

Ravenclaw's Bracelet

by snapeophile

Severus Snape and two Death Eaters pursue a Muggle-owned Horcrux. Can Snape retrieve the Horcrux before the DE's? And will he accept love along the way? Concurrent with HBP.

A Gift with Strings Attached

Chapter 1 of 10

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A/N: A million thanks to my oh-so-talented beta, JaneAverage, whose sharp eyes and insightful suggestions improved this fic immeasurably. Also, thanks to Hogwarts Honey and Droxy for their support. Only "Emma" belongs to me, the rest belongs to JKR.

Chapter 1: A Gift with Strings Attached

"Macnair! Goyle!" hissed Lord Voldemort. "Have you regained Ravenclaw's bracelet yet?"

The two terrified Death Eaters lay prone at his feet. "My Lord, we are close! Please, my Lord, more time is needed. We traced the bracelet to America. We eliminated the Muggle buyer and his brats, but he did not have the bracelet with him. We are close, my Lord, very close!" Macnair pleaded.

"*Crucio!*" hissed Lord Voldemort, pausing to savor their cries of pain as his two loyal servants writhed before him. "Return with that bracelet or feel the full wrath of my displeasure. I need not remind you how important this bracelet is to me, or what happened to the demented old witch who released it."

"Yes, my Lord, we thank you for your mercy," stammered Goyle, as the two grown men slunk backwards on the ground, removing themselves from Lord Voldemort's circle.

A continent away, Emma Doherty inspected her letter addressed to Mrs. Macnair; it had been returned to sender with no forwarding address. "What could have happened to her?" Emma wondered out loud. "Poor Ian. I don't even know if his father is alive. He's never been here."

Mrs. Macnair was the one to visit Ian, pay his tuition, and receive progress reports. Very proper and British, recalled Emma; and very interested in her son's welfare, almost obsessively so. When she visited the school, she would spend as much time with her autistic son as possible, gently touching his face when speaking to him, never bothering about spilled food or missed social cues.

On one visit Emma had overheard a hushed cell phone conversation of Mrs. Macnair's. The British woman had told the caller that her husband and some Lord—"Lord Vardemont? Voldimont?"—Emma wasn't sure—was ashamed of the boy, that people of her "blood" did not tolerate imperfect children. Emma, livid, had tried to interrupt the conversation, but Mrs. Macnair silenced her with a haughty glare, and the incident was never mentioned again.

Emma was not concerned at the lack of an emergency contact. Ian had spent three years there, and she had limited power of attorney to see to his medical needs. He would stay with her as long as he needed. *That's the joy of owning your own school—you can keep the kids tuition-free with no one to complain to* Emma thought wryly.

She dropped Mrs. Macnair's letter onto her desk and headed downstairs. It was her habit to check on her boarding students before she left.

Roberta Owens was the overnight nurse and surrogate mother to all. "Emma, make sure you eat something tonight. And get some sleep! You're looking haggard."

Emma smiled to herself, wished them sweet dreams and headed bravely into her night.

Emma listened for the *thunk* of the deadbolt's release. She paused and strained her ears, waiting, hoping irrationally, for the sounds she knew would not come. Her breath caught in her throat as she remembered how they felt, sounded, smelled—little twin boys running down the hallway in slipper socks, yelling her name, jumping into her arms. Identical, yet so different. Five-year-olds; in their minds ready to set out and conquer the world. Freckled redheads just like their father. And Rick would come down the hall after them, take her in his arms and pull her into the apartment, welcoming her, loving her.

It was all anyone could want, she thought bitterly as she entered the cold, dark apartment. "I won't cry! I won't!" she told herself fiercely, but she fought a losing battle. It had been twelve weeks since the suicidal cab driver had crossed the center lane, crashed into their car head-on and killed her family. Twelve weeks of being empty and shattered.

"If it weren't for the school, I probably wouldn't be here now," she said out loud, "and that might not be a bad thing." Kicking off her shoes and turning on the kitchen lights, she poured herself a glass of Pinot. A flash of silvery-gold caught her eye, and she looked once again at her bracelet, the last gift her husband had given her.

The bracelet had been delivered two weeks after the accident. On her birthday. Screaming, hysterical, she had called the auction house demanding answers.

They sent a letter by messenger the next day explaining that her husband had purchased the bracelet and had asked the house to ensure delivery on her birthday. They included an information page with the letter, and after she calmed down, Emma read about her rare, and priceless, bracelet.

It was very old, believed to be from the eleventh century. A stylized eagle was engraved on the center of the disc. Two large, almond-shaped Ceylon sapphires flanked the disc at the beginning of the cuff. Emma learned the decorative figures which overlapped on the upper and lower edges of the cuff were representations of the rune "Algiz." The rune was not translated, and at the time Emma couldn't have cared less.

But tonight, she silently berated herself for not yet finding out the significance of that rune. So many things slipped in and out of her mind these days. Sometimes she thought she was losing her sanity completely as grief overwhelmed her. Sighing, Emma repeatedly traced the outline of the eagle with one trembling finger, lost in the motion, the repetitions calming and soothing her. She crawled into bed, fully clothed.

The next morning, as Emma was leaving for school, two well-dressed muggers rushed into her, pushed her back into her own hallway and slammed the door shut. A man in a black suit tried to clamp his big, beefy hand over her mouth so she could not scream, but he screamed in pain and surprise and pulled his hand off immediately. The other man pointed a wooden stick at her and hissed, "*Stupefy!*" as a bright light flared. The light reflected off Emma and back to the man, felling him. His associate muttered, "*Enervate*," then turned to point his stick at Emma's wrist, shouting, "*Accio* bracelet!" A brighter light filled the hallway, the air crackled with energy, but nothing happened.

Emma struggled, found her voice and started to scream. The first man swore and tried to wrench the bracelet off her wrist, but it would not budge. The second man gritted his teeth against the pain of touching her, forcibly stilled her and tried to insert tin snips between her wrist and the bracelet. He was repelled and thrown against the wall by that crackling energy. Swearing, sweating, frantic, the man in gray shoved Emma into the wall, hard. She lost consciousness, and they left her slumped on the hallway floor.

At Hogwarts Castle, Severus Snape walked resignedly to Albus Dumbledore's office. Albus had requested his immediate presence. That was never good news for a spy. Sighing tiredly, Snape announced this week's inane password: Circus Peanuts. "Why in hell is Albus using the name of a disgusting American candy?" Snape wondered aloud to himself as he entered the Headmaster's office.

Remembrall

Chapter 2 of 10

Emma questions her sanity. The Death Eaters regroup after failure. Severus Snape arrives to collect the Horcrux for the Order.

A/N: I'm so grateful to my wonderful beta, JaneAverage. And JKR still owns all you recognize.

Chapter 2: Remembrall

Emma rushed into school. She was late but would be damned before she would answer any of Roberta's questions. Waking up alone, with bruises and a pounding head in one's own hallway was not exactly an indicator of good mental health. Emma forced on a smile and, when asked, made up a lie about slipping in the shower. She had the feeling that Roberta didn't buy it. She also had the powerful feeling that something *not right* had happened that morning. It wasn't that she couldn't remember, but rather she did not trust the veracity of her memories.

She knew she had seen two men, one very large and bulky, both wearing silver masks. They were pointing what appeared to be magic wands at her and yelling Latin or French phrases. They definitely were focused on her bracelet, which was worth a bundle. So why didn't they leave with it? And, most importantly, did this all really happen? Was it a hallucination, or dissociation? She resolved not to tell anyone, and prayed that no one would notice her shaking hands and quavering voice, or the fact that she could no longer remove the bracelet from her wrist.

Walden Macnair and Gregory Goyle, Sr. stood at the coffee bar in a bakery near Emma's school, having followed her there after the attack. They, too, were visibly shaken.

"Macnair, what the bloody hell happened back there? I couldn't touch the bint, my hands burned like fire when I made contact with her skin. Not one spell worked on her. We couldn't cut the bracelet off her. Why the fuck not?"

"I have no idea, Gregory. She, or the bracelet, is obviously protected by powerful dark magic. I'll wager if we kill her, the Horcrux will be destroyed."

The two Death Eaters sat in stony silence. They felt their lives slipping away as they realized they could not complete their mission.

Finally, Goyle spoke. "I say this: let's kidnap her and take her back to the Dark Lord. Let him figure out how to get the damned bracelet. We'll be punished, but hopefully still alive after this all ends."

"Fine, Gregory, fine. But we will have to gain her trust first and make it appear to be her decision. We cannot do anything against her will—the dark magic will not allow it. However, I have something to confess about that particular Muggle that may please you. I have a connection to her. She is the headmistress of a school for autistic children. My son's school. Ian."

"But . . . I thought the Dark Lord had you 'take care' of the boy. Said he was a stain on your pure blood."

"Yes, well, I was willing to comply, but my wife had other ideas and she deceived and disobeyed me."

"You've acted against the Dark Lord's wishes?" Goyle asked, incredulously.

"Indirectly and regrettably, yes, by not controlling my wife's behavior. She paid the ultimate price for her weakness, as you know," Macnair replied casually, as if discussing the New York City weather. "But my connection to the Muggle is in our favor."

"Quite."

"I would, of course, be indebted to you for your secrecy on this matter, Gregory."

"If we survive this, Macnair, I'll take your secret to my grave."

Severus Snape slipped virtually unseen around the corner nearest Emma's school. He had cast no Disillusionment Charm, yet he blended into the New York City neighborhood like a native. Tall, rangy, and wearing black head to toe, he adjusted his leather messenger bag and took in the lay of the land.

Dumbledore had tracked Ravenclaw's bracelet to a purchase made at an auction house here, and Aurors from the US Ministry of Magic easily identified the purchaser. He and his two young sons had died in a cab crash, caused by an illegal Imperius Curse which had been cast on the cab driver. Snape felt a momentary twinge of sympathy at the children's deaths; the Dark Lord's depravity toward children was one of the main reasons Snape had turned to the Light.

Pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, Snape audibly cursed the brilliant old hag, a distant cousin of Dumbledore, who had circumvented Voldemort's magic and retrieved the bracelet from its hiding place. She had had no idea what it truly was, and had sold it immediately.

Dumbledore suspected the bracelet to be protected by Dark Magic, so it was Snape, with his relevant experience, who was sent—*no, forced*, he thought bitterly—to Muggle New York to get the bracelet before the Dark Lord did. The mission had been deemed too dangerous for Harry Potter to join, so Dumbledore reluctantly had involved his inner circle in the Horcrux hunt. *Thank Merlin for small favors*, Snape had thought at the time. *No Death Eater revel could be worse than babysitting that arrogant prat Potter in New York.*

Snape crossed over to the small patch of grass which passed for a park here and sat down on one of the benches. He wanted to observe the school, and the Muggle woman, before he decided on a course of action.

Today was Thursday, field trip day. They were going to the American Museum of Natural History on Central Park West. They would take the cross-town bus at the end of the block. "The subway is a bit too real-world for them," Emma chuckled to herself.

It was a beautiful New York fall day: unseasonably warm, brightly sunny, just perfect . . . except for her morning, which she tried not to think about. In fact, it was fairly easy to block it out while at work, as her students demanded all her attention. *Tonight will be difficult, probably another round of Pinot with a NyQuil chaser in order to sleep*, she thought, before pushing it forcefully out of her mind.

The walk was energizing, the day was warming, and she absentmindedly rolled up the sleeves of her pink cotton button-down shirt. Rick's shirt. Comforting. They reached the corner and rehearsed bus procedures and etiquette with the students while they waited.

Snape couldn't believe it. She had strutted right past him, flashing Rowena Ravenclaw's bracelet for all the world to see. *Clearly, she has no idea what she's wearing on her wrist*, he thought.

At first he had noticed her, not the bracelet. He was, after all, a man. And she was a woman: attractive, in her late thirties, of average height, with a distinctly feminine figure and shoulder-length dark blonde hair in a simple braid. Smiling as she shepherded her charges down the street; laughing, encouraging, holding hands with a nervous student as they walked. *The teaching inverse of Professor Snape*, he snidely thought.

Snape bent down to gather his bag and stayed down. With his excellent peripheral vision he had noticed Macnair and Goyle on the other side of the busy street, heading toward the Muggle. He swore softly to himself and cast a Disillusionment Charm. Unseen, he strode along the border of the park to within earshot of the group.

A Dearth of Options

Chapter 3 of 10

Emma meets the Death Eaters and Snape. Sparks fly and plans are made.

A/N: Thank you to JaneAverage, my beta, and Linney who looked over the original.

Chapter 3: A Dearth of Options

Emma noticed the two well-dressed men walking with speed and purpose toward them. She had been a New Yorker too long not to be wary. There was something different, yet strongly familiar, about these two. She stepped away from the group to intercept them.

One man, the handsomer of the two, inclined his head and smiled. "Emma Doherty, I presume?"

Scottish? British? Emma wondered. "Yes, what can I do for you?" she asked the speaker, as she took his measure. Six foot, salt and pepper hair and mustache, weathered tan. Fifty-ish and quite distinguished. He radiated a feeling of importance and cold assurance. Handsome, yet Emma's gaze was unavoidably drawn to the eye patch over his left eye.

The other man, stockier, darker, and not as nattily dressed, was staring at her hands. Unnerved, she reached up to sweep a few loose hairs behind her left ear and watched as his eye traveled with her hand. She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to figure out why he unnerved her so, but the other man spoke and broke her thoughts.

"Mrs. Doherty, so pleased to finally meet you. I am Walden Macnair. You have, I believe, been dealing with my wife. I am here to inquire after Ian and settle his accounts."

Ian Macnair...Mrs. Macnair...him? Emma's mind spun to connect the three. She could not equate the gentle, closed child and devoted mother with the man standing before her. It was a few seconds before she found her voice: "Of...of course, Mr. Macnair, you startled me. I am used to dealing with your wife. Is she here with you?"

"Walden, Mrs. Doherty, please call me Walden. And I regret to inform you that my wife is dead," he said smoothly.

"Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry," Emma replied sincerely. "When did she pass away?"

"Two weeks ago," he replied, without a hint of remorse or mourning.

Emma's eyes widened at his insensitivity. When she was two weeks into her mourning, she could barely admit to herself, never mind strangers, that they were gone. "You must want to see Ian and speak with him," Emma recovered.

"Oh, yes, Ian," he replied with an air of indifference, "that will have to be dealt with."

The city bus pulled up and the group readied itself to board. Emma called out to the staff, "Wait. We'll have to take the next bus. Send Ian over here and take the rest of the students into the park."

Ian walked over to them and looked steadily at his father, appearing to recognize him but not saying a word. The man reached out to embrace his son, as the situation warranted. Ian flinched, but did not pull away. Emma had worked with children long enough to guess the tenor of their relationship, and she decided not to let them alone if she could help it, parental rights be damned. She needed to ascertain the man's intentions for his son, so she quietly spoke to Rachel, her day nurse, then lead Ian and his father and the other man toward the school. No one noticed the fifth of their party trailing closely behind.

The conversation went as well as could be expected. Ian's reactions were muted, yet sorrowful. Emma realized the full impact of his mother's death would hit on his birthday. His mother never missed coming for two weeks, and Ian's internal sense of time would not fail him. She allowed Ian a set of Magnetix, one of his reward choices, which would soothe and occupy him, while she spoke with his father. "Mr. Macnair, what are your plans for Ian? Will you take him back with you? Or is he to remain here?"

"Goodness, no." Macnair chuckled. "I will not take him back. He was like a wild animal when he came to you. I am amazed at the changes you have wrought. I *insist* that you continue to influence him."

Insist. An odd choice of words, Emma thought. *Powerful, intimidating. I would never give Ian willingly to a man like you.* Unconsciously, she crossed her arms over her chest and shuddered.

Macnair continued, "Mr. Goyle and I plan to stay in your lovely city for a fortnight. We will visit Ian daily and, hopefully, get to know you and your methods better." He looked deeply and meaningfully into her eyes, then firmly grasped her fingers and brushed his lips across the top of her left hand.

Emma shuddered at the hungry, desperate look in his eye as he released her hand. He bowed, Goyle nodded his head, and the two swept out of the room.

Two weeks. He had two weeks, if not less. Snape had noticed the slight bruises on the Muggle and the way she reacted to the men...warily...as if she knew them, but could not place them in context. *Obliviated*, he assumed. He surmised that they had already tried to take the bracelet by force. And failed. If they could have killed her or kidnapped her, they would have done so. He had to move fast.

Silently he descended the stairs and let himself out. An alarm beeped to indicate the door had opened. Emma wandered to the top of the stairs and watched as the door closed with no one there. She shook her head questioningly to clear out the cobwebs. Her mental state was beginning to be worrisome; maybe some caffeine would help. "Ian!" she called. "Ian, let's go to Nonna's and get a cinnamon roll!" Cinnamon rolls were Ian's favorite food, and he rushed to join her. Emma grabbed her bag and they left.

Snape followed the woman and the boy as they walked slowly down the block. Macnair and Goyle had Disapparated in the shadows of the school, so Snape dispelled his Disillusionment Charm. The spy forced his mind to compartmentalize the rising tide of anger he was feeling toward Dumbledore for placing him, yet again, in a contrived and dangerous situation.

The experienced spy coldly reviewed his options. Option, actually. If she could not be taken by force, he would have to gain her trust and tell her as much as she needed to know, to convince her to leave with him. *That should be a scintillating conversation*, he thought furiously, as he entered the bakeshop.

Snape wondered if Dumbledore had known what would be required and sent him on purpose. He tried to recall Dumbledore's demeanor during their conversation. Dumbledore merely had said, "For the reasons I have explained, Severus, you are the man for the job. You will need to assume a false identity and persona. You will have to interact with the Muggle woman involved. It will require all your talents and charms." *Talents and charms indeed. It sounded like the old fool was matchmaking in the middle of a crisis, and with a Muggle to boot. I'll play your game, Dumbledore, but I will be victorious in the end. My solitude will be my victory.* He shuddered unconsciously at that thought and stepped up to order his usual double espresso, black.

Emma and Ian were greeted enthusiastically by Nonna and her daughters. The school was a good source of business for Nonna's bakery, and the grandmotherly woman had come to know Emma and her students well. Nonna admired the younger woman for carrying on in the face of such loss. She knew the nature of Emma's work helped her get through the days; but what about the nights?

"I think I know what you want, Ian, but why don't you tell me?" Nonna smiled at Ian and waited patiently for his order. Hesitantly, the boy made eye contact and ordered, remembering to thank her. Emma smiled and gave him a congratulatory thumbs-up.

They moved to a small table next to the coffee bar at the front window. Nonna's was the only bakery on the Upper East Side which sold real Italian coffee and pastries. That had been the deciding factor in locating her school here; Rick had teased her for sealing such a momentous decision based on coffee. She smiled to herself, remembering his gentle teasing about her coffee addiction. Still smiling, she looked up to see the tall, dark, self-possessed man stride to stand at the counter next to them. She noticed his fluid, graceful movements and studied him as he arranged his place. *Not handsome, exactly, but striking, intriguing*, she thought. She noticed the way his all-black clothing accentuated his coloring and his shiny, bluish-black shoulder length hair. *Very New York Gothic-chic.*

Still staring, she started as he leaned over quite close to her and asked, "May I please have one of your extra napkins?"

She froze, embarrassed at being caught evaluating him. She recovered enough to notice his voice: pure British velvet; and the scent he wore: manly, earthy, spicy and warm.

"Of-of course," she stammered.

His darkest brown eyes met hers and held her gaze as he smiled warmly at her. It was a very intimate moment. She immediately felt a flash of connection. Like she'd felt with Rick. Like she hadn't with all the other men she'd met. Desire surged through her, and she felt herself flushing and tore her gaze away.

She concentrated on handing the man a handful of napkins. Grateful for a distraction, she busied herself with Ian's progress. *Damn horny woman*, she inwardly snarled, *knock it off! You've been a widow for just three months! Control yourself!*

Despite her anger, she was puzzled at her reaction to him. To a stranger. Just like it had been with her husband. Nonna said the Italians called it "The Thunderbolt." She had felt that with Rick on their very first date, and she had decided then that she would marry him. He took a little more convincing, but they had fallen in love and had crafted a wonderful life together. *What is happening to me?* she thought frantically.

For the second time that day she shook her head violently to get rid of the cobwebs. She felt herself mentally falling apart and did not like it.

Snape allowed himself a moment to gloat. *Like taking candy from a baby*, he smirked. Her desire was naked on her face, and he idly thought that he might just get some pleasure out of this task, after all.

Stealth

Chapter 4 of 10

Snape works to win Emma's trust and the Death Eaters redouble their efforts to regain the Horcrux.

Chapter 4: Stealth

A/N: I'm so grateful to JaneAverage, my beta.

For almost two weeks Snape bided his time, shadowing her as only a skilled spy could. Each day he managed to get into the school after Macnair had left. He was somewhat surprised by what he saw. With the students, she was caring, yet firm, slow to anger and quick to forgive. *But she rides her staff hard, too hard. She has high expectations for herself and desires the same in return from her employees. There is a hardness there, a sharp edge . . .*

Despite his best intentions, he found himself enjoying the time he spent watching her interact with her students. *She has a beautiful smile that lights up her whole face and...Merlin, help me...her eyes sparkle like Albus' when she laughs.* He could see, too, that she delayed leaving the haven of the school as late as she dared every evening. *Her loneliness weighs heavily on her, just as mine does me.*

Snape was there at the bakery every morning when she appeared for her morning coffee and pastry. They had progressed from eye contact, to nodding, to smiling a greeting; to today, when he arrived later than usual and asked if he might sit down with her. She narrowed her eyes in answer, but he explained quickly that there was no other place to sit or stand. She acquiesced.

He introduced himself: "I am Steven. As you most likely can guess, I'm British. I'm here in the city to do some contract work. I'm a chemist by trade."

"Nice to formally meet you, Steven. I'm Emma. I work with autistic children. How are you finding New York?"

"Loud, busy, bewildering and entertaining. In short, much like London."

Emma laughed her reply, but did not offer any more conversation. He didn't seem like one for small talk, and neither was she.

Emma believed herself to be a good judge of character, and after a while, unconsciously, she relaxed. Yesterday, out of the blue, Nonna had mentioned him to her, saying approvingly, "I know his type, darling. Still waters run deep, Emma, and passionate. Once you break through his defenses, there's more love there than you could spend in a lifetime." Despite her mourning, encouraged by a trusted friend, Emma was beginning to be intrigued by the handsome British chemist.

When Emma started clearing her space, he asked quickly if she would have dinner with him.

"Oh, Steven, no thank you. I don't feel ready for company just yet." She debated with herself whether or not to tell Steven about her recent losses, but for some reason decided not to. She could see the disappointment in his eyes, but he did not press her.

As Emma left the table to throw away her trash, "Steven" leaned over her open canvas tote bag and removed the first thing he saw...a puppet. It was a white polar bear. He quickly secreted it under his black leather coat and wished her a good day. She lingered for a moment, as if she wished to say something, but reconsidered and smiled wistfully at him, gathered her belongings, and left.

From her place at the counter, Nonna had caught the whole thing. He clearly wasn't stealing; the puppet had little monetary value. *How sneaky*, she thought, *and how determined. He's going to contact her to return the puppet.* He slowly turned his head to make eye contact with her, as if he had been reading her mind. She smiled conspiratorially at him and decided to help his cause, and Emma's.

That afternoon was a long one. Macnair's routine was to come every morning at ten o'clock and leave promptly at two. He had insinuated himself into the daily workings of her school, and Emma had to admit, Ian was starting to relax around him. She was not. Something about his manner, his being, put her on edge. He was ever the gentleman, excessively complimenting her teaching and the school, inquiring about her life, all the while never taking his eyes off her. He rarely interacted with Ian and never with the other children. *Snake-like! Yes, that's it. That's how I see him. A snake-oil salesman. But what's he selling?*

Needing an afternoon pick-me-up, she started over to Nonna's. Just as she grasped the doorknob to the outer entryway door, she felt herself pulled forward as the door was opened. It was Steven! *My goodness, what does he want?* she thought, surprised to see him, and somewhat irritated.

"Steven! This is a surprise! How did you know where to find me?" *Oh, God, I hope he's not a stalker.*

A small smile played on his lips as he dangled her polar bear puppet between his index finger and thumb. "You left this behind this morning, and Nonna told me where I could find you."

"Oh, my goodness. I didn't even realize it was missing. Thank you so much for returning it."

He continued, "What do you do with it, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I was just on my way to Nonna's. Join me for a cup of coffee so I can properly thank you?"

As they walked, she explained that they used the puppet for storytelling, to help her students practice their verbal communication skills. This puppet was a favorite of one of her students, and she thanked him sincerely for its return.

As they reached Nonna's door, he softly said, "I'm so glad I could help." Leaning down, he lightly brushed her lips with his.

She could feel the electricity between them, but the feeling instantly brought her back to her attack, with its overwhelming feelings of negative electricity. *But how could they be linked?* she frantically thought. *That was awful; this was ...well, wonderful.*

He noticed her reaction and knew something was wrong. His carefully orchestrated kiss should not have engendered fear and confusion. *She is kissing "Steven," not Snape, after all,* he thought darkly. "Emma, what is it?" he asked firmly. "What is wrong?"

"Steven, it's nothing to do with you. A bad memory which I've had a hard time erasing."

"Then let me take you out tonight, and we can create some nicer memories," he said, hands on her shoulders, dark eyes connecting, sparking, with her lighter ones. She felt the gentle weight of his hands, caring, caressing, and without realizing what she was doing, heard herself accept.

They met at the school at seven. He arrived promptly, with a car and driver. *He is almost handsome tonight,* she thought, in his black European-cut suit and tailored white shirt. His hair was glossy and dark eyes shining with approval as he took her in.

Tonight she wore her blonde hair long and loose. She had on a simple black silk dress with a side-wrap bodice that accentuated her curves. Her only jewelry was a simple gold necklace and the bracelet. Missing from her ensemble was the gold chain on which she wore her and Rick's wedding rings. She had left them at home.

Snape was staring at her, his mind a blur. *Standing this close to her, she emanates magic...could she be? This Muggle...could she be a witch? A Squib?* He could clearly feel magic pulsing from her now; this much couldn't be due to the bracelet.

At a loss for words, he continued to stare intently at her. Emma broke the tension, asking, "Where are you taking me tonight, sir?"

He smiled easily as he replied, "I know a small restaurant where we can relax and get to know each other, without throngs of tourists babbling in the background," and he held out his arm to her as they walked to the car to start their evening.

He took her to a tiny Italian restaurant tucked off a back street in Little Italy. He ordered for them both in Italian. The excellent wine warmed her as much as his gentlemanly attentions did. She relaxed and opened up to him.

For his part, he was amazed at how much he enjoyed her company. He could not remember ever feeling so at ease with, and interested in, a woman. Especially not a Muggle woman. He lowered his carefully crafted guard for her just a bit, whilst still maintaining his ruse. He took a long sip of wine, sat back in his chair and sighed, conflict raging within him. She thought him to be pleased, reached over and took his hand in hers. A wry smile played at the corners of his mouth.

She will have to determine the level of intimacy if I am to build her trust. But how far am I willing to take this? She was a Muggle, after all, and while he didn't hate her kind as others believed he did, he was reluctant to become entangled with one. With her. Emma. *She certainly is attractive enough, and I'm man enough to admit I'm enjoying...or rather, "Steven" is enjoying...her.*

He could feel the ironclad control over his emotions slipping ever so slightly. *Damn you, Dumbledore. This is rapidly becoming more complicated than just a simple spying mission.*

In her mind, Emma was conflicted as well. She was powerfully attracted to this dark near-stranger. So much, in fact, that she was contemplating sleeping with him. Her mind warred with itself, her relatively recent widowhood versus her loneliness and physical needs. They lapsed into silence, each lost in thought. The antipasti arrived and they both focused on the food before them, grateful for a distraction.

By the time dessert arrived, Emma had made up her mind. She longed for intimacy; she craved the release and feelings of comfort. She and Rick had had an active and fulfilling, if not terribly adventurous, sex life, and she had not even thought about being with anyone since her husband's death. But if things continued to develop nicely, she would sleep with Steven tonight, consequences be damned. *I'm sorry, Rick, I love you. I'll always love you and the boys. But I need this now.*

After dinner she directed the driver to her apartment. She was very sure of herself and her decision. "Steven, you can let the driver go for the night."

She held his hand tightly as they climbed her front stairs. He suddenly stopped their forward momentum, throwing his arm across her body as they reached the upper step. The door to her apartment was ajar. The intrusion of Dark Magic was palpable in the air. She felt it, too, he could tell. Shock registered on her face as he put his hand over her mouth to quiet her scream. He turned her around, pulling her toward him, grasping her firmly around the waist. He whispered into her ear, "Emma, you've got to trust me. I will protect you." She nodded her assent, and with a *pop* they Disapparated to his hotel room.

Revelations

Chapter 5 of 10

Out of options, Snape admits his mission to Emma and they flee to the safety of Hogwarts.

Chapter 5: Revelations

A/N: Thank you, JaneAverage, my wonderful beta!

Emma was quiet now, sleeping, as the dawn approached. Snape, too, was spent from their intense conversation. He was cheered by the fact that she had maintained physical contact with him all night...mostly gripping his hand, occasionally resting in the crook of his arm. Despite it all, she trusted him. That was essential if he were to complete his mission.

He had tried to explain to her about the magical world and the Muggle world and about Ravenclaw's bracelet and the Dark Lord. He explained her unwitting role in the Horcrux drama. He apologized for his necessary deceptions and described his life and teaching at Hogwarts, leaving out much more information than he included.

She had challenged him with question after question, and he knew she had taken in only half of what they discussed. His questions about her magical aura were answered, too. While not a witch, she was a descendant of Sarah Good, who had been hung for witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts. Snape knew that Sarah Good had been the village herbalist and was, in fact, a squib. Emma's magical lineage no doubt magnified the enchantments attached to Ravenclaw's bracelet.

Inevitably, Emma had asked for proof of his magic, and he had transfigured a magazine into a golden goblet. At this she had not fainted, as he expected, but cried a few quiet tears of relief and confessed her morning encounter with the two silver-masked men and their magical attempts. He identified them as Macnair and Goyle and reassured her that she was not losing her mind as she had feared.

Her exhaustion and need to process the night's information led him to offer her a small dose of Dreamless Sleeping Draught, which she willingly accepted. He was touched by her trust and relieved at how relatively well the night had gone. Unfortunately, Snape knew this evening was the easy part. Macnair and Goyle had been lying in wait in her apartment, and he wasn't sure what they had been planning. He was certain they weren't aware of his involvement yet, and he planned to use this to his advantage. He lay down on the couch and tried to sleep.

Emma woke with a start. Her heart raced and her stomach heaved as she recalled the events of the night before. While she only understood bits and pieces of what Steven...no, Severus...had said, she could feel the mortal peril she was in. She feared for her students, staff and school. She could take care of herself, but would not allow them to be injured in any way. She leapt out of bed and ran right into Severus, who was coming to wake her with a hot cup of coffee. He swore softly, took out his wand and muttered, "*Tergeo*," and cleaned the hot liquid from his clothes and hers. He invited her to join him at the table, where a continental breakfast had been laid out. "It's not Nonna's coffee, but it will do for today," he softly said.

Emma nodded numbly and joined him. As if reading her mind, he offered, "I'm reasonably sure that Macnair and Goyle will do nothing to the children and staff. It's you they want, and they can't perform offensive magic on you, or, I believe, on anyone connected closely to you. You need to disappear...literally and figuratively..." he chuckled softly at his own joke, "...with me. I have alerted my Auror contacts at the US Ministry of Magic to the situation with Macnair and Goyle. They will be carefully monitored until they leave."

"Are you *insane*?" Emma retorted. "Last night, I'm informed that there truly are witches and wizards alive in the world. You told me I'm part of some evil plot hatched by a maniac killer. I'm not going anywhere with you! I have my school to run..."

Snape snidely cut across her: "I'm sorry, Emma, but you really have no choice in the matter. If you stay, you will be kidnapped or killed or worse, face Voldemort himself. I'm offering you a chance at life, Emma. Don't be a fool. Take it."

"I'm not particularly interested in living, right now, Severus. But I do have other people in my life who depend upon me."

"As do I, Emma, which is why I am here trying to convince you to help us."

Emma shut her eyes tightly, willing herself to wake up in her apartment, or at her desk, or at Nonna's...anywhere but here. How could she trust this man who had lied to her about his identity then disappeared into thin air with her? *The reality is, I have no choice. I felt the Dark Magic of those men. I'd be dead now if they could have killed me.*

Emma, her eyes filled with tears, took a deep breath and responded, "I have many loose ends I need to tie up, starting with the running of the school. I will need to access my bank accounts, and my clothes from the apartment."

"You will have time to go to the school and make arrangements there," he curtly replied, "but it's not safe enough to permit a full morning of errands. I will have my contacts at the US Ministry deal with your bank transfers. We will stop at your flat so you can pack. I insist that we Apparate directly from your school to Hogwarts."

She sighed deeply, a bit of her brain again demanding to know what the hell she was doing, trusting him, letting him run her life. She muttered to herself, "You know what he's said is true. You've felt unsettled since you first slipped on that bracelet. With Macnair and Goyle after you, you have no choice but to trust him and hope for the best."

They went first to her apartment. Snape checked carefully for any signs of magic, but there were none. Nothing had been disturbed. Emma quickly filled three suitcases with clothes and shoes, carefully including her sons' baby pictures, her wedding picture and a family portrait. She packed her jewelry, including her husband's ring. Snape used the *Reducio* Charm so effectively that her luggage fit in his cloak pocket. She set the thermostat to automatically cycle, and they took a cab to the school.

"Emma, I must insist you tell no one about me in case Macnair and Goyle try Legilimency on your staff," Snape warned her.

She did her morning rounds with Roberta and Rachel and called them into her office. Snape followed her in and waited in the corner, under a Disillusionment Charm. Emma explained that a family crisis had called her out of town for an unknown length of time, and that the stewardship of the school would be theirs. She signed and dated the contingency papers, which her attorney had drawn up after her husband's death, then thanked them both. "It's a relief to me that the school is in good hands. I'll be in touch with you as soon as possible."

Both women were stunned and worried. "You know we can help you with anything, right, Emma?" Roberta had asked.

Rachel added, "Money, legal troubles, whatever, we can help you."

It was clear that they did not believe her family emergency excuse.

Emma lowered her voice to barely above a whisper, so Snape could not hear her and said, "I have to help a friend and many of his friends. I believe this to be a life and death matter for all involved. I think, too, this may be my future."

Walden Macnair arrived just as Emma and the invisible Potions Professor were leaving. Snape drew his wand immediately. Macnair sidled up close to Emma and snidely whispered, "Just now coming from an exciting night, Mrs. Doherty? And who is the lucky man?" She recoiled but he pressed closer, spitting, "I want you to be mine. I will brook no arguments!" He grabbed her arm, but let go with an angry hiss as his flesh burned at the touch. Emma froze with fear until she felt Snape grab her other arm and propel her to the park. Macnair and Goyle followed on their heels. Snape, still invisible, stood behind her and circled her waist with his arms. With a loud *pop* they *Disapparated*.

Snape and Emma arrived at the gates of Hogwarts. Emma was dizzy and nauseated from the feelings of Apparition. She breathed deeply to regain control of her senses.

She cried out in fear when she looked at what Severus had described as Hogwarts Castle. As a Muggle, she saw a dilapidated, rat-infested two-floor shack listing

dangerously, swaying in the wind.

Snape swore to himself, and he realized that from this moment on, nothing was going to be easy. He would have to anticipate everything for her. "Oh, Merlin, what have I gotten myself into?" he muttered under his breath. He forced himself to think of what "Steven" would do now.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, looked deep into her eyes and calmly said, "It will be all right, Emma, it will. I will take care of you."

First Firsts

Chapter 6 of 10

Severus Snape and two Death Eaters pursue a Muggle-owned Horcrux. Can Snape retrieve the Horcrux before the DE's? And will he accept love along the way? Concurrent with HBP.

Chapter 6: First Firsts

Disclaimer: The usual. All but Emma belong to JKR and I'm making no money from this.

A/N: I'm grateful as always to my beta, Janeaverage, whose talents improve this story immeasurably. Thank you, too, for reading and reviewing!

"Quite right, Severus, quite right," Albus Dumbledore's hearty voice chuckled behind them. "The young lady will need a constant guide to our world. I thank you for volunteering!"

"And that, Emma, is the senile old bat who runs this place," Snape spat.

Emma stood frozen, mouth agape, staring at the magnificent sight of a purple-robed, star-and-moon-bespangled Albus Dumbledore.

"Oh, come, now, Severus, don't be cross. What will our guest think of your manners?" Dumbledore teased, as he reached over to grasp Emma's hand in his. He started a bit when he touched her and inquired, "My dear, are you a . . .?"

"No, Albus, she's not a witch, though she does have magical ancestors," Snape interrupted.

"Ahh, I could feel it," said Dumbledore, wonderingly.

Filius Flitwick soon joined the odd threesome. Emma's eyes opened even wider at the sight of the diminutive Charms Professor.

Flitwick squeaked out a greeting to Snape, then took Emma's hands softly. "I understand you need some assistance, dear lady. Close your eyes and I will gift you with sight."

Flitwick performed a long incantation and complex wand-wavings, and reversed for her the effects of Muggle-Repelling Charms. "I am finished, dear lady, open your eyes!"

"Oh! It's magnificent! And huge!" Emma cried, gaining her first sight of Hogwarts Castle.

"I hope you've gotten that same appraisal from her, dear boy!" Dumbledore said, smirking, *sotto voce*, to a murderous-looking Snape.

Ignoring the crude attempt at humor, Snape suggested: "Emma will need more Charms and magical assistance if she is to stay at the castle."

"Ah, indeed, Severus, indeed. We can take care of those tasks on the morrow," Dumbledore said. "Right now, you two have had quite a trip. I've taken the liberty of adding a guest suite onto your rooms, Severus, and the house-elves will be bringing up dinner. Time change, and all that. Have a pleasant evening, you two!" And with that, he and Flitwick nodded to each other and Disapparated.

Snape strode ahead through the gates, stopping only when he realized Emma wasn't following. "You *are* coming along, aren't you?" he inquired tiredly. He had only just realized the enormity of his responsibility to her. He did not completely regret it.

He showed Emma how to access the dungeons from his personal side entrance and keyed his wards to release automatically for her, saving the main entrance and the Great Hall for another, quieter, time. Students roamed the grounds and castle now, enjoying a rare sunny afternoon. He did not want any speculation about the identity of this new castle inmate. *In fact*, he thought, *we should change her appearance somewhat tomorrow, in case any Death Eaters' brats see her. But not too much of a change. I like her just as she is.*

Emma got her first complete, chemical-free night's sleep since her family's tragedy. *That's a good omen for this place*, she thought. In the large bathroom, she investigated the deep, claw-footed tub she had longed for last night, but was too tired to use. "Why all the different taps?" she wondered. She twisted the tap nearest her and warm, sudsy, spice-scented water splashed out. "Mmmm, his scent," she mumbled, and jumped when she heard Snape's voice remark, "Try the last two taps. They are feminine-scented."

She turned to smile at her host and wish him good morning, but with a swish of his black robes, he was already gone. Emma settled on the final tap, a mix of jasmine and lily of the valley oils. She undressed and sank gratefully into the warm, comforting bubble bath water.

She was just nodding off to sleep, when a loud CRACK startled her. Emma screamed as she looked upon the ugliest creature she had ever seen. The creature was about the size of a three-year-old, had large bat ears, a pushed-up snout, green wrinkled skin, and bloodshot, goggling eyes the size of billiard balls. It wore a tied-off tea towel styled as an island sarong.

The creature shrieked in response to Emma's scream and wouldn't stop. Snape came running into the room. "What in blazes is going on in here?" he thundered.

At that, the creature stopped screaming and bowed down low. "Winky is sorry, master. Winky did not feel the lady to be in the room. Winky came to clean the bathroom but will return," the creature squeaked. Glaring at Emma, it disappeared with another loud CRACK.

Snape turned, and tried to glare at Emma, but couldn't maintain his anger as her face screwed up. *About to cry*, he thought with disgust; but instead, she let out peals of pent-up laughter. Snape reluctantly smiled as he realized what was so funny. Her first house-elf. Her first first of many. *Let's hope she takes them all this well*, he thought. *She certainly has strength of character and optimism enough for two. STOP RIGHT THERE, SNAPE*, he inwardly snarled at himself. *Spies have no business in entanglements.*

"Here," he said gruffly, "I made this up for you. Shampoo with chamomile, a special formulation for your hair." *Your beautiful blonde hair*, he wished to say.

"Oh, Severus, thank you so much. You're very good to me. Do I have time to enjoy my bath for a while longer?"

"Yes, by all means. I will be teaching this morning. You will find breakfast laid out in my sitting room, along with some Muggle newspapers I procured. I only ask that you not leave the suite until I return, for safety reasons."

Emma obviously understood, as she dipped her chin and sweetly smiled her consent, unconcerned that the bath bubbles were disappearing rapidly. Snape inhaled sharply as he caught sight of her full, rounded breasts, glistening and gently swaying as she moved in the bath. *Oh, bloody hell. What I wouldn't do to be in there with her.*

She smiled sweetly once more, and he had the strong impression that she could read his mind. He turned on his heels and strode back to his private potions lab to steal a few precious minutes before his second year Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff DADA class of complete and utter idiots. And to stop thinking of her, which would be his most difficult task that day.

Dumbledore came down shortly before lunch, meeting Emma in Snape's suite. She was shocked to see that he had badly injured, probably burned, his hand. She had not noticed the previous day due to her fear and heightened emotional state. The flesh was withered, and the skin, what was left of it, was black and necrotic. He saw the concern on her face and waved it away impatiently. "It's nothing to be concerned with, my dear. I thank you, Emma, for trusting Severus and accompanying him here. Just how much did he tell you about your predicament?"

Snape had told her everything. Anticipating his request, Emma held out her left arm for him. Dumbledore took what looked to be an old-fashioned jeweler's loupe out of his vast purple robes. He gently rotated her arm to look at all sides of the bracelet. He could feel the magic pulsing off it.

After a few minutes of silent analysis, he made his report. "I do not think that it is Dark Magic holding the bracelet on to you, my dear, but rather a series of elaborate protective Charms for the bracelet and its wearer. Leave it to brilliant Ravenclaw to capitalize upon the importance of intent in all our actions," Dumbledore murmured.

"For instance, this is the ancient rune Algiz. Its power is protective," Dumbledore explained to her. "How did you acquire the bracelet?"

Trustingly she told him her story. He nodded sympathetically, stroked his beard, and offered condolences. She brought him her pictures and he looked intently at her family. He inquired about her school and students. Emma replied happily at first, sharing anecdotes about her students with Dumbledore, but then she became lost in thought, her voice trailing off.

After a long silence, Dumbledore spoke. "Muggle poet William Shakespeare claims that it is better to have loved and lost, than not to have loved at all. Only people who have truly loved can understand his meaning. You also understand that true teaching requires love, and that sometimes love requires teaching." Smiling indulgently at her, he promised to meet with the staff that evening to see about her bracelet.

Snape had arranged for Hermione Granger to spend the evening with Emma. The Muggle-born witch would share her experiences and explain some of the magical ways of living. Emma looked forward to some diversion and answers.

Hermione arrived with her familiar, Crookshanks. The half-kneazle strutted boldly up to Emma, sniffed her outstretched hand, then leapt lightly into her lap, claiming that space as his for the evening. Snape watched all this in bemusement as Emma cooed and petted Crookshanks, before glaring at Hermione and exiting the suite.

Snape sat in Dumbledore's office with Minerva McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, and Poppy Pomfrey. Dumbledore began the meeting with a bang. "We have, I mean, Severus has, obtained one of the missing Horcruxes, a bracelet belonging to Rowena Ravenclaw."

There was a collective gasp, followed by sighs of relief and even some clapping.

"Headmaster," Snape silkily intoned, "you have neglected to mention the bracelet is attached to someone."

Minerva's eyes widened. "Yes, do tell, Albus. Don't keep us in the dark any longer on a matter of this importance," she said tartly.

Snape cut across Dumbledore: "It's attached to a Muggle widow from New York City. By circumstance, she was the teacher of Walden Macnair's autistic son. Macnair and Goyle, Sr. used the Imperius Curse on a cab driver and caused the deaths of her husband and sons. They attacked the Muggle and attempted to remove the bracelet, but could not because of the powerful Charms attached to it . . . or rather, attaching it. Any attempt to remove the bracelet or destroy it is repelled. I submit that the only way to destroy the Horcrux is to destroy the bearer. She is in my suite now," he added calmly, not betraying the voice which screamed inside his mind, *Save her! Don't let her be one more sacrifice to the Dark Lord!*

A horrified silence filled the room. Even Dumbledore was momentarily at a loss for words.

Imperfect Conclusions

Chapter 7 of 10

Severus Snape and two Death Eaters pursue a Muggle-owned Horcrux. Can Snape retrieve the Horcrux before the DE's? And will he accept love along the way? Concurrent with HBP.

A/N: All that you recognize belongs to Joanne Rowling and her lawyers.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta, JaneAverage, and to all who read and review!

Previously, Severus disclosed that Emma, and Ravenclaw's bracelet, are in the castle. He suggests their only alternative is to destroy both the wearer and the Horcrux/bracelet.

"Severus! Your estimation of the situation is rash at best. In this room we have the best magical minds of their respective specialties. Certainly we can come up with a more humane solution!" Dumbledore thundered.

He paused and considered his Potions Master, trying to ascertain his mindset. "Do you not think the poor woman has suffered enough at the hands of the Death Eaters? And still she forsook all to come here with you to help Wizard-kind. Her capacity to love seems boundless," Dumbledore finished softly.

"What do you propose, then, *Headmaster?*" Snape replied furiously. "Do you think such an animated, intelligent woman will be satisfied to hide in my suite, until we create a magical solution to rid her of Tom Riddle's soul?"

"No, of course not," replied Dumbledore. "Here is my proposal. We introduce her as a distant Squib cousin of mine." Snape snorted in disgust but Dumbledore continued, "And apprentice her to Professor Philogen. He has been complaining about his workload now that Muggle Studies has been elevated to a N.E.W.T. level course. She must stay in the castle. It is the safest place for her. And she seems quite taken with you, Severus," Dumbledore smiled merrily, "so by all means, her rooms may stay attached to yours."

Snape returned to his suite to find Hermione Granger trying to teach Emma how to control the lights by using the *Vox* and *Lumos* spells. Neither woman was surprised that these simple spells did not work for Emma. Emma smiled sadly at Snape and thanked Hermione for her attempts. Snape nodded indifferently to Hermione, snarling at her, "Order business, Miss Granger. Not a word to anyone, especially not Mr. Potter." Hermione quickly packed up and left without another word.

Emma bristled at his brusque treatment of the girl and was about to address it, when Snape curtly summoned her to the couch.

He related Dumbledore's plan and was surprised to learn Emma was reluctant to stay in the castle. "We discussed sending you to a safe house with an Auror...a very technically advanced wizard...to safeguard you, but at the moment the Order is stretched to its limits. Staying here is your best plan. Minerva, Filius and I will be here to help you, and Professor Philogen is giddy at the thought of working with an *actual* Muggle." Snape rolled his eyes dramatically before continuing, "But of course, you realize that I am a very busy man. I have classes all day, my Slytherin Head of House duties at night, and frequently I am . . . called away . . . from the castle. I will not be able to mind you every waking moment, Emma."

Emma was not used to such condescension. She was furious and she glared at him; when she spoke, her words dripped with sarcasm. "I realize I am at a great disadvantage, here in your world. I will do everything in my power not to encroach on your *very full life*. Good evening, Severus." *You miserable bastard*, she added to herself.

Snape did not see Emma for the balance of the day, nor the following morning. He attempted to work in his private lab, but could not concentrate and did not trust himself to work with volatile potions ingredients. He was rehashing last night's conversation with Emma over and over again, disgusted at the remorse he felt for speaking so sharply to her. *You're losing your edge, Snape. Your brain is addled with her, and that's how mistakes are made in the spying business*, he chided himself. Yet part of him, the "Steven" part, wanted to reach out to her, hold her, and apologize for his callousness.

Finally, his growing feelings for the woman trumped his self-control. He crossed his sitting room and knocked on her door. He received no answer. He opened the door and called for her with no response. "Where can the bloody woman be?" he hissed, as he pelted Floo powder into his fire. "Headmaster's rooms!" he snarled, and immediately Dumbledore's smiling face appeared in his flames.

"Well, good morning, Severus! What can I do for you today?" *Damn that man, he was always in too good a mood.*

"Emma is missing, Headmaster. I have not seen her since late yesterday afternoon."

"My, my, trouble in paradise already?" Dumbledore inquired sweetly, ignoring Snape's glare and growl. "Today being Saturday, Minerva took Emma to Diagon Alley to do a bit of shopping. She'll need teaching robes and supplies for Monday. From now on, she'll be eating in the Great Hall with the staff, as I introduced her at breakfast."

Snape did not see Emma until she entered the Great Hall for dinner that night. His breath caught in his throat as he saw her. Her hair had been darkened and changed to a chin-length bob, and instead of Muggle clothing, she was now wearing figure-gracing sapphire-blue teaching robes. Her sparkling eyes sought his, and he bowed his head in apology. She returned the look with a warm smile of acceptance. She twirled once in her robes for him, and without thinking, he smiled...a genuine, warm smile that was not missed by anyone at the head table.

Flitwick, Minerva and Philogen corralled Emma to sit with them. Snape, as was his custom, ate silently, in his usual seat at the end of the table. He could hear her laughter and snippets of their conversation. When they were done, she left with Minerva and Flitwick, and he felt a stab of jealousy, which he immediately negated as foolishness. *You made a point to push her away, fool. For her own good. And besides, any feelings she has are for "Steven," not Snape.*

Emma returned much later to her suite of rooms, led by Winky the House Elf. Minerva had obligated Winky to Emma, as a personal assistant, as Emma could perform not a single spell. She badly needed assistance navigating her way through the castle, as well. She was still mystified by the moving staircases and myriad passages, and she had been harassed by Peeves. That night, too, she had made a heart-wrenching confession to Minerva: "I am unnerved at being around so many young witches and wizards, all who have powers I do not."

"But my dear, you realize no one can harm you whilst you wear that bracelet."

"Of course, Minerva, I'm not worried about being harmed. No one has tried to trick me or fool me yet, but some students, the Slytherin students especially, seem unfriendly and a bit dodgy."

Minerva suppressed a snicker at Emma's confession. "Well, my dear, you are right. When in doubt or trouble, seek out a Gryffindor. Or a Ravenclaw. Or, well, a Hufflepuff."

Winky was thrilled to be needed and of service again, and she did not mind too much that Emma was a Muggle. Earlier, Minerva and Flitwick had performed some very complex Charms to open Emma to the magic of the castle. They secretly hoped these ministrations would ease her transition into, and acceptance of, her inevitable new way of life.

Dumbledore was gone from the castle for increasingly long stretches of time. Whenever possible, Minerva called together the "team," to work on the Horcrux dilemma. Snape, Flitwick, Minerva and Bill Weasley worked late into many nights. Bill, a former Hogwarts Head Boy and accomplished scholar, had been working as a Curse-Breaker for Gringotts. In that capacity, he had crafted many effective approaches to obscure curses. He had been a late addition, but a valuable one; for with all their research, through the Restricted Section and Snape's own private Dark Arts collection, they had not found a single spell to release the soul from a Horcrux without destroying the object. They were in uncharted territory and would have to create their own magic, incorporating all their specialties...a kind of holistic, "complementary"

magical approach. Whenever they started to feel frustrated or blocked, they reminded themselves of Emma and worked with renewed spark. Especially Snape.

Despite his best intentions, Emma and Snape had fallen into a comfortable routine in just a fortnight. Emma would sit with her friends at dinner and chat and catch up on the day's news.

In the early evening, she would bring her marking into Snape's suite. Emma enjoyed her teaching and found much hilarity in seeing the Muggle way of life from the wizard point of view. They would work there companionably, regaling each other with occasional bits of student idiocy. It was during these quiet, intimate evenings that Snape was most himself, Emma suspected. With her, he was gentle and attentive, and he let loose his dry and witty sense of humor. Frequently, he would have a wizard liqueur to sample, or a magical gadget for her, like the two-way mirror he gave her, or the charmed galleon which could summon him, for emergencies. He showed her his private laboratory and allowed her access to his common remedy potions for headaches, dreamless sleep, etc.

One memorable evening, he showed her a Muggle-style picture of himself, about age five, in his mother's arms as they sat on a bench in a sunlit garden. Eileen Prince could not be considered pretty, but as she gazed at her dark-haired son with unconditional love and acceptance, she was beautiful, and Emma had said so. Snape had startled Emma then by impulsively sweeping her up into an intense, powerful hug. He had held onto her for quite a while before reluctantly, and embarrassedly, disentangling from her. Emma surmised that during these times, he shared more of himself with her than he had with any other woman.

Every two days Snape would go to Hogsmeade for her to check the post and bring back connections to her other life. She treasured these letters and books and kept her sadness to herself, as she felt he had more than enough of his own. Enough for both of them.

If she wondered why their relationship was so chaste, she didn't let her frustrations show. She knew he would have to determine the level of intimacy if they were to build a lasting relationship. *He's so guarded and closed off from people. Nastiness and ill humor are his chief defenses. But I think Nonna was right, when he decides we should be together, nothing will stand in his way. I wonder if he's wary of Rick? But I know I have his blessing; Rick would want me to be happy. Even if it's soon . . .*

"Am I falling in love with Severus?" Emma mused out loud.

Cruciatus and Curses

Chapter 8 of 10

Severus Snape and two Death Eaters pursue a Muggle-owned Horcrux. Can Snape retrieve the Horcrux before the DE's? Will he accept love along the way? Concurrent with HBP.

This story is concurrent with HBP. Thank you, JaneAverage for your wonderful advice and beta skills!

In Chapter 7, Emma and Severus continued their chaste domesticity; Emma thinks she's falling in love; the team worked to break the enchantments on Ravenclaw's bracelet and Emma has begun teaching Muggle Studies.

One snowy Saturday, Emma and Snape shared a relaxing lunch together in the Great Hall. All the older students and most staff were in Hogsmeade that day. That afternoon Snape planned to replenish Madam Pomfrey's potions stores and had asked Emma to assist with the prep work. They finished lunch and walked companionably toward the dungeons. As they walked, their fingers brushed, and impulsively, he linked his with hers, unseen under the long sleeves of their robes. He quizzed her about the ingredients for the headache potion. She identified all of them and he smiled at her ability. Their moment was broken, however, by a Ravenclaw second-year rushing to them, screaming, "Katie Bell's been cursed! Professor Snape, help! Help!"

Without a word, Snape ran to his suite, strode into his private lab, then Floo'd back to the Hospital Wing, carrying several vials of potions. "Severus, do you need my..." Emma began; Snape's response was little more than a growl. "No! Stay in the suite!"

He returned hours later and knocked on Emma's door. She was sitting on the bed writing a letter when he returned. Snape smiled tentatively and sat down on the bed, facing her.

"Severus, is Katie all right?"

"I hope so. I was able to stop the spread of the curse. Katie was taken to St. Mungo's, the wizard hospital, for long-term care." His voice broke and Emma realized the man was exhausted and overwrought. She scooted down to him and gently cupped his face with her hand. She leaned in and lightly kissed his cheek.

"Katie's lucky to have you here, Severus."

He recoiled from her touch and her words and leapt up. "You have no idea, Emma, of the idiocy of what you have just said," he hissed. "In truth, it ~~is~~ because of me that Katie is in St. Mungo's right now."

"So, sometime during lunch, when I wasn't looking, you CURSED her?"

"No, you foolish woman, it's more complicated than that."

"Then explain it to me, Severus, I want to know your truth."

"NO!" he raged. "I cannot. You will have nothing to do with me once you know 'my truth,' as you call it, and I could not bear that." Shocked at his own admission, he strode from her room and into his private lab, slamming the door.

Dinner in the Great Hall was subdued, to say the least, that night. Severus did not show up. Emma hardly ate. Minerva told her about the cursed opal necklace and that Katie's prognosis was uncertain.

Emma became lost in thought, reviewing their disagreement again and again. Obviously Severus had nothing to do with that necklace. Why was he willing to take the blame for such a Dark act? Why did he see himself as the focal point of Dark Magic at the school?

Emma knew a bit about his dark past...faculty gossip had taken care of that. And she was not frightened of what she might hear, but rather more frightened that he may never open up to her. She made up her mind to press the point tonight, despite any discomfort he may feel.

He was nowhere to be found in his suite. *Probably down at the Hog's Head, drowning his sorrows*, she thought. *I'll leave the door between our rooms open, so I'll hear him when he returns.*

In the hour before dawn, Snape slumped against the outer door to his dungeons. "Buck up, man, you've made it this far. Another lovely evening spent with the Dark Lord," he spat. Somehow, he managed to get himself through the wards and into the inner hallway. In front of his suite door, he felt another crashing wave of pain and nausea. Retching, he fell to the cold stone floor. He had taken himself as far as he could on sheer willpower. He lost consciousness and gave in to the pain.

With a *crack* Winky appeared in her new mistress' bedroom. She frantically shook Emma awake and announced, "Master Snape is needing of you, Miss. He is sickened outside the door."

Emma flew out of bed and found Severus unconscious, trembling, laying in a pool of vomit. She tried, but could not lift the dead weight of him. "Winky, please help me. Can you do something?"

"Yes, Miss, step aside. Winky is sending Master Snape to his bed." The elf closed her eyes and screwed up her face and, extending her long bamboo-like fingers over Snape, levitated him six inches off the floor. Winky propelled him into the suite and Emma helped lift him onto the bed. Still unconscious, Severus groaned in pain at her touch.

"Winky, what is wrong with him? Do you know?"

"Yes, Mistress, Winky is knowing, but cannot be telling. It is evilness, Mistress, pure evilness. Master Snape would punish Winky fierce if she tells you."

Emma made up her mind. The man needed help, now. "Winky!" she commanded in a loud voice. "Go get Madam Pomfrey."

At that Snape's eyes flew open and he croaked, "NO! Elf, do not call Poppy. Leave me be."

Winky stood frozen, not knowing which master to serve. She had been obligated to the Muggle lady, but the Potions Master's authority seemed stronger at Hogwarts. Winky twisted her ears and moaned softly.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Winky, don't hurt yourself. Get me a cauldron of ice water, a stack of towels and a flannel," Emma said sharply. Relieved, Winky disappeared to fulfill Emma's request. Severus' eyes were on her as she removed his cloak and started to unbutton his frock coat.

"What do you think you are doing, Madam?" Snape croaked out.

"You refused Poppy's help, Severus, so you are stuck with mine."

Snape sighed deeply, exhausted, as a new wave of pain made him tremble and jerk violently. Emma lay down next to him, covering him with her body, to try to still his movements. He groaned; from pain she thought, but he knew differently. When he had calmed, Emma went into the bathroom and returned with two phials. She slipped her arm behind his head to raise it and brought the first phial to his lips. He refused it, asking acerbically, "Trying to poison me, Emma?"

"Well, if your skills were not up to par on the day you brewed this, possibly," she retorted. "Severus, it's just a potion for pain and one for nausea. Surely you can identify them."

He grimaced in reply and swallowed the potions without complaint. Emma ran her hand down his face to feel for fever and she could tell that each touch brought increasing pain to him. She guessed that his nerve endings were inflamed. She quickly and efficiently began again to undress him.

"Emma, what are you doing? I beg you, please leave me be."

"Severus, your nervous system is overtaxed. I am applying a principle of Muggle sports medicine. I'm going to chill your body to ease your pain."

"Emma, you know I don't trust Muggle doctors," Snape said scornfully.

"All right, then, it's just what the Muggle teacher ordered. Now be still!" Emma slipped her cool, soft fingers underneath the waistband of his black wool trousers and started to undo the buttons. Despite his pain and exhaustion, Snape felt himself responding to her touch.

"Unhand me, woman!" he cried, sitting up, wincing with pain.

"Severus! Lie back down! You're hurt, badly, and you need assistance," Emma said forcefully. Then, cupping Snape's cheek in her palm, looking deep into his eyes, she said softly, "Relax, dearest, and I will take care of you."

The little house-elf and the Muggle woman worked cooperatively to undress Snape. The pain and nausea potions were kicking in, and the tremors were lessening. Emma delicately turned away while the little elf placed a thick wool blanket over Snape's groin. He sighed deeply and gave over to Emma. But soon he found himself regretting his decision as she began the treatment.

His glittering eyes watched her every move as she wet, wrung and lovingly placed a double layer of icy, moist towels on his legs.

"GREAT MERLIN, WOMAN! What are you trying to do to me? I beg you again, LEAVE ME IN PEACE!" Snape thundered, trying vainly to kick off the thick layer of toweling; he growled from the pain and exertion and frustration.

"I'm sorry you are uncomfortable, Severus, but that is temporary. In fifteen minutes, I will take the towels off, and I promise you that you will feel much better," Emma replied, enunciating each word carefully and slowly. In the time it took her to respond to him, she had covered his torso, arms and legs with the icy toweling. "Winky, can you charm these to stay at their current temperature?" Emma asked.

"Yes, Mistress," replied the Elf, raising her knobby-knuckled fingers over Snape.

Snape groaned in reply, but did not complain, as he was beginning to feel significantly less pain. This had been the worst bout of Cruciatus he'd ever had. While enduring it, he had toyed with the idea that he might not recover...this was a familiar thought pattern for him, and in the past it was of some comfort...only now, he fought to live and keep his sanity during the blinding pain, the image of Emma in his mind.

Fifteen excruciatingly cold minutes later, Emma smiled and announced, "Time to get warm again, Severus! How are you feeling?"

"A bit better," he said, grudgingly; actually, he was feeling better than he had a right to feel after the abuse he had endured.

"Excellent. Winky, please bring me a cauldron of lukewarm water, and more towels, please."

"Now what?" Snape asked, pretending to be more exasperated than he was.

"I have to repeat the procedure with some lukewarm toweling, to bring your body back up to temperature. After that, I will clean you up; you were sick all over yourself and you smell," Emma said, exaggeratedly holding her nose when finished.

"Ah, now I am something to mock, Madam? Do not treat me as one of your schoolchildren."

"You always were 'mockable,' Severus, you just didn't realize it!" Emma laughed, as she repeated the process of layering him in towels which were much warmer this time. Snape made no sounds of protest as his pain was nearly gone and the weight and warmth of the toweling was so . . . soothing. He suddenly felt very tired, and realized it was more than twenty-four hours ago that he had slept ...

A new sensation, a very pleasing one, partially awakened him. He felt warm, sudsy water as it was tenderly stroked onto his body. Emma sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over him. Smiling sweetly, she set to work cleaning the sweat and sickness off him. At first, her touch was firm and quick and businesslike, but soon, Snape felt her actions slowing, the mood changing. Fully awake now, he feigned sleep and watched her, fascinated, through half-lidded eyes.

Emma's breathing was shallow as she ravished his tight, lithe body with her eyes and tended to every part of him save what was hidden under the wool blanket. Mesmerized, she watched the rise and fall of the flannel over his muscled abdomen and ribs, which were a bit too prominent for her taste, and she made a mental note to make sure he ate better. She smiled to herself as the flannel caressed his chest and unconsciously, she circled each dark nipple with a sudsy finger.

Snape watched her, enthralled, as she traced the outline of a scar on his chest with a feather light touch. Her eyes brightened with tears while she caressed his scar, and Snape felt a pain in his chest, in his heart, that puzzled him, at first. But then realization flooded his mind, his senses, and for a moment, he forgot to breathe. No one since his mother had comforted him, cared for him, with such obvious love and concern. And no woman's ministrations had ever elicited this depth of feeling, or arousal, from him. The heavy wool blanket at his midsection tented with evidence of his desire.

"But is she doing this to 'Steven' or Snape?" he wondered to himself.

Several hours later Snape awoke, and he found himself looking straight into Emma's eyes as she lay curled next to him. Emma raised herself up and gently laid her hand on his cheek. "No fever, good. How are you feeling, Severus?"

He took stock of his physical state before answering, "Much better. Weak, still. But no pain. What have you done to me, woman?"

Emma laughed and reached over, laying her hand over his heart. He covered her hand with one of his own, stroking small circles with his thumb.

"Just a bit of Muggle medicine, dearest. I'm glad you've 'responded' so well," Emma said, saucily, as the heavy wool blanket tented again. Snape looked away quickly, disdainfully pretending not to see her reaction. She laughed gleefully at his pretense, and called for Winky, ordering tea and fruit and toast for both.

"Severus, in all seriousness, I'm so glad you are better," she said, leaning into him, initiating a chaste kiss. He responded by pulling her toward him, deepening the kiss as his tongue sought entrance, which she willingly allowed. Their tongues met and caressed and Emma found herself on the receiving end of one of the loveliest, most sensual kisses she had ever gotten.

The *pop* of Winky appearing with the breakfast tray startled them out of their embrace.

Emma smiled and whispered, "I hope there's more where that came from!"

But Snape struggled to sit up, pushing her off him as he went, his face a mask of seriousness. "Emma, about last night . . ." he began.

Emma interrupted him. "I know enough about medicine to realize last night was due to more than just a hangover from the Hog's Head. I still think you should see Madam Pomfrey for a checkup."

"No, Emma, I'm fine. In truth, this is not the first time that has happened to me and the worst is over."

Emma jumped off the bed, yelling, "Who would do that to you? Why would you let that happen again? Severus, what in the name of God are we dealing with?"

Revelations

Chapter 9 of 10

Severus Snape and two Death Eaters pursue a Muggle-owned Horcrux. Can Snape retrieve the Horcrux before the DE's? And will he accept love along the way? Concurrent with HBP.

A/N: Many thanks to my hardworking beta, JaneAverage, and to Hogwarts Honey and Droxy for concrit and moral support!

In the previous chapter: Katie Bell is cursed; Severus is summoned; Emma cares for his Cruciatius-induced injuries and demands a full accounting.

Snape demanded time to shower and change before they talked. In reality, he needed time to think. For he had taken last night's punishment for her; the Dark Lord knew about her existence at Hogwarts and her apparent closeness to him. *Draco*, he thought bitterly. *That brat is up to something. He won't meet with me to discuss his situation, and yet he runs and squeals to the Dark Lord about Emma.*

Snape had closed his mind to Voldemort and feigned ignorance of the bracelet, but at great physical cost to himself. Goyle and Macnair suspected him of thwarting their plans in New York and had said so. After his punishment, Voldemort ordered him to keep Emma close by and safe until he had a plan for regaining the Horcrux without destroying it.

Snape heard the swish of the Floo in the sitting room fireplace. Emma was sitting on the leather couch, an expectant look on her face. Dumbledore's head appeared in the flames.

"Severus, my dear boy, I've just returned to the castle. Minerva tells me you were called out last night. Do you have anything to report?"

Not even bothering to inquire about my health anymore, Albus? Snape thought bitterly.

"Yes, Headmaster, the Dark Lord knows about Emma's presence here. He has asked me to keep her close by and safe."

"Well, Severus, the irony abounds!" Dumbledore replied jovially. "I did have another message for you both. We will meet after dinner in my office. We are ready to help Emma at last!" Dumbledore exited the Floo and Snape sat down to meet his fate.

He knew he owed her the truth, albeit the highly abridged version. He fully anticipated her wanting to have nothing to do with him after their talk. Thus, he began the conversation by offering her another suite of rooms closer to Minerva's. Confused, she declined, and threw him off balance when she gently requested, "Severus, show me your Dark Mark."

Startled, he complied, reluctantly rolling up his left sleeve. She leaned across his lap to get a better view. She touched the Mark with a hesitant finger. He recoiled, jerking his arm away, but stilled himself and returned his arm to her, holding it like a peace offering. Emma looked up and saw a brightness in his eyes...unshed tears, or reflected light from the fire, she could not tell.

"And this burns when you are summoned to Voldemort?"

"My, my, the staff has been thorough with you," he said disgustedly. "What else would you like to know, Madam, or do you know the whole story already?"

She narrowed her eyes and replied, "Severus, from what little you've explained...and the very few questions Dumbledore has answered...and, yes, from faculty gossip, I know you are a spy. You were a Death Eater and have done some horrible things. But something, I think your innate sense of honor..." Snape snorted in disgust at this "...compelled you to seek the Light. Since then, you have lived an incredibly dangerous double life, appeasing two capricious masters."

"Capricious? My dear, you have a clearer vision of Dumbledore than many who have known him all his life."

"Severus, it's obvious that in his eyes everyone, himself included, is ultimately expendable to 'the cause.'"

Snape hung his head and breathed deeply to regain control. How did this Muggle woman know so much? Did she know of the Vow he had taken? That if called to satisfy it, his life would end, whether he lived or died?

He cupped Emma's cheek and turned her head to meet his. "Emma, you understand far more than I gave you credit for. You must realize that we cannot be together. I have made a Vow, an Unbreakable Vow, which guarantees I have no future. Have mercy on me and leave me alone. It's cruel to dangle happiness in front of me when I cannot have it."

"Severus, I'm falling in love with you!" Emma said fiercely. "Can we not get through this together?"

"NO! It is already beyond us," Snape replied bitterly, moving away from her, dropping his head into his hands. "And, more to the point, you don't truly know me. Severus Snape is a dark and evil wizard with no hope of ever compensating for his malevolent actions. You have fallen in love with 'Steven,' a man I wish I could be for you, but can't."

I don't believe him, Emma thought fiercely, I can't. No one can live without hope.

"Severus, you *are* 'Steven'...he is a part of you just as equally as 'Snape, the double agent.' Choose to love. Choose to live. I've had too many tragedies in my life; I will **not** let you be another. Do you love me, Severus?"

Snape's dark eyes glittered as he lifted his head to lock his eyes with her lighter ones. "Yes." *Oh, gods, yes. More than you'll ever know.*

Emma turned to kneel on the couch, and straddled his lap. She looked deep into his soul. "Make love to me, Severus."

He pushed her off his lap, swept her off her feet and carried her into his bedchamber.

They walked slowly to Dumbledore's office. Emma had been too nervous to eat anything at dinner. As they walked, Snape outlined his part of the process. "Over the past three weeks I have brewed a complex potion for Soul-Binding. This potion was originally created for Dark Arts practitioners, to secure their souls while doing magic of untold evil. It will ensure that you leave the process wholly you."

When they reached Dumbledore's office, Snape whispered, "Licorice whips," and they entered. The room was more dimly lit than usual. Dumbledore's desk was moved. In its place was a chaise surrounded by five straight-backed chairs, four occupied by members of 'the team.' They all rushed to greet her and hug her, comforting her with their friendship.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and address the group. "Tonight, we sail into uncharted magical territory, to help the newest member of our Hogwarts family. It is crucial to the process that there is absolute trust and a feeling of love in the room tonight. Rowena Ravenclaw, in her brilliance, devised enchantments which can only be broken by those working with purity of heart and soul. Emma, if you would lie down, we will begin."

Emma sat nervously. She was trembling and did not think she could go through with it. If the bracelet was so protective of her, could it be a bad thing to keep? But of course, she knew the answer. For Voldemort to be defeated, for her and Severus to have a chance, this Horcrux had to be destroyed.

Snape saw her distress and instinctively moved to sit down next to her. In relief she leaned into him. He enveloped her in his arms.

"Albus, since my part in the process is completed already, I think I should hold Emma and comfort her. Her willingness is crucial to the outcome."

"Yes, Severus, by all means."

Snape reclined on the chaise, parted his long legs and pulled her back to his chest, gripping her tightly around the waist. She settled into him with a sigh, feeling his warmth and love. She relaxed. He placed a large purple velvet pillow tenderly under her left arm, supporting her braceleted wrist. 'The team' all smiled to themselves, pleased and astonished to witness the intimacy between Emma and the notoriously private Snape.

Bill cleared his throat and began. "Emma, I'm just the backup here. I have a Soul-Catcher in case Voldemort's soul escapes the Horcrux at any time during the ritual."

Bill held up what appeared to be a lap-sized golden harp. Looking directly through the strings Emma could see swirling, multi-colored, sparkling air particles, though viewed from any other perspective it looked like a tiny traditional harp.

"Now, William, no need for modesty here. Emma, William was the one who pulled all our disparate elements together to help you," Minerva said proudly.

"One thousand points to Gryffindor," Snape said, smirking.

Bill just laughed at his former Potions Professor, now his equal in the war against Voldemort.

Minerva took Emma's right hand in hers. "My dear, we need to transform this bracelet into something else, to loosen the Charms inherent in it. The desire to transform it has to come from your mind. I need you to think of an object, small enough to stay on your wrist, that is a receptacle of some sort. This object needs to be something special to you, something you cherish."

Emma immediately thought of a small, wildly colored clay pot her sons had made for her for Mother's Day. The pot had a lid and was meant to hold rings and other small trinkets. They had inscribed their names into the side in their uncertain beginning printing.

"Okay, Minerva, I'm ready."

"Emma, focus on that object to the exclusion of all else."

Emma tried hard to block out the room and her situation and the person holding onto her for dear life. She pictured the pot, imagined herself tracing over the names as she had so often done, feeling the round and mostly smooth texture of the pot in her hand. She saw herself lifting the lid to peer inside. She briefly registered Minerva's wand gently tapping the bracelet. Emma felt the bracelet tingling and then felt the weight of the pot on top of her wrist. Opening her eyes, she saw the little pot, fastened to her wrist by a pulsing, golden band of light.

Minerva's eyes shone with relief as she sat back, her part complete.

Severus shifted and took a delicate silver goblet from a small table next to them. He handed it to her, saying, "Emma, you know that this potion is precautionary in nature. Its effects will last only one hour. He smiled sadly, then kissed the top of her head. "Bottoms up, dear heart."

Emma quickly drank the bitter, fizzy concoction. She turned and kissed him quickly on the lips, muttering, "Thank you."

Next Dumbledore spoke. "Emma, Filius and I will perform some very ancient, complex, and lengthy Charms. This spell is a compendium of many sources. You will hear some recognizable Latin, some Middle English, Old French, and Elvish. We have done our best to assure your safety, but I have to warn you there is still some danger inherent in magic so profound. Do you wish to continue?" he inquired gently, leaning down to look into her eyes.

"Yes, Albus, I accept the risks and have full trust in yours and Filius' abilities."

"Excellent. Filius? Are you ready?"

Flitwick nodded his assent and reached his tiny hand to pat Emma's knee. He smiled reassuringly at her. With a flick of his wand a three-foot parchment appeared and hung in the air before the two wizards. They started chanting, mingling their voices and magic and power, with a slow cadence at first, picking up speed as they progressed.

Emma felt heavier, weighted down, sleepy. *Probably from Severus' potion*, she thought. As the chanting progressed, she became disoriented. She felt herself rising from the chaise, through Severus' increasing grip, until she was floating above her body. The room started to spin. She became dizzy and sick to her stomach. She began to moan, and vaguely could feel Severus running his hands up and down her arms, trying to ground her to his touch. He flung his legs over hers as he realized she was only partially there with them. The incantations increased in speed and volume and she felt a ripping, a tearing, a blinding flash of pain and color.

Everyone but Severus was on their feet, wands raised in the electrically charged air, Bill frantically scanning the room for any sign of Voldemort's soul. A low keening sound registered in Dumbledore's mind and brought him back. The source of the keening was Severus. Emma was limp and unbreathing in his arms. "Emma, don't leave me! Don't! Albus, do something!"

The old wizard put his hand on Emma's head and whispered frantically. Seconds passed by, feeling like hours. Then with a whole-body spasm, Emma sharply inhaled and struggled against Severus' grip. Everyone exhaled in relief.

"Emma! Emma! Are you all right? Speak to me!" demanded Dumbledore.

"Albus, I'm okay," Emma said weakly. "What happened to the trinket box?"

They turned to focus on the multi-colored clay pot. Gingerly, Dumbledore reached out and easily lifted the object from her wrist. He handed it to Bill, who placed it on top of the strings of the Soul Catcher. The harp-like object began to hum and vibrate and with a whoosh the pot disappeared between the strings. The Soul Catcher glowed a sickening shade of green.

"Emma, his soul is captured now and Albus and Filius and I will destroy it. You're safe," said Bill, securing the Soul Catcher into a large, lidded, black onyx box on Dumbledore's desk.

Severus reached up and brought her left wrist to his lips. "It's over now, darling, it's over," he mumbled.

Poppy Pomfrey Floo'd in to check Emma's condition. She was too professional to register shock at Emma's and Severus' intimate pose and without a word performed diagnostic tests. "She seems to be well but exhausted, and still under the effects of a potion I can't identify. She needs nourishment and sleep. I will need to check on her once an hour for the next twenty-four hours. I'll take her up to the hospital wing."

"NO!" Severus commanded. "I will take care of her, Poppy," he said more gently. "I will call you if you are needed."

Poppy hmmmffed! and left by Floo.

"Emma, do you think you can walk?" Severus breathed into her hair. She struggled and quickly realized she did not have enough strength to stand. Severus gathered her in his arms and strode to the fireplace. He turned back to face his colleagues.

"Thank you . . . for everything you have done tonight. You secured the Horcrux and you have saved . . . the most precious person in my life."

Vows and Prophecies

Chapter 10 of 10

Severus Snape and two Death Eaters pursue a Muggle-owned Horcrux. Can Snape retrieve the Horcrux before the DE's? And will he accept love along the way? Concurrent with HBP.

Chapter 10: Vows and Prophecies

A/N: All my gratitude to JaneAverage, Hogwarts Honey and Droxy, for their moral support and super beta skills!

In the previous chapter, the Horcrux is destroyed. Snape accepts Emma's love.

Snape returned Emma to his bed. She was exhausted and strung-out from the ritual. He gave her a Calming Draught and she slept soundly for a few hours. He summoned a chair and sat next to the bed, holding her hand, intending to be there when she woke.

In the pre-dawn quiet, he reflected on his life—his emotionally distant father; the indignities he suffered at the hands of the Marauders; his descent into the Dark Arts; his unpardonable mistake of joining the Death Eaters and revealing the Prophecy. He thought of Dumbledore's fatherly love and his forgiveness, which came at too high a price. He thought about his years of self-imposed loneliness, self-loathing and guilt. Then he thought of Emma. And the man he could be, with her. And the promise of redemption through their love. He would speak to Dumbledore tomorrow. He would demand freedom from his bonds of guilt. He would love. He had hope.

Dumbledore refused his 'resignation' from spying. He appealed to Snape's honor and sense of duty to triumph over what transient happiness he could have found with Emma. The old man had ripped his heart out. Called due his Wizard's Life Debt. Secured Snape's loyalty and obedience to the end. . . however it would end.

Ironically, their conversation in the Forbidden Forest was partially heard, misinterpreted, and reported by an eavesdropper—Hagrid. A prophecy of sorts, with a lower-case "p."

Emma knew something was wrong the next day. He barely spoke. Emotionally, he seemed to close himself off from her, but she did not press him too hard, knowing that he would talk if he needed to. They made love twice, fierce yet tender, long and slow, as if he was trying to burn the act into his memory. She thought he was crying, but when she reached to wipe the tears away, he turned his head.

Dumbledore came to her early that evening, dressed for a journey in a long dark traveling cloak. Snape had been called to a disturbance in the Slytherin common room. "I have very little time, Emma, so I must be direct. I am not expecting to see midsummer, and I need you to handle certain affairs after my death."

"Albus, NO! We all need you too much. You can't die. And you certainly shouldn't choose me over Minerva!"

He replied sharply, "Emma, we all must die. I am comforted that I will most likely die fulfilling my duty to the Order. You, unlike Minerva, have no status in the Wizarding world; therefore, your reputation will not be tainted by your involvement in this enterprise. Take this ring. It is on a specially charmed chain which will release only upon my death. When that happens, you must put the ring on immediately. My phoenix, Fawkes, will deliver a parchment to you, which can be opened only by your applying the ring to my wax seal. This parchment will exonerate the parties involved. You will need this when called before the Ministry of Magic for a hearing, gods willing." Dumbledore paused here, looking as if he were contemplating hell itself, then continued.

"If the Dark wins, this ring will be activated as a Portkey to your school in New York City. It goes without saying that nothing of this conversation is to be revealed to anyone—not Minerva, not even Severus," the old wizard explained, sighing.

"My dear, I thank you for your assistance with Tom Riddle's Horcrux. I thank you also for teaching Severus to love. I remain hopeful that you two will be together after a period of terrible events. Never give up on him, Emma. I love him like a son." Dumbledore hugged Emma tightly and Floo'd away. Emma sat, stunned and numb, on the couch.

Snape returned later that night, exhausted and disgusted with the Slytherins, Draco Malfoy in particular. He held Emma for a long time as he sat in front of the fire nursing a glass of firewhiskey. "Severus, is there anything I can help you with? Anything we need to talk about?"

"No, Emma, thank you. Go to bed and get some sleep. I love you."

Raised voices and a loud bang in the suite awakened Emma. She ran out to find Filius Flitwick sprawled on the carpet in front of the hearth. Hermione Granger and another girl were tending to him. Severus, looking wild, was standing at the door to their rooms, muttering an incantation. His dark sparking eyes met hers. In them she could see love, desperation and fear. He turned and ran from her.

Emma tried to follow him. She ran to the door and was forcibly repelled. She tried again and again. Sobbing, knowing, she told the girls to go on without her. Severus had charmed the suite to contain her safely during the battle.

Dumbledore's chain broke, and her heart broke with it.

Trembling, sobbing, she slid down the stone wall of the suite onto the floor. How long she stayed there, she did not know. She felt like she was underwater, thinking in slow motion, only partially conscious. After quite a while, a witch with wild blue hair stood over her, angry, jabbering. Nothing made sense. It couldn't be true. Severus. Albus. NO. NO. Rocking, crying, she made no response to the angry witch's rapid-fire questions. The witch left in a huff, mumbling, "Azkaban's too good for Snape's whore."

Emma heard someone screaming, as a wildly-plumed bird swooped into the suite. "NO! NO! OH, GOD, NO! ALBUS! SEVERUS!"

Later, she realized she had been the one screaming.

Remus Lupin, kind Remus, came down to the suite hours later. He explained what Harry had seen on the Tower. Severus killed Albus, and had fled and rejoined the Death Eaters.

Emma didn't say a word. She sat, twirling Albus Dumbledore's signet ring, a perfect fit on the ring finger of her left hand.

Wily Remus found the remains of the broken chain and his eyes were drawn to the signet. Emma smiled sadly and silently retrieved the chain from the werewolf. As she fingered the shattered golden links, she had her first clear thought in hours: *I will exonerate you, Severus, and we will be together. Forever.*