let it run on her hands to ground a wandering mind. As she finished her night time routine and slipped beneath the sheets she hoped Emma would be receptive to the discussion they needed to have the next day. Drifting still further in the cool caress of darkness, Regina stared at the ceiling of the past behind closed lids…

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Flashback - Over Two & a Half Years Ago… Before the Do Over Spell & the Accident

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Regina thumbed the empty crystal tumbler. Part of her wanted to throw it against the wall. Another part wanted to refill it a second time, but one was her limit, frustrated that neither was an option. Sighing at the responsible thought, she set the glass aside next to its half full mate on the coffee table of the Study. The woman on the other end of the couch stirred, long legs crossing, tip of an open toed pump brushed against closed red leather ones.

Braving what had to be said, or so she thought, Regina spoke amid the crackling logs in the hearth. “I need this to end.”

Hooded sapphire eyes embraced the brewing Queen. “Need or want Regina?” Mal reached for her drink, crystal in hand as clear as her intent.

“Don’t play word games with me.” Wet peat smoked, heart hid from view.

Assuring spoke, a silk fan for flames trying to rise. “I’m doing nothing of the kind. You’re scared and that’s okay.”

“I know what I am and that, dear, is not it.”

Mal shook her head, setting down a glass in favor of leaning forward, elbows on knees as she studied the brunette. “You can fool yourself, but not me. I know you too well.

Agreeing with a nod. “That is exactly why we cannot do this.”
"You mean why you can't do this."

Wincing whisper. "Stop it."

"I will not." Mal took up the Queen's hand. "I love you and I know you love me too, even if you can't say it yet. We've come further than hiding in the subject of a sentence. So be the subject of yours and tell me what you really need."

Full and cracking in chest. "I need time... And respect that you will let me go because I'm asking you to." Brown memorized blue within a blink, repetitious photograph of memory already housed in heart.

"There it is." Cupping a tan cheek as tears began to fall for both of them. "I'll always respect what you need Regina." With a final squeeze Mal need, kissing the palm of a tan hand. "Even if it is not something you want." She left quietly.

Door clicking closed shifted a lock in mind as somber Queen returned eyes to the fire. Heavy lungs drew a shuddered breath. The room grew cold before she realized time had passed. Magic stoked the grate anew, but warmth was slow to return. Barely hearing a soft tapping on the Study door, she granted entrance without turning around. Spirit grave and with raw eyes she tried to smile as Emma carefully settled at the end of the couch, but failed.

Tender. "You okay Gina?"

"No." Chewing on truth both tough and brittle.

Emma set the notebook she'd spent the last few hours trying to write in aside. Pen rolled to the floor, splitting ears in the silence. She flinched. Rubbing hands on jeans, she didn't know what to say to soothe that broken voice. She suspected, but wasn't sure of the root for the exposed nerve in the room. "I saw Mal leave a few hours ago and I just wanted check in and go over some of the writing you asked me to do."

Dark mirrors turned to green moss, forcing reassurance. "Tomorrow, my girl, we will."

Emma shifted closer, reaching for a hand to give the comfort she was often given by the same one in her palm. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Tears slipped again, but were hastily brushed away. "There is nothing new to say. I'm not able to be an equal in a romantic relationship right now and my failing is not fair to Mal when she has been nothing but perfect to me and to you. I broke it off."

Brown found the fire as green did in further reflection. A habit Regina was comforted to see her girl was slowly starting to get used to. Mal accepted Emma's claim and the place their dynamic had within a royal heart, never infringing on their time or space when it was requested should Emma need certain attentions. She had hoped to be able to nurture the bud of love, but once again she let her own past losses get in the way.

It was complicated, but the liquid love story of the last five months had worked between Dragon and Queen. She had anticipated some kind of jealousy on Emma's part since their time had become shared with Mal, but there was not a view of the green eyed monster to be had. The Savior was supportive. Regina was the vertex in the V of the relationship. Emma and the Dragon shared a friendship and liked each other as such. It was unconventional, could have been messy, but wasn't in the least. Fluid and easy scared her, but not for all the reasons Mal suspected.

Regina had never been a runner, not like Emma, but tonight she had run from the arms that remained open. Kind, but firm she had tried to be. Mal accepted with grace and understanding she didn't feel she deserved. But Mal was Mal. Sighing again she rubbed circles on the pale hand in hers.

"I don't expect Mal will be anything less than kind going forward. She is not one to stew in heartache or loose ends." Wanting to assure Emma that the friendship shared with the Dragon would likely go unaffected.

"'S'ok. I didn't think she'd be weird about it, just sad, like you." Curling up alongside the Queen, she rested her forehead on a shoulder. Quiet and full of the deference needed. "I'm so sorry Gina."

"Me too." Brown closed against the light. "Me too."
A/N – Sooooo insight into Regina’s complicated heart, past relationship and a hint of what’s to come. More little Emma in next chapter. Thanks for reading!

Next time – Regina’s spell for Emma is revealed and what it means going forward. A new direction for their life is discussed and a dinner invitation at the loft upon Snow’s news is accepted.

“OpenHelper, and I KNOW YOU LOVE ME... EVEN IF YOU CAN’T SAY IT YET.”
Chapter 22

A/N – So I am going to be winding down this story. Resolution to Emma’s shifts, Regina’s magic and memories, Belle/Ruby side plot, Gold and the oath, some more Snow drama but wrap up in general with that plot line and hints of new DragonQueen to come. Probably 8-10 chapters depending how I chunk it. I have finished writing this story, but need to edit everything.

The small heart charm with the initials ESM engraved in the center sparkled when a still six year old hand held it up to the light. Silver held the faintest purple glow at a certain angle. “It’s beautiful.” In awe of the gesture. “How come?” Wondering why she was being given a gift in the middle of a Sunday afternoon.

They were in the lavender room sitting on the bed where Emma had been sent to clean up a Lego mess made earlier that day. The gift box had been pulled out of a hiding place between a pile of clean clothes Regina had entered with in a basket a few moments ago.

“This is actually a late Christmas present and it wasn’t ready until this morning.” Regina folded her hands, watching Emma take in the gift. “It is also what I mentioned I would give you yesterday that will help with getting you into a routine again, one that is predictable and will give you the certainty you need to thrive.”

“I’ve been doing kinda okay, though… mostly.” Still confused, but sensing she wouldn’t be for long.

“But not as well as you could be. This will help with that significantly.”

“How will this make things any more …?” Thoughts immediately going to her biggest problem of the random shrinking and growing. Then they exploded. “Is it… did you… the potion? Did Mr. Gold… Mama?” Breath quickening with hope and slowing as a red smile grew.

“I found another way and it is not perfect, but it is as close as I am able to get at the moment.” At the eager look Regina began to explain. “Our bodies have rhythms they need to maintain to remain healthy and balanced. There is a time to wake and sleep, or eat and drink as examples. A magical body is no different and yours, because of the tether breaking that kept you an adult, has been trying to find a new rhythm with all the shifting back and forth.” She waved a hand summoning a notebook and opened it for little eyes to take it. Lines were filled with dates, times, and notes. “I’ve been keeping track of all the times you shrink and grow and why I think it might have occurred.”

Dawning filled Emma’s face. “You were looking for patterns. That’s…” Shaking her head. “I didn’t think to do that.”

Nodding. “A few patterns became clear to me. Shifts seem to happen mostly when you sleep and when that happens you tend to remain that size for about two and a half to three days before sleep causes another shift. The shifts also occur when you experience an extreme range of emotions rather quickly. Like yesterday after your reminder.”

“Or when I got upset at Town Hall that time when Will asked if I was still his boss if I was this size.” Chiming in as it began to make sense why she was changing so much.

“And both patterns are extremely common with shape-shifters, though not all of them, the Werewolf being the exception. They only change with the moon. This seems to be a category you now have fallen into.” Watching as the child’s head spun for a moment and then clear eyes found hers.

Emma blinked hard. “I’m a shape-shifter like Ruby?”

“In a way like Ruby, yes. She is a Werewolf whose magical rhythms fall in time with the full moon.” An elegant hand took the charm and clipped it onto the charm bracelet. “Since your magical rhythm seems to come in threes, every third day you will take this off at night before bed to allow for a shift to happen. And how you shift will also regulate; since you are six now the next shift will be back to your adult form, then thirteen and then six and so on. When you wake after a shift you will clip the charm back on. It will keep you your current size until you remove it to allow for another shift. That will give you certainty in what three days will hold between shifts because the charm also acts as a suppressant and will block any attempted shifts caused by emotions. Growing or shrinking will happen only when you sleep. It doesn’t give you the ability to shift at will, but——”
“It gives me more control than I have.” Emma’s eyes blurred with relief and more wonder. “How come I can’t just leave it on when I’m in any one form all the time? What would happen?”

“There would be a build of magic, a sickness of sorts and if you think your shifts are random now they would be exponentially more frequent if blocked for longer than your magical rhythm allows once it’s been regulated. I have not found a way around that yet, though I will keep working on it.”

“How did you do this with your magic the way it is?” Then it dawned. “That’s why you’ve been so tired the last few weeks, huh? You’ve been doing this in stages.” Little blonde moved from the head of the bed where she’d been sitting and crawled over to find her spot on a lap.

“Yes, though carefully and not to the point of harm or draining myself too much.” Assuring worried eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I could have helped.”

Regina shook her head. “I wasn’t sure it could be done and I didn’t want to give you false hope until I was sure. Remember when I said that the choices we make affect each other?” Receiving a nod. “You are my responsibility and I take that with the utmost seriousness because it is a gift you’ve given me. I had to be certain before you could know and to do that I needed to test it first. Ruby was a big help with that.”

Something else clicked for Emma. “So that’s why you had Granny watch me earlier this week so you test the spell on Ruby, during the full moon.” Suddenly remembering how bright the sky had been the night Granny stayed over.

“I put a drop on her diner apron and when she changed into her wolf form I tied it to her neck. When dawn came and went, she was still a wolf and we knew it worked. The apron came off and she was in her human form again. And once I knew it worked it had to be absorbed in a symbol that represented you.” Fingering the initials on the charm. “Like the red cloak represented Red, and as the apron now represents Ruby. That took about a week and why you are just now receiving it. Do you have questions about what this means going forward?”

“One question, but I gotta do something first.” Turning, Emma planted a kiss and tight arms around the Queen for a long moment. “Thank you. Those words aren’t enough…” Another kiss, sniffing hard and with wide sparkling eyes. “What does this mean going forward?”

“Funny girl. It means that now that your shifts are predictable that we can plan ahead for them so that life has a pattern for you to count on and that, sweet one, will help keep you out of trouble. We will make a calendar, starting today, of the months ahead so we can easily see the shifts coming.” Regina paused, lifting Emma up to sit back on the bed and handed little hands a pile of socks from the basket to begin sorting before she continued. “That calendar will also allow for others to plan on how best to support you.” She encouraged Emma with a nod to start on the socks, this part of the conversation best had when Emma had something to do fidgeting hands while she did the same.

Emma obeyed the silent request to help and rolled her favorite pair of duck socks into a neat bundle as she’d been taught. “What others? Where?”

“School.”

Emma’s little jaw dropped. “You’re serious? Like for real real?”

“I am. It is a way to ensure a predictable routine for days you are six or thirteen.” Regina moved about the lavender room, putting away laundry as Emma processed her words. “Your child and teen sides need schooling, both academic and magic related. Between that and your Kung-Fu class which will start up next week again now that the holidays are over, will be close enough to our spelled life to bring you that comfort when you are small. The station and being Sheriff will also have some adjustments, but we will get to that in a little bit.” She caught shocked green eyes as she returned to the bed, taking the three different sizes of folded socks in hand.

“How would that work exactly?” Skeptical, but curious.

“I picked Snow’s brain to get a feel for the staff at the school and what challenges we might face.” Watching Emma carefully for a response as she finished putting away socks in the dresser. “It will not be near as complicated as I once thought it might be.”

Wrinkling her nose. “What did she say about my writing thing?”

“I have not mentioned that to her and won’t without you, but the school and your teachers will have to know to ensure your accommodations are provided. I have copies of your IEP and the
diagnosis paperwork in my lock box that came back with us.”

“But how can I even register?”

“Being Mayor gives me the ability to pull some strings as well as Snow working at the school. Between the two of us that is easily taken care of without the usual paperwork needed.” She returned to sit on the bed. “It does mean keeping your name change quiet until I can secure my magic from Gold, least he gets wind of it. Henry, even Paige can know, but no one else for now.” Brain automatically going to Snow’s loose lips. “I can magically remove Mills temporarily from your IEP paperwork to help with that. I’ve also placed an invisibility spell over your initials on the charm, temporary, so only we will see them.”

“That’s good. I’m not ready to share my name yet anyway and as long as it’s just us you say it right, okay?” Realizing she may hear her former name from those lips again if they are in public, but knowing why now would make it easier to hear and to obey.

The Queen smiled, cupping a cheek. “Of course, sweet one.”

Emma leaned into the affection. “It’ll be like last time, starting late in the school year.”

“I imagine it will be like riding a bike; one does not easily forget that skill.”

Green eyes rolled and she flopped back on the bed. “More like a unicycle, at least for my teen part.”

The visual of that made Regina roll her lips in, but she kept assurance in her tone. “Starting mid-year will not be so bad. Technically you’ve been out of school for well over three months, if we count summer break from the spelled reality and the time we have been back. A refresher for your six year size will be good for you.”

Sitting up. “I was almost seven though, when the spell broke. It feels weird when we came back that time rewound for me.”

“Time never moved forward here. We were gone, but a moment. The tether breaking reset that time line for you.”

Little fingers picked at the bedspread until she was handed a shirt to fold. “What about when I’m thirteen?”

“You’ll be in 7th grade and you’ll have similar classes to attend, but with multiple teachers in the Jr. High wing; Math, Science, Writing, English, and an elective.”

The corner of a mouth twitched up. “Please say its art?”

“You may pick between a painting class, or a dra—”

“Drawing.” Smile with all teeth.

“I thought so.” Taking the shirt and adding it to the pile in her hand, Regina put them away in the dresser.

“If I’m only there some of the time and in different grades, what about the homework and everything? I’ll fall behind quickly.”

Regina returned and took Emma to her lap as worry creased a small brow. “In days you attend you’d only be responsible for the work assigned for the time you are there, that includes homework, which would be due when you return the next time you shrink. Teachers would have the calendar of what days to expect you and any assignments or tests would be modified to reflect what you were there for.”

“It’d be like school would be on pause when I’m not there. That’s kind of cool.” Brilliant, actually. Maybe this would work and she felt her heart lift.

They continued to discuss details and the more Emma learned the more she began to accept the idea. She grew elated upon hearing she would be able to drive her yellow bug again, when she was in adult form and patrolled as she used to enjoy doing since her random shrinking wouldn’t be a problem anymore. There would be some changes to her schedule at the station, too. With Will as
an addition the days she was an adult provided the flexibility needed so her Sheriff schedule could match school hours of 8:00-3:30. The calendar would communicate to David and Will so the men could plan around her shifts, but still leave Emma’s role of Sheriff intact. The only thing that Emma was hung up on was going from full time to part time officially on her job title and having Will take on some of the more imperative parts of her job that required more consistent monitoring. 

Little arms crossed. “But that’s my job! I don’t want him doing it.”

“It is still your job, dear heart and no one is taking that from you. We just need to modify how it is done for the time being until we have more choices.” She rubbed Emma’s back. “For this to work the way it needs to, you will have to accept that for now.” Sighing at the events of what may come, her thoughts darkened. ‘Until I get my magic back and can beat Gold at his own game or until how to allow you to shift at will is discovered.’

“I don’t want Will to do my stuff though.” Repeating for comfort when there wasn’t any other option.

“I know, but it cannot be helped right now. We will fix this, until then this is my plan, what I believe is in your best interest to give you the routine and consistency you need. The current rhythm you are in will be for one more day after today since you shifted last evening. That means tomorrow we will spend some of that time getting you ready for school. Tuesday through Thursday you will be an adult and can see if my proposed schedule for the station works for you. If it does not we can talk and adjust it for that side. That choice is yours. Friday your teenage self will start school. That choice is mine.” Waiting a moment as the blonde processed before adding the firm finish Emma needed to move forward. “I am always willing to hear your thoughts now and going forward, but my decision about school, for both of you, is final.”

Emma slouched, dead weight against the Queen. The decision being made for her was mostly a relief and one that made the most sense, even with her one hang up. “I trust you.” She sighed in acceptance. “And I’ll try my best with it.”

“That’s my girl.” Regina praised with a smile. “Now that your routine is settled, I want to revisit a few of our ground rules before we go make lunch.”

Emma looked up with a wrinkled nose. “More rules?”

Shaking her head. “No, not new ones, just a review of some of our basic agreements so you are clear on my expectations of you.”

“Oh.” Squirming as she was reminded of the knowledge that she’d been toeing every rule that they had for the last several weeks.

“Our three main ones specifically. Repeat the first one now for me please.”

“But I know them already.” A tiny pout.

“Rule one.” Catching a pointed chin. “Begin.”

Seeing the serious eye Emma backed down. “Safety first and then communicate.”

“Three examples of when you used that rule correctly, one for each size you’ve been.”

“Like with Jasper and the disposal that one time in our other life… I didn’t reach in myself to get him, I came and got you. The time when I didn’t conjure clothes for myself when I was thirteen and I didn’t have any yet because I didn’t know how to magic them myself… I told you what I needed instead.” Emma wiggled and tucked her chin to chest. “Or when I gave you my car keys at Henry’s graduation when I slipped, but couldn’t verbalize that I did and you knew what to do.”

“Good girl.” A much needed kiss. “Rule two.”

“Be honest in words and deeds, between us.”

Regina repeated her earlier question about examples before asking Emma for their third rule.

Scrunching face; she’d destroyed this one the last few days. “Be respectful in both actions and words.”
Nodding. “What does that look like and sound like in regards to you?”

Emma thought for a moment. “Looks like eye contact so you can see what I might not be able to say. Sounds like using my words and manners.”

“Good. Non examples?”

That was easier to list. “Crossing my arms, stomping my foot or kicking, whining, and pushing more when you tell me not to.”

“I will continue to be patient with you on that due to your emotions, but not nearly as much as I’ve been. What does that rule look like and sound like for me in regards to you?” A reminder that the rules applied to both of them.

More wiggles. “Looks like knocking and waiting until I say come in, or stopping if I use my safe word. Sounds like calm voice, prompting me when I shut down, please and thank you.” Then without prompting. “Non examples look like barging in my space or hitting, sounds like yelling or interrupting.”

“Excellent.” Giving another kiss to the top of blonde curls. “You have a solid understanding of my expectations and like I mentioned yesterday, I am going to be more consistent in enforcing them along with our other smaller rules. Do you understand me?”

Emma nodded, knowing that was coming.

“Words please.”

And those two held so much.

“Yes I understand.” Then looking straight up, eyes full. “Thank you Mama.”

“Always baby.”

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“That was waaaayyyy easier than I thought.” A six year old grin beamed up at the Queen that stood behind her.

“A lot of effort, on both your parts, helped that to be the case.” Regina squeezed the shoulders under her hands gently as she praised, reflecting on the conversation that’d just taken place as they watched Snow out of the window leaving Town Hall.

Upon waking Monday morning and getting her electronics back, Emma had insisted on calling Snow herself to set up a time to meet to talk. Lunch between meetings in the black and white office had provided the space and Regina’s proximity to allow Emma to hear what Snow had to say about the new baby. The meeting had ended in a hug and though brief, was willing on both parts and one that left red lips grinning at how far they’d come.

Emma spun around and hugged a slim waist as her hair was fluffed. “Do you think they will name her the same?” In their other life she had gotten used to the idea of her little sister being called Emilina and the special memory of what that had meant.

“I don’t know the answer to that, but Snow seemed eager to seek your opinion on names when you asked, so maybe that will still be the case.”

“Maybe…” Impish in her grin. “It should be their idea, buuuuttt I might suggest it.” Thoughts moved to the rest of the day. Hopeful. “Can we make cinnamon cookies to take with us tonight?”

“There won’t be time for that baby. We need to get you fitted for your school uniform this afternoon before we head to the loft for dinner. At least we can get that one fitted right. There will be some guessing on the exact measurements for your other ones as it is.” Tapping a dimpled chin in front of her.

Emma looked away and sneezed. “I forgot about that.”
Plucking a tissue from the box on the desk, she wiped Emma's nose. "Mmmhhhhmm, I'm sure."
Sensing that might not be the case. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yep." A sniffle and wiggles to get away from a fussing hand. "If we can't stop home, will you please conjure my new video game, the racing one Neal gave me for Christmas? I wanna show him how to get to the bonus round in level 2."

"Is that why you so readily accepted Snow's invitation to dinner tonight?" Fingers snapped and purple smoke left the game in Emma's grip. Bouncing feet followed her heels as they rounded the desk to sit.

Holding up two fingers in a pinch. "Maaaybe a little bit."

"That is not the only reason I hope?" Catching little eyes as she opened her laptop.

"Not the only one. I actually wanna try to spend time with them, but I'm just not ready to do it by myself and I kinda owe Snow for how my other part acted Saturday. Besides, I miss Neal."
Shrugging and dropping her eyes in favor of toying with the new charm on her bracelet. "I'm sorry I didn't ask before I said yes for us, but I didn't think I'd do it if I over thought it."

Regina nodded. "Asking would have been appreciated, though I understand your motive. We don’t have any plans at that time, so it worked out, but next time," lifting a chin, "I expect be consulted if you are not an adult." She wouldn’t have said no, not if Emma was so willing and their plans allowed it, but some concern rested between her brows at the weight the evening ahead held. The little one needed it to go well and she would do everything she could to help that be the case.

"Yes Mama."

Regina accepted the kiss on her cheek. "If at any point you feel uncomfortable or need a break you need to let me know."

"I will, promise." Lashes batted twice as Emma crossed her heart.

Smiling. "Alright then, go clean up your blocks while I finish this e-mail and then we need to get going." The Mayor sent the girl off with a light pat and turned her attention to her inbox as Emma made quick work of disassembling the block tower that was taller than she currently was.

The uniform fitting took a few hours and Emma was more patient this time around than she had been in their other life. Partially due to the fact that Jefferson knew who they were and he was much more personable with them as his quick hands took the necessary measurements as he and the Queen chatted about their children’s most recent visit at Christmas. Regina had brought along a bag of clothes from Emma’s teen size for Jefferson to use as a starting point. When the measuring tape was put away, the blonde happily hopped off the pedestal. While the Hatter went into his storage room to begin pulling items from his vast storage supply they went next door to The Cobbler’s to pick out shoes.

Emma grew nostalgic remembering the first time she’d been in this store and the Queen buying her the purple Converse on her feet. Also, for the missing friendship she’d shared with Gabe and one she hoped might return once school started. She went immediately to seek out a red and blue pair for her current size and settled on a pair of dark purple military style ankle boots for her thirteen year old side along with a pair of black high-top Converse that looked like leather.

The contrast between the bright colors for six and darker for thirteen was not lost on the Queen that knew there were more talks with and about that side of Emma they needed to have. Before the spell they had focused many of their conversations on Emma’s early life between the ages of six and ten, having no idea at the time how long they would be away in that spelled reality for Emma to experience what she needed to before they returned. She realized she didn’t know nearly as much as she needed to about what Emma’s teenage years had been like and she wondered how to broach that subject as little hands held up a third pair of shoes for her consideration.

"No."

"But Mama... They’re like the bomb.com!" Little eyes flicked enviously from the black three inch platform combat boots that went buckling up to mid calf she struggled to hold up high. “Big me wouldn’t wear them, but teen me would and so would I right now if they came in fun size and in yellow… with sparkles. Please?"

Taking the boots, Regina looked them over for a moment before putting them back on the shelf. “They are inappropriate for school Emma.”

“Then I won’t wear them to school, just other times.” Reaching to take the boots back if that was
the issue, and sighing when her hand was caught and she was pulled toward the register.

A dark head shook. “You would fall flat on your face trying to walk in them. I don’t veto any of your clothing choices and I very rarely will, but I am on these and for that reason.” Emma, all of her, had two left feet on a good day. The idea of those teen feet so far off the ground attempting to move about wasn’t one she was willing to entertain.

Mumbling, but without tone. “It’s my face.”

“No it’s our face and such a pretty one. I intend to keep it that way. Here, hold these for me please.” Regina gave Emma two pairs of shoes while she put the others on the counter and pulled out her wallet.

Bags in hand, they returned to the Hatter’s for even more bags. After stashing their purchases in the trunk it was nearly five and time for them to head to the loft. Emma’s chatter died down as they approached, growing a little nervous about being on the receiving end of so much attention and sets of eyes. David answered the door and Emma, almost shyly, gave him a hug and more shyly, despite the headway that afternoon, gave Snow one as well. Neal said his hellos and dragged Emma into the living room gushing about the new baby that would be joining the household before they both got lost playing the game Emma had brought along.

Regina sat with David at the counter as Snow finished making a salad. They talked of nothing consequential to start, their attention on the children playing together in the living room, each deep in their own thoughts. Snow, as she often did, was the first to blurt out the elephant in the room.

“David mentioned that Emma was a little different sometimes when she’s this size, but I don’t really see it. Her and Neal have always joked around and spent time together like this.” Even as an adult her daughter was like a big kid sometimes and she’d always appreciated how playful Emma was with Neal.

An amused smile spread across red lips. “You saw a hint of some behaviors that are different, ones she can not all the way help, when you visited us at the mansion the other day and at the loft when she was triggered. She doesn’t go too long in one focused space before she relaxes enough to let herself just be or if her emotions get the better of her.” She took a long sip of coffee. “Just wait.”

Snow nodded, still confused and handed David the salad bowl to set on the table. “So, I gave her teachers the calendar of her shifts you e-mailed earlier and a copy to David for the station. I kept one too, just in case?” Questioning if she’d overstepped.

“I was going to suggest you do. Emma needs all of us working together to help her through this, not just me and she is starting to realize that.”

David returned for the salad tongs and bundle of silverware for the table. “I was surprised she accepted Snow’s invitation, but I’m so happy she’s getting to a good place and that you guys figured out a way to predict her shrinking and growing.”

“That wasn’t easy.” Deciding to give a little insight to the unsaid question. “There is still work to be done there, but we are getting closer—”

“Let goooo!”

The shout turned all their heads toward the living room where the siblings were now in a full on tug of war over something.

A little huff. “It’s MY game and MY turn! You let go!” Emma managed to roll herself in on the remote, taking them both to the floor. Socks on wood making it hard to stay upright and though smaller than her brother, she was quick and more than scrappy.

“No you!” The boy fought to get his sister off of him.

Regina sighed and set down her mug, eyeing Snow to follow her and together they both moved toward the living room where the siblings were now in a full on tug of war over something.

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Regina sighed and set down her mug, eyeing Snow to follow her and together they both moved toward the living room where Emma and Neal rolled around pushing for dominance over the video game controller. It was comical to say the least and she struggled, as Snow and David did, not to smile over the squabble.

“Two pairs of royal eyes met. “On three; one, two, three.”

Emma wiggled as familiar hands found her underarms and pulled her straight up off her brother as Neal was helped to his feet by Snow. The controller, both children eyed with want, was picked up by David and set on top of the TV.
The man shook his head at Neal as he turned off the gaming system and began to put away the game disk back in the case to give to Regina. “I think that’s enough for tonight.”

“But Dad, she wouldn’t share.” Neal panted, pointing at his sister.

“Did so and it was my turn! And you…” Emma trailed off when she finally caught her Keeper’s face.

“It wasn’t your turn yet.” Finding his mother’s eyes. “Mom, she always shared before…why isn’t she now?”

Snow looked lost on that question and instead of answering reached to brush her son’s hair out of his eyes with a small smile and shake of her head. She looked to the Queen holding her daughter; dawning came then on what Regina had meant by just wait.

Regina wanted the boy to have some understanding. “It is not something she can help all the time right now, Neal. Like when you are very upset by something and sometimes it’s overwhelming and you don’t know what to do or you feel scrambled inside.” The explanation was simple compared to how complex the answer actually was, but at eight, he was old enough to get the idea and seemed to when his face relaxed.

The little blonde stilled at her Keeper’s voice and then reached for her adult rational mind amid the child emotions she was swimming in. As worked up as Emma was she couldn’t stay there and crossed her arms with a pout over that fact. Now she wouldn’t get to play her game the rest of the night as she watched it disappear in a puff of purple smoke. She straightened both legs and dropped them with a huff causing the brunette to shift her to another hip.

“Emma, none of that. Sharing your game with your bother is the nice thing to do. You were so excited to do that earlier. What changed between then and now?”

Squirming. “It was mummy turn.”

A red frown. “Was it really your turn or was it Neal’s?”

Green eyes darted between her brother and Keeper. “But I won the bonus round so it should have been MY turn again.”

“Rethink your tone please.” Regina gently tapped a finger against little lips. “It wasn’t your turn though; it was his, was it not?”

“Maaaayybbeee.” Refusing to admit the fact. “My game, my turn!”

An eyebrow arched at the continued whine and Regina turned to Snow and David. Upon seeing their thoughtful expressions asked. “Do you mind if we step upstairs for a moment? Someone needs a chance to reflect and calm down for a few minutes.”

Grumbling as all adult eyes were on her Emma countered. “Dooonooosst.” But knowing she did, a chance for her little body and mind to re-center anyway.

Snow nodded quickly, mind racing to catch up. “Sure, I’ll work on plating dinner.”

She watched them go upstairs, Emma disgruntled, but resting fully against the woman holding her, much as Neal did when she redirected him in a way he didn’t want, but needed. The realization that she and Regina had some similarities in how they managed kids reminded her that they were, indeed, on the same team. As Snow’s mind sat in understanding she dished dinner quickly, giving her daughter the same portion as Neal and had David take the plates to the table.

Heels clicked downstairs a few minutes later and Snow’s eyes caught a much calmer green pair when Emma offered her a smile. Little feet were set down and ran to Neal. After a hug and an apology they all sat down to eat. Emma talked all about shoe shopping and of the excitement to be able to know when she would be what size. The topic of school came up from Neal sharing about his most recent basketball game and the Princess noted how quickly Emma chimed in with what the experience of school had been like in the alternate reality. She began to wonder more about the details of the spelled life that her daughter had lived in for ten months.

“Do you have pictures?” All eyes turned to the interruption and Snow realized she’d blurted her thought out loud. Blushing, she clarified. “I mean, do you have any pictures you’d be willing to share with us?” Looking directly at Emma, who looked at the Queen and back again.
“Um, yeah…. Gina took a bunch and they came back with us. I… I’ll pick out a few tonight…”
Looking to brown eyes and getting a nod that there would be time for that once they got home.
“I’ll give them to David at the station tomorrow so you guys can see some.” She wasn’t ready to
share her memory book, and didn’t think she would be for a long time. It was too personal, but
there were a few pictures she thought would give them a sense of what her do over experience
had been like. Maybe that might further bridge the gap now starting to close between them.

Green eyes glassed and Snow looked at her plate. “That would be amazing.” A little hand fell
over hers and she swallowed before looking into her daughter’s eyes.

“I’ll even ask Gina to make copies so… so you can keep them.” Emma chewed her lip, unsure of
how exactly to take the tears rolling down Snow’s face. “If you want, I mean.”

“I do, we do.” Nodding vigorously as David smiled her way. “Thank you…” Reaching across the
table to take the hand of the Queen that had made that reality possible and the light shining from
Emma’s smile. “Both of you.”

A/N - I am taking requests for the last part in this trilogy—Part 3 after this story—A series
of one shots mixed with a smaller story line of Regina/Mal. Emma is still the main focus, so
let me know if you have ideas/requests.

NEXT TIME - Adult Emma plays a prank on the Queen and humor ensues. Teen Emma
has her first day of Jr. High and learns about a family tradition. Justina is back and Mal
makes an appearance. :-)
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

A/N – Thank you for comments and kudos! I love hearing your opinions on the plot and characters! Humor & some fluff with scattered feels in the forecast ahead. Fan art at the very end and on my Tumblr.

Enjoy!

“..." Oh my god, Gina, look at her butt!” Emma laughed as she sat hers in a red plastic chair next to the Queen in the Kung Fu Studio after the mixed levels class.

Regina tsked, eyeing where Emma was pointing. “I will never understand your fascination with them.”

“They are sssoooooo cute and fluffy though.” Finger tapping the screen of her cell phone to another picture on the Corgi Butts Facebook page. “This one has like, 2000 votes. I’m not the only one that gets it.” She tucked her phone away and bent to slip on her boots. “Speaking of which, can we get a dog?”

Pretending to be thoughtful. “Hrmrmn, No.”

“How about a Corgi then?” Fingers quickly tied laces.

Raising a brow. “Last time I checked they were the same species and both have fur which I do not want clinging to furniture, clothes, or wafting about our clean floors. You asked me that in our other life and my answer is the same.”

“But all sides of me want one, so that’s like a three against one vote.” Blonde brows wiggled up and down on an adult face as Emma stood shoulder to shoulder with the Queen to leave the studio.

“You are forgetting one very important thing.”

Smirking. “Oh yeah?”

“I get veto power over two of you so the vote is really one to one. Even then, dog fur is a hard limit.”

Emma shrugged. “It’s more of a soft one, but... How do you feel about cat fur?” Not ready to give up.

She took out the keys to the bug and opened the passenger side for Regina before getting in the other side. The first thing she had done upon waking Tuesday morning, after breakfast and getting dressed at her Keeper’s insistence, was to take the bug out for a spin. Driving it again brought back a joy she had been missing and she drove it to work after dropping the Queen at Town Hall.

The envelope she’d prepared Monday night with a few pictures from her memory book had been received by David’s eager hands. Overall, the last few days had flown by between work and her Kung Fu class and she was feeling more and more like herself, all parts of her. Emma was grateful Regina’s plan was working, as she knew it would, and the predictability she’d been craving was back.

Regina buckled her seat belt. “I have two words for that question; litter and no.”

Doing the same. “That’s three words actually.” Emma sighed and dropped the issue in favor of listening to the radio on the drive home, humming to the tune as fingers drummed the steering wheel in beat.

Thoughtful red smile. “It is nice to see you so happy.”

“IT feels amaze-balls to know what my day will hold and not to have to worry about sudden changes or getting stuck in situations.” Emma flashed teeth. “I feel like celebrating since the last few days have gone so smooth. In fact, I am going to cook you dinner tonight.”

Amused chuckle. “I claim the right to supervise your kitchen shenanigans I have no doubt will ensue.”
"I wouldn’t have it any other way Gina. How does Kraft Mac and Cheese sound?" Asking as she turned them down Mifflin Street.

Grimacing. "Like a brain aneurysm in a box."

“I’m kidding, but that sounds like fun too, kind of like ketchup exploding in a bounce house.”

Emma parked in the driveway next to the Benz and opened the door. “Seriously, I was thinking of making clam chowder and cheesy biscuits as a side. Cold weather always makes me want soup.”

“Just Campbell’s or from our recipe book?” Regina keyed them into the house.

“It’s not just Campbell’s, those cans got super fancy since they added the pull tab feature. And I’m gonna use a secret recipe... For the biscuits anyway.”

“What recipe?”

“Betty Crocker, I seriously have no idea what’s in it, but the directions on the tube are easy to follow.”

Once in the kitchen blonde pulled out a few cans of soup from the pantry and the tube of biscuits to bake from the fridge. Regina settled at the counter with a stack of files left over from work to read for a meeting she had in the morning. After setting the oven to preheat Emma picked up the tube and glanced over her shoulder with a mischievous grin, noting how brown eyes were skimming papers instead of on her. Wiggling her fingers the biscuit tube magically floated high overhead and settled behind the Queen’s chair. It was one of those marvelous ones that popped obnoxiously when opened and it did so deafeningly when pale hands mimicked a twisting motion magically.

Regina jumped, back arching liked a fire hosed cat and hissing as the ringing in her ears gave way to snorts across the room. She looked over her shoulder seeing the open tube and turned eyes on the snickering blonde slowly edging out of the kitchen. Pursing her lips she stood, straightening her suit jacket by the cuffs and putting her hands behind her back as she slowly sauntered towards the doorway Emma was eyeing between laughs.

“Come on Gina! You have to admit it was funny! Like really, really funny.” Emma bit her lip trying to keep the giggles at bay. “Maybe... just a little bit funny?”

“Oh, it was very humorous, but not as much as this.” Royal fingers twitched.

Emma’s giggles turned to shrieks and feet danced wildly as a handful of ice-cubes was magically released down her white Kung-Fu uniform collar. It was the Queen’s turn to erupt as her girl spun, finally releasing the silk sash at the waist of the tunic so ice dropped to the floor. They smiled at each other as they each caught their breath calling a truce. Emma returned to cooking as magic cleaned up the ice. After a few minutes green eyes found brown and flicked towards the wine rack.

“Wine?”

Regina raised brow at the double meaning and shook her head at what she thought was coming. “No, water though, if you please.” A chilled glass made it to her hand. “Thank you.” She watched Emma quietly stir the soup and wondered if she’d been wrong.

“So, since stuff is back on track and we’re celebrating me being happy, can I have a drink drink?”

There it was, her girl never disappointed and she sighed. “Emma...”

“It’s kind of like a holiday though, like Bear Claw Day. I know I made that one up, but it almost made it on the council board agenda to vote on last year. I just couldn’t get enough signatures in time.” Turning down the burner and pulling bowls from the cupboard. “You said one drink on holidays and special occasions if I ask and you’re with me. Archie even thought that was okay sometimes.”

“I did, of which today is neither.” Regina closed the file and pushed it aside, this conversation needing her focus. The oven door slammed in response. “Emma.” Warning clear.

Grumbling as her happy mood balloon lost some air she set the steaming biscuits on top of the stove to cool. “You drink whenever you want though.” A low card to play as green peeked over under lashes.
"I do. In extreme moderation and I’m always considerate of you.” A chin rested on laced fingers.  
“And why is that dear heart?”

Sighing, expecting that response. “Cause you don’t lose control… Sorry Gina.” And she was.

Regina rarely drank in front of her, especially when she was an adult and she was legally able to. She wasn’t addicted to alcohol, of that they all became certain. Running was the culprit and Emma used to use alcohol and other things to hide the fact. Therapy helped her to get to the root of why that was the case and it was extremely effective coupled with their dynamic. Emma learned to change her thinking and to use other means of relieving stress when she wanted to run. Now she rarely even wanted to drink and only did so when she was feeling emotionally and physically well, socially, and under careful eyes within the confines of their rules. It wasn’t perfect, but it worked for them.

Emma quickly ladled soup and set hot bowls on plates to carry into the dining room. Regina followed her with the plate of biscuits and butter, flatware magically appearing on the table with white smoke. They ate the first half of the meal quietly before Emma broached a different subject entirely.

“Always an amusing activity when you engage in it.” Teeth took delicate bite of a biscuit.

“Haha.” Grinning. “Seriously though, I have. About being a teenager again and I want to be this size to talk to you about a few things because I’m not sure how easy it will be for me to open up about certain stuff when I actually am one in the morning. As you figured out, that age was a very guarded time for me and I had a ton of walls that never got taken down.” Spooning more soup. “This is me being all proactive, responsible, and forward thinking by the way. Don’t get used to it.”

“Oh I assure you I won’t.” Smiling back in easy teasing and glad to see Emma opening up without having to knock on this door for them. “I did sense that there were things in that part of your past we needed to bring to light.”

“I don’t want to get into everything right now, but you need to know a few things.” Emma set her spoon down in favor of rubbing her hands on her jeans. “I was very secretive at that age. I trusted no one and I was desperate to belong. Like reaaallyyy desperate. And after the few times I’ve experienced that age again those feelings are very much there. I didn’t expect them to be because we worked on trust and other feelings during my do over, but hers, mine, are different at that age. It’s deeper, harder to dig out and let go of and I don’t know how to turn them off.” Finding balance in brown eyes. “I trust you, with everything that I am and so do my six year old self and my other part too, but she’s gonna keep pushing you. I need you to know I don’t mean to overdo it, not when I’m that age.”

Regina sipped her water as Emma came to a pause, suspecting as much. There was still work to be done for that piece of her girl’s heart to heal and a challenge she was more than up for, one that would take considerable time and attention. The teenage version of Emma had made her head spin and caused more second thoughts and questions to her usual methods than she would have thought possible in the last few weeks. After the last encounter, the Queen felt she had a good handle on how she needed to go about things. 

“That’s more than understandable. What would help? What else do you need from me that I’m not already doing?”

Clear eyed and unveiled. “Just love me, how you do. Don’t give up on me or let me hide. I need our same rules, boundaries, and consequences.” Then unable to help smirking. “Since you asked you might want to change out your heels for Nike’s because I’m going to run circles around you tomorrow morning when you insist I have to wear that darn uniform.” Teeth devoured the last biscuit on the plate between them.

“I expect nothing less and you, I will be taking plenty of pictures for that side of you on the first day of school.”

“Assumed I’d expect nothing less from you so I took the liberty of taking care of that so it wouldn’t be a problem.” Emma wrinkled her nose with half a grin. “If you can find your cell phone that I made invisible and randomly stashed somewhere in the house between now and tomorrow morning, then be my guest and snap all the pics you want.” Green eyes sparkled at the arched brow. “Sorry-not-sorry.”

“Then it is a good thing I uploaded the most recent pictures I took of you to my lap top.” Wrist flick. “One of which has just been added to my e-mail draft box for sending to a few of our close friends who would love to see the most recent one of you in bunny pajamas hopping about your room.”
Emma nearly lost her soup through her nose. “You wouldn’t…” Then blanching. “Shi—shoot! You would!”

“I would not if my cell phone reappears in my hand in ten, nine, eight, seven…” She bit her lip as she watched Emma dash off to retrieve the hidden I-phone and giving in, rolled back her head and laughed.

“Already stood still for the Kodiak moment, why are we doing this again?” Thirteen year old Emma slouched against the archway of the dining room, arms crossed over the crested blue blazer of her uniform in curiosity and with a dark purple combat boot resting against the wall behind her.

“Is it a family tradition I would like to continue and one we will repeat when you are six again on Monday. Stand up straight please or it will not come out right.” Regina waited until Emma lost the slouch and drew a line at the girl’s head on the archway with a small smile, adding Emma’s name, date and age. Her eyes trailed the wall fondly for a moment before finding a thoughtful green pair.

Puzzled. Emma had seen the marks for Henry on the wall in their other life, the mansion a near mirror of their home here, but never thought twice about it until now. “If it’s a tradition, why didn’t we do it during the spell?”

Capping the marker, the Queen vanished it away before moving into the foyer for her coat. “The wall we would have had it on in that life would not have fit in the trunk to come back with us and…” A lame excuse. Taking a breath for what needed to be said. “After just a week and how quickly you were making progress, I suspected we would not be there a full year before we had to come home.” She tied the sash at the waist tighter than it needed to be as Emma shrugged into a jacket. “And when the first day of school came for you I could not… As each month rolled around I told myself I finally would; mark your height just as I had Henry’s on the first day of school each year.”

Emma swung her new grey backpack to her shoulder still confused and followed the brunette out the door. “But you didn’t.”

Finding her voice. “No I did not because, at the time, I was struggling to separate my role of Keeper and parent to you.” Heels followed boots down the walkway to the Benz as her truth spilled. “I could not bear the thought of not being able to make that mark a second time for when you’d be seven.”

“Why though?”

Finding green. “I had a strong feeling we would not see your birthday in that life. Even in the beginning of the spell I had already considered you mine, my little girl and I knew at one point I had to let that part of you go when we came home, but now…” Trailing in the hope of their current reality.

The weight of those words fell through Emma in all the right places and heart picked up a beat. Thoughts blurred in a blonde head at what went unsaid as the car rolled out of the driveway, and she remained quiet on the way to school. Emma had asked and the truth found them both wanting the same thing, one she had suspected was there, but now knew for certain. Hearing it with these ears, ones yet still to be fully conditioned to the truth and promises from red lips, gave her pause. Mind returned to the night in the Study last weekend when she’d accepted the role the brunette next to her played and decided to go with it when old habits of hiding her feelings at this age wanted to surface.

“Thanks for the tradition. I love it Mama and you.” The matching affection earned her a smile, one she returned as they slowed to a stop in front of the Jr. High wing of Storybrooke School.

A long moment passed as Emma’s thoughts switched gears and took in the building, along with what the day ahead might hold. Regina had assured that her teachers were aware of the IEP and that all her accommodations would be followed. Since there was more writing involved with her being this age she was allowed to use a tablet with a swipe feature programmed to pick up words and common phrases with certain movements, like her adult side used at the station for some of her lengthier reports now. That had eased her mind a great deal. It took her another equally long moment before she heard a seat belt other than her own un buckle.

“Wait!” Hands grabbed for the Queen’s seat belt and redid it.

“Wait for what?”

Cheeks pink. “You can’t go in there.”
"I am the Mayor and I can go anywhere I please."

Emma rolled her eyes at the missed point. "I meaan you don’t have to walk me in. I’m not six… right now. And that would be ssssooooooo embarrassing, no offense."

"Right." Said with a small wanting sigh. "Do you have your lunch?"

"Yep."

"Your cell if something comes up? Your tablet?"

"Yep. Yep."

"Your schedule of classes?"

"Triple yep. Can I go now? I don’t want to be late for my first class Mama." Blonde lashes batted with a grin.

"Have a wonderful day. I will be here at 3:30 to pick you up." Regina quickly kissed her girl’s cheek, least that get a comment and watched as Emma walked up the path to the entrance and smiled softly when there seemed to be a friendly face the teen knew. Shifting, the Benz slowly pulled away.

Justina grinned at the blonde walking her way. Since the night they’d first met and Emma had explained some of the spell resulting in the teen she’d met at the pond, some of the Mayor’s involvement in it, and that there was predictability now on when this version would be around, "Welcome to the club blondie." Arms spread to the school building. "Or should I say Savior. Must suck to have to do this part of your life over again. Cool boots by the way."

Beaming at the compliment. "Thanks and I'm SO sorry about getting us busted."

"It’s alright. My old man wasn’t too upset at me, but my mom went full on Donkey Kong on my ass. I was grounded until Christmas and then with the storm stuff…" Shrugging. "Sorry I haven’t been in touch."

Emma blushed at the memory of that night and quickly switched topics. "Sooo I have no idea where any of my classes are." Pulling a crumpled paper from her skirt pocket to show Justina. "Looks like you have Math in room 42. And you’re in luck because so do I. Follow me, I’ve got you covered."

Smile big, Emma followed the spunky brunette. Her first class flew by and she liked her teacher’s sense of humor and surprised herself at what she remembered about algebra. Science was next and what was supposed to be a simple experiment involving baking soda and iodine left Emma and her new friend rolling when their iodine was accidentally swapped with vinegar that exploded all over their lab table. Emma had shrugged when the teacher eyed her suspiciously, but the bell rang before anything could come from it.

The two went their separate ways for Writing. She desperately needed the bathroom and by the time she was done the warning bell rang for her next class. Running down the hall, eyes on the door numbers, she rounded a corner sharply and slammed right into a tall blonde woman in a designer pin stripe suit. She landed flat on her butt, binder spinning across the hall into the lockers.

"I'm so sorry!" Emma started to scramble up and stared at the elegant hand, an offer to help, following the arm to familiar face. Grinning and taking it. "Thanks Ms. Mal." Using the term she’d heard others mention for the Principal of the school. Maleficent had no last name that she knew of.

"No worries Emma. Are you finding your classes alright?" Bending to pick of the fallen binder, Mal handed it back with a smile.

"Um… yeah. I'm trying to find room 53." Frowning when the tardy bell rang.

"Don't worry; your teacher won't give you a hard time on your first day. Come I'll walk you."

Emma followed down the hall. The Principal gestured to a closed door. "Just in there. Have a
Emma followed down the hall. The Principal gestured to a closed door. “Just in there. Have a wonderful rest of your day and let me know if you need anything.”

Small, now nervous to walk in late despite the escort. “Thanks.”

“Oh, and do tell Regina I said hello and if you think about it that I’ll be calling her with the date for your first IEP goal meeting once I confirm a time with all your teachers.”

“I will.” Internally smirking at how well that conversation would go over. Queen and Dragon were an interesting pair; a long and complicated history.

In writing she got to try out her tablet and loved how simple it was to use. She was able to create an outline nearly as quickly as everyone else in class. With wifi she e-mailed her draft to the teacher for grading. Writing in Jr. High and High School the first time around had sucked and she hadn’t been able to keep up with the demand of the assignments as she got older. The feeling of knowing why and being able to do something about it now was so empowering. Before she knew it, the bell rang and she rejoined Justina at lunch. When Emma showed up in the cafeteria she quickly spotted her friend and plopped down across the table, pulling her lunch from her backpack.

“Hold up, you bring your lunch?”

Hesitating. “Don’t you?” Emma went to lift the Velcro tab on the red bag.

“Not since fifth grade.”

“Oh…” Not sure how to take that idea, Emma shrugged trying to cover. “I’ll probably be buying it from here on out. I just didn’t think about it.” She blinked at the five dollar bill that slapped down on the table between them. “What’s that for?”

“For you for today. You can pay me back later. No one in seventh grade who wants to be taken seriously brings their lunch. I’ve got a lot to teach you blondie, come on, chuck that and let’s get in line.”

Emma looked longingly at the chicken salad, fruit, and a cinnamon cookie in her bag to the hot lunch section of pizza and burgers. Torn between her want to belong and do what she knew was expected of her. With a sigh she palmed the cookie for later as belonging won out and she upended her lunch sack into the trash to follow her friend to the line. She loaded her tray with several options, each looked better than the last. Fast food heaven in her mouth was an understatement. Between bites of food and talking she was enjoying herself immensely.

“Em, do you want to hang out tomorrow afternoon?”

Green eyes sparkled. “I need to ask, but I do, yeah that’d be fun. I’ll let you know later today.”

The rest of the afternoon was easy. English and her favorite class, Art, both of which she didn’t share with her new friend. When the final bell rang she was feeling a little nauseous from all the greasy food she’d eaten, but so happy about everything in her day that she ran to the Benz. Once in the car, threw arms around her Keeper.

Regina had the wind knocked out of her, but recovered quickly in the girl’s enthusiasm and squeezed back. “Hello sweet girl. How was your day?”

“I had the BEST day ever, EVER!”

“Two evers and a best, it must have been some kind of wonderful. You can tell me all about it on our way Granny’s.” Easing back with a gesture to Emma’s seat belt and pulling into traffic as chatter suddenly died off.

“Granny’s? How come?”

“For those milkshakes you love so much, to celebrate your first day.” She side eyed the blonde at the question and not the smile she’d been expecting, having planned the treat as a surprise. “Is that alright?”

“Oh, yeah, that sounds good!” And it did to Emma’s taste buds. “Anyway, the girl I told you about before, Justina, she’s in a few of my classes and we sat together at lunch. It was nice knowing someone already and I’ve never gotten that before at this age…” Trailing off as heavier thoughts took over. She was pulled back when a hand found hers.
"I am so glad that was the case for you this time around."

"Me too. And guess what? I got invited to hang out tomorrow afternoon at her house. Can I go? Please?" Before the Queen could respond she added. "I’ll do the homework I have tonight and my weekend chores in the morning before I go."

"Emma—"

Green eyes batted lashes. "Please? I promise nothing like last time will happen. It’ll just be us at her house with her parents."

"That’s not what I—"

"Cross my heart and scouts honor. You have to say yes."

"I won’t say anything if I cannot get a word in." Regina pulled the car into a free spot in front of the diner and turned in her seat with a raised brow.

Emma shrugged and smiled. "I’m just excited."

"I can tell and I’m happy you are dear heart and yes, you may as long as homework and chores are done before. I also would like to speak with her parents first."

"Buzz kill." Blonde head dropped back against the seat. "Why?"

"I know of her family, but I do not know them well, hence my yes, with this amendment." At Emma’s less than enthusiastic eye roll she tilted her head and gently turned a dimpled chin her way. "Hey, it is a phone call, not an execution. I’d appreciate a bit more respect from you on the matter."

"Gotcha, sorry… It’s a yes though, can I text Justina?" Hopeful.

"Yes. Go grab us booth and send your text while I order your shake at the counter. Then I want to hear about the rest of your day."

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" Emma bolted from the car, slamming the door.

Regina felt her eyes rattle from the vibration, and shook her head fondly as she followed Emma in the diner. Ruby took her order quickly and heels found the side of the booth opposite a beaming blonde. After the phone went away Emma chatted about her other classes. Coffee and a small chocolate shake made it to the table ten minutes later.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Ms. Mal says hello and that she will call soon for my IEP meeting goal or something stuff."

Sipping her coffee, Regina raised a brow at the appraising look Emma was giving her. "Whatever is that look for?"

"Every time someone mentions Ms. Mal the vein in your forehead pops." Giggling. "It did it again."

"Ha ha." Shaking her head and changing the topic as she blushed. "You mentioned homework. What do you have to do?"

"A math sheet and a lab summary from the experiment today. Not much, but I might need your help with some of the stuff on graphing." Emma rubbed the cold shake glass through her hands, after taking a long pull. The normally delicious cream felt like sludge going down.

"Is your shake alright?" Wondering if it was that or the idea of homework that caused the sour face in front of her. "Emma?"

"I gotta—" Emma slapped a hand over her mouth and bolted from the booth. Boots pounded tile to the bathroom and she just made it to a stall before everything in her stomach came rolling up. Tears and gagging came next and finally she slumped to the floor to catch her breath. The door to
the bathroom opened, closed and a cool hand made it to a sweaty brow. She pulled away. “I’m not sick, not like that.” Emma looked up into brown eyes, accepting the paper towel offered and wiped her mouth as she was helped to her feet.

“Then how like that.” A regal wrist flick summoned a bottle of water and she cracked it to give to Emma.

“Like I ate too much food sick.” Sighing that she’d just outed herself. “I’m fine now. Can we go back to the booth?”

“Of course.” Regina followed the girl, not yet fully convinced that was the case. Emma sat across the way squirming as often was the reason when misbehavior had occurred, but she couldn’t place what. “Why do you think you got sick? Was it was the chicken salad I packed you? I put the ice pack in the bag so it shouldn’t have—”

“No it wasn’t that or the fruit.” Taking a long pull from the water bottle she drained it and set it aside. At this point she’d answer direct questions, but volunteering any information on her own wasn’t happening.

“How can you be sure?” Prompting when Emma remained quiet.

“Cause’ I didn’t eat it.”

Pulling her head back in confusion. “But you just said you over ate.”

“Yep.”

“Emma you are not making any sense.”

Teeth caught an upper lip briefly and shrugged. “I don’t wanna get in trouble.”

“Why would you be… Ah, I see.” Folding hands together at what may have happened. “What did eat from the school lunch?”

“A slice of pizza.”

“That shouldn’t have made you sick.”

“And fries and onion rings.”

“Emma.”

“And cheese sticks and a soda… What? It seemed like a good idea to my stomach at the time.”

“No wonder the milkshake didn’t sit well with you.” Gesturing to the melted sugar. “Your body isn’t used to eating like that anymore, not that much junk food at one time anyway.” Regina shook her head at the glare coming her way.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Tone, dear girl.” Reminding, then softer. “Why would you do that?”

Deflating. “No one else had brought lunch from home and I wanted to fit in so I dumped my lunch and got something else.”

“Emma that’s…” Regina pinched the bridge of her nose and thought. ‘Expected. She’s thirteen. Henry did the same thing.’

Blonde brows furrowed. “That’s what? Stellar, stupid, something that pissed you off?”

“No, none of those things and careful with your language. You are edging a fine line there.” Reaching both hands across the table palms up then, glad Emma took them easily. “I will
compromise with you on the lunches. Every other day you have school this age you may buy lunch and have the entrée you wish with two healthy sides. I will put money in your school account tonight. Other days you eat what I pack for you. Deal?” Emma’s choices would be easy to follow up with on the online café registry through the school website.

Skeptical. “So like pizza, sweet potato fries, and a banana?”

A nod. “As long as you don’t go overboard on the fried food, unless you liked getting sick just now.”

“No! That sucked.” Thinking. “No consequence for throwing away my food?”

“No from me. Only the natural one that occurred after your choice.”

“Deal.”

“Aright then. Do you want your shake to go?”

Emma’s skin took on a green tinge and shook her head no, watching as money for their drinks was left on the table and they both stood.

“Despite being sick, was it still the best day ever, ever?” Red lips grinned and she wrapped an arm around Emma’s shoulders. After a moment the girl relaxed into her as they walked out of the diner.

Reflecting on their conversation that morning about the tradition and the gift of time stretched before them to possibly repeat it again come fall, Emma warmed to a lingering kiss on her temple. As green basked in the promise unspoken, she shared a heart full. “For me, it really was Mama.”

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A/N – Hope you liked it!

Next time – Little Emma and Neal team up in school shenanigans. Trouble, with Gold teeth, rings a Belle in mocking resulting in Mal and Regina connecting. Snow becomes suspicious.
First day of school traditions...
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

A/N – Here we go again... Snow and Gold drama ahead... Feels and angst.

Six year old Emma was in trouble.

Or at least the adults in front of her said she was. While the first day of school for her teen side last Friday had gone well and the first on Monday for her current pint size, the second day had fallen apart. She kicked her mismatched, now dirty, Converse back and forth as she tried to pay attention to what was being said to both Regina and Snow. Neal nudged her on the bench they shared and she returned a small half smile his way with a fist bump. Actually they were both in trouble, but it had all been worth it or so she thought until amber eyes found hers. Emma was reminded of the book she had read once called something along the lines of the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day and frowned when she realized she’d been having one of her very own.

It had all started that morning when she’d woken up too early in her excitement for the day to begin. She’d enjoyed school yesterday and couldn’t wait to go again. Green took a long moment to register the early hour, but she was wide awake. She wanted her Mama and she was hungry. Grabbing Stitchy she went to the master suite, popping head around the door like a little bunny out of a hole. Regina was curled up in the middle of the bed in the dark space. Forgetting herself and unable to ignore her stomach Emma took a running leap and landed right on top of her Keeper, causing a shriek and lights to magically flood the room. Startled hands grabbed for her, but she scooted away and began hopping on the bed with a big grin.

"Wake up Mama! Time for breakfast."

Regina blinked, and rubbed her face quickly at the rude awakening, automatically turning to get out of bed. “Emma…” Then her eyes took in the glow of 4:30 AM, two full hours before she had to be up for work and the child bouncing way to enthusiastically on her bed. With a groan she tucked her feet back under the covers and leaned back against the headboard.

“School today, huh?”

“Yes, later. Come here baby.” Holding out her arms for Emma to fall into them. The girl snuggled in. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“Nu-huh.”

Brows furrowed. “Then why—”

“I’m hungry and awake and I don’t wanna sleep no more.” Emma wiggled out from those arms and rolled to the end of the bed.

“Come here please.” Patting the duvet nearby as the child rolled back and came to sit. A wrist flick summoned a yogurt with spoon. “Have this.” As Emma ate she rested her eyes, nearly drifting back off until she felt a spoon poking her mouth. She cracked one eye open to a silly little smirk and ate a bite of the offered snack. “Thank you for sharing baby. Are you finished?”

Emma nodded letting her Keeper set aside the container and rolled away again. “Time to get ready?”

“No, it is much too early to be awake. Do you want to go back to sleep in your room, or lay with me?”

“Mmmmmm, play?”

“Not one of your choices. Your room or Mama’s?”

Emma rolled to the end of the bed and hopped down, tucked herself under the duvet and crawled back up toward the head. When the covers were pulled back to reveal curious dark eyes Emma pounced forward with a roaring giggle like a lion cub. “Yours!”

“Alright my little cat, time to settle down.” Regina wrapped Emma in the covers and curled up
around the girl in her arms. Fingers snapping dimmed the lights. Running nails down a small back in a calming fashion, hand stilled after a few minutes and sleep returned to take her quickly.

Emma lay quietly counting sheep, then ducks, and swans, but she wasn't sleepy. Propping up on elbows she watched the Queen. “Mama?” A whispered test. “Maaammmmaaa?” A little louder.

Not a peep.

She grinned, carefully wriggling out of the embrace. Feet found the floor and skipped to the walk in closet. If Mama wouldn't play with her she would play Mama…

A few hours later Regina woke to a blaring alarm and much as she did earlier groaned, sitting up to turn off the annoying beep. It took a full minute to remember why she was so groggy and that a little one who should be next to her wasn't. Rubbing sleep away she went to the closet for her robe, sensor lights coming on automatically as she entered and froze. The clothes she'd laid out last night were missing, as were the red Jimmy Choos to go with it. Confused, she wrapped up against the morning chill and went to her en suite, frowning at the mess. Mascara streaks on the counter, lipstick tubes half opened and tested on tissues, and a brand new blush caked in the sink. The crowning glory was a big heart drawn on the mirror with little red lip prints inside.

A sigh, apparently Emma's brain was in full on child mode this morning and enjoying the freedom without watchful eyes and that meant… Eyes grew and feet hurried downstairs.

Emma giggled as she cracked the very last egg out of the new carton into a bowl and stirred it with a fork as she'd seen done a bazillion times. She stood on her stool near the stove, balancing carefully in the red shoes she was wearing, shoving up the long sleeves of the matching dress as she poured the eggs into a pan just as the toast popped up. Startled and with a squeak she lost her grip on the pan as a foot went sideways and slipped only to be caught around her middle before her head cracked. Egg yolks splattered a yellow Picasso layered between the stove and floor. The other shoe dropped as Emma was set down and spun to face her Keeper.

"Uh oh..."

"Is right... Emma the stove is off limits.” At the sight of red lipstick around the perfect O gaping at her, Regina wanted to smile, but quickly lost the urge when she looked back to the burner.

"I was playing and I..." Eyes followed a finger pointing to the red light. “but..."

Regina turned off the stove and regarded the child with hands on her hips. “Are you allowed to use the burner or anything with a heating element without permission?”

Whine slipping out. “But I... I was playing Mama.”

“Answer me please.”

“No I’m not, but I was playing Mama.” Pointing to red heels as if it was obvious.

Fingers pinched the bridge of her nose at Emma’s sense of logic her decaffeinated brain had trouble registering and dropped as Regina finally took in the full picture. The girl was drowning in her expensive designer dress now stained. Make-up smeared on that cute proud face with the biggest puppy raccoon eyed stare batting lashes up at her. Three rooms a mess, eggs dripping onto her clean floor around their bare feet and Emma in need of a bath at 6:38 on a Tuesday morning.

“Are you playing me?”

“Yeppeers and I did good, huh?” Emma blew a red lipped kiss and then swept her fingers over the dress trying to smooth it, lipstick smearing the fabric in their wake.

Regina smiled internally at the pride in that voice and knelt down to take little sticky hands. “Yes, you got the look down just right, sweet one.” A kiss in return. “However there is quite a mess left behind from your adventure this morning and the fact that you were cooking without me. Using the stove or anything hot by yourself is not allowed at this age.”

Emma considered that rocking on her feet. “But tech-ic-ly I was you sooooo...”
“No baby, pretending or not you know better. Remember when you burned your finger in our other life when you tried to make yourself breakfast?”

Nervous fidget. “Kinnndaa.”

Brow arched. “I think you do and we talked about why using hot things without asking or without me is not allowed. Why is that a rule?”

“Cause I can get hurt or a fire might happen.”

Nodding. “You had a natural consequence last time, this time you’ve earned a timeout and then we will get you cleaned up for school. If there is a next time it will be a reminder. You also need to ask before you play Mama again and get into my clothes and make up. Alright?” Standing and guiding little feet to the corner across the room with a pat to stay put.

“Yeah.” Red pout as eyes faced a white wall and she considered her Keeper’s words.

By the time Emma was called out of the corner the mess in the kitchen had been vanished away and she was hugged as she apologized into dark hair. Lifted to sit on the counter next to the sink and washed up as breakfast cooked, she squirmed as a warm cloth ran across her face.


“You need one, but there isn’t time if we do not want to be late. Hold still.” Catching grubby hands and arms next. “Alright, upstairs and get dressed. Your uniform is hanging on the back of your desk chair.” She lifted the child down as eyes found the clock, 6:54.

It was going to be a long day.

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‘Gonna be a llooonnngg day.’ Emma thought and yawned, slouching in her desk after being redirected a second time to pay attention.

Her thoughts drifted back to earlier that morning. After getting dressed she couldn’t find red converse she wanted to wear to school and had to settle for her second choice of blue and purple mismatched ones. Her favorite butterfly barrette broke. They were running late and she had to settle for a ponytail instead of the braids she wanted. An omelet and fruit for breakfast when she’d wanted Coco-Puffs and her new backpack caught in the car door, ripping when she tried to pull it out and that was all before the first bell at 8:00.

The kids in her class were friendly and Gabe was even in it, sitting to her left, but he didn’t know her. Emma attempted conversation with him, but doing so when she was supposed to be listening. Here Mrs. Gold was not her teacher; instead the beauty was the school librarian. The girl missed the bubbly gentleness of that version in their spelled life. Her teacher here was also a friend of theirs and though patiently kind was no nonsense.

Emma watched as Kathryn Prince went through phonemic blends in a say repeat fashion before her pencil moved to write the sound. Regina had taken her last week to the school, like they had in their spelled life, so she could see the classroom and to speak with Ms. Prince. Adult side had been grateful that Kathryn was more than understanding of the situation and that there was a similar system set in place to be able to call Regina if something wasn’t right or she needed to process something. It was barely noon and Emma had found herself in the chill chair in the back of the room twice for being snippy about not following directions, but not enough trouble to warrant a call that she knew of.

“Emma?”

“Huh?” Green eyes snapped to attention as she realized Ms. Prince was looking down at her.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, just tired. Sorry.” And she was also starting to regret not trying harder to go back to sleep when she’d be asked to that morning.

Thoughtful. “Would you like to lie down in the nurse’s office after lunch to get some rest?”
“Curls shook. “No thanks, I wanna have recess.”

“Alright, but try to pay attention to the lesson okay?”

Emma nodded and she made more of an effort until the bell released them for lunch. She scrambled out of her seat and followed her class to the cafeteria, eager to dig into her lunch. Spying Gabe at the first grade table she started toward him, but caught Neal’s wave from across the room. Hesitating only for a moment before she made a beeline to him, dodging the bigger third graders looking down at her in curiosity. Her new Wonder Woman lunch bag slapped the table as she plopped down next to Neal, eyeing his food with a grin.

“What’d ya bring for lunch bro?”

“Cheese sandwich, fruit roll up and Oreos. You?” Peering over.

Emma dumped out her bag in response, quick to catch an orange Cutie rolling to the edge of the table.

He took in the star shaped turkey tomato sandwich with carrot sticks, thermos of milk, and a wrapped cinnamon cookie. His mouth watered. “Wanna trade cookies?”

“No, but I’ll give you half for half?” While she liked Oreos, she loved cinnamon cookies, but wanted to share with Neal.

They broke and swapped, joked and laughed as they ate until a familiar face Emma had not missed came into view; Jason McFee. The boy she’d made bleed in a spelled reality was apparently just as much of a brat here as he was there. He was also Neal’s friend.

Jason scowled at the blonde invader then back to Neal. “Since when did you resort to eating lunch with babies?”

Rolling his eyes as Emma bristled beside him. “She’s not a baby, she’s my sister. So relax. She’s cool.”

Emma puffed up at the compliment and glared back at the boy. “Yeah, and I’ve got skills. So don’t try any funny business mister.” She remembered all too well the lesson she’d learned from punching him, or another version of him. “I know Kung-Fu, but I use my words first.”

“You’re not supposed to sit here. This table is for third graders and I’m gonna tell if you don’t scram.” Crossing his arms in challenge, Jason smirked.

“Dude, that’s a stupid rule. Besides I want her here. Back off.” He couldn’t figure out why his friend was being mean.

“Yeah back off dude!” Emma chimed in and reached for her half of the cinnamon cookie. It was snatched by a freckled hand and stuffed into the same mouth she’d once shoved dirt in. “Hey! That’s mine!”

Swallowing. “Not anymore munchkin. Go sit with the rest of the lollipop guild.”

“Like this?” A hand spilled the rest of her milk onto the table, it rolled to the edge dripping on her new shoes. “Where are those skills munchkin?” Laughing.

Emma clenched her fists wanting to pop him, but opened her mouth to use her words instead. “I’ll show you skills.” She grabbed the condiment bottle from the middle of table. Letting a stream of ketchup fly over Jason’s shoulder to the 4th grade table, she slapped the bottle into his hand just as a much bigger girl whirled around, red staining the back of a head. With a mischievous look at Neal Emma yelled at the top of her lungs. “FOOD FIGHT! JASON’S IT!” And ducked, pulling her brother under the table with her as food flew between 3rd and 4th. Ketchup, mustard, banana peels, milk, all hurled among shrieks, giggles, and yelling.

A whistle blew, then several and the fight slowed to a standstill.

“That was AWESOME!” Neal high-fived Emma under the table, then gulped as familiar eyes of his mother came into view.
“Neal, what on earth are you…” A closer look. “Emma?”

“Hi,” Emma hunched shoulders up to her ears and waved up at Snow as she slowly crawled out from under the table behind her brother. Big grin forming at the sight of a pink faced Jason looking like a well dressed hotdog. She pointed to a green bottle on the floor. “Relish?”

“Stop.” Snow stepped between them before the angry boy could take a swing. “Jason, go to the nurse to get cleaned up. Neal and Emma, Principal’s office.” Turning away to give directions to the lunch aides and other kids.

Green eyes watched her brother move to obey, but she stalled. “Why are we in trouble? Jason started it.”

Snow hesitated at that questioning little face. “He will be joining you two in the office once he’s cleaned up Emma. Go on with Neal.”

Emma stomped her foot in response, but followed her brother, joining him on the bench in the front office. The Principal, Ms. Mal, interviewed them and was just finished questioning as Snow entered the office with Jason, now in a borrowed uniform, in tow.

Maleficent dipped her chin in greeting. “Ah, you’re here… Have you phoned Regina yet? We need both of you so we can discuss the situation.”

Snow looked between her two children and then back to those luminous eyes. “Regina?”

Dragon nodded with blonde brows high, holding up the school file with Emma’s name on it. “Of course. She is the primary contact listed.”

Tight smile. “I haven’t yet… Please call her.” The little blonde had perked up at the Mayor’s name and Snow noted how those green eyes studied her carefully.

Long tapered fingers dialed a known number by heart, eyeing the Princess as the Queen’s voice came, like sweet open sky, into ear. She explained the situation, eyes shifted to the child as a pink lipped groan escaped across the room. Mal sincerely felt for Emma, as Regina sounded less than pleased.

While she and the Queen had their differences in the past, both Savior and Regina had kept their word to help reunite her with Lily many years ago, despite Charming pretenses that the couple had nothing to do with Dragon being separated from daughter. Though she and Lily were closer now, distance made connecting hard. Lily preferred New York to Storybrooke while Mal liked the magical latter where she was free to change between forms. Mal had found a home and a passion for the children in the town where she oversaw them with love and high expectations. She had made her peace with Snow and David, but enjoyed the occasional dig she could get at their expense. Hints of former darkness still lurked inside and always would, but were tightly controlled.

Snow shook her head at Emma’s moaning dramatics and watched as Dragon spoke with Queen. Her eyes fell to the open file on the desk, unable to help brushing over the contents. One acronym caught her gaze and she squinted at the letters IEP before the file snapped closed and was put away, complete with Mal’s chiding look at being nosy.

Fifteen minutes later Emma was on the receiving end of displeased amber eyes as the details of the food fight was relayed by Neal, with Snow chiming in with what she knew. Disgruntled agreements and comments by Jason joined in under the guiding questions from Mal. Emma hadn’t said a word and smashed her lips together harder when the Queen knelt to her level.

“Is that what happened in the cafeteria?” Regina frowned at the scowl on her girl’s face. “Emma, answer me please.”

Hands picked at the crest on her blazer. “Mostly… yeah, but I used my words like you said to instead of punching him like last time.”

“Last time?” Snow interjected between them.

Regina looked over and up, quietly annoyed at being interrupted. “That is a long story for another day.” Back to green. “You did, but not appropriately. Yelling ‘food fight’ after you squirted ketchup across the room is not using your words. What else did I tell you to do?”
Squirming. "To tell an adult. But he spilled my milk first and took my cookie and ate it."

“He did and that was wrong. You were also wrong in how you responded and that is why you are sitting here in trouble. Do you understand that?”

Green narrowed. “I don’t like it.” Crossed arms.

Patient. “You don’t have to like that idea, but you need to understand your role of responsibility in it. We will be talking about this and the timeouts you got in class today at home later tonight.” Regina gently uncrossed little arms and cupped a chin as green questioned her. “Yes sweet one, I know all about those too.”

Emma teared up, but kept her pout. “This day sucks.”

Regina silently agreed, not wanting to have to discipline for a second time that same day as she stood and turned to the Mal with an apologetic look. “Has the cafeteria been cleaned up yet?”

“No entirely.” Snow answered instead. “I bet the lunch monitors could use some help. Three extra pairs of hands to be exact.”

Mal nodded, internally rolling eyes at being answered for, but kept civil. “That sounds like a fair consequence before they go back to class.”

“Moosmm.” Neal spoke up. “I didn’t throw food!”

“You didn’t stop it either Neal.” The Princess shook her head. “You know to get an adult and not encourage that behavior. The way you and Emma were high-fiving under the table when I found you says otherwise about your involvement.”

“It wasn’t his fault.” Emma popped in to defend her brother. “Jason was being a jerk!”

“Emma.” Stern from a red mouth.

Green snapped to brown. “He waaasss a JERK though!” Upset her Mama didn’t see it her way.

“That is quite enough with the name calling.” Regina held up her hand for silence as little lips pursed back. “We have also talked a lot about whining, tone, and being respectful recently.” Reminding Emma of their discussion on rules.

“Is she always this argumentative?” Interrupting again in wonder, Snow leaned whispering her question.

Giving brief, but thoroughly irradiated eyes at the cut in. “Sometimes more so when she feels passionately that she’s right about something.” Regina sighed and looked back to Emma’s simmering form with a much softer gaze. “Are you ready to speak nicely and go help clean up?”

“Can’t MAKE me…. NOT gonna help!” Kicking the bench she sat on, Emma glared.

“Can’t be TALKING to me…. NOT gonna help!” Kicking the bench she sat on, Emma glared.

A brow rose again at the tone and shouted words. “You may help now or we will go home for a reminder first about listening and being respectful before coming back and you help anyway. Those are your choices.”

“Don’t wanna chat with yooou! Angry eyes and chin bobbing.

“We will be talking at some point today about your behavior at school.” Kneeling back down to restate and give time to calm. “Is your choice to help now or are we going home for a little bit before we return?”

“Regina….” Disapproving, Snow cut in.

“This is between Emma and I, Snow.” Having meant what she had discussed with Emma last week. The girl needed boundaries and all parts, including the pouting one right now, expected them to be reinforced.
A blonde head shook complete with a sniffle as words and actions caught up with the tears starting to leak. Emma wanted to go home, but not what came with that offer and she didn’t want to work with Jason. The boy scowled at her from his spot across the room. Her words became tangled as the emotions of the day got the better of her and she couldn’t explain it, but she hoped her eyes could so she gave them to brown.

“Noooo.” Clogged.

Regina recognized Emma’s plea for help in that stubborn little wet face before standing and lifting a clingy child to her hip. “May we use your office for a few minutes Mal?”

“Be my guest.” Dragon gestured down the hall and watched heels turn that way.

“Noooo talk.” Emma kicked out her legs in frustration over her scrambled words, further trying to explain her lack of them.

“Regina! You can’t just—”

“Snow, this is not what you think.” The Queen assured and kept walking, soothing the child as she went.

In the privacy of the small, but neat office Regina sat in one of the chairs opposite the desk with Emma curled up on her lap. The girl fought back tears as the Queen pulled a tissue from her purse.

“No ’minder Maamaa?” She blew into the tissue at her nose.

“No reminder. That is not why we are sitting here baby. You need a quiet space away from others to calm down so I can help you. Mama realizes that you didn’t mean to not listen to me.” Assuring now that she understood it was not defiance in response to her prompts to adjust behavior coming from Emma in the main office.

Emma snuggled into her favorite spot under a chin. “Tangled up inside.”

“I see that baby. Right now I need to understand how you’re feeling so I can help you make a good choice. Why don’t you want to help clean up?”

“He’s being mean, like before and I don’t wanna be by him.” A yawn tore through pink lips.

“I imagine you don’t. It has been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“Little nod and more tears as words finally returned. “He called me munchkin and I’m not and he ate my cookie you made for me and made fun of me and the milk messed up my new shoe.” Dropping her chin to chest. “And I wanna be friends with Gabe ’gain, and M-Ms. Prince isn’t Ms. Gold and I tried to listen and ’member to be good and I forgot and gots timeouts and my backpack ripped and my barette broke and…” Crying as was pulled in closer and kissed.

“Oh my poor baby. That sounds like a very long and very tough day.”

“Un-huh, it was.”

“Sometimes we have those and they are no fun at all.”

A hiccup. “You too?”

“Me too, but you know what?”

“What?”

“No matter how bad one day seems we always get another one. Tomorrow is a new day, a clean start and we get to try again.”

Sniffling. “I like that idea.”
"Until then, here is what we are going to do with the rest of this one." Lifting a chin. "We are going to have a small change of plans and not because of the food fight, but because you are tired. By the time you are done helping to clean up it will be near time for school to be over. We will go right home, no Town Hall or Kung-Fu today, you will do your homework, we will talk more about your choices at school over dinner, your bedtime routine and lights out by 7:00."

Emma rubbed her eyes. "Bubbles in bath?"

"Yes bubbles." Smiling when the child did in response.

"Mama, what’s my con’quence from you?"

Regina thought for a moment about Emma’s words as the child played with her necklace and the fullness of the day through six year old eyes. "I think cleaning up the mess you helped make and apologizing to the lunch monitors is enough along with the apology you will be making to the girl you squirted ketchup on."

"I can do that. I’ll work hard to show I’m sorry."

"Let’s go share that with Ms. Mal and start to turn this day back around." She lifted Emma to stand up and hand in hand they left the office. As they walked back into the main one Regina came to a ridged halt as she took in the two new additions and the lack of a Dragon having a conversation in the far corner of the office waiting room. Breath hitched as a leering glance and a crooked smile came her way. The day just got worse.

"Hello dearies."

"Mrs. Gold!" Emma brightened seeing her former teacher, happy memories gave her tunnel vision and she pulled on the hand holding hers to go give a hug.

"Emma." Firmer than she meant to be, but Regina’s tone stilled little feet quick enough for green eyes to take in the whole room. The child immediately took a step back and hid face in her black coat at the site of Gold. She rested a consoling hand on the back of a blonde head.

"Regina?" Snow questioned the sharp tone and the hand holding her daughter’s, sensing the tension between the Dark One and Queen.

"Let it go Snow."

A cane rapped the floor with a laugh. "Should you Snow? A little edgy aren’t you Queenie and poor Emma, are those tears in her eyes again. Baiting the Princess was so easy. He revealed Snow’s uncertain eyes as his shredded the Queen. "How is the little Savior? I’ve been worried since you made her cry the other day in my shop."

"Regina… what is he talking about?" Taking a step toward Emma, Snow crossed her arms.

Brown eyes flashed and shifted to comforting warmth when she cupped Emma’s face to look up. "Baby I need you to go with Neal and clean up. Remember to make your apologies. Snow will go with to talk to the lunch aides. Are you alright to do that for me?"

Uncertain, Emma shifted side to side. "You’ll stay at school?"

"I’ll come find you in a few minutes."

Emma mulled over the idea and shrank back when Gold eyes rested on her. Flashes of her last encounter with him made her heart pound. She hugged the leg she clung to, but his mean eyes more than made her ready to be out of the room. "Okay, but hurry." Taking Neal’s hand she scurried ahead of Snow out of the office.

The Princess’ eyes narrowed back at her as there was now no choice but to follow little feet. Regina sighed as she turned to Gold. "What are you doing here and what was that about?" She snapped, his game too fresh in mind.

Crooked smile. "Just bringing my wife her lunch." Handing the take out from Granny’s to Belle, he leaned in to nuzzle a soft cheek, eyes never leaving the Queen’s.

"Rumple, I’m at work." Belle blushed like a crushing school girl.
Anger bubbling, Regina felt sick.

“’t can’t help it my love. Tonight I must feast on your beauty.” Stealing a kiss from a dimpled cheek as Belle left down the hall. He gave a hungry look before turning and coming to a stop within inches of the seething Queen. Eyes drifted down to see that royal fist clenching flames it could no longer summon. “In case you’re thinking of trying anything foolish to get your magic, I’ve warded my shop.” Snarling when red lips curled. “I’m also planting seeds that will flower in the right charming head.” Backing away. “I suggest you keep Emma close while you can.” Wicked grin. “Your move, dearie.”

Regina shook as he slithered out of the room and turned sharply, nearly colliding with Mal in the doorway leading to the other hall. Files flew and papers scattered between them.

Swallowing her upset down. “I’m so sorry Mal.” Regina knelt to help pick up the mess.

“Quite all right.” Fingers brushed accidentally over the Queen’s and she hesitated before reaching away for another pile. “I had to take a phone call, so I stepped out. Is Emma alright?”

“Yes, she just needed a quiet space to calm down for a few minutes.” Standing and handing the pile over. “Both she and Neal are in the cafeteria cleaning up now.”

Mal studied the flustered brunette. “You are good with her like this, you always were before too.” Reflecting back to when they had been in a relationship. “She was adorably guilty when I called you earlier. Those eyes of hers are so expressive.”

“They are.” Softening. “Thank you for calling me.”

“Snow didn’t seem too keen on the idea, but didn’t give me any fuss.” A brow quirked up at the shadows passing over brown. “Let me know if you’d like my eyes on Snow too as well as on the little one, both sides of her. I support what you are doing for Emma and as your friend… I’m here for both of you.” Mal brushed a hand down an arm and squeezed before letting go.

Regina tucked hair behind her ear and cleared a throat. “I’d like that and for the record, Gold should not be anywhere near Emma.”

“Is the Dark One up to mischief again?” When the Queen didn’t answer Mal simply nodded. “I see. I will keep a close eye, don’t fret.”

Regina smiled tightly in thanks and turned to go when a hand on her shoulder stopped heels. Breath hitched, eyes closed at that familiar feather light touch. Stomach flipped and heart fluttered. Remembering feelings and words she had tucked away long ago. The Dragon had known her darkness, accepted her at her most foul moments in the Enchanted Forest. Friends turned enemies, then friends to budding lovers. Regina had not been able to let go of her first lost love enough to let Mal in and now…

“Mal… Please.”

“Regina.”

The Queen opened her eyes at the soft command in that tone. They were both dominant women, powerful in their own right, together at their full strength impossible to stop. More than stubborn to a fault and they agreed to disagree on a good day. Still, she gave pause and allowed her ears to hear what was said and unsaid.

“If you are ever ready.” Squeezing again. “I’m still here.”

“Regina, what the hell was that?” Snow whispered fiercely to the approach of heels, eyes supervising the children cleaning up in the cafeteria.

“A game of his.” Heels shifted and rested against the wall near a white covered shoulder that cornered hers.

“That’s not what I mean. Emma practically ran from you out of that room. He said you made Emma cry and you were sharp with her back there. I know you guys have this… thing between you, but was that really necessary?”
“It was for what it was and for the record Emma needed a quiet moment to calm down not what you are insinuating took place.” Gold’s seeds of doubt had taken root much too quickly for her taste.

Memories of an evil mask playing at affection in another realm decades ago flapped against the walls of a heart. Snow jabbed a finger into a royal shoulder. “Did you hurt Emma, like he implied? I swear to Hades if you—”

“No and if you will kindly not point a finger in the wrong direction I will explain what I can to you.”

A hissy huff. “Fine. Explain.”

Regina leaned her head back taking a deep breath. “Do you remember that night we were looking for Emma years ago and we were walking down the road following her footprints and we were talking about good and evil?”

“Seriously?” Standing tall and crossing arms. “You’re taking a trip down memory lane right now when—”

“Take the hero cotton out of your ears Snow White and just listen to me as one mother to another, for Emma.” Eyes pierced for understanding, then closed finding the memory again. “You told me that people are not all evil nor are they all good. That things… people are not ever that simple.”

Nodding, but chin lifting in challenge. “I did, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“I was so sure back then that I understood the line between heroes and villains. That you would forever be a hero and I a villain. That free will meant nothing in regards to being able to change when it is in fact everything. I never forgot your words about choices and making the right ones, the good ones in order to find my piece of happiness.”

“You remember all that?” Softening the edge slightly, Snow relaxed her arms. “From me?”


Rolling eyes. “Was I right?”

“You were. I did find happiness in repairing my relationship with Henry and in the one Emma and I share, and too in learning to love myself.”

Frowning. “How does Gold factor into that?”

“A game of heroes and villains. Someone playing hero by using happiness to mask free will so they will no longer be a villain. It’s twisted logic, but someone wears it well and I am not talking about myself, dear.” Turning to hold green eyes. “You understand that people are shades of grey and you believed that I could redeem myself even in my darkest moments. Emma believes in me. I need you to hold onto that belief you are questioning and trust that I would never harm Emma. Do not open the old door of blind self-righteous heroism. I am not the woman I once was, nor will I ever be again.”

“Regina…” Pensive confusion.

“You are far from the idiot I sometimes called you and even then I meant it with affection. Use your brain and not your heart right now. Think about my words.”

“Okay, I will.” Conflicted over two sets of them on the scale before her. “Should I be worried?”

Regina continued to explain best she could. “Be watchful of Emma at school. I am counting on your eyes here and David’s at the station. She is not to be alone with Gold and she knows that. If she ever is, it will not be by her choice. I cannot be in two places at once.”

“At once for what?”

“Remember my words, Emma’s belief if nothing else, when you doubt my motives.”
Suspicious in spite of herself. “Speaking of motives, why didn’t you tell me Emma had an IEP when we had her school discussion? That is a big deal.”

Brown eyes closed with a sigh. Some things never change. “Because that is Emma’s personal business to tell.”

“But what’s it for? I could help.”

“Emma needs to be in on that conversation. I suggest letting her come to you when she’s ready to share.” Regina smile came back as little feet approached and arms claimed her waist. Neal did the same to Snow.

Wondering, Emma looked up. “All done? Can we go home now?”

“We need to get your backpack first. You did a great job in here working together.” Kissing the top of head and teasing. “Maybe when we get home you can do the same to your room?”

Green widened wrinkling a nose. “Nu-huh, my arms need a nap. Sides, I have homework. Then bubbles! You said!”

Chuckling. “So I did sweet one. Say goodbye to Snow and Neal.”

Emma stepped away, looking up at the woman hugging her brother and joined in, wrapping arms around both of them. “See ya later, alligators!”

Those willing arms were not something Snow thought she’d ever have around her again until a few weeks ago. Resting a hand on her daughter’s back, her eyes shined. “After a while crocodile.” The child pulled away flashing a smile, returned happily to the Queen and waved. Despite words from red lips she couldn’t help but linger on the accusing ones from Gold.

A/N – What did you think?

Next Time – Ruby seeks advice from Regina and Emma. A sweet comical coming out happens over dinner. Queen and Wolf make a plan to pan for Gold. Emma has a foretelling dream…
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

A/N – For those that voted on the sub-plot line of Ruby coming out, here is your chapter. Thanks again for your input! Fan Art at end.

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Emma hummed as she looked out the car window at the passing homes leading up to their own. Today had been a much better one than yesterday all around and included her Kung-Fu class she chatted happily about until she saw someone she recognized. A little finger pointed to the front porch as the Benz rolled into the driveway.

"Look Mama!"

Regina followed Emma's direction and saw Ruby pop up from a sitting position on the front steps, waving at them. The child scrambled out of the car seat and ran up the walk, throwing arms around the waitress as Queen smiled in greeting.

"Hey Ruby! Did you bring me a bear claw?"

"Emma." Red lips chided softly.

"Ah, it's okay Regina. Not today little swan." Big eyes complete with a teasing pout. "Am I enough for you?"

Rolling green eyes and a grin. "Duh, I'm just hungry!"

Regina cracked a smile as she keyed them into the house with a wave to Ruby to follow. "You are always hungry sweet one. Let's go in and you can have some grapes."

"Green or purple?"

Ruby laughed as she shed her coat along with her hosts. "Don't they taste the same Emma?"

Serious face regarded the wolf in shock. "I have a 'fisticated plate. It so does matter. A lot."

Taking Ruby's coat to hang up, Regina offered clarity. "What she's trying to say using her big words so well, is that she has a sophisticated palate. Running fingers through curls and giving eyes to green. "I washed some purple ones this morning. They are in bags on the bottom shelf in the fridge. You may have one bag. Dinner will not be long off."

Happy little feet took off for the kitchen as Regina led Ruby into the living room.

"Swan has a palate?" Ruby sank into the couch.

"A very picky one. Everything is about color, shape and texture with this version. Taste is just an added bonus for her." Setting nearby in a winged chair. "I suspect you were not waiting on our porch to talk about a six year old's eating habits."

"Not really." Shrugging in wonder. "Does she still have her adult awareness anymore?"

"In some capacity though that's leaving more and more in her altered states, but it still comes and goes. She is self aware and has all her memories, but she can not control exactly how she accesses them. Often she just gives into whatever impulses and emotions come with the age she is."

"Three Swans is a neat idea."

Chuckling. "Tell that to my washing machine."

"She's adorable and sassy. I love it." Sighing. "I hope I didn't catch you both at a bad time. I've been sitting on this for a while now and I need to run something personal through somebody and you two came to mind."

"Why us?" Emma trotted into the room all smiles popping a grape in her mouth, making a beeline for a lap she wanted to sit on.

Royal hands lifted the girl up. "Did you wash your hands?"

Thinking then nodding. "Uh-huh." Offering the bag to Ruby. "Want some?"

"So polite, but no thanks Emma. You guys are my friends and I just thought you might be able to give me some tips on a conversation I need to have with Granny."

"We'd be happy to help or just listen if that's what you need." Regina adjusted a wiggling Emma around to better see the redhead.

"Thanks... um, you know two years ago when you were working on the potion for the town line and that rat Gold had been holding out on all of us and finally he broke the spell on it? She paused wondering why Emma turned to hide in the Queen's arms. "Uh, she okay?"

"Just sensitive." Rubbing a little back with a sigh in return. "And yes, I well remember." Wishing she didn't.

Palm sweating as she broached the reason she was here, Ruby rubbed her hands together.

"Anyway that was a really tough time for me for a lot of reasons and in watching you and Emma these last few years and more so recently I realized how much I've been missing out on. I want that same freedom you guys have. " Licking lips as curious green eyes lifted up from dark hair. "You don't care what anyone thinks and you just live your lives however you want to. I see it more now with this side effect and it's really refreshing."

Emma scrunched her brows and went back to chewing grapes thoughtfully. "Do you need a Mama too?" Looking from Regina and back again as the adults laughed kindly. "Cause sharing is good, but I don't wanna share Mama and me time, so maybe when I'm at school you can borrow her."

With a wink to the Queen. "No I don't little swan, but that is super sweet of you to offer. You get to keep Regina all for yourself. What I need is to be real with myself and learn to live my own truth." Deep breath and holding. "I've only told one other person this and... that didn't work out so well for me, but I'm ready to try again..." Shoulders bunching. "I'm a lesbian."
What she was expecting Ruby wasn't sure. There were no explosions, no fireworks either. Her chest pounded wide open at finally verbalizing what the last heart she trusted betrayed her on. In between green and brown there was a soft acceptance and smiles on two faces. Water ran downhill and it took a full minute to process the taste of her own tears. Emma came first on her left and Regina joined on her right, a trust sandwich. Little lips popped against her cheek as Regina spoke for both of them.

"Your truth is brave and beautiful. We are honored to hear it."

Emma nodded. "What my Mama said."

Sniffing as a tissue box made it into her hands. "I hope Granny is as easy to share with as you two. She's so old school though about a lot of things. She still freaks out whenever a skirt I wear is above my knee."

Regina chuckled. "She is about some things, but she is also a wise woman who is not afraid to speak her mind and that is a skill she passed onto you."

"But what if she doesn't see it the way I need her too? She's my only family, all I've got and I couldn't stand her looking at me... how she used to, during the curse."

Hand finding Regina's. "You and I have made amends and I'm not mad at you anymore for that. I just don't want to be on the receiving end of those disappointed eyes again."

Regina swallowed thickly, remembering the dark part of her heart. "Granny loves you and if she can look at me with kindness and acceptance after the dark curse, as you do, what more for her own flesh and blood?"

"Mama..." Emma scooted off the couch and nearly tackled her Keeper, cupping an ear to whisper an idea. Pulling back. "Can we please?"

"Yes baby, go ahead and ask."

Grinning. "Ruby, you and Granny can have dinner with us tonight, okay?"

"Yes! Bouncing on the couch Emma did a fist pump. "I help cook too!"

"Careful Emma. Catching the excited child mid leap to the floor. "You have homework to do first, but yes you may help. Go get your school folder and come into the kitchen. We will meet you there."

Emma ran to get her folder and pencil as Ruby followed Regina into the kitchen. A quick, but nervous call to Granny had the wolf on the way to the mansion. As the fixings for a salad and a pan of cold pre-layered lasagna was brought out from the fridge, the girl completed her grammar worksheet and flashcards with help from Ruby. Once the lasagna was cooking, little hands and wolf ones helped make a salad when the doorbell rang. The redhead nearly dropped the bowl as Emma squealed happily in her ear.

"MAMA! I GOTS IT OKAY?"

"Emma..." But the child was already in the fryer hopping up to open the lock, bouncing circles around their new guest as Regina entered wiping her hands on a dish cloth. "Baby let her get in the door. Hello Eugenia."

"She's alright Regina, thank you." Smiling as her coat was taken. "How is my favorite little cook?"

"Awesome! I made the salad." Puffing up with pride. "Ruby was my shoe chief."

"Sous chef, baby." Laughing Regina led the way into the kitchen. "Dinner is nearly ready. May I get you anything? Cider perhaps?"

"Please." Nose turning up. "Is that lasagna?"

A dark brow rose. "Yes."

"Red pepper flakes?"

"You know it." Regina poured a glass of cider into a crystal tumbler before beginning to ease the bubbling pan out of the oven when the timer went off.

"Thanks." The old wolf rested elbows on the counter, sipping. "I should, it's my recipe."

"One I altered. So it is more like my recipe, dear."

"You two still at it over that stupid recipe?" Ruby rolled her eyes, joining them from the bathroom off the kitchen.

Granny looked down her nose at her granddaughter with a sly smile. "We are. It's a matter of principle."

"More like stubborn pride." Regina teased lifting Emma up so the child could carefully sprinkle a three cheese mix on top of the pepper flakes. Grinning when Granny stole a pinch and tasted it.

"Is that Gouda with the sharp cheddar and..."

"No, and you'll never guess what it is, I have this blend imported specifically." Opening a drawer and extracting silverware, she handed the bundle to Emma with napkins. "Go set the table please."

"That would be amazing, yeah. I'm off already and Granny is too since we hired on more staff for the winter season."

"Yes! Bouncing on the couch Emma did a fist pump. "I help cook too!"

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Looking between the adults and wanting to listen in least she miss out on something, "But Mama..." Small whine earned a smaller pat to a behind in the right direction. Obeying Emma went to complete her chore.

Ruby snorted as a wrinkled face harrumphed then paled when that face turned to her in question.

"So, what am I here for besides a wonderful meal with good company?"

"Uh..." Red brows shot up as big eyes darted anywhere but the ones looking at her.
Emma, unable to help keen little ears, popped her head around the doorway trying to be helpful. "You're here 'cause—" Muffled as her Mama's soft hand came to rest gently over her mouth.

"Let's finish setting the table together," Regina eased out of the room with the grumbling child as Ruby caught her breath. "Join us whenever you both are ready."

"I… Emma invited us." Tight smile as Granny's lips pursed.

"For a wolf, you are a lousy liar, sweetheart." Ruby rolled her eyes, dropping her arms. "Fine. I need to tell you something that's kind of a big deal and for the record, Emma did invite us." She grabbed the salad bowl and tongs to carry into the dining room as Granny followed with the pan of lasagna.

Emma looked among the adults registering the grumpy nature between the two wolves as she slid into her place. "You guys gotta play nice or Mama will put you in timeout."

"Ha! I'd like to see her try." Granny smiled fondly at Emma and helped Regina dish everyone up a plate.

Little shoulders shrugged dramatically at the obvious. "Okaaay, but she's the boss." Emma inhaled the scent of her favorite meal, but waited until everyone was ready to eat before grabbing her fork. She sighed and held up the blue plastic cup in her place. "Mama?"

"Your yellow one is in the dishwasher Emma."

"Please? I just can't." Pouts and lashes fluttering followed.

Ruby smirked as Regina stood to take the cup. "Whose the boss?"

"R-Ruby was the same way when she was that age. Wouldn't eat anything on her plate that touched something else."

"Granny." The waitress whined.

"I'm stone cold sober. Now, are you ready to tell me what you need to say?"

"I said pass the salad not toss her salad, who ever she is." Smirking at her granddaughter.

"Scoffing. "Until Emma, I never thought the color of a cup could spoil the taste of milk."

"Ruby was the same way when she was that age. Wouldn't eat anything on her plate that touched something else."

"Ha!" Regina nearly lost her wine through her nose and groaned. "We have a child present you two."

"Emma what's that mean?"

"When Emma gives up bear claws." Granny shook her head accepting the bowl with amused eyes. "I had a feeling you were sweetheart for a long time now."

"How could you know?"

"Oh come on Ruby." Plating greens. "All those Victoria Secret catalogs you used to hoard under your bed stated the obvious. Why do you think I got those catalogs to begin with? Can you imagine me in a V-string? There are some fine tails in there."

"Eugenia, really." Biting a lower lip to keep from laughing, Regina shook her head as Ruby flushed ten shades of red gaping, but Granny was on a roll.

"Give me some credit. I used to go chasing plenty of tail when I was your age and for me, it never mattered what pronoun the tail was attached too."

Sputtering, Ruby turned to the Queen. "Did she just…?"

"Yes, she did." A royal nod accompanied with a much bigger sip of wine.

"The conversation turned to the past holiday and the diner there after. Emma begged to tell Granny about Jasper's latest adventure after dinner in her room. That left Ruby and Regina to clean up the dishes in the kitchen.

"And Mama who is Victoria and what's her secret?"

Brown eyes scolded both chuckling wolves. "Make that two years, with pie and it had better be apple."

"You don't owe us anything, but I meant what I said about the coffee and pie, especially after the thong visual that will haunt my nightmares." Running a cloth over a glass to dry.
She hated wearing them, but hated waking up in cold wet even worse. Far and rare in between
"Not a baby." Wilting and slowing bringing hands to her Mama's knees to balance as a foot lifted
"I know you don't like them. They are just for tonight and only in case. I've spelled them to
"Noooo." Tight lipped Emma crossed her arms.
Hesitating as child rubbed sleepy eyes, but knowing better than not to as a repeat was usually the
Sitting on her bed she stood Emma between her knees. Summoning a clean pair of yellow PJs.
"It's alright Emma." Pulling back, a thumb wiped a tear path as lips kissed that same
Clinging and whispering. "Accident Mama.
Soft eyes. "It's alright Emma." Pulling back, a thumb wiped a tear path as lips kissed that same
"The first person you told you were a lesbian, was it Belle?"
Taking a hand, she led the child into her bathroom. Water ran in a shallow bath as she quickly
Regina sat surrounded by journals, magic books, and her lock box. Slim fingers brushed over a
"Mean man took me away from you…" Failing to elaborate more.
A low growl in the back of a throat couldn't be helped. "Sorry. I..." Eyes closed fighting the
"Mr. Gold but..." Nose wrinkled in pause. Dewy green looked up. "Snow was there too, but it
"You have to because I cannot do what needs to be done as I am now if you want your happy
"Regina, I can't..." She threw down the sponge.
Resting a hand to a shaking shoulder. "It matters more than you think."
"Regina, I can't..." She threw down the sponge.
Regina, I can't..."
Later that night after the Lucas women left and Emma was in bed, in the privacy of her room, Regina sat surrounded by journals, magic books, and her lock box. Slim fingers brushed over a skeleton key before returning to the page in Cora's old book of spells about wards. Pen made quick notes and her eyes popped up when little ones that should be asleep peered at her from the
"Emma?"
"B-bad dream Mama."
Later that night after the Lucas women left and Emma was in bed, in the privacy of her room, Regina sat surrounded by journals, magic books, and her lock box. Slim fingers brushed over a skeleton key before returning to the page in Cora's old book of spells about wards. Pen made quick notes and her eyes popped up when little ones that should be asleep peered at her from the
"Emma?"
"B-bad dream Mama."
"You cannot do what needs to be done as I am now if you want your happy ending back." A scented trail to follow for a well adept nose.
Ruby named sharply, searching brown eyes carefully. "What do you know about my happy ending?"
"Careful words. "That a beautiful pawn in a twisted game is within your reach. Chess can be a
"It had been months and not since their spelled life, that the little one had a dream triggering an
"Mean man took me away from you..." Failing to elaborate more.
Regina stiffened at the very idea, but raked fingers softly through blonde tresses. "Who was this
"Emma splashed the duck down underwater and let it go to bob up a few times before answering.
"The first person you told you were a lesbian, was it Belle?"
"And then there was Gold." Nose wrinkled in pause. Dewy green looked up. "Snow was there too, but it
"After tonight, you could ask me for the moon and I'd snag it for you. Shoot."
"Oh my little sweet love." Drawing child in for a hug.
"You must have seen them in your dream, right?"
"Soft eyes. "It's alright Emma." Pulling back, a thumb wiped a tear path as lips kissed that same
"The moon you spoke of snagging me is in three weeks and I need your wolf to retrieve a bottle or box with this scent."
Clutching her magical essence to surface with a puff of purple smoke as Red nostril's flared.
"You have to because I cannot do what needs to be done as I am now if you want your happy
"Regina stood in concern, padding over to kneel down in front of the sniffling girl. She smelled it
"I know she asked you for the potions, but I didn't think she told you it was for
"I have to live with her. You should have seen her on New Year's. Her and Leroy were matching
"Oh my little sweet love." Drawing child in for a hug.
"You must have seen them in your dream, right?"
"You have to because I cannot do what needs to be done as I am now if you want your happy
"Red grinned in return.
"You have to because I cannot do what needs to be done as I am now if you want your happy
"It matters more than you think."
these nights were, they were still something that occurred. Never once had she been made to feel shamed or in trouble, only loved through the occasional more than rough nightmare.

"No you are not." Reassuring and kissing a cheek as she helped Emma into them followed by PJ bottoms and finally a matching top. Lifting the girl to her lap, consoling the last few tears away as Emma began to relax. Another wave of her hand left the bed in Emma's room made up with clean sheets. As if reading her mind the little one shook a head.

"Stay here with you."

"Alright sweet one, in you go," Shifting the child and pulling back the covers before tucking in. She rested a cool hand on a little brow. "It's a shift night. Did you remember to take your charm off earlier?" A bracelet encased wrist was held up in answer, initial charm missing. "Such a good girl."

Yawning. "I am, huh?"

"Oh yes." Nose rubbing little nose.

Little fingers tugged at sheets. "What if he's in my dream again?"

"Do you remember the special safe place we made together?"

Dimples in pale cheeks as a chin nodded. Readily recalling the first night she had sought comfort from her Keeper after an accident. The adult mind little body had possessed at the time had struggled to accept the offer of arms and understanding. Now she knew not what she would do without them. "Our fort in your apple tree."

"Nothing and no one can come into our safe place without our permission. I'll be waiting right there in your dreams for you." Thumb stroking blonde brows as green fluttered.

Hopeful murmur. "All of me?"

"Every single one of you, baby."

Drifting off. "Not a ba-by..."

Kissing between sleeping eyes. "Always my baby."

A/N - Still taking prompts for PART 3 of this series, so please toss any ideas you have for Regina/Mal and Emma interactions my way. :)

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A/N - Still taking prompts for PART 3 of this series, so please toss any ideas you have for Regina/Mal and Emma interactions my way. :}
The next morning Emma turned over in silk sheets, mouth dry yawned as she cracked an eye to the dim room. Cool morning made her shiver and she pulled the thick duvet up close under chin, stretching once as the night before rushed nedly in. Hands shot to her face, rubbing sleep away and pulled back stringing at adult palms she didn’t yet recognize, then wrists incased in yellow PJ cuffs on a shirt that had grown with her over night. Turning over, wide eyes rested on Keeper slumbering softly across the bed. Teeth worried a bottom lip as green filled.

At her most vulnerable last night, though but a shadow of the former haunted child she had been the first time she’d grown up. Emma was slowly losing the last little bits of that scared untrusting little girl. All because of the woman she had allowed into her heart and of the heart beside her she belonged to in so many beautiful yet complex ways. Brunette stirred and a warm hand found hers, squeezing a sweet hello.

Amber opened soft and inviting. “Good morning my girl.”

“G’mornin.” Small and quiet, unsure of the last words she had heard before good dreams had stolen this reality from her for sleep.

Regina eased up taking green in for what they were, flattening pillow against the headboard and sitting up into it. Beckoning once, Emma rushed at her. Fingers combed blonde tresses quickly calming tangled thoughts of the past and present under them. “What demons are bothering you baby?”

Emma blanked as dew fell from green leaves. Fisting silk that wasn’t sheets as her little mind struggled to let go for the shift into her adult body. Cross over between versions of her happened sometimes, though not often, in the first few minutes of waking after a shift night. “Am I still Mama, even now?”

“Especially now… Remember back to when you broke into my lock box when Ruby was watching you and I had my council meeting back in our other life?”

Sniffing hard. “Yeah. It was the first time I…” Mind let go finally as adult one came into focus. “I mean little me trusted you there. But what does that have to do with anything?” Fully present now, she summoned initial heart charm from her room and clipped it on, settling back into her spot as fingers played with a birthstone necklace.

Lips met a warm brow, soothing. “That moment when you were standing in front of me, tears streaking down your face so full of want and need, I knew you were mine.”

Emma nestled in, soaking in that assurance returning with some of her own. “I was already yours though Gina.”

Lifting a chin up fondly. “Exactly, you were. It doesn’t matter what side of you is present. You are mine.”

“What are we now, then?” Searching amber for an answer needed. “We have never named it.” A thumb, smoothed circles on her cheek as red kissed again murmuring one word that said it all.

“Happy.”

The bitter winter of Maine continued to chill the small down as the second week of January came to a close. The last three days as an adult had passed quickly and even included a breakfast date with Snow. Though the Princess had been on her best behavior, Emma sensed something off with the woman, but couldn’t place it. After the busy week she was looking forward to the weekend plans she had.

It was Sunday late morning and the first day Emma had awakened from shifting to her teenage form. Early morning had been filled with another shopping trip to get her some regular clothes for when she was this size. The topic about paying her Keeper back for items purchased had been discussed, as Queen promised it would be at the girls insistence on their first shopping date for bras. After some back and forth Emma had finally agreed to let Regina take care of her needs financially when she was this age and six. They had a different arrangement between them as adults that still worked and neither felt the need to make adjustments there. That topic also came along with a talk on money management and the discussion they were currently having as they ate lunch in the diner.

Emma shoved a sweet potato fry in ranch then her mouth and chewed as she tried not to roll her eyes. “I don’t need an allowance. I have a bank account with my own money I can tap when I want stuff.”

“Correction, your adult side has a bank account. You do not.” Taking a bite of kale salad, Regina studied the sullen blonde.

Picking at the remains of a club sandwich. “I could though, if we open an account and just move money over?”

“We talked about that yesterday, Emma. That money, while yours, is not yours. You need to learn money management skills just like your little side does.” Reminding of their new agreement. “I was thinking every other time you are this age you can earn an allowance. Fifteen dollars should be a sufficient amount to allow you some personal freedom for things you want or for fun without having to ask me for it. That’s not to say you give me some for certain things should you ask.”

Emma mulled that over. She was impulsive at this age and having free rein over debit and credit card accounts would be way too tempting. Sighing, she nodded her understanding. “So since I’m meeting Justina at the arcade after this, does that mean I can have my allowance today for games?”

“You may if that is what you want to spend it on. I will give it to you when I drop you off.” Eyes turned to the red head passing. “Ruby, may we have our check please?”
“Sure thing.” A black billfold made it to the table as the waitress moved to take the empty salad plate. “My shift is nearly over, are we still on for 1:00?”

“We are. I should be back from dropping Emma off by then.”

Emma looked between the adults quizzically and pushed her nearly empty plate aside allowing Ruby to take it away. When the wolf was out of ear shot she leaned over the table top. “Hold up. You two are hanging out?” Brow wrinkling as a flicker of jealousy caught green wick in eye aflame. “Without me?”

Regina tucked two twenties in the front pocket by the receipt. “Ruby and I have a few things to discuss and I thought since you and Justina already had plans it would be a good time.”

“Oh.” Sitting back. “So you’re just talking? It’s not for fun.”

Curious. “Would that make a difference?”

Shrugging. “Maybe.” Rolling eyes when dark ones assessed. “It’s weird is all. We all usually hang out together.”

“So if I wanted to,” air quotes, “hang out with you and Justina at the arcade that would be just fine with you?”

Blushing. “No cause that’s not the same thing.”

“I see.” Standing and beckoning for Emma to follow to the car. The girl was quiet until they were settled in the front seat.

“See what?” Emma buckled up as the car was started.

“That you seem to think it is alright for you to have friends and go off with them without me, but that for me to do the same is not.” She wasn’t sure where this was coming from, but the logic was not sitting well with her.

Fidgeting. “But Ruby is our friend. Justina is my friend. It’s different.”

“It is and it is not, Emma, especially when you are this age.” Turning down Main Street. “Sometimes I enjoy spending time with other people. I deserve time with friends, just as you do.”

“Yeah I know, but that’s not what I’m saying. It should be all of us though or you and me.”

Slouching. Confusion was replaced with concern evident in her tone as Regina realized it was jealousy speaking. “Ruby we have talked about this. Sometimes it will be just us like this morning and sometimes, like now, it won’t.”

“But it should be Mama…” Curls shaking. “It’s not fair that little me got you all to herself in a perfect world for ten months and I only get you a third of the time here and not even all that time.”

“No it is not fair. I agree with you sweet girl, and while our reality is not entirely within our control, we still have choices.” At the stop sign she rested a hand on a bouncing knee and squeezed reassuringly.

“Then my choice is to go with you guys.”

Pulling into park in front of the arcade, Regina turned in her seat. “I love spending time with just us, like this morning and with our friends, all together. While I respect your feelings, coming with Ruby and I is not an option right now. You already have plans with Justina, ones you have been happily chatting about all morning. I’m sure she would be disappointed if you canceled last minute, especially for this reason.”

“Okay, you’re not being unfair. It’s just how I feel right now.”

“And you may have your feelings. I am not trying to change them, just understand where they are coming from.”

“Thank you baby. I love you too.”

Closing the door more appropriately Emma gave a wave and went to join her friend in front of the
“Awww, really?” Quick fingers flew over the screen as Emma looked on concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“My Mom needs me home to watch my little sister. She got a last minute appointment she can’t move. I gotta go.” Chocolate eyes offered apologies.

“S’ok. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” Bummed, but understanding Emma shrugged. “I have a few quarter’s left so I’m just gonna hang here.”

“Sorry Em, I’ll see you.”

Watching her friend leave with a deep sigh, Emma turned to try and find a machine she hadn’t played yet when she felt it. “Oh dear god, please don’t.…” Running to the bathroom into a stall confirmed her speculation. ‘No wonder I was so grumpy this morning.’ She thought and leaned against the wall itching her final two quarters out of her pocket. George Washington to the rescue. Exiling the stall she found the wall machine for pads and tampons and pushed the quarters into the slot, groaning when it jammed. “Seriously?!” Snatching the machine in frustration did nothing but hurt her hand.

Emma ripped her jacket off, then her sweater and tied it around her waist before putting back on her coat over her cami. Remembering she hadn’t used all her money on video games, she checked her back pocket and pulled out a five. Plan B was the pharmacy across the street. She pulled up her hood to hide her appearance and quick footed out of the arcade and to the crosswalk, hoping the entire time that she did not run into anyone she knew.

With a deep breath she entered, nodding to Doc who did a double take as he gave a robotic greeting. She scanned half the aisles before finding the one she needed and after looking both ways to make sure no one was watching she grabbed the first package of pads on the shelf. Only desire to hurry out of there. Blushing furiously, she tucked them under her jacket. ‘God this is gonna suck.’

Standing on tip toes she spotted Doc ringing up a customer across the way. As soon as the lady was out the door Emma made a mad dash toward the register to pay before anyone other than the dwarf saw her. Bad luck had her slamming right into the person she least expected to see. Emma grunted as the wind was knocked out of her and landed hard on her knees. Nearly fainting when the package of pads she had tucked away spun to a stop in the middle of the floor.

“Oh Emma! Are you alright?” Snow offered a hand to her daughter.

Emma glanced like a fish out of water. Green darted between the floor and the Princess wishing the earth would open up and swallow her if not the package of pads between them.

Snow followed those wide eyes and looked down, bending to pick up the package she had seen drop from under a jacket, not even registering what she was holding. Just the girl’s shocked horror.

“We’re you…”

“We are not having this conversation.” Emma reached to snatch the package back as Doc came around the register.

The dwarf crossed his arms. “Hey you have to pay for that.”

Something gave Snow pause. “Emma, stealing is not okay. You know that.” Surely at this age Emma had a moral compass, but she wondered if this was some version of teen rebellion.

Remembering New Years Eve at the mansion, Emma’s dishonesty at her expense.

“I was going to pay.” Defensive at the insinuation, Emma pulled the wrinkled bill out, she slapped it on the counter and held out her hand expectantly to Snow.

“That is not enough for that item.” Doc shook his head following Snow’s lead, as he and brothers shrugged.

“Fine.” Grabbing her money back and starting toward the door. “I’ll go somewhere else.”

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“Why were you hiding it if you were going to pay Emma?”

It was a simple question that had Emma burning with embarrassment. The last thing she wanted to do was to argue her logic and feelings while she was currently bleeding through her underwear. Especially when Snow was looking at her with a mix of surprise and upset. Frustrated and with heat building behind eyes as words became harder she threw up her hands.

“Fine.” Grabbing her money back and starting toward the door. “I’ll go somewhere else.”

Doc stepped in her way. “We need to sort this out.”

“He’s right Emma.” Snow countered. “Stealing is a big deal and not something that can just be let go of.”

“I wasn’t though.” Tears brimmed at not being believed.

Snow stepped closer and rested a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Then why were you hiding the package and running for the door?”

“I wasn’t running to the door.” Emma pulled away sharply, anger bubbling against humiliation. “Why do you care? You’re not my Mom!”

Bristling and turning to Doc to hide her hurt. “I’ll call Regina. Emma lives with her, so she will help us sort this out.” She whipped out her cell phone and got the Mayor on the third ring.

Slumping back against the counter as Snow talked, Emma sank to the floor with her arms crossed, wondering how she was going to get out of this mess. She readily ignored Snow’s further attempts to talk to her and the continued questions, she refused to answer. While she understood her actions said one thing, her intent had been entirely different. Not being believed when she was being honest yanked at all the misplaced accusations that had been thrown her way in the past. She didn’t always make the best choices and she was a lot of things, but not a thief. Thoughts broke apart several minutes later as a husky voice calling her name drew green eyes up and she went to stand as heels approached from the door, but before she could open her mouth Snow started.

“Regina she’s having a hard time being honest about her actions.” Crossing her arms. While she disagreed with Regina on a lot of things, Emma couldn’t be left running around getting trouble without being held accountable in some way.

The Queen lifted a brow at the Princess and found Emma looking anywhere but where she needed green eyes to be. “Is that what happened Emma?”
“Doesn’t matter.” Sniffing and balling hands into fists.

“It most certainly does.”

“No, it doesn’t! No one here seems to give two shi—”

“Mind your language and tone please.” Firm with warning. Regina wanted no reason to put her girl in check in front of Snow, lest the teen’s emotions spiral. Giving Emma a moment to calm down, she turned to Doc. “What was she supposedly stealing?” A chubby finger pointed to the counter. Seeing the item, the Queen softened considerably and gently pulled the girl with wet eyes several yards away off to the side.

Red, angry and sniffling. “If you’re gonna tell me off can you at least wait until we get to the car?”

Regina lifted a quivering chin. “There will be no telling off sweet girl. Take a deep breath for me and then another…” Waiting a few moments as Emma obeyed before opening her purse and handing over a black zippered pouch. With a writhe flick she added a clean pair of underwear to it with what she already had prepped and had for weeks since their talk. “Inside you will find what you need. Go to the restroom and take care of yourself. Join us when you are done.”

Blinking as grateful tears fell. Cracking. “Mama, I wasn’t…”

Drawing Emma into a hug. “We’ll get it all sorted out in a few minutes baby. Go on.” As Emma retreated to the back of the store she went back to the counter and eyed the scowling pair. “Emma needs a moment. Until then—”

Snow huffed. “Regina you can’t just give into her whenever she has a tantrum.”

Russet flashed. “That was a far cry from a tantrum. Use your eyes Snow. She’s thirteenth, in a pharmacy with a pack of pads and questioning adults. She’s embarrassed.” Sighing and shaking her head. “I’m sure she can explain and that she was not stealing.”

Finally registering what the package was, Snow stammered. “I asked her and she refused to say anything.” The Princess, hurt still over the girl’s earlier comment flushed. “But if you insist on taking this role with her—”

“Stop right there.” Holding up a hand, Queen paused the room. “Just the other day you said I was too firm with her, now you are acting like I let her run the show. While either situation is none of your business, Emma is my responsibility and I take that with the utmost seriousness, including her discipline when it is warranted, which now it is not as you will see.” At a door closing from behind she glanced over her shoulder to see Emma approaching. She took back the black bag into her purse and wrapped an arm around the pink cheeked girl. “Go ahead and tell us what happened please.”

Toeing the checkered linoleum Emma struggled to start. “I needed… Pointing to the counter and growing red again. “And I didn’t want anyone to see me with them, so I was keeping it hidden until I got to the counter. I ran into Snow and fell and those dropped.” Hugging herself and leaning further into the Queen. “I had money to pay. It wasn’t enough, but I didn’t know when I grabbed the package. I just wanted to get in and out quickly before someone saw me.” Looking between the adults, gaining confidence. “I wasn’t gonna steal.”

Regina dropped her arm to rub Emma’s back. “Thank you for explaining.”

“I tried earlier and to give money but….” Mouth pinching with a glare to Snow and Doc.

“Mmmhhmm.” Dark eyes flicked in annoyance to guilty pair that they were even having this conversation at Emma’s expense as she extracted a ten from her wallet and handed it to Doc before taking the pack from the counter and putting it in her purse. “Problem solved.”

“You.” Doc gave Emma a sheepish look. “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“So, I get it.” Mumbling with a nod. “I understood how her actions had looked and in truth she didn’t blame him or even Snow, too much, for going there. She was more upset at not being heard or believed. Irritated, cramps started to set in and she just wanted to go home.”

“Snow?” The Queen raised both brows expectantly.

“I’m sorry too Emma. It just looked like something different and I was reacting instead of listening to you.” She felt terrible, yet something deep inside stirred again, causing her to narrow eyes at the teen.

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“S’ok. I get it.”

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“S’ok. I get it.”

“She’s very sensitive at this age and if you want to continue making progress with her, you need to take a step back and start approaching these situations from a different perspective—”

“As her friend, you mean.” Taking a step closer as Gold flakes never there before rose in iris’. “I am not trying to parent her, but I won’t stand by and let you go off the deep end, dismiss what she needs. You promised me you were doing your best and the other day didn’t look like it. Gold said you made her cry in his shop and then the other day at school you… Wait, where are you going?”

Regina paused near the door and turned back around. “I am not going to stand here in the middle of the pharmacy debating parenting skills or Emma’s needs with you. Obviously you did not think about anything I said in that cafeteria and after all the years we have spent fighting in the past I am more than done with that part of my life. I do not appreciate you trying to paint me as something I am not.” Heart bursting she crossed her arms, civil at best. “A deep breath brought back the calm she needed. She knew exactly where Snow was getting fuel and tried to hold onto the fact that Gold’s words had taken root in the pixie haired head.

“Pursing lips, but wiling. “I’m not saying you’re a villain anymore or that you’re going back to old ways.” Hand to forehead. “I get that she is a consenting adult and you guys have this relationship, but it is hard for me to get past the idea of you… you know, especially when she is an adult.”

Sighing. “Would you have if she, this side of her, had been stealing?”

Jaw squaring. “That would depend entirely on the context and her choices within the situation. Again, something that is between her and I.”

Fuming. “Hitting her isn’t going to solve anything!”

Patience spent, Regina snapped. “Stop it. We have all had this conversation already. Yes, I discipline Emma when she needs it and we don’t need your permission or judgement on how we choose to live our life. And before you go aiming another arrow at me I suggest you go take a long hard look in the mirror and ask yourself why Emma ran from you years ago to begin with.”
As the woman went white at the memory, Regina immediately regretted her tone. Looking away to ground emotions, she tried again. “I don’t want to fight with you and I’m sorry I said that. It was not my place.”

Snow studied her shoes. “It’s alright, your right and I deserved that.” She’d never forgiven herself for the night she slapped Emma.

“I’m just frustrated that we keep spinning on this same wheel.” They needed to be more than civil with each other to help Emma. With Gold’s words beginning to drive a wedge she knew she needed to be careful with her own.

Nodding once Snow finally gave veiled eyes to the Queen. “Don’t make me regret what I asked you to promise me on New Year’s Eve Regina because right now I’m starting too.” With that finality and Gold dust swirling, she left in a huff, pushing past a royal shoulder.

Getting teeth and cursing in mind, Regina spun on her heel to follow. Upset was lost however as Emma gave her wet eyes through the frosted car window. Taking a moment to let the cold take away the heat of her temper she joined the blonde in the Benz.

“Why was she all hissy cat?” Breaking the silence, Emma wondered and pointed to Snow stalking down the block.

“I said something I should not have that hurt her feelings.” Adjusting the heat setting and shifting gears into drive.

Surprised. “What’d you say?”

Debating on giving details, but needing to be honest. “In short, to take a look in the mirror before she accuses me of harming you.” She barely caught Emma’s hand going for the passenger door as the other pressed the lock button.

“Let me out.” Emma demanded and tried the door again, stopping only when the parking break went up and a hand found her arm. “She can’t just accuse you of that and walk away!”

“Emma, it’s done for now. She’s too upset to listen anymore and quite frankly, so am I. Her and I will try talking another time.” The Princess was insufferable at times, but as long as Snow stayed within the boundaries Emma and her had defined she was more than willing to work through disagreements with Snow. If that line was crossed, the promise she’d made in the loft to Snow after Emma’s trigger would be kept.

Slumping back in her seat, the teen mumbled. “Probably didn’t help that I was kinda rude before you got there.”

“Oh?”

“I was mad when she didn’t believe me and I asked her why she cared cause she’s not my mom.”

Looking over. “Then she called you.”

With the missing puzzle piece to explain the hurt in Snow’s tone she sighed and removed the parking break. “Sounds like we both need to take a step back and think on our words today once we get home.”

“Am I in trouble?” Wondering at firmly pressed red lips.

“No baby.” Assuring as she rolled into traffic. “I am upset with myself.”

Confused. “But you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I did for me. I knew exactly what to say to shut her down and while it needed to be said in some capacity, my approach was inappropriate.” Regina wasn’t afraid to show Emma her flaws or to own up when she had acted against her own standards. She was the girl’s model right now and she was grateful at least Emma hadn’t witnessed her mishap.

Both remained quiet in thought until they got home. As they were putting away their things Regina looked over Emma’s somber stance. “I have an idea.”

“What’s that?” Hugging her stomach as another wave of cramps set in.

“How would you like to use my Jacuzzi tub for a hot bath? I have some bath bombs you may pick from under the sink. We can order in some Chinese and indulge in Rocky Road with a movie later.”

Emma moved in for a much needed hug, melting into the Queen. “That sounds really good.”

Inhaling the calm scent of vanilla apple clinging to clothes. “Instead of a movie though, will you read to me?”

“Yes, baby.” Planting a kiss. “Go relax and I’ll come get you when the food get’s here.”

Starting for the stairs, Emma paused at the base. “Do we have to talk about earlier and the store?”

Considering the question since recent events. “Do you need to?”

“Not really. I was just emotional this morning and I get why now. I’m annoyed at Snow, but I don’t need to go there again today.” That was a raw nerve that didn’t need further scrubbing.

“Then we may table that conversation for later, if you are sure.”

Bright smile. “Thanks Mama.”

A/N – More drama coming.

Next time – Emma deals with an old fear. Regina keeps a promise. A final line is crossed and Snow learns a hard lesson.
A/N – Gold’s words take over Snow… Waves begin crashing.

A headache was an understatement. Regina felt like hers was in a vice. She had always suffered from migraines for as long as she could remember. At this point in life she had a good handle on how to prevent and manage them. While the occurrence was rare enough, she felt one building over the course of the day and no amount of Excedrin or brief moments of focused relaxation attempts had helped.

Town Hall had been a nightmare the moment her heels set foot in the marbled halls. Her secretary had accidentally double booked a meeting with two cranky council members that both needed urgent attention. The phone had not stopped ringing between the other events scheduled that day; a ribbon cutting for the new hospital wing and a financial meeting with the town treasurer for an overview of the start of year budget. A last minute document signing Ashley thrust in front of her nearly made her late picking Emma up from school. Thoughts of bringing work home had made her stomach knot as she packed up her laptop, but she had to attempt to slim down her email inbox at the very least. She also needed a quiet half hour to close her eyes in a dark room to recoup, but she was seriously wondering if that was even possible with everything still to do that evening since leaving Emma’s Kung-Fu class. Impatient fingers tapped the steering wheel waiting for the red light to change as Emma began round three of why it was beneficial to stay up later than 9:00 on a school night.

“I get up at 6:30 for school so that means I get nine and a half hours of sleep when I only need eight. If I stay up ‘til ten I can get eight and half hours still.” Blowing a bubble with her gum, Emma popped it with teeth and turned from the window to her Keeper.

“When I set that bedtime I did it because the minimum you need at this age is nine hours. That extra half hour makes all the difference if you wake in the night or have trouble falling asleep.” The light finally changed and she turned down Mifflin Street.

Rolling eyes. “But that’s only an hour difference between when I go to bed when I’m six and I’m eight years older now.”

“Enough with the eye rolling please.”

“Mama…”

Sighing at the whine, Regina pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. “Emma, we’ve been over this and I hear that you are displeased. We’ve tried adjusting this once before and you had such a hard time waking up the next morning. I am not changing my mind right now—” Before she could finish the car door slammed and Emma stomped up the walk.

With a rub to her forehead Queen followed inside after Emma keyed the door and quickly put away her things. When the TV came on in the living room she took a moment to roll her neck and take a breath. Calling from the archway did nothing but make the volume go up on the screen. Tired of being ignored she waved her hand magically turning off the TV. That motion had the teenager frantically pressing the power button before throwing down the remote on the couch when she realized she’d been temporarily spelled out.

“Mama, turn it back…” Pausing when she saw russet flash with warning.

“Time for homework and then you have a room to clean. You may watch after dinner if those things are finished.” Pointing to the kitchen.

Emma wisely snatched her back pack up from where she had tossed it on the floor and headed into the kitchen to work. As she began her reading assignment, a small plate of sliced cucumbers and ranch was placed nearby for her snack. Mumbling a thank you as Regina left the room she nibbled and wrapped up the questions to go with the passage. Math took longer and she finished at half passed six just as her Keeper was starting to prep dinner. Stealing a cherry tomato from the cutting board with a sly grin to match the one she received in return Emma watched as a head of cabbage was chopped.

“I’m done. Can I go watch TV now?”

“After dinner if your room is cleaned up by then, remember?”

“Ugh, yeah.” Shoving away from the counter, Emma started to stuff her papers back in her binder.
"Leave your homework out please. I'll check it once the meatloaf is in the oven."

"Maammaa." Groaning, she put the papers back on the counter. "You don't have to. I did it."

"I know you did and thank you. I'd still like to look it over like always." Regina was genuinely interested in what Emma was learning and it helped stay on top of any misconceptions before it became too hard for the girl to catch up if something was not understood. "Dinner will be ready by seven fifteen."

Complacently dramatic. "I'll be upstairs slaving away until then."

Once the salad was finished and the turkey meatloaf in the oven, Regina took a few minutes to go over the worksheets. Emma had gotten most of everything correct and she made a light note next to two math problems to discuss in the morning before school. With a half hour until dinner she summoned her laptop and began to make a small dent in her inbox.

A quarter after seven crept up quickly and after removing the meatloaf to cool she went upstairs to fetch Emma. Smiling as she heard humming coming down the hall, she lost it for a frown when she saw the lavender room still in the same disarray as it had been that morning. The teen was on the bed, headphones in ears, thumbing a book. She knocked loud enough for green eyes to dart up and a pale hand to wave her in as another yanked out headphones.

An excuse stumbled from pink lips. "I was just taking a little break."

"From what? This room has not been touched." Hands on hips as eyes took in the clothing littering the floor and spilling out of the closet, disheveled bookcase and desk. "You have been up here forty five minutes."

Emma got up. "I'll do it now. I only meant to chill for awhile." Bending to pick up a pair of shoes.

"Dinner is ready. You will have to do it after."

"Already?" Catching the clock. "But my show will be by the time we are done eating." Frustrated, she followed downstairs.

Patient. "I will DVR it for you and if there is time after your shower you may watch it before bed."

Nose wrinkled. "I don't need a shower."

"Yes, you do. Your hair needs washing since you skipped it last night in the bath." Confirming the case as she handed Emma silverware and napkins to set the table as she began dishing dinner. While the little girl loved baths and the adult version often used all the hot water possible, this version often avoided both without much coaxing.

"But I can just wear a hat tomorrow."

"Emma please." Hands rested on counter, fingers tapping. "I have a headache right now and would appreciate your cooperation without further argument."

Eyes went to the ceiling briefly before getting a stern look. At the ache in brown eyes attitude dropped. "Sorry."

Dinner, as usual, lightened Emma’s mood and she enjoyed the meal between stories about the latest drama in the Junior High wing. Regina chimed in with a question or two between bites, glad that the blonde was getting used to school. Overall the new routine was working well and there had been a noticeable difference in all sides. While this version was still struggling to adjust to everything, the other two had found peace in the consistency. After clearing her place Emma went to tackle her room while the Queen set the TV to record the show as promised.

Dishes finished shortly, Regina worked on her email and was looking forward to a hot bath and bed after Emma was asleep. She worked steadily until a little after 8:00 and once again went upstairs to see the progress on the bedroom. Fatigue was replaced with annoyance as the room was only half finished and the teenager sitting cross legged on the floor on a cell phone.

Knocking. "Emma?"
Not looking up as fingers flew texting. “What’s up?”

“I should ask you the same question.” Leaning in the door frame with crossed arms as green eyes flicked up. “This room should have been done by now and have taken no more than twenty minutes. I’ve been patient with you all evening. Please put the phone down and finish up. I’ll be back in ten and your room needs to be done.” She left down the hall after receiving an acknowledgement to begin prepping clothing for the next day. Returning promptly remaining patience left when it was clear Emma had not moved. “Give me your phone please.”

“Why?” Emma’s chin jerked up in question, but one glance at the firm look had her standing up to hand over the distracting device.

“It is getting late. Finish hanging up those clothes, straighten your desk and school things for tomorrow.” Walking deeper into the room she sat on the purple bench to supervise, done with the attempts to delay.

“But…”

“No Emma. Get moving.”

Muttering the girl obeyed and had everything squared away in less than five minutes. Turning to the Queen with a scowl and gesturing to the clean room. “There, happy now?”

“Come here.”

Emma slowly walked over to stand by the bench. “Can I have my phone back?”

“In the morning, you have no need of it until then.” Regina pocketed the electronic and stood up, taking Emma’s hands in her own. “I do not care for your sass nor the extent you have been arguing with me tonight. This is your last warning. That being said, thank you for finishing your room. It looks much better. Go take your shower. We will have just enough time to braid your hair before bed, if you would like.” Another nightly habit they both enjoyed.

Face warming. “You said I could watch my show.”

Correcting. “If there was time, which you chose not to use well with all the stalling to avoid your task. You may watch it tomorrow evening. Right now it is nearly your bedtime.”

“So. Not. Fair!” Emma pulled away. “Ugh! I’m not a little kid and I shouldn’t have to go to bed so early.”

Grumbling and losing some attitude as she was sent out of the room with a pat of warning. She showered as quickly as she could, frustrated that her hair always took so long to wash. Dripping and wrapped in a towel, she went back to her room to find PJs laid out. After changing into the yellow long sleeved shirt and red flannel pants she sat in a huffing heap on the bed just as the Queen returned. Without being asked, Emma turned around as the brunette sat and relaxed some as her hair was brushed and braided.

“All done sweet girl. Into bed.” Standing and pulling down the covers Regina waited as a theatrical sigh came from her charge settling under the blanket. “I love you baby. Sweet dreams.” Kissing a cheek as Emma turned from her with a muttered ‘night’. Letting it go, Regina adjusted the lights and quietly left the room.

Emma waited ten minutes and tossed off the duvet. If the Queen had a headache a bath was sure to follow. That meant an undisturbed hour where she could catch her half hour show downstairs and still get back to bed without being caught. Quietly she tiptoed to her door and listened. At the sound of water running she eased into the hallway and to the landing.

With an impish smirk she decided to take the fast way by sliding down the banister. Having done this a few times undetected it always gave a thrill. She went a little too fast around the last curve, losing her grip and footing to get off, falling in a heap on her arm.

Groaning, she stood up and flexed her muscles, nearly yelping at a sharp pain in her left wrist. More gently she tried again and though there were fewer aches she cradled it to her stomach trying to rub it away. Not thinking much of it and losing precious time, Emma stopped to get an ice pack from the fridge. She easily found her show on the recording list and cuddled up with the couch throw blanket to watch. The ice numbed the sharp ache to a dull throb over a half hour as Emma turned off the TV. With a yawn she went back to the kitchen to drop off the ice pack. At the base of the stairs she heard a creak from above and froze. Slow eyes followed the trail of light coming from the top landing on a quiet unreadable Queen wrapped in a gray robe and slippers.
“It’s not what you think Mama…” Biting her lip at the failing excuse.

“Oh I believe this is exactly what I think young lady.” Tone leaving no room for argument. “Upstairs now please.”

Sour at getting caught, Emma trudged up the steps. Feet hastened to her room by a swat as she passed and Regina followed on her heels. Diving for the bed, she got under the covers careful of her wrist. The Queen came to sit on the side.

Dark eyes assessed. “Care to explain your late night adventure?”

“Not really.” Guilty ones looked away.

“Mmhhmm.” Brushing a stray curl away from a pale cheek. “Since you have missed nearly an hour of rest you will be making it up tomorrow, either in the form of a nap after school or early bedtime. In the morning you may let me know your choice.”

Sulking, but thoughtful. “How’d you even know I was up?”

“I always check on you before I go to sleep and from your empty bed two and two were not hard to piece together.” Leaning down to kiss a forehead. “Good night sweet girl.”

“G’night Mama.” Turning over and snuggling down. The room darkened and she winced, wrist pinched as she adjusted further to get comfortable before finally drifting off.

Way too soon the swan alarm blared and Emma automatically slapped it, yelping as her wrist protested. Sitting up, she rolled up her sleeve. There was bruising and some swelling beginning on her lower forearm that wrapped around to the front of her hand. Her heart sank, knowing she probably needed some kind of medical attention. The thought of a doctor’s office or hospital made her shiver. While the little version had made progress with this fear, right now she was swallowing down the bile pushing to spill.

She’d been to plenty of emergency rooms as a kid for worse injuries and every time doctors had let her walk out the door with the same person who had put her there in the first place. As a foster kid the standard question was always asked if she’d been abused and she could never get the words out to admit that she needed help, eyes had begged as her body certainly had, but lips couldn’t say the phrase that would rip her out of another home. As crappy as most of her situations were, they were familiar after a time, behaviors of the adults became predictable and Emma was really good at avoiding slaps to the face and running if she was being chased with something. Not every foster had been physical with her or abusive, though most had been. Some foster were kind and she had genuinely been thankful they had been, but something always led to her being taken out of the home. Starting over with new houses and people had always thrown her off balance and being hyperventilate until she gained her footing was exhausting.

Regina would take her to urgent care at the very least, possibly the emergency room. She wasn’t scared of getting in trouble or her Keeper being upset with her. Not in the least. The fear rested solely on the person in the white coat and too many past faces turned the other way. With one hand fingers began to undo the fuzzy braid from sleep as thoughts shifted.

Now, she wasn’t the same damaged girl. She was safe and fiercely loved. No one would take her away again and Regina, she knew, wouldn’t allow it unless it was something Emma desired. A blur of adult thoughts flew in offering more rational comfort, but drowned in valid emotions based on experience of age. Moaning as her mind and nausea settled, Emma forced herself to get up and dress for school, struggling with the buttons on her blouse, but managing. It took twice as long to get ready and she was so focused on trying to keep her wrist immobile that she nearly jumped out of her skin as a knock sounded.

Yanking down her shirt cuff and throwing her hand behind her back. “Come in.”

Opening the door Regina brightly greeted. “Good morning, I’m just making sure you are up. Breakfast is ready.” Thoughtful eyes took in the disheveled curls and sleepy face laced with ache. “Are you feeling alright?” Stepping into the room and reaching automatically to feel a forehead.

Emma tolerated the fever check. “I’m not sick, just tired.”

Not completely buying the excuse, Regina decided to leave it alone for now. “Have you decided if you want a nap later or to go to bed early?”
“You pick.” Said without tone and looking away as another red wave made her breath hitch. Covering by grabbing the hairbrush on her dresser and beginning to pull it through hair with her good hand. “Can I please have my phone back?”

“Is it on the counter downstairs. I charged it for you, as well.” That response was not expected and only further had Regina questioning the strange behavior. “Are you sure you are alright Emma?”

“Yep I’ll be right down.” Forcing a smile as she side stepped to closet for shoes.

A brow rose. “What is behind your back?”

“Nothing.” Dropping her hand to side in proof.

The Queen frowned further and left the room to return to the kitchen, sure by now that Emma was hiding something when no protest or bargaining attempt to get out of the promised consequence for last night was forthcoming. Emma always pushed back over a given redirection and that lacking raised a red flag. After she plated waffles and berries she set dishes out on the counter.

Heavy feet announced the sleepy teenager. The girl sat and immediately began eating, though slower than normal. Observing closely out the corner of her eye, Regina set a bowl of homemade whipped cream with spoon out. As Emma was bringing a fork to mouth left hand started toward the bowl and dropped in favor of setting the fork aside instead to reach for the spoon. Gently Regina caught that right hand hovering over the bowl and held out her free one with a pointed look.

Emma’s stomach cramped. “What?”

“Let me see your other hand please.”

Squirming. “Why?”

“Because I know you and something is wrong. Give it here.” Fingers curled beckoning. “It’s alright.”

Tears forming, Emma slowly lifted her left hand, jerking it back with a hiss as she rotated it wrong. Regina moved to her side immediately, carefully unbuttoning the blouse cuff before she could blink.

“Oh baby…” Taking in the discoloration and swelling, fingers snapped, summoning a cold gel ice pack and ace wrap. “Are you able to move your fingers?” Relieved that it didn’t appear to be broken when Emma wiggled all digits. “How did you do this?” She began to coil the wrap around that slim forearm to support the joint, careful not to make it too tight.

Wincing. “I fell last night sliding down the banister.”

Passing briefly at the visual before continuing. “Emma that is dangerous.”

“I got the menu on that right here.” Glancing up and shrugging. “I won’t do it again Mama. It just seemed like a good idea at the time.”

As she secured the wrap with a metal clip, Regina moved the injured wrist to rest on the ice pack. Gently. “After breakfast we need to get you checked out.” Not missing that way Emma withdrew at that suggestion. She suspected, but needed to ask. “Why didn’t you tell me last night baby?”

“Cause…”

“You know I’m not upset and you’re not in any trouble, right?”

Nodding. “I know, that’s not it. I just wanted to avoid doctors.” Green pleaded. “Can you use magic to heal it?”

Cupping both cheeks at the fear welling there. “I want to Emma, but healing magic is different, more complex and with our current situation, I need every ounce of magic in case of an emergency.” She couldn’t afford to be down for a day or possibly two with the price her body would pay to heal this injury. The girl was hurt, but this was not an urgent situation, had it been Emma would be healed by now, price be damned.
“Please Mama.” Beginning to cry and crumbling more as those thumbs wiped tears away and she was drawn in for a hug. Logically she understood her Keeper’s reasoning, but it still sucked. “I don’t wanna go.”

“I know sweet girl.” Consoling with a kiss as tears slowed. “We will be in and out before you know it. Whale owes me for upping the timeline of the hospital wing opening. You will receive the very best care and attention as quickly as possible.”

Relaxing at that news. “You’ll stay with me?”

“For as long as you need me I’ll be right by your side.”

And Regina was. In the waiting room, through the initial check in, exam, and X-ray’s. Emma managed to swallow the pills Whale gave her upon arrival and was already feeling the effects dulling the ache in her wrist. Within an hour, the blonde had a wrist guard on and a prescription for an anti-inflammatory and pain relief called into the pharmacy to pick up. A minor sprain that would heal in a week or so. Regina made sure to get two additional wrist guards; sure the injury would transfer after a shift. They had learned that with the cut on the girl’s finger weeks back in the loft.

Emma swung her legs from where she sat on a padded table checking out the new red addition to her wrist as Regina finished getting aftercare instructions from Whale. The medicine she was on was making her sleepy and she lay back on the table to rest her eyes. Green popped open a few minutes later when a cool hand brushed her cheek.

“Do I havta go to school?”

“Not today.” Grinning at the instant smile on that sweet face. “You can come with me and rest in the office. I’ll scan and e-mail in your homework from last night and request what you’ll miss.”


“I know baby, but you can still write and use your tablet with your dominant hand later after you rest awhile. I need to go fill out and sign a few papers for Dr. Whale. Would you like to come or do you want to lay here for a bit?”

Considering with a yawn. Anxiety was gone and fatigue was all that remained. Having Regina’s support and presence had made all the difference in this experience. “Rest here. I’m good, now that stuff’s done and we can go.”

“I will be ten minutes.” With a stroke to curls she left down the hall, pulling the curtain across the entrance of the three partial walls closed.

As heels left Emma tried to ignore the sounds of the hospital, but her mind wouldn’t disengage enough to sleep. Sighing, she got up and began to explore the small space. Curious at what was in the cabinets along the back wall she started to peek into a few when she recognized a strained, but sweet voice outside. Edging up to the curtain she pulled it back to see Snow pacing across the way on the phone, two cubicles down. Wondering what the Princess was here for she tried to catch the conversation, but couldn’t. Wanting to avoid contact after the debacle of Sunday she started to tug the curtain back into place right when the woman spun around and eyes locked on her.

“Emma? What are you doing here? You should be in school.” Shocked to see her daughter Snow advanced quickly, pausing when the girl took a step back.

Rolling green eyes were still full of Snow’s questions from their pharmacy encounter. “Chillax. I have an excuse.” Holding up her wrist. “What’s yours?”

Eyes never leaving the wrist guard. “Neal got hit in the nose with a basketball in PE this morning. There was a lot of blood and he’s in X-rays right now. I was just calling David at the station.”

Swallowing hard with a nod to the new red addition. “What happened?”

“Oh, nothing really.” Rubbing an arm and looking away, sad for her brother and how rude she’d come across initially. “I fell.”

“You felt…” Crossing arms as Gold planted seedlings dug deeper in mind. “How?”

Already done with the inquisition that felt too familiar in more ways than one, Emma began shutting down. “I’m not trying to be rude, but it’s not your business. I’m fine.”
Taking a step forward. “Emma, you can tell me… We agreed to be more open with each other, remember?”

Mulling that over. She had promised to try, but right now Snow’s words were setting her teeth on edge. “Yeah.”

Tone concerned as twisted thoughts not all her own made roots under dark pixie cut ones. “Did Regina do something?”

Blonde brows furrowed, nose wrinkling. “What do you mean?”

Snow sighed, looking both ways down the hall before speaking. Low and ridged. “Did she punish you?”

“Not this again…” Misunderstanding the question. ‘How many times do I havta tell her that I’m more than fine, safe, and happy. Ugh!’ A shoe wanted to stomp, but tapped repeatedly instead. “If I tell you will you leave me alone about it?”

Nodding hastily. “Of course.” She would do no such thing. All of her cursed memories of teacher training for signs of abuse were kicking in. Emma wouldn’t look at her, was avoiding questions, shying away from her touch, seemed anxious, and using age old excuses to explain being hurt. ‘Gold has been right. I need to get Emma away from Regina today.’

Emma hugged herself staring at the floor to avoid losing her temper, thoroughly tired of Snow digging into her business. “I snuck out of bed last night to watch my show. I got caught so I have to go to bed early because of that tonight.”

Snow blinked hard, having expected a much different answer. “Are-are you sure that’s all that happened?” Pointing to the injured wrist.

‘When are you going to start listening to me?!’ Emma screamed in mind and counted to five before answering. Annoyed at having to repeat again. “I told you I fell.” All the questions and not being believed again while in this sterile setting was sending her spiraling into the beginnings of a trigger.

“If this happened last night, why are you just now in urgent care?” In Snow’s mind it didn’t add up. It was time to step in.

Before Emma could answer she gratefully heard her name being called down the hallway as heels approached. Feet automatically moved toward the calm in that voice. She nearly stumbled when Snow grabbed her good arm pulling her back. Jarred at being handled so suddenly and heart beginning to pound, Emma was slammed into the past. Adult hands, too many of them, crawled over her skin. Marking, bruising, tugging her apart right now, not now Emma… Breathe, just breathe, but she couldn’t. A pinched whimper escaped as green blew wide open searching for an anchor as flood waters rushed in.

“It’s okay you are not going with her Emma.” Snow’s assurances only further dumped buckets on the frozen blonde as flecks of Gold swirled in her eyes. Her words seemed to snap something in her daughter and she tried to put the now struggling girl behind her as the Queen quickened steps.

“Regina—”

“No. You do not get to speak.” The brunette inhaled sharply in the thick pause between them.
Snow glared. Looking down at a teary Emma clinging to her waist. “I need to know exactly what happened sweet girl.” Regina lifted a chin, tone gentle. “You are safe and I’m right here. Try for me.” Prompting when Emma stuttered. Heat filled the space around them as facts spilled from a pink mouth. Snow tried to interrupt, but a regal hand held up allowed the girl to finish. “Go wait for me just outside of the door baby. You’ll still see me right through the window. I’ll be right there.” With a kiss and gesturing down the hall.

With great reluctance and a hard glare at Snow, Emma obeyed. Once the door closed russet eyes tore through the Princess. Voice hard and low. “I warned you in the loft if you ever crossed the line again—”

“Of course she acted the way she did. She doesn’t want to piss you off so you’ll hurt her again. You’re the one who abused—” Snow slapped her hand to her throat, trying to speak, panicking when she couldn’t.

“Enough interrupting.” Ice in tone. “It is my turn to speak.” Two fingers stayed together, sealing off Snow’s voice box, but not airway wanting her message to be clear. “You have crossed a serious line with your actions and you are about to cross another with your false accusations. I always keep my promises. Nod if you remember what I said to you in the loft after Emma was triggered?”

A slow nod as eyes misted at that memory. The stolen necklace, forcing Emma to talk, the little girl running, the bathroom, the screaming… Her child broken and crying in the Queen’s arms. Shoulders began to shake with unshed tears. ‘What have I done? But Gold said…’ Head dropping forward as some clarity came, as an aching heart battled with logic. ‘But Regina said… And Emma said…”

“You are throwing away a precious chance to mend your relationship with her.” Words cut from a sharp tongue. “I am done understanding, coaxing, and encouraging her to open up to you only for you to crush her trust again and again. She deserves so much more, all of her.” One step closer. “I will not stand in her way if she chooses to engage again with you as an adult. That choice is always hers and I will support that.” Amber stripped the surface of wet green away. “However, you have lost the privilege of engaging with any of her counter parts for the immediate future until you can prove to me and more importantly to her that you respect her boundaries. Are we clear?”

Face pink as those words fully registered and the price she would pay for her hand and jump to judgment was defined. Eyes leaking, Snow managed one single nod. Hard lesson delivered, she was left to marinate in words she longed to forget.

Finally understood, Regina released her spell and turned to leave. Eyes on the door window framing the tear streaked face of the child eager for solace. Steps thundered away from the begging Princess calling her name.

Later that evening as a Queen and Swan were processing the events of the day safely within the walls of their home, Snow was falling apart in hers. She hadn’t told David of the mess she was in with Emma or the guardrails that Regina had set in place temporarily, but she had cried in his arms before claiming to need some air. Thoughts swirled from the past several weeks. All the progress she’d made with Emma and even Regina was tearing at the seams. She wasn’t even entirely sure why she’d grabbed Emma, only that for a few minutes she’d let her bleeding heart and doubts run away with her. Walking mindless through town, or maybe not, she stopped at an old door with an open sign. Something drew her hand to the knob and she entered, bell ringing overhead.

Gold cracked an inviting grin. “I’ve been expecting you dearie and I’ve just the thing for that troubled heart of yours since we last spoke… Listen carefully…”

Snow did and with such hunger to mend the breaking bridge that she missed the treadles of magic floating behind her ears, just as before on the day he came to the school. Pulling a bag from her pocket, she handed over what he had asked her to retrieve. Slick, he whispered half truths and promises of what she wanted to hear. She left with hope, a potion in her pocket, and a plan to get Emma away from Regina once and for all.

At the mansion Emma sat in bed quietly mulling over their discussion about Snow and the temporary line halting engagement that Regina had drawn on her behalf as she played with the charms on her bracelet. She was relieved in a way. Though they had not gotten to the point of spending one on one time with each other when she was any size but an adult, they had been getting close. Today had put a serious hold on that progress and she was grateful that Regina had been there to snap Snow out of it. Something nudge at her brain. The way Snow had looked at her hadn’t been right. Almost as if… Knocking and the door moving caught her eye as the Queen entered to say goodnight.

Emma grimaced at the pink liquid prescription in a clear cup she was handed, but downed it without protest as a glass of water was offered to chase it.
“Did you remember your charm?” Setting the water on the nightstand Regina came to sit on the side of the bed. “It’s a shift night.”

“I forgot, thanks.” Un-clipping the initial heart and setting it in the little bowl near the water. She settled down under the covers as she was tucked in. “Mama I was thinking about Snow again and what we talked about… I don’t know how much of what happened was her fault.”

Regina focused on smoothing the blankets as she gathered her thoughts around this new idea. “How so sweet girl?”

“She seemed weird and desperate…” Rolling her eyes at how desperate. “More so than normal for her.”

“You were awfully upset by the time I got to you and she was too.” Brushing curls back, thinking that might have something to do with this new perception.

“That’s not it.” Shrugging as dark eyes studied her. “I’m not sure, but I just have a funny feeling.”

Considering the other alternatives some tension left as Regina remembered how convincing Gold could be to the right ear, especially with magic as an influential tool. Emma was also intuitive and that should not be dismissed. She’d been so focused on getting the teen calmed down and taken care of she hadn’t allowed her mind to go there yet. She nodded once in agreement.

“Perhaps not. I want you to leave that to me to figure out and deal with, alright?”

“Okay…” Biting a lower lip, wanting to help.

Knowing that look well. “Emma, I mean it.”

“I know and I understand you.” Answering in full before she was asked. Wondering, she gave green back to brown. “Does what she did mean that I won’t be able to see David and Neal when I’m this size? Little me is supposed to play with Neal tomorrow at the loft, remember?”

“I do and not at all baby, I told you that. We are simply on pause when it comes to you and her. I will call David and work out the details for you to see Neal tomorrow.”

Faltering under the desire to keep trying for progress. “But if it’s not her fault then why can’t we all keep on like we have been?” She’d been enjoying the occasional dinner at the loft or meetings in the park when she’d been six to play with Neal while the adults talked. It felt wrong to go backwards.

“Her fault or not, we all need some time to think. I need time to look into your idea and if she was somehow being manipulated today by magic or something else, then that could be dangerous going forward and I won’t have you exposed to that.” Bending to kiss a cheek, pulling back to shift between green. Soft and serious. “This is one of those times where the choice is mine and you are to heed me every step of the way.”

Trusting and letting go. “I will Mama.”

“Good girl.”

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A/N – Aw, Snow… one step forward and three steps back… Dang Gold.

Next time – Little Emma and Mal have a talk. Snow sees an opportunity and seemingly tries to reconcile with Regina and Emma pays the price. Queen and Dragon begin to reconnect.
Thursday afternoon of that same week little Emma had had it with adults. All of them were bossy, made her do stuff she didn’t want to do and didn’t let her do the things she wanted. Right now she wanted to go to recess and play on the monkey bars, but had to sit out because she refused to do her reading assignment that morning. Never mind the fact she couldn’t swing from them if she wanted to due to her wrist, but that was beside the point in her mind. She sat at a picnic table outside near the playground with her teacher Ms. Prince, book and assignment in front of her and scowled.

“I’m not gonna do it.”

“Why not Emma?” Patient, Kathryn tried to get the girl to look at her.

“I don’t want too.” Resting a chin on the table. Footsteps nearby caught green eyes and Emma sat up pouting as the tall blonde Dragon approached.

“What seems to be the trouble?” Mal came to sit on the other side of the table with a nod to Emma. “Ms. Prince?”

“A little reluctance to try her assignment. She needs to at least attempt this before she can play.” Kathryn tapped the open book.

“I see. This is your lunch hour. I’ll sit with her and she will have the assignment for you by the end of recess. If you have not yet, there is no need to call Regina.” Getting a negative on the call she nodded. Blue shifted and didn’t miss the flash of curious fire in green eyes at the promise of the completed paper as the teacher left. “Emma?”

“What?” Biting with arms crossed.

“This isn’t the cheerful girl I saw walking into school this morning holding Regina’s hand.”

Emma dropped her arms, nose wrinkling, “You saw us?”

“I did, from my office window. You looked so happy. What changed?” When she’d agreed to keep an eye on the child for the Queen she’d meant more than just for safety.

“A little shrug and picking at a sleeve. “My Mama says that too.”

“Try me.” Ever a good listener, Mal leaned in and waited.

For a reason Emma couldn’t yet pin point other than her adult side’s friendship she trusted those eyes and their openness to hear her out. “The other parts of me are mad at Snow. Mama is upset with her too and I was supposta go play with Neal yesterday at the loft after school and couldn’t cause Snow was there when Mama took me instead of David like he said he would be.” Big sigh.

“My Mama says that too.”

Slow smile at the affectionate term. “Your Mama is a wise woman.”

Curls nodded agreeing, but sad green eyes found sea blue. “It won’t this time though.”

“Try me.” Ever a good listener, Mal leaned in and waited.
Mal nodded along trying to keep up with the sequence of events. “That is a lot to have in your head.”

“Oh-huh and there’s more.” On a roll, Emma threw out her arms to show how much. “I easy-dropped and Mama didn’t like that, but I wasn’t in trouble cause I was already upset. I don’t want them to fight and I get why cause of what Snow did to other me, but I still don’t like it.” Blowing her hair out of her face, Emma sagged in some relief as if a great weight had just come off. “Mama says it will be okay in a little bit so it will be, but it’s hard waiting until then.”

“Sometimes adults disagree and that can be upsetting. Waiting for people to be ready to deal with their feelings is also not easy.” Reflective. “But sometimes waiting is necessary for everyone involved to have time to sort themselves out. Time can be our friend that way. Try some patience and I bet your Mama is right. It will be okay.”

Mal knew Regina well enough to gauge depth the dynamic had taken since their break up. A lot had been further entrusted to her as Emma’s Principal when they had met before the child versions were enrolled. While she was closer to Regina than Emma and wished to be more so still, she greatly respected the Queen’s primary relationship and would do what she could to support it. She realized with some comfort that maybe the words said hadn’t just been for Emma. Her and Regina had their fair share of differences and epic fights in the past, but there had always been a deep connection either had been unable to explain. Regina was different now somehow, too. Had been in the years since Emma and even more so the last few weeks she’d observed them around town. Mal wondered if Queen has finally made peace with a broken part of heart.

Green studied blue, a habit copied from the Queen. “You and Mama are still friends, huh?”

Dragon smiled softly. “I like to think so.”

“But do you still like-like her?”

Blonde brows shot up briefly. “Emma, I don’t think that’s approp—”

“So Ms. Mal.” Emma patted the hand resting on the table between them. “I think she likes you too. You should ask her on a date with romance candles and spaghetti like in the movies! That’s what grownups who like each other do.” Whispering as if a great secret had been shared. Little cheeky grin changed the subject as a blonde brow was arched in return. “I think I’m ready to try my work now.” Pulling the book over and opening it to the story she was supposed to read. Willing and a wave to move closer. “Help me?”

Letting Emma’s suggestion go for the moment Mal shifted over to the other side of the table and leaned in. “Let’s take a look.” But mind long lingered on the idea of reconnecting.

The rest of the school day turned around for Emma and she’d even gotten to play for the last ten minutes of recess for finishing her assignment quickly. At the bell she scurried out of the classroom and ran right to her Mama with a huge grin. Squealing as she was picked up and swung into a big hug.

“Look at this beaming girl of mine. How was your day sweet one?” Kissing hello as the child gave one back.

“Great and guess what?”

“Hmmmm. You made a new friend?” Setting Emma down and taking a hand to go to the car.

She skipped alongside heels. “Nope! But Gabe and I did play today. Try again!”

“Did you get a reward or make something fun in art?”

Curls shook. “Mama you’re not good at this game so I’ll help you. Ms. Mal sat with me to do my reading assignment and I got a sticker when I gave it to Ms. Prince.”

Heels stopped walking and looked down in question. “That’s wonderful about your sticker. Why was Ms. Mal helping you?”

Emma lost a bit of her grin. “I kinda wouldn’t do it for Ms. Prince in class and so at recess outside she sat with me to work, but I couldn’t, so Ms. Mal talked to me and I felt better to try again.”
Puzzled at why Kathryn hadn’t called her or Mal for that matter she turned the other way and moved toward the building. She was not in any way upset with the child, just concerned that the method for lines of communication may have been flubbed today and with Gold a threat that would not do.

“Mama?” Worried she might be in trouble for her earlier defiance.

“It’s alright Emma. Mama is not upset with you. I need to ask your Principal something quickly and then we will go home.” She led Emma into the front office asking the secretary to keep a close eye on the girl and giving instructions for Emma to stay put. Going down the short hallway she knocked on the door of Mal’s office. A silky tenor answered inviting entrance.

“Regina, I’d expected you at some point.” Mal stood from her desk and rounded it as the Queen shut the door, giving her calculating eyes.

“I’m sure you did.” Crossing arms and regarding the Dragon. “Emma said you talked to her today?”

Head tilting at the hint of anger rising in brown eyes. “I did.”

“And why did I not get a call from Kathryn that Emma was upset?”

“I asked her not to call you.” Leaning against her desk in classic teacher pose her arms crossed matching the Queen.

“We have an established system for communication in regards to Emma for a reason. I trust you and Kathryn to uphold that.” Fuming and dropping her arms in exasperation at how calm the Dragon was. Old defenses came roaring back. There had been a reason in the do over spell in their other life that she had not had Mal as the Principal of Emma’s school. There was too much tender history between them to make that working relationship purely what it needed to be—professional. “What are you getting at Mal? Is this some way to get close to me again through Emma?”

Scoffing at the accusation, but understanding of the roots Mal answered in the only way she knew to get Regina’s divided attention back into focus. Curt and direct. “Regina drop the defenses and listen to me.” Brown flashed back, but opened just wide enough to invite an explanation. “I am doing nothing other than exactly what you asked me to do. I am looking out for Emma. She was upset. I talked to her and called you.”

“You did?” Regina pulled out her phone to check her call feed.

Yielding for a softer tone. “I left you a voicemail right after I talked with her.”

Seeing a number she didn’t recognize on her screen Regina had dismissed it as a spam call. Apologetic eyes looked up into the Dragon’s knowing ones.

Lips twitched upward in slight amusement. “You deleted my cell number didn’t you?”

“Of course I did…. and of course you didn’t delete mine.” Regina sighed at being read so easily. “I would have picked up had I known it was your cell or the school.” Losing her annoyance, she sank into a nearby chair as Mal did the same. “I’m sorry I doubted you. There’s a lot going on right now and I’m just trying to stay on top of it all.”

“I get it.” Crossing long legs and tugging suit jacket cuffs down. “You are quite a stunning Mama bear when you get riled up, but you always are and have been stunning.”

Rolling dark eyes she felt her cheeks warm. “Mal, now is not the time for compliments. What was Emma upset about?” She listened; heart sinking that the child’s day was affected by the events of yesterday evening. Little Emma and her had talked at length about what had happened leading up to her decision to put a hold on visits with Snow and she had thought she had left it in a good place with the child. Just because the teen version understood did not meant the six year old one did.

Mal gently touched a forearm. “Do I need to break out my wings and flames to have a chat with the charming Princess?” Jesting in only part with a ready grin.

Chuckling. “Do not even think about it. I have got it handled. The last thing I need is a puddle of Snow on my porch and David showing up with a sword to slay you…. Again. Emma is rather fond of him too.” Smiling. At least that sweet relationship hadn’t been affected.
Mal snorted at the visual. “He can try. Speaking of the little darling where is she?”

“Waiting in the front office.” Standing and opening the door to leave. The genuine inquiry from Dragon gave her pause. “Would you like to say good bye to her?”

“I would.” She brushed a hand at the small of the Queen’s back and followed heels, quicker once they saw the empty lobby and it was clear the child was no longer in the room. As Queen bristled, she stayed close.

“Where is she?” Regina started at the secretary, losing some heat to replace with worry as Mal came to stand near in comforting support, that affect on her instant.

The poor girl shrunk under two strong gazes and pointed a shaking finger down the hall. “She went willingly with Snow and since… I thought…” Trailing off as two sets of heels stormed out of the office.

Emma wrinkled her nose as Snow paced in front of her. When the pixie haired woman had seen her in the office and said hello, Emma hadn’t hesitated to say it back. She had not expected the offer a sucker and coloring while she waited for her Keeper to finish with Mal. Her tummy flipped at the idea, but candy was a rare treat and she rationalized that she wasn’t going with a stranger. Snow had told her Regina had said it was okay. That the Queen had called last night and they had talked everything out. Now that she was sucking on the grape ball the sweetness was quickly becoming lost in the obvious nerves riding the edges of the room. She regretted leaving and wondered why her Mama hadn’t said anything to her about the phone call.

Snow kept checking the door waiting for the Queen. She had no doubt a very pissed Regina would find her and she only hoped she could be convincing enough to get the woman to sit down long enough for a drink. She fingered the small bottle in her pocket, palms sweating made it slick against skin. It had been risky involving her daughter and she hadn’t wanted to, but knew Regina just might hear her out for Emma’s sake if she played her cards right.

If Regina drank the potion she planned to put into a cup of water then Emma would be coming home with her today. Gold had been clear it would not cause any physical harm to the Queen, but a protection spell to keep the body that consumed it far away from what the potion had been warded against. A single blonde hair taken in the diner during a hug from over her Friday breakfast date with daughter last week had been enough for the Imp to craft such a potion. The door opening made her jump and she yanked hands out of her pockets.

“Emma…” Regina’s worried tone laced with relief that her hunch had been right echoed in the quiet. She went straight for the child, lifting the girl up to her hip in a tight hug. Pulling back and seeing the sucker, she gently took it by the stick from little lips and threw it away, putting two and two together as she set Emma down.

“Are you alright?” Getting a nod her worry began to leave. “I had no idea where you were. Here, you feel my heart, feel how it’s racing?” Regina quickly took Emma’s hand and placed it to her chest.

Emma apologized as Regina hugged her again tightly for a long moment and tried to explain. “Mama… she said you said okay… That you called her last night…”

Regina snapped upright, sharp eyes on the Princess at that blatant lie. “Mal… Take Emma to your office please.”

She released the girl and moved Emma behind her, fighting the welling anger inside. She swallowed it down along with the passion to rip the woman in front of her to shreds for disappearing with the child.

Emma’s hand was taken and she was led out of the room. It was becoming clear to her that a phone call had not been made and she struggled with her own hurt, wondering why Snow would lie.

Offering some caution. “Regina.”

Mal’s voice a soothing balm, Regina nodded once and waited until the door was closed and took a deep breath to keep her temper in check. “What were you thinking Snow?”

“I just wanted some time with her.”
"Lying to your daughter to get her to come with you because you knew I would follow is a new low."

"And for what? So you would get a chance to beg me to reconsider the line I drew?" Hands on hips as the face across from her paled. "You forget how well I know you dear. Did you see Emma’s face when she left? She knows you lied to her. I told you yesterday I was willing to talk to you, but on my terms when I was ready and here we are on your manipulative ones, yet again." She pulled out a chair from the desk and sat. "So let’s have at it. Say what you need to say."

Under that stern glare Snow faltered, but moved to sit across from the Queen. "I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes. I saw Emma in the office and…" She cleared her throat and gestured to the pitcher of water and glasses across the room. "I need some water… Would you like some?"

Head tilting, darkening brown eyes eclipsed briefly in consideration. Regina simply dipped a chin once.

Snow crossed the room and with her back to the Queen emptied the potion from her pocket into one of the glasses and poured from the pitcher to fill each halfway. Returning, she set them both on the desk, the spelled one close to a royal hand.

"You were saying?" Regina flicked her gaze to the water then back to Snow.

Keeping her eyes carefully masked. "It was a stupid move on my part. I just want to clear the air between us so we can move on for Emma. She’s upset that we are at odds. I know you’re aware of that and I hate seeing her that way. I saw her and took a chance you might let me talk to you and maybe her." Licking lips as Gold dust glittered behind her eyes forcing words from her mouth. "I’ve been so wrong about things. What do I need to do to get us all back on track?"

Regina leaned forward, hand lifting her glass to bring the rim to her mouth just as Snow’s lips parted. She gave pause, lowering the glass back to the table. ‘She would not dare… would she?’

The questionable thought made her blood simmer. Trusting her gut she slid glass away with one word in return.

"Drink."

Snow forced a confused smile. “What?”

Folding her hands on her lap, Regina crossed her legs and leaned back merely observing. "If you want to prove to me that you are ready to respect Emma’s boundaries along with our relationship and you won’t cross the line again… Drink."

Feigning misunderstanding Snow took her own un-spelled cup and took a sip as red lips tsked.

“No, no dear.” A nod of her head magically shifted the other one to rest against pale knuckles. "From my glass."

Cheeks going pink, Snow picked up the spelled cup. Bringing it to her mouth, she allowed the liquid to almost touch her lips and pretended to swallow. “There. Happy?”

“Yes, actually.” Regina stood mind clear in her quelled outrage. "Because you just made this conversation so much easier." A wave of her hand over the glass cast a simple separation spell and the magical fluid floated up from the water in a perfect ball. Summoning a small vile, she caught the orb, sealing the top and dropped it in her purse. "I suspected you had gone to Gold, but I didn’t actually think you would try to drug me with something to get to Emma. I’ll be speaking to Mal about your little party trick on school grounds and we will see if a few days suspension from campus for falsely luring a student and an attempt to drug me clears your head enough for us to actually have the conversation we need to have.” Remembering the sucker and rising to a dark edge. “And Hades help you if you did anything to the sucker you gave Emma.”

"It—I didn’t… It was just candy.” Inside a Golden spell broke in half under the weight of those midnight eyes and Snow jerked forward. "Regina please… I’m sorry! I was desperate. I can’t get his words out of my head. I won’t listen to him anymore. You have to believe me!" Snow stood, blocking the Queen’s path. "You have to understand how hard this is for me. Please I know you do!"

"I do." Assessing those eyes for the Imp’s manipulations she saw none in that moment, resting a bit easier at the apparent truth about the candy. He had done something to influence the Princess’ motives, but the choice to act on it had been Snow’s, of that she was sure. “And as I told you before I am done understanding if Emma’s heart will be hurt in the process.” Side stepping the teary woman and adding more softly. “Being desperate or hurt doesn’t make you right and it is a poor excuse for your actions when your daughter is involved. If I can own that lesson and learn from it, surely you can as well. We will try again in a few days after you have had time to clear your head of these false notions you have about me."
Shutting the door to the classroom, she leaned against it for a deep breath before she left to find Mal and Emma in the main office. They were sitting side by side with a library book she recognized from Emma’s school bag. Dragon and little Savior were so absorbed that she was able to observe them quietly for a few moments. Her heart flattered seeing two blonde heads bent over a book. Emma’s finger tracing the words on a page as Mal read aloud. Those translucent sea blue eyes looked up and she wondered for just a moment if she had been missing something, perhaps someone she didn’t remember she needed.

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Two crystal glasses of cider sat side by side in the Study of the mansion later that same night. The women each enjoying the crisp taste sat across from each other on matching sofas. Fire in hearth gave the room a warm glow. A little bottle of liquid was set on the table between Dragon and Queen.

“She has guts… That much I’ll give her.” Mal reached for the vial, holding it up to the light.

“Guts or a death wish.” Shaking her head and tone bordering bitter, Regina took up her glass and sipped as Mal gave her a questioning look. “I would never hurt her. I just thought we were beyond trying to manipulate and poison one another.” Finger traced the rim of the glass in thought. “We were close at one time, friends even and I would like to get back to that, but it has been hard since the do over spell and coming home.”

“What does Emma want?” Wondering if that had changed in the years past.

“A friendship with Snow. I pushed for that. I never wanted them to be like this. Emma has been trying so hard to make things right between them and it kills me that Snow keeps throwing that away. I don’t think she could entirely help it this time and that’s why I will try to help fix this mess she’s caused. But there are things at play I cannot share with you or anyone and I’m just…” Setting her glass down, she hugged herself.

Thoughtful over the royal. “One person.”

“Pardon?”

Mal set down the vial and stood going to sit on the other end of the couch Regina was on. “You are one person trying to do and be everything for your girl. From what you’ve told me about your life in the spell, you two grew incredibly close within that relationship, and outside of that world you have been Emma’s support for years now and that is a beautiful thing.”

“But.” Regina waited, there almost always was one with Mal.

“No but.” Blonde eyebrow flexed. “I’m just validating you.”

Half a grin spread on red lips. “When did you learn therapy vernacular?”

“I do enjoy learning about humans and their how their minds work. Though, I have made it a priority to do some work on myself since our last go around.” The Dragon sat back, sipping her drink. “I surprised you didn’t I.”

“Humph.” Dark brows rose at that truth and fell in hesitating, but left little choice. “Do me a favor please and distill the ingredients in that potion.”

Mal did as requested. Levitating the vial it glowed blue as the spell filtered through the ingredients. She hissed when two in particular crossed her senses. Vial floated down to the table and a small square of parchment appeared next to it. She stood and crossed the room to the decanter with her glass to refill. Returning she nodded to the one already in the Queen’s hand and to the paper.

“Trust me you are going to need a sip first before reading that.”

Regina obliged and then snatched up the page. She skimmed the ingredients, fist closing around the tumbler hard enough to crack it. Cider leaked down her wrist and she vanished the mess away to take the paper in both hands.

“Dragon’s blood and Emma’s DNA in a protection potion… How did he even get…?” Hands lowered as purple mist swirled around her irises. “Snow.”

Mal summoned a new crystal tumbler and gave it to Regina. “Maybe for that ingredient, but the dragon’s blood is a few hundred years old and no one I recognize. This has the Imp’s magical signature all over it.” Nose wrinkling delicately, nearly sick with distaste. “It positively reeks of oil and nightshade.”
If I had drank this I wouldn’t be able to be anywhere within fifty yards of Emma. It wouldn’t have hurt me physically or her, but…” When they had made the blood oath, Gold had promised them no physical harm. This was an entirely new war he was playing. She picked up the vial thinking. Perhaps it might still be of some use. Powerful enough, she sensed a drop on skin or tongue would do and wondered why Snow hadn’t just thrown it at her. If she could get Imp to touch or drink it…

"In the office I did hear part of the commotion with the dark rat, you know how sensitive my hearing is. You said before that you couldn’t explain and I respect that. I would like to offer my help though, if you want it?"

Regina levitated the vial over to her desk to sort out later and took a long sip. Setting her glass aside, she smoothed a crease in her slacks. “With Snow suspended for a few days and this latest stunt I can not trust her right now. I don’t think it’s all her, but I need time to work that out.” Not to mention Emma. The little girl had been hard to console over being lied to by someone she’d been building trust with. "I need you to keep looking after her on campus please. Like I said, she is not to be near Gold.”

“You have my word.” The Dragon swirled ice in crystal considering her next words carefully. Regina could be sensitive in a way not many knew and she did not want to step where she was not wanted. “I am unable to detect your usual magical energy and I know you well enough that you wouldn’t have allowed him to threaten you like that if you could have stopped him. I am guessing something is not right with your magic.” When the Queen did not speak she confirmed her theory and stretched her arm out along the back of the couch, a flexible offer of comfort. “I can ward the school campus to alert me and you if he comes on the grounds, but I can not stop him from entering since it is not personal territory, but public. I can also ward the house entirely against his entrance since this is your personal space.”

Regina leaned forward resting her face in her hands with relief as tears started. She never would have asked on her own, that was not something she did well. Being vulnerable without her full powers was one thing. To admit to her ex-girlfriend that she needed help was a whole other level of exposure. That extra defense would help ease her worry immensely and with a quiet affirmative and a ‘please’ she felt the air fill with Dragon magic of the strongest kind as an invisible shield coated the mansion. The blanket of security brought her upright a few minutes later when a rustling sounded outside of the door. Eye on the clock showed it was nearing midnight. They had been talking since she’d put the child to bed at 8:00.

Calling for Emma to come in she beckoned. Sleepy eyed and dragging a blanket the girl crawled up onto her lap, sitting to rest heart to heart. She rubbed a little back soothingly. "Are you alright baby?”

“Felt something funny and gots scared and you weren’t in your room.” Voice thick with sleep.

"I’m sorry you were frightened. Mal was just securing the house for us.”

Murmuring into a neck. “Magic?”

“Yes sweet one.” She kissed a fuzzy braid as the girl fell back asleep with thumb firmly planted in mouth. Once comfort came Emma was never long for this world.

“She is too precious.” Grin adorning a face with a nod to Emma.

“Do not let her hear you call her that.” Regina whispered and smirked. “She will tell you off right quick, but yes… she is.” Clearing her throat. “Thank you for your help. I feel much more at ease.” Standing with Emma and needing to put a little space between intimacies of the discussion. “I did not realize how late it is.”

“Just like old times.” Mal joined Queen in the foyer. “I missed this Regina.” Donning her coat and scarf. “Our talks.”

Brown elastic fitted around blue. “Mal I…” Stopping when those eyes gave reassurance.

“You don’t have to say anything. This or not, is entirely on your timeline. Regardless, I will support and protect you both. Just let me know what you need.” Mal’s fingers gently touched the end of a blonde braid and down the back of the Queen’s hand before seeing herself out.

A/N - About 3-4 chapters left of this journey then epilogue. I am busy writing the new story, the last part of this trilogy, now. Posts for that will begin within a week of final chapter here. Much shorter spin off... though this story wraps up well, I couldn't leave our girls incomplete.... Title reveal coming soon.

Next time - Emma struggles with Snow's dishonesty. Dragon and Queen connect via text message. Regina and Snow talk about the potion and next steps going forward.
“Mama?”

“Yes, baby?” Regina turned from the stove where she was stirring chicken soup and set the dripping spoon on the rest plate. Wiping her hands on the front of an apron her jaw dropped when she realized what was in Emma’s small fist.

“What’s this?” Emma shook the little bottle full of clear fluid she’d found on the desk of the Study, paper to draw with in her other hand.

Swallowing thickly, Regina vanished the vial she’d forgotten to put away in the lateness of last night to the safety of her lock-box. “A potion and next time, please remember to ask before you go into my Study.”

“Sorry.” Rule well known, but curious still Emma hopped up on a stool to open a box of markers. “What’s the potion for?”

Returning to stirring the soup, Regina debated on how best to answer that for little ears. She didn’t want to scare or worry Emma, but she wouldn’t lie either. “Well, it was something that Snow wanted Mama to drink yesterday, but I did not want to. She and I have to talk about it later this weekend.”

Emma scrunched her nose recalling her last encounter with the Princess and scribbled harder on the paper to make the sun bigger. “Is she gonna yell at you again?”

“No she most certainly will not.” Adamant of that fact. Regina turned the burner down and took a peek in the oven at cheese crusted bread baking.

“Are you gonna yell at her?” Dropping a yellow crayon in favor of blue.

Regina turned and rested elbows on the counter sensing the worry and agitation behind the inquiry. “No, Emma. That is not how adults should speak to one another. I am upset with her, but we will work it out.”

“I wanna use big loud words at her cause she lied to me.” Emma’s foot kicked the counter, staring up with aching eyes. “That’s not nice and she’s not supposta do that. It’s a rule, huh?”

“It is and a good one to follow,” Nodding in agreement. “Even so Emma yelling is not the way to get your thoughts heard. She hurt your feelings and that is not okay. Snow is also hurting right now and sometimes people do things they don’t mean to do when that is the case. It does not make them right, but it does help us understand what is causing their behavior. Does that make sense?”

Shifting. “Kinda… But she didn’t havta do that to my feelings.” Lip quivering.

“No she did not.” Rounding the counter she hugged the little girl. “I’m sorry this is happening baby. Mama is working to make things better.”

Sniffing. “I know, still doesn’t feel good.”

“It does not.” A consoling kiss.

Looking straight up into loving brown. “I think big me wants to come with you when you go see her.”

Regina highly doubted that would prove true. “We’ll see.”

“No, it means I’ll think about it little miss swan.” Queen returned to the stove.

Curls shook and a finger shot up to prove a point. “That means no too.”

“Emma.”

Little grumble. “Well, it doess sooo.”

Done with the idea for now. “Enough.”

“Fine…” Scribbling faster, Emma dropped the blue crayon and held up her drawing to look at with a critical eye. Deciding something she added one more detail. A few minutes later she held it up again, finally satisfied and turned it around to show her Keeper. “Mama looky!”

Regina paused ladling the soup into bowls and turned taking in the picture of their home with stick figures and a red blob that had to be Jasper inside surrounded by blue clouds. She freed up her hands and went to Emma for a closer look.

“That’s me and you.” Pointing to a pair of blonde and brunette stick figures holding hands. “And that’s Ms. Mal and her blue magic clouds protecting us.” Little finger tapping the third stick figure on the other side of the brunette.

“This is lovely baby and so detailed. I like all of the different colors you used.” Specific, but unsure of how she felt about the third addition. Carefully she kept uncertainty out of her tone. “May I put it on the fridge?”

Beaming with mischief. “Uh-huh, but will you take a picture and send it to Ms. Mal? I wanna show her too.”

“I’ll do it right now.” Tapping the counter where silverware rested. “Set the table while I do.” Regina snapped a quick picture and texted it to the Dragon. Unsure of what to write, she kept it factual.

{Emma wanted me to share this with you…}

She went to set down her phone and it buzzed before hitting the counter. Swiping she couldn’t help grinning at Mal’s response.

[Tell the little darling she’s a Picasso in the making. I mean that both literally and affectionately. XX]

[She’s six Mal. The only artist’s name she knows is her own.]

[Hmmmm, that gives me a brilliant idea…]

Feeling mischievous Regina smirked as she typed.

[Careful dear. Do not push your blonde roots to the breaking point.]

[Oh, cheeky! I always liked it when you bit back. Still do. *winks*]

Regina flushed and looked at the feed marker flashing. ‘What am I doing?’ Thoughts of the past rolled in and self chiding for getting caught in flirting she set her phone face down as her waist was encircled by happy arms.

Quick and bright. “Did she like it Mama?”

“She did baby and said you are the next Picasso. He’s a very famous artist from a long time ago.” Elaborating before confusion set in. Emma’s smile was all teeth and in that moment she’d do anything to keep it on that little face.
“I like Ms. Mal. Don’t you Mama?”

“She is very nice.”

Emma tilted her head as little brows wiggled impishly up and down. “Uh-huh, but don’t you like her?”

Running hands through loose ringlets. “As a friend, yes I do, but it’s complicated sweet one.”

Nose wrinkled. “Why?”

Lacking a good answer. “Many adult relationships just are.”

“But it doesn’t have to be. If she’s nice to you and you are to her, you can be like bestest best friends.” Confident in the simple truth.

And Regina wondered if maybe it really was. Tapping a nose. “You are absolutely right.”

“Silly Mama… I know. You should ask her on a date.”

Surprised at the blunt direction, but Emma’s rumbling stomach beat her in answer.

“Time to feed my tummy?”

Fishing for words, they finally came. “Yes, go sit. Mama will be right there.” As she finished prepping the soup and sides of bread the phone vibrated again. Picking it up and leaning against the counter, thumbs hesitated over the screen for a long moment in reading.

[I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable Regina…It’s easy for me to get carried away and I apologize if I was too familiar.]

Typing, Queen’s heart was ready to whisper back.

[You were not. Honestly, I’ve missed this with you. Please do not stop being yourself. I always appreciate your honesty and humor, dear.]

Almost instantly a reply popped up.

[In that case, perhaps we can discuss that further over dinner one night soon?]

Regina let go of hesitation and trusted herself.

[I’d like that.]

[Then it is a date. Have a wonderful evening my Queen.]

:::::::::::

Regina eyed the coffee critically offered by a pale hand. Snow sat across from her in the loft, tapping fingers nervously on the table top at an annoying rate. With a casual wave of her wrist she cast a reader spell for any foreign substances other than what should be in the mug. Satisfied nothing was amiss with the drink she took a small sip.

“I deserved that.” Snow broke the silence.

Simple fact. “Finally something we both agree on.”

“I know there’s nothing I can say to gain your trust back right now and I owe Emma an apology when she decides to speak to me again, but I want you to know I’ll do anything you want me to...”
do to fix this.” Having the quiet of the weekend to clear her head, it was as if a great fog cleared. She’d been horrified at what she’d done.

“Right now I don’t want you to do anything, but listen and absorb what I am going to tell you.”

“Before you start… How is Emma doing?” Voice crimped with nerves.

“She’s hurt, confused, and angry.” Answering for all three versions. Regina had asked Emma if she had wanted to come with and the adult Savior had declined the offer this morning. Her girl’s feeling’s were complicated. The little one was hurt, but ready to forgive, the teen torn, and the adult was pissed and needed time.

Biting her lip, Snow felt sick. “Did you tell her about the potion?”

“Yes, she is aware.” Taking another sip of coffee to clear the bitterness away, black brew somehow sweeter.

Chin dropping. “She’s never going to speak to me again, is she?”

“I don’t know when, but I suspect in time she will come around.”

Hopeful Snow leaned forward, palms up on the table. “Will you tell her I’m sorry?”

Softer. “She knows Snow and she needs some time to process.” Regina sighed, finally settling on where to begin. “Do you even know what was in that potion you tried to drug me with?”

Head shaking. “Not entirely… He said it wouldn’t hurt you, just keep you and Emma apart.”

Heat crept in. “A fifty yard radius apart and nothing, his magic or mine could have countered the effect. Do you have any idea the mental and emotional damage you almost caused Emma? Running off with her to the loft, away from her home and me would have devastated her. The trigger you witnessed in the bathroom would have looked like a tea party compared to what you would have on your hands.” Razor thin, her tone danced a fine line. “Not to mention her shifts… How long do you think she would have stayed with you when she changed back into an adult?”

Snow squirmed wildly. “I-I was supposed to pick up another potion that would keep her…”

Jumping when a mug nearly cracked against the table. “Only for a little while…”

“Of all the foolish and selfish things you have ever done this is by far the worst. It is her freewill Snow. No one deserves to have that stolen or manipulated.”

Tears falling. “I’m sorry Regina, please… I don’t know what else to say.” And she didn’t, for once.

“At this point Snow you can not say anything. I know Gold's deals and magic well. Some part of you had to make a choice to act on his offer. He can only manipulate free will if you go to him seeking something. So some part of you was deliberately seeking to separate us, his influence pushing or not.” Done with the mug and the very topic she pushed both away. “Actions speak louder than words. If you want to start to regain my trust I will give you one opportunity to do so.”

Nodding profusely. “Anything.”

“First, leave Emma be at school until you and I speak again. Her classrooms are on the opposite end of campus from yours. She deserves to be able to focus on her learning and not worry over us fighting or you walking off with her.”

“I promise.”

Sincere as the Princess was, she could only take the words for what they were worth. Mal’s eyes and extra senses would be enough to ensure Snow kept that promise. “Also, over the next few weeks, keep playing the bleeding heart card around town when you see Gold out and about. Do not engage him one on one. A pathetic look and a few tears will be plenty to keep him thinking he is still playing you.”

“That’s it?”
“That is all, yes.” Raising a brow and needing to lighten the mood. “Simple enough even for you dear.”

Sniffing. “Are you teasing me?” Head lowering to the side like a scolded puppy.

“I am.”

Snow relaxed some against the back of the chair. “Then I know you don’t hate me, at least.”

“No, I don’t.” Assuring with clear eyes. “And I haven’t for a very long time.”

Pink bowed in hope. “I’m sorry Regina.”

Nodding. “We need to work together not against one another. For Emma.”

Cautious. “Does this mean I might be able see Emma again outside of school? Any of her that’s willing… Supervised, maybe?”

Sighing. “I’ll talk to her and think about it, but I can not answer that right now.” Her lost trust aside, Emma’s hurt was a raw issue by itself.

Accepting, Snow tried to school her grief. “I’ll do what you want with Emma and Gold to the letter and I’ll respect your space until you’re ready to give me an answer….” Fidgeting. “So what happens now?”

Leaning back, Regina’s thoughts flooded with the plans ahead as she considered the question. If Snow played her role and Ruby was successful the night of the next full moon, she would have her magic restored. The Queen was almost ready to put the King of the crooked game in check and when she did…

“Regina?”

Pulled from plans crafted according to her strengths and weaknesses, red lips smiled. “Now we wait and hope for a happy ending… for all of us.”

-----

A/N - Almost there... :-)

Next time - Teen Emma has her first sleep over. Mischief ensues. The first phase of Regina’s plan to take Gold down goes into action with a little unexpected help.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

A/N – Two chapters left after this, including the epilogue. Enjoy! Fan-art for chapter on my Tumblr and at very end.

—

It was Tuesday evening just after a magic lesson and Emma was texting Justina on the couch as she had watched some mindless teen drama on TV. Regina sat across the way in the winged chair with a journal and spell book out on her lap working on what Emma assumed was the constant search for the potion that would let her shift at will. She had given up on the idea, now that her shifts were regulated; mind focused on her friends, school work, and the easy flow their life had taken since New Year Day. Regina assured if such a potion existed she would find it and wasn't so easily thrown off the hunt. Phone chiming brought eyes to the phone and Emma shot upright in her seat, fingers flying across the screen.

The sudden movement drew Regina's attention. Pausing in the middle of a lengthy Elfish translation she smiled fondly at how content Emma looked.

'This is how she should be.'

The brunette confirmed.

'Enjoying this second chance. Not worrying over magic, potions, or Gold…'

Fingers paused texting. *Mama?*

'Hmmmmm?'

'Please hear me aalllll the way out before you say no.'

Regina's eyebrows arched in interest. She set the pen within journal pages and the spell book aside to give Emma her full attention. "I promise not to say no right away… just after."

Rolling eyes at the tease, Emma cracked a grin. "So Justina's birthday is tomorrow and since it's a school night her parents are letting her have a small party with one friend over and she invited me to spend the night. She's having a bigger party this weekend, but I'll be fun size by then and I won't be able to go. I reaaaalllyyy want to sleep over and it is not a shift night, so can I please?"

Emma leaned forward, resting elbows on knees, hopeful.

Beginning to think the request through, Regina spoke her concerns. "It's a school night Emma and you have homework."

"Which I'll do first right when we get to her house after school and I'll even text you a picture so you can check it like always." Slow grin starting when the first word hadn't been no.

Coaching thoughts on what Emma was still responsible for, Regina further considered the request. "What about sleep and getting up on time?"

"Justina's mom makes her go to bed by 9:00 too." Eyes fought not to recline to the back of her head permanently at that similarity. "So I'll get plenty of sleep to be able to be up for school on time. I have an alarm on my cell. Her Mom would drive us in the morning." Knee bouncing.

"Please Mama. I won't be this size again on a weekend for a while to sleep over otherwise. You can call her mom and everything."

"And everything?" A pleased inquiry.

"Maammmma."

"Oh, I suppose." Arms were around her throat before she could blink.

"YES! THANK YOU!"

And just as quickly gone as Emma got sucked back into the phone. Deciding something Regina stood and turned off the TV. At the teen's wondering expression she nodded towards the foyer.

"Go get your shoes and coat on. We have a birthday present to shop for and only an hour before the stores close." Happy teen feet thundered out of the room, giving a drive by kiss to a cheek in thanks.

They found a little trendy boutique still open and browsed the jewelry section. Emma had an idea of what she wanted to get for her friend, though nothing popped out at her right away. Regina helped, suggesting items for her to consider, but Emma's mind was elsewhere.

"What about these?" The Queen held up a gold hoop set.

"Nah, not right." Curls shook after a very brief glance.

Brunette blinked at the item and put it back. "What is wrong with them? They are classic."

"Exactly..." Grimacing. "They're like too normal and old-ish."

It was Regina's turn not to send eyes rolling. Never mind the fact she had a similar pair, thought real gold, tucked away in her vanity at home. They browsed for a few more minutes and she wondered. "Why so quiet all of a sudden?" Girl had talked her ear off in excitement the entire ride and up until they started looking around.

Shrugging. "Nothing really. I was thinking about that potion you keep looking for."

Rounding the earring stand to be closer. "I will find a solution Emma."

Green windows opened in that assurance. "I know and that's not it. I think I don't really mind so much anymore. The shifts are predictable and it doesn't seem that important is all."

Processing the possibilities unsaid and wrapping an arm around Emma. "I am still going to keep looking for you regardless and you may change your mind by the time I actually have an answer, which I feel I am close to."

"Maybe so." Resting head on a shoulder, mind rolled. 'It might be nice to change at will or not at all.' Thought though, was stone cold sobering.

Fighting heat of tears at her brow, the idea of not having more time as they were, Regina swallowed thickly. Outside of their current pattern unless Emma chose to remain in a single younger state, which she didn't think her girl would; there would be no more helping with homework, bedtime stories, teaching milestones, or holding little bodies close. Small impish smiles
or awkward, yet sweet conversations would be missed. She was used to three pains of very
different green eyes. Spoiled in the tether breaking since the do over spell, Gold's cruel cut of it a
slow to realize gift. It was Emma's choice of course and she would honor whatever decision was
made without influencing the outcome.

"We will leave it at maybe then, my sweet girl."

"I still can't believe I got a yes." Emma pondered aloud as she lay on top of her new gray and
purple striped sleeping bag that had been purchased in addition to the I-tunes gift card and mood
changing earring set for Justina. She thumbed through a magazine on the floor of the green bed
room. They had finished homework, dinner with cake, and presents an hour ago and still had a
few before lights out.

"Stocked blondie." Justina grinned upside down from where her head hung off the end of a twin
bed, reaching out a hand to play with the end of a long blonde curl. "You have great hair, you
know that?" Flipping over and sitting up. "Hey I have an idea. I got some hair paint from my
cousin for my birthday. It will show up okay on mine, but it would really pop on yours."

Taking to the idea, Emma sat back crossing her legs, fingers running thoughtfully through strands
then deflating. "I'd be in a ton of trouble."

Smiling eyes. "Chill. It washes out. We can try it, take some pics and you can rinse it out in the
morning before school. Problem solved. I'll do it too. Besides it'll be fun, no harm done."

Chewing a bottom lip. "It really washes out?"

"Way out. You in?" Rolling off the bed and waving Emma to follow into the adjoining bathroom.

Hopping up and cracking knuckles. "Way in. Let's do this."

Thirty minutes later rainbow colors swirled down the bathroom sink as Justina washed her hands.

"Cool right?"

"I look totally different." Emma gathered the top half of her hair into a high ponytail, the bottom
half was covered in a range of purple, blue, and red chunky stripes. The hair paint, a wet chalky
substance, went on easy and once brushed through, dried quickly with no sticky residue.

Over the next hour they took a ton of pictures, playing with their looks by adding makeup,
jewelry, and a range of wild clothes in their own version of fashion show. A knock and a
reminder from Justina's mom had them both groaning, but complying with the request to get ready
for bed. Emma poked her hair up in a messy bun to deal with in the morning, washed her face and
slipped into her sleeping bag.

She tried to still her mind and relax, but anxiety began to steal thoughts. First night away from
home nerves drowned out the high of fun; missing Mama and her own bed as the room grew dark
and quiet. At the approaching nine o'clock hour a text brightened the dim screen of the phone near
her head. Picture with a bright red smile came into view, a text message of love and sweet dreams
that took her to rest with an easy heart.

Morning dawned hard and rude to green eyes as the alarm beeped across the room and buzzed
from her phone. Swiping the annoying thing off, lips smacked and grimaced over the sour taste
from forgetting to brush her teeth. Arching her back in a deep stretch, Emma got up and turned off
the beep machine by her friend's bed, shaking Justina's shoulder awake.

"Hey. You mind if I shower first?"

Mumbled as a pillow was pulled over a dark head. "Mmmmm, go for it."

Emma took her time, enjoying the hot water. Soaking her head with shampoo, she scrubbed,
laughing as the colorful suds splashed at her feet. Rinsing she brought her hair over her shoulder
to condition and frowned at the color still residing. Shrugging she tried shampoo again. More
color whirled down the drain, but fainter and hair just still bright as before.

"Justina!" Emma poked her head out of the shower calling.

"Sup blondie." The teen yawned, going to the sink to brush her teeth.

Beginning to panic. "The color isn't coming out."

"What?" Dropping the toothbrush and reaching for the box of colors on the counter. "They're
supposed to wash out... " Reading directions again. "Says right here. Tapping the front and
turning the box, eyes growing big. "Shit!"

Emma gulped. "Please tell me that's not how deep in trouble I think we are."

Throwing the box in the trash. "There's a protection prep spray we were supposed to use first.
Warning label said it'd be really hard to remove otherwise without a marathon shampoo session."

"We don't have time for that." Sliding down against the tub wall. "I'm dead."

"That makes two of us." Leaning against the counter. "Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll bury us
in twin plots... BFF's and all." Idea brewing. "Hey, we only did the underside of our hair. Maybe
we can pin it up tight against our necks and the top part will cover it up. If we wear beanies it
might work until we have more time to wash it out after school."

"Yeah maybe." Standing up, Emma hurried to rinse and get out to give Justina a turn.

Drying her hair took longer than she would have liked. They helped each other pin up the
underside of their hair with bobby pins in several small tight buns. Wearing a borrowed grey
beanie, Emma threw on her uniform and packed up her stuff. The ride to school was full of
Justina's little sister chatting away and Emma made sure to thank Mrs. Wood for having her when
they were dropped off. Feeling more confident at getting their idea past one adult, Emma
answered a good morning text from Regina, assuring she had fun, ate breakfast and was at school.

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they were dropped off. Feeling more confident at getting their idea past one adult, Emma
answered a good morning text from Regina, assuring she had fun, ate breakfast and was at school.
After storing her sleeping bag and overnight stuff in her locker she nearly forgot about her hair in
the busy span of the day until after school.

Lugging her stuff to the Benz she flashed a bright smile in greeting. Throwing her stuff in the back
seat she heard hugged her Keeper, singing. "I had the best-best-bestest time Mama!"

Kissing hello and starting the car Regina smiled. "Did she like the present you picked out?"

Buckling up. "Yeah, she wore the earrings today and we picked out some new music for her I-
The Friday on the eve of Regina's birthday a few weeks later Ruby stood on the mansion's porch at dusk. She fingered the heavy brass skeleton key Regina handed over to gain her wolf entrance into Gold's protected shop. "So the ward is against humans?"

"More specifically against me, but yes. You will be able to pass in and out undetected, especially with this key. It will unlock any door, magically sealed or not." Regina crossed her arms against the chill and the pending plan to take place once the full moon began its ascent with the approaching night. Snow had kept up the proposed charade around town and Gold seemed to believe the tears and depression, appearing almost disgusted according to Snow's frequent updates via text.

"I do expect to see any pictures of your daring fashion adventure though as payment for my leniency." Teasing smirk.

"No Mama. We were just messing around and dressing up."

"Yes, but…" Valid excuse failing.

"I couldn't help but notice your new colorful addition while you were sitting out."

"It wasn't supposta be. The box said it would wash out right away, but there was this protective spray we should have used before." Shrugging.

"It was a mistake Emma. I'm not upset. You did not purposely set out to achieve this result. Intentions make a difference where your actions are concerned."

"I thought you'd be more upset with me is all."

Thankful smile. "Thanks Mama."

"I see." Thinking what she wanted to do about the matter. "Well, it looks like I am teaching you how to do an extraction spell tonight after your homework."

"Mama!"

---

The night before the birthday party, Regina sat on the porch with Emma. "You have Kung-Fu today. I have your uniform in your gym bag in the back. Next time, please remember to put your used ones in the wash after practice, not back in the bag. I swear a fungi farm could have grown fat, happy, and old in there."

Laughing Emma agreed, and then sobered as she thought through the pending session. Uniforms were strict at the studio and there was no way she'd get away with wearing a hat. "Um, can we just go home?

Concern answered. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah, but…" Valid excuse failing.

"Did you get enough sleep last night?" Wondering if fatigue was a factor of the request.

"I did. I just…" She wanted to go, so that wouldn't do. Lying was out altogether. Sighing. "Never mind."

"You love Kung-Fu. Did something happen at school?"

"No Mama. Forget I said anything."

"Upon arrival, Emma grabbed her bag and made a beeline for the bathroom to change. Leaving her thick curtain of hair down covered the carefully pinned colors if she didn't turn too suddenly. It was risky without the hat to secure everything, but left with little choice she forced a smile and went to the mat to warm up. Posture ridged and limbs stiff, she moved through the first set of exercises. Mulan came over twice correcting her stature and modeling correct pose again for what Emma was to do. An eye roll earned her a silent warning from the instructor and another with a comment halfway through the class when they were partnered for pad work had her sent to observe the remainder of the class.

Across the room Regina watched not amused at the third redirection from Mulan. Emma sat with head down, palms covering face before the teen sat up and there eyes met. Green pleaded with her to leave and waited for a summons to depart. Regina shook her head and the girl poured, arms crossing. She refused to shorten the instructor's sentence by taking Emma home before the class was over. Greatly respecting the tight ship Mulan ran, the girl would have to learn the hard way today as sometimes was the case. Noticing something else, she kept eyes lingering long enough for Emma to squirm under them. The moment class was dismissed the blonde shot up and jogged across the mats reaching for shoes.

"I see."

"Not just yet, sweet girl." Standing Regina gestured toward the instructor. "Go make your amends please."

Sighing Emma nodded and went back toward the teacher, annoyed, but receptive to the question answer routine over her attitude she'd experienced only a few times. Returning to her Keeper when apologies were done, she slipped on her coat and footwear before following heels out to the car.

Regina stole a glance at the slumped form in the passenger seat. "I couldn't help but notice your new colorful addition while you were sitting out."

"Not really." Then suddenly curious. "Is she a real character?"

Scoffing. "Hardly."

"It was an extraction spell tonight after your homework."

"I thought you'd be more upset with me is all."

Thankful smile. "Thanks Mama. We were just messing around and dressing up."

"Yes."

"Red lips popping the 'p' as the girl often did."

"Mama!"

---

The birthday party was the busiest one Ruby had ever seen. People were everywhere. Snow was her usual motherly self, tearing around, ensuring everyone was having fun. The main hall was filled with various standards ranging from a rock band to a car show. The Vans on a budget contest was the most popular among the kids who often used it as a place to hang out and chat. The food was the usual assortment of finger foods and desserts. There were tables set up for games such as pin the tail on the donkey and the usual cake cutting ceremony. The Yard Jockeys were also present and they were playing their usual set of music which included hits from the past and present. The DJ was a popular topic of discussion among the kids who were often heard commenting on his playlist. Ruby stood on the mansion's porch at dusk, staring at the party below. She wondered how Regina would react to Snow's plan. Regina seemed to be enjoying herself, dancing to the music and mingling with the other guests. Ruby sighed, knowing that Regina would be dealing with Snow's plan soon enough. She hoped they would handle it gracefully.
Emma finding the key several weeks ago in the vault wall had been an unexpected gift. Once the curse broke she’d lost access to her keys in a raid on Town Hall. Her office had been destroyed and tagged, things stolen, the huge ring of skeleton keys among them. Henry had taken the master key in Ruby’s hand all those years ago in a fit of ten year old anger and through Emma’s mischief it had made its way back to her. 

Like Savior like son.

"Granny should be here soon to watch Emma." Ruby assured. She was beyond ready to shut Gold down and get a chance to mend things with Belle. She didn't understand all that was going on, but was able to read between Regina's cryptic speech and clues to know there was a lot riding on her ability to achieve the goal of tonight.

"Maamumma?" Emma’s cracked moon came from the living room.

Regina waved Ruby inside and shut the door, quickly returning to find the little girl she’d left bundled in blankets on the couch suddenly in the archway hugging her legs. "Come here sweet one." Lifting Emma, a ragged wet cough rang in her ear.

"Mama, throat hurts and tummy and head and even my fingernails." Glassy green eyes blinked miserably over a flushed pink pout. "My hair hurts too."

"I know baby, it's nearly time for another dose of medicine. Do you want to watch your movie? I set up Lilo and Stitch for you."

"Nooso, only want you." Emma tightened her hold around Keeper's neck, resting a hot cheek against a shoulder.

Ruby bent to pick up the dropped blankets on the floor when her phone buzzed. Checking with a frown, she replied and gave apologetic eyes to Regina. "That was Granny. There was a grease fire at the diner. She's fine, and it's out, but the fire-department is going need her for a while." She winced. As each moment passed closer to the approach of dusk she felt each hair on her skin beginning to lift and bones began to ache, signaling her shift would soon begin. "I can do this on my own. You need to stay with Emma."

Shaking her head, Regina was adamant. "You need a lookout and at the very least what protection I can offer you."

"No go Mama!" Kicking out her legs, Emma whined shilly, tears starting.

"Shhhhh, Baby, I'm right here." Conflicted over leaving the sick child, but time was not on their side. This war with Gold needed to end this weekend with Emma only having two more days in this shift cycle for her full plan to work. Pulling out her phone, she texted an SOS message before dialing plan B. The phone rang twice before blue smoke cleared revealing a grinning Dragon.

With a sweeping flourish of a bow, Mal fluttered lashes. "Sorry I'm late."

Smirking as she rubbed Emma's back after a particularly nasty round of coughing. "That's my line dear and you are right on time."

"Awwww, how is the little darling?" Mal practically cooed, eyes melting when a little mouth tried to smile at her.

"Hi. Emma waved then hid her face back in dark hair.

"Hush baby." Soothing softly so she could think.

"You are not asking, Regina." Mal turned to the waitress, gesturing to the front door. "I am telling. Ruby went ahead and she paused to look over shoulder. "We will return by midnight. Focus on Emma."

"Mal—" Before Regina could finish the front door closed and Emma stilled in her arms. Heart clenched, pounding as emotions buzzed within the hive of mind. Queen bee whispered, guiding worker feelings to settle. She always knows just what I need to hear. Why am I still pushing her way?" Kissing Emma she moved to the couch to sit with the child cuddled on her lap. "Maybe it is time to try again. I've made peace with Daniel's memories, the chaos with Gold will be over soon, and Mal is… Mal.'

"Mal, it's complicated at best, but I cannot ask you to do that."

Little bundle whined and squirmed in between. "I want yooou."

"Want Mama?" Emma begged, turning in lap to face the TV as her stuffed friend was summoned and the movie began playing. Little hands pushed the blanket being draped against a shoulder.

"Mama Stitchy please and movie?" Emma begged, cringing. "I want yooou."

"I know baby, it's nearly time for another dose of medicine. Do you want to watch your movie? I set up Lilo and Stitch for you."

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"I know baby, it's nearly time for another dose of medicine. Do you want to watch your movie? I set up Lilo and Stitch for you."

"Mama, throat hurts and tummy and head and even my fingernails." Glassy green eyes blinked miserably over a flushed pink pout. "My hair hurts too."

"I know baby, it's nearly time for another dose of medicine. Do you want to watch your movie? I set up Lilo and Stitch for you."

"Mal—" Before Regina could finish the front door closed and Emma stilled in her arms. Heart clenched, pounding as emotions buzzed within the hive of mind. Queen bee whispered, guiding worker feelings to settle. She always knows just what I need to hear. Why am I still pushing her way?" Kissing Emma she moved to the couch to sit with the child cuddled on her lap. "Maybe it is time to try again. I've made peace with Daniel's memories, the chaos with Gold will be over soon, and Mal is… Mal. 'Flawed yet perfect in match.

"Mama Stitchy please and movie?" Emma begged, turning in lap to face the TV as her stuffed friend was summoned and the movie began playing. Little hands pushed the blanket being draped across her legs away. "Too hot."

Regina summoned a skin thermometer and ran it across a forehead. Beeping it read 101.2. A wrist flick brought a fresh pair of cotton PJs and a damp cloth. Pausing the movie, she stood Emma up and removed the fleece pants and top. A quick wipe down to flushed skin and new lighter garments brought some relief to a small face.

"Better baby?"

"Un-huh, 'specially cause I don't havta wear that wrist guard anymore. It was itchy." Glad when she was able to start going without it last week. A tiny plastic cup was brought to her lips and she scowled, but drank the medicine knowing better than to try and fight the inevitable. Her favorite yellow mug with honey tea followed and she climbed back up to snuggle into the best spot in the whole world.

Hours passed with broth soup with toast, Pedialyte, small naps and more medicine between coughing fits and tears. Emma wouldn't give up her spot on a lap until close to midnight. Regina settled the girl on the couch under a blanket once a deep sleep came and moved to the kitchen to get some water. Sipping in the quiet of night she felt a familiar magical static in air and set her
glass down as Mal and the wolf appeared in a puff of blue smoke.

"Are you…" Queen started as the wolf padded over, a purple filled bottle held delicately between jaws capable of crushing bone. Yellow eyes unblinking, furred nodding, wet nose nudging a hand. Regina took the bottle, eyes taking in sure blue with question.

"We are both more than fine Regina and Gold none the wiser. I took the liberty of replacing what we took with a glamour spell. Should buy us at least a day, maybe two to finish this." Mal moved to scratch big furry ears and set the borrowed skeleton key on the counter. "That came in very handy."

The use of we wasn't lost on royal ears. Regina's blood began to sing, magic trapped in spelled glass yearned to flow through the veins of home. Ruby whined and licked a shaking tan hand. Kneeling and resting her forehead against a great furry brow, Regina hugged a strong neck. "Thank you Ruby." Standing she waved her wrist and pointed to the living room. "There is a new fire in the grate and a plate of lamb with some water right in front of it waiting for you. Go warm up and eat." The wolf left with a peppy step and a soft yip in thanks.

Dragon went to the counter, removing two wine glasses. Tapered fingers snapped conjuring a fine quality Malbec and worked foil with cork off the neck of a green bottle. Pouring two scarlet streams, she handed one stem to the Queen and clinked hers in a toast of a mission well done. Old times nostalgic of teamwork, desire, and a common beat of heart; beckoned within elastic love filling the space between them.

Careful to respect the quiet reflection coating the room, Mal tasted more than one red victory. A sip first for both of them, then almost chaste burgundy brushed a cheek close to the corner of a mouth. Regina sweetly ducked a chin after, teeth catching bottom lip with the smallest smile full of promises possible. The clock in the hall chimed the stroke of midnight as their eyes answered the same question.

"Well then…" Mal set both their glasses aside and lifted a royal hand, carefully taking the top off the glass bottle housing long missed magic. "Additional cheers to your birthday and many, many more my Queen."

For Regina, draining the contents felt like slipping on a favorite shirt, an old friend after hours when the day was done. One that saw better days and the most ragged. Soft, warm, ripped and torn, purple popped heady on her tongue, slick down, down, and spread like liquid silk fire through layers of muscle and skin. Neck cords stretched and fingers flexed summoning missed strength and power to tips. Flames danced within her palms and in a puff of smoke she moved from one side of the room and back again and again with sweet laughter, nectar to the senses, in her wake. Done testing, arms found the neck of the Dragon and Queen rode the waves of joyful relief wrapped in the security she had missed and in the possibility of so much more looking right back.

A/N – Phase one done! Thoughts?

Next time – A sneak peak at what life could be like if Regina embraces a possible change and phase two of Operation Shut Down Gold…
Chapter 31

A/N – Can’t believe we are here already—second to last chapter, folks.

Regina awoke the morning of her birthday to something poking her face, or rather someone. Cracking a blurry eye she moaned sleep away as little green ones came into focus. “How are you feeling baby?” Reaching for the girl sitting close on her bed and jerking up when she finally registered the time.

“How are you feeling baby?”

“Better and guess what Mama?”

It was nearly ten. Feet found slippers and she lifted Emma up to her hip, feeling a forehead and glad it was cooler than last night. “What baby?” She never slept in this late. Emma needed breakfast, medicine, and today was—

Cupping her Keeper’s face, she popped a kiss on a cheek. “Ms. Mal make’s good cheesy eggs.”

Slippers froze, remembering last night. Magic returning, wine, and that loaded peck on the cheek from the Dragon…. She’d taken a sleeping Emma up to bed right after consuming her powers with Mal trailing on her heels to help. Blankets had been turned down and Emma tucked in. More than impulse had made her hand take Mal’s and lead the way back downstairs, begging a single question along the way.

“Stay awhile?”

And Mal had. Having felt celebratory, a glass of wine led to them talking for hours, just like old times and Regina realized how much she had missed their closeness, if not more. Dragon offered, much to her relief, to keep watch on the couch as Ruby slept on the rug in front of the hearth in case Gold discovered their plan too soon.

Present moment full, Regina adjusted Emma in arms as the day ahead came back into focus. Sighing and not sure how Emma had interpreted waking up to the Dragon in the house she forced her feet to keep moving.

“She does cook well.” Finally responding, knowing that as fact.

“Un-huh and I asked for my cereal and she wouldn’t give me Coco-puffs cause she said they looked like rabbit pellets.” Emma shrugged dramatically, confused to what those were as they descended the stairs. Wiggling to get down at the landing she darted off ahead into the kitchen, footie PJ feet nearly sliding on tile.

“Slow down Emma.” Regina reminded and rounded the corner after her little one. The smell of coffee perked her senses and she smiled softly at the pure domestic fluff before her eyes. Eggs sunny side up sizzled in a pan alongside turkey bacon, toast popped up with a ding as Mal moved fluidly about the space wearing an apron that Regina had forgotten she owned. A red one Emma had gotten her that had a custom saying: ‘I’m a Queen and a bit more refined… and so is my cooking.’ Emma sat at the counter finishing the last few bites on a ketchup smeared plate and coloring. There was a card propped up with a small vase of flowers and a little box in her place setting. Heart stretching when blue eyes swept over her.

Mal smiled in greeting. “Good morning.” Handing over a mug of well dressed milky caffeine just the way the Queen liked it and assuring amber eyes with a nod to the little one. “She’s been up for an hour, I took her temp and her fever must have broken last night, but just barely. I gave her another dose of the children’s Tylenol and some of the Pedialyte I found in the fridge. She insisted on waking you to sing happy birthday, but was easily swayed with food to let you sleep in a bit longer… I hope you don’t mind.” Gesturing to the cooking and apron.

Regina surprised herself. “I don’t actually. Thank you for getting her situated this morning and for the coffee.” Sipping the brew in hand and enjoying the warm wash of pleasure that only the first sip of coffee could bring. Feeling it stronger this morning as she realized it was more than the coffee waking her body up. Clearing throat. “Where is Ruby?”

“She left a while ago after consuming nearly a pound of bacon.” Mal began to dish food onto the two remaining plates, setting them on either side of Emma at the empty stools. “Said she would text you for next steps later today. How are you feeling?”
Moving to her place on the left of Emma, she took a little bite of yellow heaven, yolk slippery on crisp toast. “Like myself for the first time in a year, if I count the spelled reality.” She gently ran a hand down Emma’s tangle of wild bed head curls, smoothing the ends as she leaned in to smell the red roses in vase.

Mal fondly watched the way the little blonde leaned into the affection. “Well worth it to you, I’m sure.”

Amber eyes bright. “Yes. It was.”

“Flowers are pretty huh, Mama? I drew what I wanted to give you and Ms. Mal made them appear and you got to open the card.”

Obeying the child, Regina opened the large heart shaped red card, melting at the set of hand prints on either side. Six year old print on the left mirrored a thirteen year old one on the right joined in the middle by the words, ‘We love our Mama!’ Throat working as eyes glassed, she nodded quietly, pulling Emma over to sit on her lap.

“Big me got you that.” Sniffing, a finger pointed to the little white box as she tried to avoid the conjured tissue coming to wipe her runny nose. “But it’s kinda from all of me.”

Setting the tissue aside, Regina eased off the box top and felt her chest fill again, sure nothing more could fit inside. Resting on a nest of cotton was a single fine gold bangle with one charm attached; amethysts winked from the four points of a crown resting over the body of a golden swan. Delicate and just right; a combination of what they were to each other.

Regina slipped it on, holding up a wrist for both Dragon and child to see. “I adore it baby, thank you. I’ll wear it every day.”

“A swan queen. How perfect.” Mal readily agreed loving the symbolism for the special dynamic shared.

They finished breakfast with the simple kind of easy conversation, between bites of food and little giggles that came from a place of quiet understanding only the years of knowing the other through the ups and downs of life could bring. Regina was on her last sip of coffee when the sudden candidness Emma possessed broke the clinking flatware.

“Mama how come Ms. Mal and you had a sleepover with Ruby?” Emma switched out crayons, never looking up from her drawing of Jasper as royal arms held her close.

The phrasing, though innocent, made the Dragon snort and Mal quickly schooled her features with the amused, but scolding look from the Queen.

“They were helping Mama get something back and it was really late when they dropped it off so they spent the night.” Purposefully leaving off the other conversation they had and not for little ears this moment.

The little girl processed this, dropped her crayon and looked between the adults. “What’d you get? A present?”

Smiling and lifting Emma off her lap to stand. “In a way, yes. Do you want to see?”

Nodding eagerly Emma gasped as her Mama disappeared in a puff of purple smoke and reappeared across the room. Squealing with delight she ran to her Keeper into open arms. “You got it back! All of you is back now Mama!”

Kissing a cheek, Regina’s smile was all teeth as she cuddled the girl in her arms. She caught blue watching them over Emma’s shoulder. Sky open and wide for the taking of flight if she so chose to accept the wings offered. Decision made and whole, she felt for the first time in so long, on this happy, happy day.

Emma played with a pile of Legos on the living room floor of the mansion as Regina, Mal, Ruby, and Snow all nursed coffee in deep thought later that same day. The Princess’ eyes rested on her daughter in the wake of heavy conversation. Like most children Emma was absorbed in her fantasy and ignoring the adults in favor of play. Snow respected the gift of being included in the mission about to take place to protect the little girl.
Regina set her mug on the coffee table between them as everyone mulled over the details of her plan long mused and laid in place, pieces finally ready to come together. Snow broke the drought of silence with wet words.

“Can’t you just blast Gold into another realm or something Regina?” Eager to help, but confused. “Why this way?”

“Trust me Snow. If that were an option…” She couldn’t say more, but it seemed like enough.

Snow’s eyes studied brown. “You want me to talk to Gold in his shop… with Emma there?”

Nodding the Queen took a deep breath. “You will tell him you used the potion and how grateful you are for his support, how well it worked. Both you and Emma will be fully shielded and those shields will be laced with glamour hiding the magical scent, but it will only go undetected by him for so long. Regardless, they will protect you.” Summoning the clear vial Gold had given to Snow she returned it back in the Princess' hand with a new use. “When you are close enough, throw this at him. One drop will be plenty and he will never be able to get near her again. I’ve also added a freezing spell that will allow you both to get out of there to Mal, while he and I have a much needed chat.”

Ruby leaned forward, elbows on knees, more than ready to kick Gold where it hurt. “And my potion?”

Mal produced another vial, red liquid and gave it to the waitress. “A temporary shape shifting spell to allow you access to your wolf.” Assessing the red head. “With your strength it will last about fifteen minutes.”

The Skeleton Key was summoned and Regina handed that over too. “This will gain you entrance to the back of the shop like before while he is busy with Snow in the front. I’ve told you where he keeps it. Be careful not to cut your mouth on the blade. Bring it straight to me in the ally. We will have but a few minutes for all of this to occur before he gets wind something is not right.” Eyes found the Princess. “Snow, I’m trusting you to protect your daughter from the one she actually needs protecting from. Do you understand me?”

Princess rolled lips in, nodding vigorously at the second chance of trust. “I understand the weight here Regina. You have my word.”

With that promise the Queen called the child over having already spent a long hour speaking with Emma before the other visitors arrived. “It’s near time baby. Do you have any questions about what Mama needs you to do?”

Blonde curls shook. “I get to throw the biggest tantrum ever and Snow will talk to Mr. Gold, but he can’t hurt me and then we go with Ms. Mal.” Grinning at the idea of getting to be naughty on purpose and not get in trouble.

“That’s exactly right sweet one.” Kissing a cheek, she summoned the child’s winter wear and Stitchy.

Emma’s size their advantage in this plan. Gold wouldn’t believe little one had so easily gone with Snow, so the child having a meltdown after use of said potion meant to keep them apart was a needed distraction for their plan to work. He would be elated, too much to question what appeared in front of him right away in his victory. As she bundled Emma up Mal began the enchantment to shield the girl and Snow as Ruby consumed the shape shifting potion.

Ready and all willing, Regina transported them a half block away from the pawn shop in front of the diner. Kneeling down to hug Emma one more time, she whispered her love, heart hopeful, but tearing when they all went their separate ways.

“Are you ready Emma?” Snow stopped several feet from their destination, hand holding her daughter's almost too tightly.

Little green eyes narrowed and with a firm nod she gave a thumb up. “I was born ready.” Closing her eyes she pulled on less than happy times, memories of her life before Regina, before she found home and a heart she fit into. Sniffles came first, then the damp heat in her eyes. The perfect match to her flushed cheeks and puckering mouth.

Emma’s game face set Snow squeezed her hand, a signal they were to begin their role-play. Snow moved faster toward the shop as the child squirmed in her hand to pull away. The bell chimed wickedly over head announcing them and Snow made a great show of getting Emma in the door with a blinding stupid grin on her face.
“Well, well... I see you finally got what you wanted dearie.” Gold crooned, steepled fingers under chin as his eyes consumed the ache on a small crying face. “Took you long enough.” Snake eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

Ignoring his shaded inquiry, Snow kept her tone elated. “It worked just as you said it would! I finally have my daughter back.” The words made her sick now that she had some understanding of his role in this, but she forced a happy grin as she looked down at Emma trying to pry her hand off.

“Not supposta be here!” A little foot stomped and Emma shouted pulling back hard, nearly succeeding too well in getting away when little teeth tried to bite the hand holding hers. “I WANT MY MAMA! LET GO!”

Gold wrinkled his nose in distaste over the little temper filling the room and shifted foot to foot at the display of brass from the pint sized Savior. “I suppose you’ll be wanting the other potion to keep her in this... lovely state now that you have your little girl again.”

Snow nodded eagerly struggling now to keep a hold of Emma. As Gold bent behind the counter she popped the cork on the invisible vile in her hand and the second his beady eyes peered over the top of the glass she threw it at him exactly as instructed. A burst of light filled the room, throwing her back a step. Stunned, but clear headed she gathered Emma into her arms as force field radiated from the potion began to push them back and ran out of the shop and nearly into the oncoming Queen. The child reached for the brunette in passing, but was pulled away in haste down the block with Ruby’s paws on their heels toward the waiting Dragon. Engulfed in blue smoke they all disappeared. Emma’s worried echo of ‘Mama!’ ringing in Regina’s ear.

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The Queen of the game hard won stood on the threshold of Gold’s shop door thoroughly enjoying the shocked leer he pitched. Palm firm around the Dark One’s dagger. Ruby had retrieved it from the hiding place Belle told her about years ago right before the botched attempt at crossing the town line had occurred and beauty suspected the Imp was becoming a danger once again. Regina toyed with blade, slowly bringing it up into the sunlight flashing on his engraved name as his yellowing eyes bulged. Hers curved at the creases, like a pair of sharp thorns from a stem of rose in the presence of his frown; pretty masked poison in wait of a finger prick.

Royalty commanded. “Dark One, lift the ward to allow me entrance.” The magical barrier dissolved instantly as the freezing spell keeping him rooted began to loosen. “Hands up.” Another direction he obeyed without question. Heels approached slowly, calculated as it was clear he fully registered the wrath accompanying every click. He dared sneer and before he could draw another breath dagger was resting at the base of his throat, tip firmly pressed at the hallow of his wind pipe.

“Careful dearie. Our oath is still—” Gasping as a fine thread of blood wormed down his neck. Dagger glowed as the oath broke. Cautious now, eyes searched the woman in front of him and shivered at the maternal rage swirling in the depths of dark eyes he had not seen in decades. Her Majesty owned the room and the Queen was not pleased.

“Damn our oath. The potion you meant for me is a perfect replacement you can not manipulate. You’ll never get near Emma again. I am done playing games Imp. Now that I have my magic back we are on equal footing again.” Pressing the tip in a hair’s width as she let well kept darkness out to play. “Well, I am at least.”

“So this is what it has come to.” Swallowing against the metal as he struggled to his knees without use of hands, blade moved with him fluidly.

Scoffing as she began to rein in cruelty wanting to slip the leash. “Oh I am not going to kill you dear. That is far too kind for what you have put that child, me, Belle and Ruby through.”

“Even the sweet Princess Snow White?” Trying once to bait her Majesty’s retreat.

“Even her. I am not that woman anymore.” Pulling the dagger back, she circled him. “We will get to your comeuppance soon enough. Summon Belle. Now.”

As a puff of black smoke cleared a confused Belle gasped at the sight of her husband kneeling at the feet of the Queen. She rushed to him, encircling his neck. Hard eyes, blue ice glared up.

“What have you done to him Regina?”

“It is not what I have done.” Nodding to Belle, a brow arched. “Tell her the truth Dark One.”
Words stumbled, no longer untrue, from his oil slicked mouth. Desperate at the prospect of a life without his sweet Belle to keep him grounded he replaced her memories with that of the Queen’s stolen true love ones. The last two years had been a twisted lie, love not theirs to have masked free will to love another. As he finished, the spell keeping Belle from strangling him on the spot still held. Blue looked into him, forgiving falsely and in them he began to sink into the injustice of what he had done to her. Truth a bitter aftertaste.

Regina took a deep breath, struggling once more against her own darkness at the depravity kneeling before her. It would be so easy to be rid of him, but the light that had grown in her heart the last ten years kept her to the original plan. “Now remove the memories that don’t belong to her.”

“I can’t give them back to you. Surely you know that.” Slow drawl, Gold almost pleaded to let them remain. Almost. “They will dissolve into nothing the moment I lift the enchantment.” He had made sure of that if it ever happened to come to this point. A knife in the gut of his best student a reminder never to underestimate the depth he would go to have some victory with one last lesson taught even in his downfall.

Red broke the hard line and a single tear ripped down a tan cheek. “They will never be nothing. Not to me.” Knuckles white on the dagger handle to keep from shaking. Bitter sweet. “Do it.”

With his black heart, aching Gold waved his hand over Belle’s contorted face and broke in the way those blue eyes narrowed at him in knowing disgust. “Belle please—”

“Oh my God! What… what the hell did you do to me!?” Scrambling back from the man she’d been forced to bed for two years, kiss every morning, and live a foggy lie between them under the sham of true love. Eyes blinked in startling recognition at Regina as she found her footing. “Ruby? Is she—”

“At the mansion. I’ll poof you there now if you are done with him.”

“I never want to see him again.” Spat with great disgust and lacking sympathy she used to feel when he looked at her with those eyes begging for understanding and another chance.

“That will be arranged.” Regina assured. “Gladly.”

Belle’s anger fell in hot torrents down her face. “I don’t love you and any friendly affection I could have had for you if you hadn’t forced this lie on me is gone.”

Rumple crumpled to the ground as if shot by the lead words hitting his stomach. “I have nothing to live for if that’s the case.” Mean but broken eyes found the Queen. “She controls me and I doubt I’ll be seeing the light of day anytime soon.”

Tsking in chide. “That is where you are wrong Rumple and where the biggest difference between you and I lay. That choice will be entirely up to you.”

“Regina, will you please send me to Ruby?” Near begging to make amends with her girlfriend from that pained night they were torn apart.

Purple smoke stole Belle away and left her with the rumpled Imp. Taking her time, she summoned a stool and sat, crossing her legs, dagger firmly in hand resting in her lap as she confirmed her original plans for him. Part of her still wanted his price in blood, but her darkness had been satiated with the dried line staining his white shirt collar and that he would never be able to get close to or harm Emma ever again.

“You might as well slit my throat your Majesty and enjoy your victory. I know you want to.” Words void of emotion, though for once in longer than he could remember he felt too much.

“You brought this entirely on yourself.” Sitting up straighter as the memories of their encounters the last several weeks came back. Temper fully locked behind the door in mind for now she sighed. “I will not give the dagger back. That is going somewhere you will never find it. But I will grant you your free will by not using the dagger against you again once we are done speaking.”

Gold eyes snapped up, narrowing in question. “What kind of game are you getting at?”

“Unlike you I detest games and this is not one. No one deserves to have their free will taken from them, not even you.” Not liking that she had done so, but game turned deadly had forced her hand. “I will give you the gift of choice you stole from others and a second chance for you to make better ones.”

Regina’s gaze dropped to the fine metal work of the dagger. A terrible beauty no one should bear
the weight of or wield over another. Free will was like that: terrible and beautiful all on its own, an absolute supremacy. Softening temper more for his life’s plight she moved to study him. A crippled man damned from birth with bad luck. He had lost his wife and child to the darkness. Given up his soul for power, addicted to the glory and rule over others. Even after all he had put them through she managed to speak with a teaspoon of sweetness for his bitter black drink.

“If the Evil Queen can find happiness so can the Dark One and we do not have to force someone’s love to find it.” Warming over the unique bond she shared with the Savior and one she’d never thought possible a decade ago. “Emma found me and a home in my heart, what was left of it when she came to town. I have no doubt you will find the one you are meant to love.” She extracted a small bag from her coat pocket and held it up for him to see. His eyes grew at the sparkling jelly bean that wasn’t in the plastic. Handing him the bag, he fingered it delicately in further quandary.

“Why would you give me this?” Mistrust evident, but flabbergasted over the very idea of the gesture. “Me of all people?”

“I’ve been saving this for a long time, ever since Tiny came to town when Emma and I were on less than good terms. I kept it as a reminder to have hope when things seem at their most dark.” Nodding to the bean. “I have more hope than I know what to do with at times and I do not need it anymore, but you do.”

The Imp sank into those words, hope was something he’d given up and didn’t know the meaning of anymore. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Take the bean, my hope for you, and a leap of faith. Go find your piece of happiness in another realm. You will not find it here. I will not grant you a third opportunity least you ever return.” Sentence of banishment given she stood with the blade still in hand. “Regardless I will not use the dagger on you again. Should you not choose to use the bean and stay we will battle this out the old fashioned way, on equal ground.” Vanishing the dagger, she cupped palms ready to summon two fireballs and deflection shield tight against her skin should he make the wrong decision.

He got to his feet, summoning his cane. With a long look at the Queen he slowly moved to the counter, retrieving a box and something from the belly of it before making his way back across the shop. Tired eyes and an accepting nod was enough to soak out the fire waiting to rise in her hands. Holding up a bottle. “This is the potion that will allow Emma to shift at will. The tether making her an adult can not ever be mended, but this will give her back her free will to choose how she wishes to be. Take it.” Peace offered without a deal attached.

Regina reached for the prize of the day, eyes never leaving his as she pocketed the vial. “Thank you. I will make sure Emma knows you gave it freely.”

Gold dropped his head staring long at bean in palm. Finally, he tossed it across the shop. They both stepped back as a whirling vortex of spinning light and sparks grew, sucking the edges of the room into a green hole. He stepped forward and with the smallest of bows, a respect and acquisition of a game well played, he stepped into the light and was consumed in his desire for the Queen’s words of hope to prove true.

In the fullness of nothing more to do save one last thing, Regina went to the door. Flipping the open sign to closed, bell rang in sweet victory. As she entered the light of the waiting day, hope rose in her mind’s eye in the form of green and blue smiles waiting for her at home.

A/N – Final chapter, Epilogue, to come next week. Please review meantime!

And last but not least, the title of the last part of their journey is going to be... 'Different Loving' - Look for it about a week after the final chapter of this one.
Chapter 32

A/N – Here we are! Hope you enjoy! End notes include details of the last part to this story and when to expect posts to start on it. A sneak peek at the cover art for Different Loving is at the very very end and also on my Tumblr!

Epilogue - One week later...

“Can’t catch me!” Emma yelled over her shoulder as she cut through the foyer, dodging the mingling adults as her little brother chased her through the downstairs of the mansion. Delightful squeal filled the space. Granny smirked at her as did Baby and Belle.

The thirteen year old nearly rammed into David carrying a platter of cheese, crackers, and meat from the kitchen, but ducked around him last minute as he spun to avoid dropping the tray. He balanced it only to barely catch it again as Neal did a baseball slide through his sprawled legs to catch up to Emma. “Whoa, speed twins slow down.” Chuckling.

“Sorry!” Emma grinned back to him as Neal finally caught her about the waist, just as Regina called to her from kitchen. “Coming Mama!” Hugging her brother, she kissed his head, complete with a noogie. “Alright little dude. Rematch later?”

“You’re on!” Neal rubbed where the kiss lingered with a wrinkled nose and scampered off to tackle Paige entering the house.

Henry followed his wife and rushed over to Emma, pink cheeked from the cold outside. Handing over the feta cheese he had gone to three different stores looking for, he sighed with relief. “Tell Mom this was all the store had and I am not going back again just because it’s not the brand she wants.”

Emma pushed it back at him. “Nu-huh, you tell her.”

“No you.” Forcing it into pale hands with a grin.

“Emma?” A royal summons again from the kitchen.

Smirking, Henry spun the teenager around toward the door. “See she wants you anyway.” Over a shoulder. “You owe me big time kid.”

Making her way into the kitchen, Emma stole a tomato from the new platter David passed by with. Popping red in her mouth, she sidled up to her Keeper at the counter. “What’s up Mama?”

“Did I hear Henry?” Eyes falling from green to the cheese in hand. “Ah, that rascal made you his messenger scapegoat.” Taking the container of feta and opening the top.

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Unsure where the expected upset Henry hinted at was. “Yep… what’s the big deal about the brand any way?”

“There isn’t one, but don’t tell him that.” Grinning at the memory. “I sent him to the grocery store once when he was your age with a list of items I was missing from a recipe. Instead of buying heavy cream he bought whipped cream in a can. Instead of sweet potatoes he bought sweet potato pie and in place of the filet I asked for he got frozen fish sticks. Needless to say we had a long talk about specificity that apparently stuck.”

Taking another tomato and nudging in jest. “Your talks are kinda epic like that.”

Taking another tomato and nudging in jest. “Your talks are kinda epic like that.”

Raising a brow. “Take these for me into the dining room sweet girl.” Handing over a bundle of silverware and napkins, Regina relished at how much her girl was glowing.

Ever since Gold left town the weight of the world came off those little shoulders and Regina intended to keep it that way. The last week had been a full one. Many discussions and questions over what was next filled their evenings, Gold’s Pawn Shop had been shut down, warded to protect the artifacts inside until Regina and Mal could inventory all of the items. Town returned to a normal rhythm, as only Storybrooke could have, as the news of his departure spread. A
celebration was in order, Emma insisted, and a party was arranged.

Emma took her chore in hand and joined Snow and David in the dining room. Charming hands arranged plates and platters as teen ones set the table.

"Thanks Emma, I was just coming to get those." Snow complimented, laying the final plate at the head of the table.

"No probs." Flashing teeth as the Princess’ hands went to a stomach. "Can I feel?"

Snow waved her over and placed Emma’s hand under hers at navel. David came to stand behind her, wrapping his arms in a hug from behind, his chin on shoulder. Delighted when her daughter’s eyes widened in wonder. “Do you feel her?"

"I do!" Nodding. " Barely, but she’s there…. Wow." Pulling back. "That must feel so weird, kind of like that movie alien!"

Emma wrinkled her nose at the very idea, as her mouth caught up to her brain. A habit she was learning slowly to curb with support from Regina and a lot of patience. As she was now, she had no connection to her adult side’s former experiences. Like her pint size, she had all her memories up until this point in her life. Each part of her mind had fully separated as she had originally in the alternate reality. They couldn’t talk to each other in mind like before, but were aware of what each part’s experiences now were. Like watching a movie from the inside, eyes TV screens to life playing outward. She was excited to meet her little sister in this life and wondered again at what the name would be and still of the recent news of sharing her new name with everyone.

Henry had beamed as she knew he would, others around town happy for her and David though surprised, accepting. Then there had been Snow. Slow to adjust, but willing to remain open in understanding. At this point that was all that mattered to Emma. They were on the right track for healing and there would be some rough patches ahead, but for today they were in a good place for celebration.

As past memories and the most recent since being home swirled in her mind’s eye, green glassed. So much had changed since that late night in the last week of November when the do over spell had been cast, a journey to another world, and home again when broken. Many challenges crested, trials passed, boundaries pushed, and love carried her through all of it under her Keeper’s guidance and protection. Needing a moment, she excused herself. Catching Mal’s ever observant soft eyes as she left, she gave a small smile.

The Dragon watched the small blonde scurry upstairs and traveled into the kitchen; taking Queen about the waist from the back she rested hands on the curve of hips. "Smells divine." Catching more than a whiff of the simmering sauce on the stove as she rested a cheek near Regina’s blushing one.

Red mouth teased. "The sauce or me?"

“If I say both, do I get a taste?” Silk whispered in ear.

Scoffing in jest. "Only if you behave the rest of the party."

“Just the party or after?” Mal brushed lips to a cheek gently, grinning deliciously as the Queen shivered under her liquid touch.

Regina moved slowly away, pot in hand and began pouring the Alfredo sauce into a serving dish for the chicken. “You are distracting me, dear.” Turning finally and holding up the stirring spoon with a cupped hand underneath up to an amused mouth, allowing Mal a taste of her creamy sauce.

They had decided rekindle their relationship again, without a timeline or expectations, save for one promise. Agreeing, after stretch of conversation the night Regina had regained her powers, for the past to stay at rest where it belonged. Remembering the foundation of what was already there between them brought the security they both needed to move forward. Starting again easy as falling into step alongside one another. Regina smiled fondly, recalling when she had told Emma the news a few days ago. The girl had been elated and full of questions she didn’t have answers to yet, but looked forward to the vast possibilities of.

Blue eyes nearly rolled back in want of more. “The sauce is perfect, you’ve outdone yourself again.” Moving to clear dishes to the sink as the Queen turned off the stove. "Your girl slipped upstairs by the way. She seemed not quite right, but nothing alarming. I’ll finish bringing the dishes out and gathering everyone.” Knowing Regina was already untying an apron to go check on Emma before she turned to confirm. “I will put a warming spell too on what’s needed, so take your time.”
Tossing the apron on the counter, Regina encircled the Dragon’s neck, losing herself in open blue sky full of understanding comfort. Leaning in, red met burgundy, light and sweet. “Thank you, We’ll be down in a little bit.”

Heels passed through the archway, smiling at the Charming couple and Neal as she passed, bigger still as Belle and Ruby came around the corner. Two sweethearts reunited arm in arm laughing with Granny on their heels. Old wolf muttering with a grin on needing to start a new blanket for a grand wolf pup the way the lovebirds were carrying on. Softer eyes still for Henry and Paige who simply chatted and observed the room. Quick feet went upstairs and a knock said hello on an open white door. Green eyes turned from watching Jasper swim and beckoned her in with a wave.

“Are you alright, baby?” Regina closed the door behind her, moving to join Emma where the girl came to sit on the purple bench at the foot of the bed.

“Yeah, I am actually. I just needed a few minutes of quiet to think on my own.” Resting a head on the brunette’s shoulder as an arm pulled her close.

Kissing the top of a braid. “Careful, dear heart. You are turning into me.”

“As if that’s a bad thing Mama.” Emma teased, dimples brief as she fingered the tiny vial clutched in her palm, having grabbed it from the drawer of her nightstand upon coming upstairs. She could feel the life changing liquid rolling in the glass, as a question would on a curious tongue.

“What is on your mind?”

“Remember when you asked my little half what family meant to her before the spell broke?”

Nodding, Regina brightened. “Like it was yesterday. She said it was all the good feelings.” Heart stretching its smile around the memory. Lifting a chin and studying green. “And what does family mean to you my sweet girl?”

Open and clear. “I think it’s more like all the feelings, even when they are hard, like with Snow before or even between us sometimes. And maybe our family is bigger than I thought…” Taking the Queen’s hand, Emma folded fingers of a royal palm around the potion bottle. Freely given. “And I, all of me, wants to try this one out for a while Mama.”

Quiet wonder over the bottle. “Emma… This potion is all you have wanted for months.”

“But it’s not what I need. I get that now.” Holding both hands in hers. “I need you, how we are, and what our family is becoming.”

Pulling Emma into her arms, Regina held tightly. She had spoken about the potion with each part of Emma over the course of the last week. Having given it to pale hands after the last talk had been completed with this part Thursday night. Each had reacted the same; pensive with few words over the want of a wish that had finally come true. It was Emma’s choice to make, all parts of her, and Regina was firm in that. Gift in palm of more time as they were, acceptance and love of what they had become and could still be, bad words disappear altogether. Queen, was full and bright eyed.

Emma nestled into her Keeper, speaking into dark hair as words flowed easily. “Keep this safe for us. Maybe one day we’ll be ready, but right now, we’re not done yet Mama.” Grateful the choice was finally hers. No magic, no Imp or breaking spell would decide fate for her.

Speaking easily for all parts of a shared heart. Emma almost heard the whispers of agreement from depths of her healing core, though, so clearly from the embrace of support she was wrapped in. Emma, truly and absolute, felt whole. She realized then enfolding in so many different hearts that home was not a place, but a shared journey traveled with those that walked the same path. Not always straight and easy or even curved with hardships, but for her there was always one consistent comfort. That of all the roles the hand she held possessed the most important and unconditional, Regina, would always be there when she went to sleep each night and when she woke to a new day.

Another adventure awaited them outside of the lavender room. In a house full of family, friends, and in a town of magic and possibility; there was a little girl, a teenager, and a swan.

But first, once upon a time, there was simply Emma.

And she was home.
A/N – What a journey, huh? Thank you for joining me and them on this adventure. There will be a shorter spin off, the final piece of this journey coming next Saturday 9/15 called *Different Loving*.

In it, Emma and Regina welcome a new family member and learn how to navigate the triangle their shared relationship has now become. Focus is heavy on the little and teen versions adapting to the growing family unit. Fluff, some angst, but lots of love, humor, mischief and family feels. I hope to see you there! Yes, I am still taking ideas and requests. It is 50k strong and I am 2/3 through. Updates will be on Tuesday’s and Saturdays.
Chapter 33

It's here.....

Different Loving – Sequel of Home Again

LittleSwanLover

Summary: Little Emma grows to learn more about what the new addition to their family means as Regina and Maleficent explore their relationship on a deeper level. Bonding, fluff, and some angst mixed with a whole lot of love. DQ romance and unique SQ dynamic. A/U. "Looking up, little Emma caught a shared smile between Dragon and Queen, wondering then, how far off another wedding might be... and what the future had in store for them all.”

Chapter one posted and ready for you! Enjoy!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!