

What the Lonely Know

by Agnus Castus

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Chapter 1 of 10

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Author's Note:

Where I have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

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Dense cloud cover hid the full moon from view as Severus Snape walked briskly towards the castle gates, answering the call of Tonks' Patronus.

His footsteps were muffled by the low-lying mist congregating upon the ground, and his lantern cast a yellow glow into the blackness of the night, announcing his presence to nocturnal beasts hidden in the shadows of the mild September evening.

In the Great Hall tonight, Snape's appointment as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher would be announced to the school. He had been waiting a great many years for this particular professorship, and Snape wasn't going to allow the late arrival of a certain Gryffindor to spoil his moment of glory.

For decades, Dumbledore had suspected the Defence Against the Dark Arts position had been jinxed by the Dark Lord, and he had tried to deter Snape from his continual pursuit of the professorship. Nothing, however, had stopped the Potions master from applying every year. Now the Headmaster had only a year to live, the long-coveted post finally belonged to Snape. It was a sign Dumbledore did indeed trust him.

Snape was incredibly satisfied that his years of loyal service would be recognised in front of the whole school, and he hoped Lily would be proud. Ultimately, he did it all for her. Even now.

Tonight he would relish the taste of triumph. Such moments were, frankly, few and far between, and he intended to savour his victory. The thought of meeting the miscreant Potter and deducting fifty points from the House of Gryffindor before term had even begun filled Snape with child-like glee. The evening was getting better all the time.

As he approached the main gate, Snape observed a lone woman waiting to be granted entry. Her lank, mousey-brown hair hung scruffily around her heart-shaped face, and her eyes, which usually twinkled, were hooded and subdued. She had a new air of grimness about her; gone was the Nymphadora Tonks of old.

Snape searched the vicinity for Potter and saw the Gryffindor removing his Invisibility Cloak and squinting in Snape's direction. When the boy realised whom his escort was to be, his features contorted in distaste, and he appeared even more like the hated James Potter.

A smirk curled its way around Snape's thin lips. After a summer of soul searching, at last he had a chance to return to the sport he loved. This was going to be fun.

Arriving at the gates, Snape took out his wand and released the padlock with a non-verbal spell.

"Well, well, well," he drawled, enjoying every syllable.

The chain slithered free, and the gate opened, iron hinges creaking in the damp night air. Snape noticed his young charge had a broken nose, which had spattered blood onto his Muggle clothes.

"Nice of you to turn up, Potter," Snape continued with a sneer, "although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance."

The Chosen One had handed himself over on a silver platter, indeed.

"I couldn't change," Potter began, "I didn't have my..."

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora," Snape interrupted, noting the witch's raised eyebrows at the use of her given name. "Potter is quite safe in my hands."

A frown creased Tonks' forehead, and her chin rose indignantly. Snape remembered that defiant look from the Potions classroom, long ago.

"I meant for Hagrid to get the message," she said, a smidgen of misgiving evident in her voice.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead." Snape took a step backwards, then indicated for the boy to pass through the gates. "And, incidentally, I was interested to see your new Patronus."

With Potter safely inside the castle grounds, Snape closed the gates with a clang of metal and Summoned the chains to slither around the iron bars once more. The padlock clunked as the enchantments resealed the entrance.

On the other side of the gate, Tonks' wide-eyed discomfort allowed Snape to sense her exposed, soft underbelly. It was the perfect time to strike.

"I think you were better off with the old one," Snape said cruelly. "The new one looks weak."

He lingered long enough to see the shocked and angry expression of the werewolf-loving Hufflepuff, then swung his lantern around and set off towards the castle, fully protected from her hexes by the school's enchantments.

Tonks had always been gullible; it was truly a wonder that she had ever become an Auror. His cruel attack had been tantamount to kicking a puppy, but Snape didn't care. Life wasn't fair, and the sooner the young woman accepted it, the better.

Presently, Snape turned his attention to the bespectacled wizard trudging beside him.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think," Snape said, smiling into the darkness. "And, let me see, another twenty points for your Muggle attire. You know, I don't believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term—we haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter."

Oh, yes. Without a doubt, tonight was going to be *agood* night.

The hour had grown late when an insistent rapping forced Snape out of his comfortable armchair by the fire. Rising to answer the door, he had no idea who could be calling at his personal quarters at this time of the evening.

He placed his brandy glass on the table, resolving to savour the final mouthful before bedtime.

His solitary celebration had been conducted staring into the cheerful flames of the fire, toasting his somewhat bittersweet success. He knew his appointment to Defence Against the Dark Arts professor would only last a year, if that, and at some time during the next twelve months he would be called upon to kill the Headmaster of Hogwarts one of the greatest wizards ever known. He could label the murder as euthanasia, of course, but he doubted the Order of the Phoenix would see it that way.

Snape pushed everything to the back of his mind as the second peal of door-knocking broke his mood entirely.

He moved swiftly to the door and buttoned up his frock-coat, smoothing the creases away with his hands. As he secured his necktie, his mask of steel was perfectly in place.

The curtness of his abrupt door-opening surprised the mousey-haired witch standing on the other side. Tonks took a step backwards, glancing up, plainly intimidated by his tall, dark stature. She took a brief moment to recover and then pushed past him into his living room, spinning on her heel to address him.

"How *dare* you speak to me like that in front of Harry!" she blustered. Her cheeks were reddened, and her gait suggested a certain amount of Dutch courage. She steadied herself against his leather Chesterfield sofa. "More to the point," she continued, gathering herself primly, "how dare you speak to me like that *at all!*"

Snape closed the door slowly, deliberately, and he clasped his hands. His thumbs rubbed together as he decided how best to deal with the unwanted intrusion.

"I'm not sure to what you are referring, Nymphadora," he replied sleekly.

Tonks leaned further into the back of the sofa, as if for support.

Was she drunk, or merely frightened?

Whichever it was, Snape would delight in exploiting her for his own gain, if only to see the young woman squirm. It was high time someone disabused her of her shameful attraction to his former adversary, Lupin.

Tonks deserved better.

"We both know you're not guileless, Severus, so stop pretending otherwise," she retorted.

It was an open invitation. Before he knew what he was doing, Snape had swept forward and was standing with his hooked nose mere inches from hers. He could smell Firewhisky on her breath.

Her lips parted, trembling.

"Do not presume to know me, Nymphadora," he hissed. "You know nothing of me... Not a single thing."

Tonks' dull hazel eyes searched his gaze... irises which had, on one occasion, been green as emeralds... as green as...

"I know you are lonely, Severus," she whispered, a flicker of daring crossing her pale features. "We both are." She seemed to hold her breath, anticipating his response.

Snape could have backed away... *should* have backed away... scolded her with a cutting remark and sent her packing.

But he didn't.

He moved closer still, remembering Tonks from another time... over a year ago, at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. He recalled the young and enthusiastic Auror, sporting long, auburn-red hair and sparkling green eyes, meeting with the Order's tame Death Eater and discussing strategy. Snape had only seen the Metamorphmagus appear that way once, and on that day she had stolen the breath from his lungs.

The mousey-haired witch standing before him must have noticed his eyes glazing over, because Snape was suddenly brought back to the present moment by the sensation of moist lips meeting his own for a snatched, fleeting kiss.

His arms, which seemed to have developed a mind of their own, slipped around her, lifting Tonks from her stall against the sofa and back onto her feet.

He withdrew an inch or two, fantasising... evaluating.

"And what are you seeking, Nymphadora?" he whispered, causing her to shudder. "One lonely person to another..."

Her lips found his again, filling his mouth with the tang of Firewhisky... warming, burning, and seductive.

"To *feel* something," Tonks whispered, breaking away. "*Anything.*"

In one rapid movement, Snape spun her around and pulled her into his arms.

Her back leaned into his chest, and as his fingers explored her torso she relaxed somewhat, allowing his strong hands access.

Snape felt surprisingly confident as he held Tonks firmly and explored the curves of her figure; whilst it had been over a year since a female had approached Snape of her own accord and offered herself, it had only been a few weeks since he had been intimate with a woman.

Tolerating the despicable Wormtail as his butler for a whole summer had driven him to distraction, and he'd made use of Persephone's Palace on Knockturn Alley more times than he cared to admit, partly to get away from the vermin nesting in his home. Peter Pettigrew had betrayed the Potters, and it was a small miracle that Snape hadn't exercised pest control in his own home and poisoned the loathsome rat, once and for all.

Snape could not deny that he was an opportunist. And when opportunity didn't come knocking, he would, like any Slytherin, make full use of his resources. As such, he could pretend the Auror leaning her head back against his shoulder was, in fact, Lily Evans. He would imagine Tonks as she was that day with her faux green eyes and magnificent red hair.

And she would most probably fantasise that he was the werewolf.

They could make that happen easily enough; all they had to do was close their eyes.

Snape's fingers caressed her breasts, his palms cupping them through the fabric of her robes. He pinched her nipples through the velvety material and made her gasp. When she removed her cloak and flung it to the floor, he pulled her body against him tightly, pressing his growing erection into the small of her back.

"Can you feel *this*?" His voice was a whisper in her ear.

"Yes," she breathed.

Tonks pushed herself closer still, rubbing up against the bulge and causing him to moan. She threw her head backwards, resting into the nook of his neck, breathing hot air onto his skin, lips searching for his mouth.

"Do you want this, Nymphadora?"

Her head rolled against him and she sighed. "Yes."

Snape needed no more encouragement. He released one of his hands and pushed her forwards, until she leaned over the back of the sofa, clutching the dark green leather for support. His hand held her in position as his other searched for the hem of her long skirt, and he gathered it up around her waist, revealing the creamy skin of her behind. He ran his hand past the seam of her stockings, across her buttocks and around her waist, and she trembled and whimpered as he removed her knickers, pulling them until they dropped down to her boots.

Her pale skin luminesced in the firelight, transfixing Snape with the beauty of her slender body. She could have been a mythical creature in that moment, delivered to him as a gift from the gods.

He ran his fingertips across her lower back, relishing the soft warmth of her skin, her taut muscle tone, and the intoxicating invitation of her flesh. He brushed against the top of her crease and fought the dark urge to take her then and there. Her shiver stopped him from taking that liberty.

One of Tonks' hands reached back, trying to grab the material of his robes and pull him closer. Snape responded by unfastening his trousers. When he was freed he sprang against her skin, and she moved, trying to locate him, wanting to welcome him.

When a witch seemed so eager, Snape was not one for standing on ceremony. He reached down and parted her folds, feeling her hot wetness waiting for him. She whimpered and bucked against him impatiently.

Snape smirked. Tonight really *was* his night.

He entered her slowly, inch by inch, luxuriating in the slick heat of her quivering body. Soon he was encased to the hilt, and she was already moving around him, searching for the delicious rhythm of friction which would take them towards ecstasy.

Snape moved tantalisingly slowly at first, but Tonks ground into him, enticing him to plunge deeper and faster. He obliged, and with each thrust he closed his eyes and revelled in the sensations, transporting him to another time, another place, another reality, removed from his life of restraint and servitude, free to live his life without guilt or fear. The power of his mind fed his need, exhilarating and liberating him.

Remotely, he sensed Tonks' orgasm gathering strength, like a blaze about to burst through the roof of a burning building. Her muscles rippled and contracted around him, and his hands sought her shoulders to steady himself, until her climax tore through her body, burning him with fiery intensity.

It was enough to push him over the edge of control, and he pounded into her with the force of a boulder. Within moments he jettisoned months of pent-up frustration and aggression; his muscles contracted in undulating waves of breathtaking pleasure, curling his toes. A low, guttural growl escaped.

When he opened his eyes again Tonks was panting, her breathing strangely laboured, and her body limp against the back of the sofa. As he removed himself and buttoned up his attire, she slid down the back of the Chesterfield onto the floor. He noticed her body shaking and watched her bury her head in her hands, quietly sobbing.

Snape remained standing, shocked and bewildered by her change of composure. Reality came back to him like an icy-cold gust of sea breeze.

What had he been thinking?

It must have been a moment of pure insanity.

Neither of them wanted each other. Both were desperate. Each needed to feel loved.

But this was not love. It was vagarious lust. And now the object of his erroneous desire lay weeping on his carpet.

He knelt down and helped Tonks onto her feet, guiding her to sit on his sofa in front of the fire. Her distress did not lessen.

"Wait here," Snape instructed her.

Moments later, he returned through the Floo with a small amber bottle from the Potions office. He placed it down on the coffee table in front of the Auror, who was now staring at the floor and wiping her tear-stained cheeks.

She glanced at the table and looked away again.

"Memory Potion," Snape explained, his tone soft. "We should both take some."

Tonks raised her hazel eyes, tears threatening to brim over her dark eyelashes once more.

The Auror shook her head minutely and arose. She collected her cloak from the floor and departed, closing the door to Snape's quarters quietly behind her.

The reformed Death Eater remained seated in his armchair, alone again in his quarters, contemplating the untouched bottle of potion before him.

Consequences

Chapter 2 of 10

The two meet again as Katie Bell lies in the Hospital Wing.

It was six long weeks later when Snape saw the young Auror again.

After spending the best part of the evening in Hogwarts' hospital wing, tending to Katie Bell, Snape headed towards Dumbledore's office to meet the Order of the Phoenix.

Lately, saving people's lives from cursed objects seemed to have become a useful skill, and the young Gryffindor girl was now stable, but remained seriously ill.

The only question not yet answered was how Miss Bell had come into contact with the opal necklace. If Draco Malfoy had been involved, he had hidden his tracks well; Malfoy had been in detention with Minerva McGonagall at the time of the incident.

Snape arrived in the Headmaster's office to find the Order meeting winding down. McGonagall looked tired, Hagrid confused, and Dawlish and Tonks were solemn. Snape noticed the mousey-haired witch avoided his gaze as he strode into the room and pulled up a chair.

"Ah, Severus, thank you for joining us." Dumbledore peered earnestly through his half-moon spectacles. "How is Miss Bell?"

"Lucky to be alive," Snape replied. "Only the tiniest amount of skin was exposed to the curse, through a hole in the girl's glove. Poppy is monitoring her closely, but we feel confident she will make a full recovery in time."

Hagrid whistled a release of tension, and the atmosphere in the room seemed to shift.

"Excellent news, Severus," the Headmaster said. "Once again your knowledge of the Dark Arts has proved invaluable. I feel sure Miss Bell's parents will wish to thank you in person."

"That will not be necessary, Headmaster," Snape replied curtly. "Miss Bell may need to be transferred to Saint Mungo's to convalesce. We shall assess the situation tomorrow morning."

"Very well." Dumbledore nodded and clasped his hands, signalling the end of the meeting.

The Order members arose from their seats, and Tonks bolted for the door.

Snape was about to follow when Dumbledore spoke softly in his ear.

"Severus, before you leave, we need to discuss our friend, Draco Malfoy."

"As you wish, Headmaster."

The slushy snow on the ground had frozen into a pitted glacier of ice by the time Snape arrived at the front door of the Three Broomsticks.

The night was clear, and his breath rose in translucent spirals as he stamped his boots on the doormat and pushed open the door. Madam Rosmerta was tidying up behind the bar as the evening's trade drew to a close. The air was heavy and sweet with the scent of mead. Snape strode to the bar and cleared his throat. The landlady turned around and frowned at her new customer.

"Severus Snape... Haven't seen you here in a long while." Rosmerta's eyebrows arched, and a suspicious smile curled her ruby lips.

"When was the last time a student almost died after consuming one of your Butterbeers?" Snape asked indelicately.

The woman made a hushing sound, pressing her finger against her mouth.

Snape sneered. "The whole of Hogsmeade will have heard the news by now."

"Yes, they probably have. And I've been interviewed by two Aurors already this afternoon." Rosmerta nodded towards a secluded booth in the back of the pub. "I thought

one of 'em had come back for more."

Snape turned to see Tonks sitting in the booth alone, nursing a goblet of golden mead. The Gordian knot in his stomach tightened.

He tapped his fingers on the bar and looked back at the landlady. "Firewhisky. Double," he ordered.

Rosmerta shook her head. "Last orders were five minutes ago, Professor Snape."

Snape scowled, and his hand balled into a fist. "If you wish to avoid a second interrogation, Rosmerta, I suggest my Firewhisky is served on the house."

Moments later, Snape was dropping his complimentary tumbler of Firewhisky onto the table in front of the young Auror. With her privacy breached, Tonks looked up at him, startled. She rubbed her forehead with her hands, hiding from his gaze. Snape settled into the seat opposite and took a swig of his beverage.

The pair sat in silence for a long time.

"What are you doing here, Severus?" Tonks asked eventually, her gaze fixed firmly on the table.

"I came to question Rosmerta about the cursed necklace."

"I've already done it."

"So I believe."

Snape took another sip, this time relishing the liquid as it warmed his tongue, his throat, his body.

He stared at the woman before him, a mere ghost of the bubbly, vivacious girl to whom he taught Potions, many years ago.

"So, why have you not taken your leave already?" Tonks asked, daring to make eye contact for the first time.

"Because there is something I need to know, Nymphadora."

She stared, wide-eyed, and swallowed visibly. "And what would that be, Severus?" Her tone attempted bravado, but in reality, it wobbled with fear.

Snape paused, anticipating the cost of his next sentence.

"Why did you choose not to take the Memory Potion?" he asked quietly.

Tonks inhaled audibly and sat up straight. She watched him closely for a long moment, contemplating his question and his demeanour.

"I..." she began. "I don't believe it... You... You didn't take the potion either?"

Snape's eyebrows pinched into a frown. "What made you think I would?"

"I dunno..." Tonks said, breathless, her features betraying relief, then confusion. "I thought... maybe..." Her voice trailed off.

Snape watched her fingernails digging into her folded arms and her brow furrowing; this piece of information was obviously causing some consternation. He wondered what she was thinking and what judgments were being cast.

When she didn't finish her sentence, his impatience got the better of him.

"I wasn't about to let you have an advantage over me, Nymphadora," he said derisively. "I'm no fool."

Her hazel eyes shot up to meet his, wide with anger. "What?" she exclaimed incredulously. "How dare you! You..."

Tonks stood up, knocking clumsily against the table and sending the drinks flying. Their glasses shattered on the floor. Rosmerta looked up from the bar as Tonks marched towards the back door of the pub then slammed it behind her.

Snape banged his fist onto the table before following Tonks, flipping a silver Sickle towards the bar as he passed by. He heard Rosmerta's footsteps and the clunk of the door locking behind him.

Outside, Tonks was pacing up and down the path at the back of the Three Broomsticks, growls of frustration escaping in white wisps from her mouth. The sight of Snape rounding the corner and blocking her exit sent her beyond the pale.

She stormed towards him, reaching with both hands and pushing forcefully into his chest. Her momentum made him stumble and slip on the icy path. Tonks' hands were on her hips and her heart-shaped face was alight with fury.

"I should have known your reasons for not taking the potion were down to your distinct lack of morals!" she shouted.

"Excuse me?" Snape's voice was a low ripple of contempt.

"You're only interested in covering your slippery Slytherin backside."

Snape glowered at the angry witch. "Do tell me, Nymphadora, what *your* oh-so-noble reasons are for keeping the memory?"

She spoke through gritted teeth. "It's about taking responsibility, Snape, something you seem unable to do.... Take responsibility for your actions for once!"

Snape felt the snapping of a tensile string deep inside his chest. He swept forwards and pinned Tonks against the freezing wall, his hot breath curling inches away from her own. The moonlight reflected on her pale, fearful face.

He was close enough to lean in for a kiss: a forceful, impassioned and unwelcome kiss which would mark his territory and make her see the folly in loving a werewolf.

But something stopped him. It might have been his anger welling up inside him like the weight of water against a failing dam. Or it could have been the fright in the young woman's eyes.

Snape knew he didn't want to hurt her. But he did want to shout and scream about the burden of responsibility. The things he had done. The things he was still to do. If only she knew.

"I assure you, Nymphadora, I am familiar with the concept of taking responsibility. As I recall, it took you a long time to hone that particular skill, so do not dare to question my ability."

Tonks raised her wand, pressing its tip into his chest. "You are not my teacher anymore, Snape. Six years have passed since I left your classroom. I have no intention of listening to your lectures on ethics and morals."

She pushed him away with her free hand and strode past him, towards the gate of the back yard, but Snape stopped her with a firm grip on her forearm. Tonks spun around, her wand pointing once again at his torso. When he saw the look of fierce calm on her face, Snape let go of her arm and took a step back.

Her voice was a measured whisper which glided through the night air like an owl swooping to catch its prey.

"The consequences of our actions will live on, Snape. We have to learn to accept them, not run away and live in denial."

Consequences.

The word haunted Snape for weeks after the confrontation at the Three Broomsticks.

Consequences which would live on.

What had she meant?

The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Tonks was hiding something. And that 'something' might turn out to be life-changing for both of them. Why else would she be so consumed with responsibility?

He wanted to speak to her, question her, but didn't know how. He visited Hogsmeade more frequently than was his custom, hoping to bump into the Auror, but it seemed she was avoiding him.

Weeks marched on, and the end of term arrived.

An invitation to Slughorn's Christmas party lay unopened on his desk. Snape told himself he would be expected to attend in Dumbledore's absence, but deep down he knew the only real reason for accepting the invitation was that he hoped she would be there.

The party, like any other social gathering, was noisy and tedious. After being forced into unwanted conversation with Professor Trelawney, Miss Lovegood and Potter, Snape had escorted the supposed gatecrasher, Draco Malfoy, out of the room. A fraught conversation with Malfoy had ensued and Snape made little progress infiltrating the young Death Eater's plans.

The evening was souring with each passing minute and Snape marched back to Slughorn's office, no longer expecting the young Auror to be there. He swept through the emerald, gold and crimson curtains with a snarl and caught a glimpse of Tonks, cosied up with the Auror, John Dawlish. Neville Longbottom was serving drinks to them.

She hadn't dressed up for the occasion, that much was clear. She wore her long leather coat, which was unbuttoned to reveal a dark purple jumper and a black skirt. Tonks looked tired, pale and sullen.

Snape took a goblet of mulled wine from Longbottom's tray and sent the boy on his way.

"Good evening, Severus," said Dawlish.

Snape nodded his greeting and turned to face Tonks. She avoided his gaze, looking around the room for a route of escape.

Dawlish nudged her gently and addressed Snape. "I was just saying to Tonks, here, that if she wasn't planning to go to the Weasleys' for Christmas this year, she ought to attend the Christmas Day feast at Hogwarts instead."

Tonks' features were embarrassed and weary.

"I was hoping for a quiet word with Nymphadora, if I may?" said Snape.

Tonks looked away, and Dawlish cast Snape a long-suffering look. "She's all yours."

When Dawlish had retired, Tonks rounded on Snape in a heartbeat.

"What now?" she hissed, catching his eye then deliberately casting a glance at the crowded room.

"I want to speak to you." Snape spoke slowly, his voice uncompromising.

"I have nothing to say to you," Tonks replied. "Stay away from me!"

"I shall not take 'no' for an answer, Nymphadora. Not when *you* were the one so preoccupied with taking responsibility for consequences."

She threw him an expression of loathing, before sighing and pushing past him, heading swiftly for the door. Snape followed and caught up with her in the dark, deserted corridor. Tonks' pace quickened, so he ran in front of her, sweeping around and blocking her forward path.

"Why can't you just leave me alone, Snape?" she moaned.

"Because... I need to know..." His heart beating sickeningly against his ribs, he forced his words through the nausea. "Are you pregnant?"

Tonks took an unsteady step backwards, her mouth agape and eyes wide. A laugh, half shock, half surprise, escaped.

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

"I..." She cleared her throat. "What... What made you think I was pregnant?" she said distractedly.

It was Snape's turn to clear his throat, and he answered before he'd even realised what he was saying. "I didn't cast a Contraceptive Charm, and I don't know if you did. Your insistence about consequences..."

"I don't believe you!" Tonks' voice raised an octave. "Sometimes... You just... Is that the *only* consequence your one-track mind could come up with?"

Snape exhaled, flummoxed.

She sensed his weakness.

"In Merlin's name, Severus... You repulse me."

Snape felt the sharp sting of an old wound searing his stomach. His anger bubbled like acid in his throat.

"You haven't answered my question," he bit out.

Tonks scoffed openly. She turned to leave.

"Answer me, Nymphadora!" Snape roared.

She snorted and walked away.

It was more than he could bear. Snape paced frantically behind her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She responded with a Stinging Hex, which hit his bicep with a crackle of red light.

He fell back with a wince, and Tonks kept on walking.

Snape rubbed his arm with one hand, shouting at her retreating form.

"ARE YOU PREGNANT?"

As his words echoed down the candlelit hallway, Snape realised he'd lost control and made a fool of himself. He wanted to shrink away, hide in his dungeon, lick his wounds and never, ever, reach out to another person again.

Tonks came to a halt in the shadows far ahead. Her hands were on her hips and her body was shaking.

"NO!" she wailed.

She ran away, sobbing.

Only the Lonely

Chapter 3 of 10

Christmas celebrations and a walk in the snow.

The Great Hall was decorated with twelve colossal Christmas trees, each one sparkling and shimmering underneath the light of Everlasting Candles, suspended in mid-air. Hagrid had coloured his beard white and wore an enormous Santa hat for the Christmas Day feast.

Snape stood with his arms crossed against his chest, wrapped tightly in his cloak, in a shadowy corner of the Great Hall, watching Minerva McGonagall and Filius Flitwick retrieving chocolate Galleons from the trees. Pomona Sprout was happily adorning the small dining table with holly and ivy.

He counted twelve seats. Snape knew that only five students resided in Hogwarts for the Christmas holiday, and he began to wonder who the twelfth guest was likely to be. Had Sybill Trelawney decided to join them once again for Christmas lunch?

Although the Divination professor was an eccentric crackpot, Snape rather enjoyed listening to the verbal sparring between her and McGonagall; it had kept him mordantly amused when she attended the Christmas Day feast a few years previously. Trelawney's company would be preferential to that of another aloof witch whom he had not seen since Slughorn's Christmas party.

Five students of varying ages shuffled into the hall and joined the hunt for the golden chocolate Galleons. Snape tapped the toe of his boot on the stone floor. Where on Earth was Dumbledore? The Headmaster was supposed to be hosting the festive feast, and Snape knew the old wizard had returned to Hogwarts that very morning he had seen Fawkes flying around the castle grounds at breakfast-time.

Presently, the double doors of the Great Hall swung open, and Dumbledore arrived in flamboyant fashion, wearing his best purple robes and shouting 'Merry Christmas!' at the gathering throng. Professor Sprout beamed, hugging the white-bearded wizard when he joined her beside the table festooned with liberal sprigs of holly and ivy.

The Headmaster beckoned the small Christmas party forward and led them in an ebullient Christmas carol.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly

Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Tis the season to be jolly,

Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Don we now our gay apparel,

Fa la la, la la la, la la la.

Troll the ancient Yuletide carol,

Fa la la la la, la la la la."

The students, who had first looked embarrassed when they'd started to sing, soon seemed heartened by Dumbledore's presence. The Headmaster had been absent for large segments of the academic year, and Snape found himself somewhat awestruck that the old man could have such a positive effect on the morale of the school. His awe was drowned out, however, by his discomfiture. Not wishing to be seen by the cheerful carollers, he slunk further into his quiet corner, hoping to evade notice.

Snape was forced to endure this dichotomy each Christmas: to tolerate the enforced merriment of the festive season, or spend it alone at Spinner's End. Hogwarts won every time, but not, as he was experiencing now, without a price.

Dumbledore frowned slightly as he began the fifth verse of *'Deck the Halls'*, and he turned to the door, beckoning another person to enter the hall with a wave of encouragement. Snape leaned forward and noticed for the first time a young woman lingering in the shadows of the archway; she stood hesitatingly uncomfortable, with her arms folded in the same manner as Snape's.

"Come on in, my dear girl," Dumbledore boomed over the raucous singing. "Come and join our merry throng! You shouldn't be alone at Christmas!"

The figure at the door stepped apprehensively into the room, glancing around timidly and forcing a smile at the carollers. The knot in Snape's stomach tightened with dread.

When her eyes swept the room and located Snape, Tonks grimaced and tripped over her own feet.

Shortly after the turkey had been eaten, the Christmas crackers were pulled and produced an assortment of ridiculous headwear, which was then cheerfully worn by several of the diners. Dumbledore was sporting a garish orange bobble-hat complete with ear flaps.

Snape was thankful that Tonks had shown no outward signs of hostility at the dinner table, and his awkwardness had lessened when Tonks relieved him of his incumbent duty; she now suffered the indignity of wearing a black top-hat, complete with a white bunny-rabbit flopping around its rim.

Christmas pudding arrived, and Snape watched the Auror seated diagonally across from him, seemingly queasy, poking her custard half-heartedly with a spoon. He understood her incongruent behaviour she didn't want to be there. She was forced to conceal her empty heart with a cheerful smile for the benefit of others. He knew the experience was joyless and tiring.

"Eaten too much?" Snape asked her.

Tonks returned his gaze warily and nodded.

Snape tapped his pudding bowl with his wand and it Vanished. He arose from his chair, hoping she would agree to his offer of escape. "Allow me to accompany you back to Hogsmeade; we could both use the fresh air," he said with a tone of formality.

Tonks appeared relieved at the reprieve from the festivities, yet equally torn with reticence.

Dumbledore assessed the pair shrewdly. "A walk in the snow will do you good, Tonks. Go and get some colour in your pretty cheeks!"

She nodded resignedly, dropped her napkin and hat onto the table, and left the Great Hall with Snape.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon as Snape and Tonks made their way through the cold, still air. The silence between them underwent a metamorphosis; it began as empty and uncomfortable, and gradually became more open and laissez-faire.

The snow was a couple of days old, and it crunched slightly underfoot. Snape enjoyed the child-like satisfaction of trudging his boots through the unsullied snow, and eventually the tranquillity of the midwinter day lent a peaceful disposition to the two walking companions.

"Where are you staying?" Snape asked, when they were within a quarter of a mile of Hogsmeade.

"The Hog's Head," Tonks replied.

Snape frowned. She was residing in the least salubrious lodgings in the entire wizarding village.

"Why did you choose that grimy fleapit?"

Tonks sighed, focusing on the white path upon which they treaded. "It was the only place available when I arrived, and I haven't had time or inclination to move."

"I hope you debugged the bed before sleeping on it."

"Yes," Tonks replied morosely.

"And you'd rather spend Christmas alone in your hovel of a room than in the company of others?" Snape surmised.

Tonks cast him a critical look, as if he had trodden upon her very soul. She abruptly changed the subject.

"What would you have done?" she asked pensively.

"What, at Christmas?"

"No. What would you have done if I'd been pregnant?"

Snape almost broke pace and stopped walking, but he realised the discussion would be easier with his eyes focused on the snowy ground and his legs propelling him forwards, relieving painful gaps in the conversation.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he answered quietly.

There was a long pause, and Snape wondered how the Auror would have reacted to a request to abort the pregnancy.

"What if I'd chosen to keep the baby?" Tonks pondered out loud.

Snape's answer was swift, unrehearsed, and came as a total surprise. "Then, of course, I would have supported you," he said. "Married you, even."

The clenched fist contracting around the hot stone of his stomach was nothing compared to the look of shock on Tonks' face when she stopped walking and turned to face him. Snape wondered why he would contemplate either of these actions and risk his reputation with the Dark Lord. The Slytherin inside him hissed at the paradox.

"Married me?" she asked tremulously.

Snape cleared his throat. "Yes," he said. The word took him by surprise a second time. The thought of a Death Eater marrying an Auror seemed supremely absurd.

"Why?"

The witch asked a very good question, and he took a moment to consider his answer. "Because we'd be having a child. It's the right thing to do."

Tonks' eyes widened, and she shook her head slightly. "The right thing for who?"

Snape stepped back in puzzlement, and a low laugh escaped from Tonks' petite frame.

"You're really quite conservative and old fashioned, aren't you, Severus?" She turned and continued her ascent to Hogsmeade.

"I suppose I am," he muttered at her back, feeling relieved that a marriage proposal would have met with Tonks' refusal.

"So, what did you mean when you spoke of living with consequences?" Snape asked when he caught up with her on the path.

Tonks' expression crumpled sadly. "I meant living with the guilt," she said simply. She stared at the outline of houses and shops ahead. "I'm in love with Remus."

Snape flinched before he could stop himself.

"Don't pretend you don't know it, Severus."

But Snape hadn't recoiled at her declaration of love for another man. Tonks did not know that Severus Snape had loved Lily Evans from the moment he'd laid eyes upon her, and every time he had sex with another woman, he felt as if he was betraying Lily and his love for her.

As a result, Snape would punish himself, hate himself, and vow to live like a monk for months upon end. His abstinence sometimes lasted for years, such was his self-reproach. He cared not that it made him an embittered and vicious man, that his students suffered his cruelty, and that his acquaintances held themselves at a safe distance; they did not know the pain he endured, day after day, year after year, its end as arcane as a lightning bolt from the clear sky above.

But, of course, living like a monk was unsustainable in the long term; eventually his resolve would crack and he would undertake meaningless sexual intercourse, most usually paid for, to release his tension. The moment of liberation was usually short-lived, however, and he would return to his self-imposed flagellation with renewed vigour; the whole cycle would begin again.

He knew guilt.

He lived with it every day.

But what he hadn't known until now was Tonks felt that same guilt. They had more in common than Snape had recognised.

Before he knew it they were standing outside the Hog's Head, and suddenly he realised he didn't want to lose this singular moment of contact with another human being. He didn't want to let her go.

"I shall escort you inside," Snape stated curtly. "I wish to ensure Aberforth is providing satisfactory accommodation. If not, we shall proceed to the Three Broomsticks and secure new lodgings."

Together they ascended the rickety staircase behind the bar. Tonks allowed Snape to step inside the guestroom, and he noted her quarters appeared adequate; it was plain that the Auror had indeed cleaned the place prior to checking in, and whilst the fixtures and fittings were old and worn, they were serviceable and moderately hygienic.

A small double bed was shoved up against one wall, and it showed signs of recent habitation. Apparently, Dumbledore had woken Tonks and persuaded her to get out of bed, in order to attend the Christmas Day feast. This struck a chord with Snape. There had been a great many days when *he* had not wished to face the world; it would require too much energy... too much *effort*.

Naturally, his teaching position had put paid to that; he could no longer afford the luxury of lazing languorously in bed. He now had a reason to get up in the morning, for at least five days a week. A reason to live. If you could call it 'living'.

Tonks followed him into the room and stared at the unmade bed. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Snape felt a twitch between his shoulder blades. "Nothing," he replied. He then shook his head, staring at the threadbare, carpeted floor. "Everything," he mumbled to himself.

She laid a hand on his arm gently.

"I'm alright, Severus," she whispered. "I'm surviving."

Surviving, but not living, he thought. They both were simultaneously alive and dead inside.

"You look so sad," Tonks murmured. "Don't be sad for me; I can't bear it."

But Snape didn't feel sad. He felt touched. Touched by another who knew his sadness. Knew it and experienced it every day and lived with its consequences.

Snape turned to see Tonks' face full of concern. Concern *for him*. It was plain she didn't know how to be concerned for herself; her loneliness excluded everything: self-preservation, hope, and dignity. Yet her love remained, and it enabled her to prevail. As did his.

His hands found their way to her heart-shaped face, and he held her head softly, tenderly, with a depth of understanding previously unknown. His heart, oftentimes so cold and merciless, now throbbed with new-found life.

And he kissed her.

He didn't know why.

Only that he needed to feel connected, if only to himself, just for a time, just for now.

She reached up and stroked his cheek, relaxing into their union, and their tongues entwined as their bodies pressed together, blissfully, enticingly warm. It wasn't long before Tonks was closing the door with the flick of her wand, removing her cloak and boots, and inviting Snape into her bed.

They removed each other's clothing with more care than speed, piling the garments into a heap on the floor. Snape retained his shirt (as was his custom) and then, gloriously, she was naked and lying on top of him, her supple, sensuous skin sliding against his legs, his chest, and his abdomen. Her kisses were soft and wet on his neck, his collarbone, his stomach.

Tonks brushed against his arousal with her cheek, and then licked his length slowly, delicately pausing over the glistening head and breathing warm air onto the tip. Snape couldn't restrain his hips, and he bucked, forcing himself into her mouth. It did not matter; she took him, hard and whole, her lips applying ripples of pleasure, her tongue rubbing against his circumference. He surrendered to sensation, losing track of space and time, lost inside a new reality of connectivity and tenderness.

She seemed to sense his climax building and her ministrations paused, appearing to seek his permission to continue, or wait for her presence to be requested elsewhere. He grasped her head, pulled her towards his mouth, and kissed her. He suckled gently on her tongue, tasting his own salty tang on her lips, and shifted his weight so that she fell back onto the bed, trapped between his body and the cold, bare wall.

His mouth claimed her breasts, and his teeth nibbled at her taut, peachy-pink nipples, making her shudder and squirm. Her skin felt exquisite, her body was nubile, and his lips explored her silky-smooth stomach as he slid further down the bed. When Snape parted her legs she gasped with nervous excitement, and when his tongue rubbed against her core Tonks sighed and her legs relaxed. She was beautifully warm and wet, like his own taste, only sweeter, and she moaned softly at his touch.

It had been a long time since Snape had pleased a woman. Most of his liaisons had been hurried, in an attempt to lessen his guilt. But it seemed that here, with this young Auror, he was free to explore himself again and put into practice long-ago learned skills.

He was aware that Tonks didn't love him, and Snape knew he didn't love her. Somehow, it didn't matter. They could each give the other something they longed for, and break out of their world of unrelenting bleakness the world only the lonely knew.

Tonks was fast approaching orgasm, and she ran her fingers through his long hair, pulling at his head, and then at his shirt collar, trying to drag him away. Her legs wriggled beneath him, attempting to dislodge him from her core. He gave her nub one last stroke of his tongue and rose above her onto his hands and knees, to look down at her pretty, flushed face, and into her pale brown eyes.

"Let's finish this," she suggested breathlessly.

This time, he would not take any chances. "Have you cast a charm?"

"Yes," she replied, with a glimmer of a smile.

Snape pushed her legs wider, raised her knees to meet him, and entered her carefully, tenderly, until he filled her completely. Her warmth enveloped and welcomed him. Tonks closed her eyes and arched her back, and together they moved as one: gentle, instinctive, reunited.

Climax did not take long for either of them to find. Neurons fired in Snape's lower back in a symphony of pleasure, showering the rest of his body in shuddering tingles, until he was left with the delicate sensation of faeries' footsteps upon his spine.

He collapsed in a heap at her side, and Tonks curled into a foetal position, her hand on his arm, and her forehead against his shoulder. She remained there, peaceful and still, for a long, long time.

It was over an hour later when Snape awoke from a post-coital haze, to find her curled in the same place beside him, half awake, seemingly content, yet also vulnerable. He placed his arm underneath her head and coaxed her into his embrace.

"When you said 'let's finish this', did you mean for this to end here?" he asked, breathing softly into her mousey-brown hair.

She nuzzled into the crook of his neck but did not reply.

"Because now would be the time to tell me," he exhorted more firmly.

Tonks remained silent for a long minute, and Snape had to be patient and wait for her reply. He didn't know what he wanted her answer to be; his only wish for now was to know, one way or another.

"Whatever 'this' is," she said eventually, "I don't want it to end just yet."

Secret Eden

Chapter 4 of 10

A decidedly Slytherin favour brings Snape an unexpected reward.

The air inside the Hog's Head was heavy and stale and smelled faintly of farmyard animals. Even though the pub itself was relatively empty, Snape hid beneath his hooded cloak, hoping to remain unnoticed by the small number of patrons taking lunch in the bar area. He nursed a single measure of Firewhisky served in his own glassware.

Aberforth was in the back yard, feeding his goats, and a scruffy young witch in her late teens was tending to customers. Snape watched as the barmaid wiped down the bar with a scrap of cloth so utterly filthy it made his stomach churn. The last vestiges of his appetite surrendered with a gurgle.

The Hog's Head was the last place he wanted to be, but his need to see Tonks again had driven him to this juncture. He craved connection. The arduous nature of his current responsibilities were pushing him further and further towards his limit, and Tonks had given him a way out of his doomed existence with her promise of a secret Eden. In addition, he felt deeply satisfied to have usurped Lupin and bedded the eligible witch. He now needed to ensure that their 'arrangement' could continue undisturbed. If only Tonks would show up, they could leave this godforsaken slum.

Just as Snape's patience had worn down to its last thin layer, Tonks stepped through the back door of the pub and walked across the sawdust-strewn floor towards the bar. He turned his head and she saw him, hesitated slightly, and then smiled.

Within moments she was standing with her hand resting on the back of the chair opposite him, saying tentatively, "Can I buy you lunch?"

Snape's nose wrinkled. "Absolutely not."

He inclined his head towards the grimy-looking barmaid, who was serving a ruddy-faced, rotund witch her third Butterbeer inside half an hour. Snape had silently mused on the calorific content of her preferred tippie and quickly answered the question of her corpulence. The ancient, wooden cash register creaked as payment was taken.

Tonks followed his gaze and smiled crookedly. "The food's alright, you know."

"I have a better idea," Snape said, draining his glass and standing up. "If you will allow me?" he asked courteously, beckoning towards the door.

The Auror assessed him with amusement, plainly not accustomed to witnessing Snape's chivalrous side. "OK," she replied, intrigued.

They walked out into the cold, fresh air and made their way up the side road towards the centre of the village. Christmas lights twinkled inside the thatched cottages, and Enchanted Candles adorned the trees; the whole of Hogsmeade had embraced the festive spirit and were now preparing to celebrate the New Year in a few days' time.

Tonks slipped and slid inelegantly on the ice, and Snape had to lend a hand to prevent her from falling into the gutter.

"Where have you been today?" Snape asked, leading her towards a safer path on the pavement.

"At the Ministry," Tonks answered, staring at the ground, concentrating on her footsteps. "Why?"

"I thought today was your day off work."

"It is. But I've been meaning to check in with the Ministry; I've got some friends there that I've not seen for a while."

Snape noticed she didn't seem to mind his gentle probing. It was a good sign. Weeks ago she'd have slapped him across the face if he'd dared to question her

whereabouts. Something between them had altered on Christmas Day.

They turned left onto High Street, where the pathways had been cleared of snow.

"Where are we going?" Tonks asked.

"Zonko's," Snape replied.

Tonks threw him a look of bemusement. "Zonko's is shut, Severus. And, even if it were open, I can't imagine *you'd* want to go there."

"Oh, really?" Snape said with a smirk. "And why would that be?"

Her smile was lopsided. "It's not exactly your style."

He snorted under his breath. She was, of course, quite correct. His sense of humour was much less obvious than the overstated, childish offerings of a wizarding joke shop. They trudged through the snow until they reached the boarded-up shop, which had a large 'To Let' sign hanging above the obscured window.

"It's a shame it's closed," Tonks lamented. "I loved this place when I was a student."

The hanging board creaked in the breeze.

"I've made some enquiries," said Snape. "Apparently, Messrs Weasley have shown interest in opening another Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes here, but nothing's been agreed as yet."

"Are you *serious*?" Tonks mocked. "Do you really think a new joke shop opening would cheer me up?"

Snape's eyebrows arched, and he rolled his eyes. The Auror made a face of disparaging despair in return.

He marched her around the side of the building and up a wooden stairwell to the first floor. With a swish and flick of his wand, and the utterance of several charms, the door opened, and a warm gust of air bathed their faces from within the house.

"Hurry up, Nymphadora," Snape said as he pushed her into the hallway. "Don't let all the heat out it took forever to warm this place up."

He followed her into the first-floor living quarters and cast *aLumos* Charm upon the gloomy rooms within. Candlelight radiated the flat, revealing its opulence and beauty to the visitors. Tonks gasped as she wandered into the bedroom at the front of the house, taking in its tall windows, luxuriant woollen carpet, and beautiful four-poster bed. Snape watched her run her fingers down the purple woven curtains of the bed and the mahogany wooden frame, before turning her attention to the magnificent dresser in front of the window, and the amethyst ornaments decorating the sill.

"This is beautiful!" she whispered hoarsely. "How is it all still here?"

"It seems the owners went into hiding a few months ago. The joke shop didn't go out of business through lack of sales; they were driven away, simply because one of them was Muggle-born, and his wife a Blood Traitor for marrying him."

"So they just up and left?"

"Yes."

"Such a shame," Tonks said with a sigh.

"It's only a shame if it isn't made use of, which is why I have persuaded Dumbledore to rent these quarters for you."

Tonks turned to face him, aghast. "I beg your pardon?"

"The lease is signed and sealed. You can move out of the Hog's Head this afternoon."

"Just hold on one minute!" Tonks rejoined. "I didn't ask you to do this! I didn't *want* you to do this. I'm fine where I am."

"That is a matter of opinion."

Her hands rested upon her hips again, and Snape groaned inwardly.

"No, Severus, it is *my* opinion that matters, not yours."

His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"You've already said how much you like it here, and you'll have much more privacy in this location." His voice was laced with his best attempt at persuasion, but he was close to losing his temper.

He knew he was enforcing his own standards upon her, but he wanted Tonks to agree of her own accord and not be forced to supplicate. Of course, he would impose his will, should she refuse; he could pull a few strings and she would soon have no recourse to complain.

Tonks' hands slid from her hips and she shrugged, plainly irritated, but there was also a sense of longing as she looked around the luxurious room. Her stomach rumbled and she covered it surreptitiously.

"What about food?" she asked promptly.

She seemed aware that this might be a useful distraction, or a get-out-clause for refusing the deal, but Snape had already covered that angle. He led her into the small kitchenette, where he opened cupboards freshly stocked with common staples such as bread, butter, and baked beans.

"Beans on toast for lunch?" he offered. "Or perhaps you'd like to call on the service of a Hogwarts' house-elf? Impy has been consigned to serve this apartment at your beck and call."

Tonks' lips pursed and she stared at Snape, agog. "You have *got* to be kidding me..."

"Not at all," Snape said, and a smile curled his lips. He snapped his fingers once.

A tiny house-elf, probably the youngest on the staff at the castle, popped into existence in the hallway and trotted into the kitchen, wearing his Hogwarts tea-towels. He bowed and turned his big green eyes towards the Auror.

"How might Impy serve Madam Tonks?" the little elf squeaked nervously.

Tonks dropped to her knees, and her eyes watered slightly. "Good afternoon, Impy, I'm pleased to meet you."

Impy's eyes widened further and he gulped, bowing his head to the floor. "Madam serves Impy a great honour," he said reverently.

Tonks giggled slightly. She looked up at Snape, torn between accepting the generous offer, and returning to her familiar room at the Hog's Head. He knew the choice she was making would not be easy; she wouldn't feel she deserved to be so well looked-after.

Snape tilted his head, hoping she would acquiesce. She smiled sadly and addressed the elf again. "I think two servings of beans on toast and a pot of tea would be lovely, please, Impy."

The house-elf bowed again and set to work without delay.

From behind his newspaper, Snape looked up at the sound of rapping on the Potions office door. With so few people residing at Hogwarts over Christmas, he felt he could open his door to a late-night caller without the need to arise from his seat by the fire. He pointed his wand at the latch and wondered who he would find standing behind it; Snape knew whose company he wished for.

Tonks stepped into the shadowy gloom of the office and walked towards his leather armchair. He put the *Daily Prophet* down on the floor and bid her good evening.

"All moved in?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Impy helped me pack and unpack, and then made me dinner. I came to say thank you."

Snape made to rise from his chair, but Tonks beckoned for him to remain seated.

"Don't get up," she said, a trace of a smile gracing her lips.

She remained standing for a short while, and Snape watched her remove her long leather coat, to reveal a short, purple and green tartan skirt, and a black polo-necked jumper which bore silver holes and studs around the sleeves and neckline. Her boots rose to the tops of her calves, and her knees were covered with black stockings.

Well, he hoped they were stockings; it was difficult to tell in this light. He wondered fleetingly if the 'thank you' would be more than verbal...

She moved forward and sat upon his lap with her knees either side of his thighs, and her core rubbing against his groin. Snape smirked with satisfaction; he would be quite happy to accept this sort of payment in kind.

Her lips grazed his cheek and she bit at his earlobe, timidly at first, but more confidently after he moaned in her ear. She unfastened his shirt collar and kissed his neck and the sensitive flesh in the nook of his collarbone. He capitulated to her touch and felt the movement of her body grinding into his, and then the teasing of her breath as she focused again on his neck and nibbled behind his ear.

"Nymphadora," he sighed.

Her lips moved to cover his mouth, stopping him from speaking, then sucking hungrily on his tongue. His erection strained against his trousers and he pulled her nearer, seeking closer contact.

She unbuttoned his attire and held him in her hands, gently enticing him to full hardness, and she kissed him again coquettishly. With each flirtatious stroke of her fingers, and each provocative movement of her hips, Snape felt his authority eroding to reveal an unfamiliar, shivering glow of subservience.

Another part of him wanted to stop the teasing and reclaim control of the situation, but when she lifted her skirt, pushed her underwear to one side, and lowered herself down upon him, he relaxed into the back of the chair, surrounded and encased by the warmth of the young woman on his lap.

The silk of her knickers rubbed against him as she moved, slowly and deliberately at first. Her breath felt like ripples of Saharan heat on his neck. His hands slid up her stockings yes, they were stockings and relished the soft, warm skin of her thighs. Her buttocks felt shapely and firm in his grasp.

If this was the way his favours would be repaid, Snape would be happy to do more *Much* more. He marvelled at the sensation of her weight bearing down upon him, the pressure exerted by her body as she glided back and forth, and the zeal with which she rode him, up and down, up and down, and then, exquisitely, round and round, deeper and further inside: a dizzying swirl of pressure and heat.

Snape revelled in Tonks' assertiveness and her ability to take the lead. It wasn't usually his style to be passive, but he was enjoying the removal of responsibility and not being in control of each move, each caress, and each thrust. To sit and be rode by a pretty young woman who gave herself willingly really was something to be savoured.

His orgasm built silently and he came suddenly, unexpectedly, and explosively. Its magnitude blasted all thoughts from his mind and flooded his body with undulating pulses of heat. He grasped at her sides, pulling her into his firm embrace, shuddering underneath her.

Tonks stopped moving and nibbled gently on his ear. When his breathing began to resemble something like normality, she slowly moved upwards onto her knees. She stepped away and her skirt fell down, covering her modesty.

She placed a kiss on his forehead, picked up her leather coat, and turned to leave without uttering a word. Snape was left sitting in his armchair, trousers and defences undone. He tossed his head into the back of the chair and sighed.

It seemed he was going to have a decidedly unconventional relationship with his young Auror.

His excitement was palpable and exhilarating.

For Auld Lang Syne

Chapter 5 of 10

New Year's Eve at the Three Broomsticks.

"Severus, I really don't know why you bothered coming here tonight," Filius Flitwick said with a hiccup. He then knocked back his mango-syrup and soda with a flourish.

Snape, too, was at a loss to explain his presence at the New Year's Eve party; the person who had persuaded him to attend had never arrived, and now it was almost midnight.

"Why be here with us, when all you do is scowl?" Filius continued. He took a bite of his cocktail cherry and dropped the small paper umbrella into the empty glass.

As Filius hopped off his stool his small foot nudged the side of Snape's leg. The pint-sized professor wandered over to the bar, where Madam Rosmerta greeted him with a stunning smile. The rest of the gathering paid no attention to the exchange; the Hogwarts group were in varying states of inebriation, and even Minerva McGonagall was chatting away happily to the centaur, Firenze, with a twinkle in her eye.

When Snape received his invitation to Slughorn's New Year shindig a few days earlier, he had thrown it straight onto the fire. But when Tonks' owl subsequently arrived with a note stating she hoped to see him at the Three Broomsticks that evening, Snape suddenly found reason enough to attend. Now, after enduring two-and-a-half hours of frivolous chit-chat and tedium, Snape was beginning to suspect he had been stood up.

Not that he was *dating* Tonks; he was merely having a mutually-beneficial carnal relationship with her, the rules of which they had not yet discussed. However, it now appeared Snape was at *her* beck and call and not the other way round, as he would have preferred. This disparity caused him more annoyance than the drunken ramblings of Hagrid, to his left, who was booming out yet another Hippogriff tale to Pomona Sprout. The Herbology Professor's cheeks were as red as a Gryffindor banner, and her words slurred whenever she managed a word in edgeways.

The whole occasion was boisterous and bothersome, and Snape reprovved himself for his poor decision-making. He would not have attended the party if he hadn't felt his groin pulsating when Tonks' note had arrived. He could barely believe the actions even belonged to him; he was acting like some randy teenager on a promise. Snape stared into his pint of stout and studied the frothy tracks sticking to the side of his glass, which had been left behind after each sip of beer.

He was completely taken by surprise when the barstool beside him scraped noisily across the floor, and the mousey-haired Auror flung herself onto the seat with a large, bright blue cocktail in her grasp.

"Wotcher, Severus," she said, a slight smirk curling her lips.

The table of partygoers greeted Tonks with shouts and cheers and enquired of her Auror partner, Dawlish, whom Snape quickly located at the other side of the pub, talking to Ambrosius Flume from Honeydukes sweet shop.

When the good wishes subsided, Snape's low voice glided underneath the hubbub of the inn. "How good of you to show up," he said dangerously.

Tonks shot him a lofty look and took a sip of her drink, after which the cocktail changed colour to mauvey-purple. It seemed his lover's favoured drink was a Rainbow Revolver. Snape didn't know why he was surprised; it matched her personality nicely, but somehow the drink seemed less appropriate now. Not only had Tonks lost her Metamorphmagus abilities, but she had also lost some bubble and fizz, and he thought she'd do better with something plain, strong and dark. Like his stout. Or, like...

"Don't try to berate me, Severus. Dawlish and I were held up by *your* lot."

Snape felt his eyebrows creep up his forehead. "I beg your pardon?"

"You know who I mean: Death Eaters, servants of the Dark Lord, lackeys to You-Know-Who." She took another sip of her drink, which then turned the colour of rubies.

"I am no lackey," Snape hissed angrily as a fire-breathing Horntail growled ferociously in his chest.

Tonks laughed, full and loud, and some of the party guests turned to discern the cause of her mirth. Underneath the public scrutiny, Snape could not continue chastising Tonks, and he remained seated, barely controlling his pent-up aggression. He was not a lowly man-servant, and he found it intolerable that Tonks might believe such a thing. Worse still, she might believe him to be *her* lackey, someone who would obediently copulate with her, whenever she desired. That was *not* how this relationship was going to work. He would see to that.

When the eyes of the room resumed their original focus, Tonks leaned towards his ear and spoke in hushed undertones. "I know you are no lackey, Severus. You're one of the bravest men I know."

A swell of pride extinguished the Horntail's fiery breath in Snape's chest. His expression did not alter outwardly, but his taut muscles relaxed, he sat a little straighter, and took another sip of beer.

Madam Rosmerta's voice rang out like a bell, magically magnified over the racket of the inn. "If you would all care to make your way outside, it is sixty seconds until midnight. We will see in the New Year with fireworks!"

Most of the patrons of the pub filed outside, taking their drinks with them, and Tonks arose. When Snape did not follow her immediately, she placed her cocktail glass on the table, spilling some of its contents, and then slipped her hand into his. With a tug, he was on his feet, sneering at the young witch as she pulled him through the back door and to the far end of the gathered crowd.

The night air was cold and still, and the pale light of the crescent moon shone onto the back garden of the Three Broomsticks, casting a thin veil of illumination onto the spectators as they listened to the New Year countdown. Snape felt some consternation about being seen publically with Tonks and pulled his hood over his head, shrouding his face in shadow.

Nineteen ninety-seven arrived, and the fireworks began, whistling and banging in a beautiful yet modest celebratory display. Extravagance was no longer the order of the hour, since so many wizarding families now suffered under the ever-present thumb of the Dark Lord, but the magical pyrotechnics flashing and crackling noisily in the night sky succeeded in producing delighted 'ooohs' and 'ahhhs' from the audience.

As a giant fiery dragon flew through the night sky, Snape felt the gentle pressure of Tonks' hand on his backside, and she squeezed his buttock playfully underneath his cloak. Snape jumped with shock, and then tried unsuccessfully to bat her hand away, but this only seemed to encourage her and she clutched his *derriere*, licentiously fondling him. Although he didn't want to be groped in a public place, he couldn't stop his crotch from betraying him, and an increasing swell of blood caused him to rise inexorably upwards.

When the firework dragon came rushing towards the spectators with its mouth wide open, the crowd tried to duck out of the way, and Snape made use of the moment's distraction by grasping Tonks' roaming hand away from his buttock. She responded by stepping directly in front, with her back towards him. Soon she was rubbing up against his half-formed hardness and laughing throatily, as if entertained by the magnificent phoenix now swirling in the erstwhile dragon's airspace.

Her hand found its way to his trousers and started to unbutton his fly, and Snape could fight no longer. The fumbling of her fingers mingled with a heady thrill; the danger of being found out, and his fear of losing control. She secured his length in her hand and gently stroked and coaxed him into a full-size erection. Snape held her arms securely to prevent her escape, enraptured by her delicate touch and youthful exuberance.

For a time, the darkness kept them safe and hidden from the distracted crowd, but when the deafening encore of airborne explosives reached its crescendo, Tonks gently tucked him away and carefully buttoned-up his fly. Throbbing and frustrated, Snape let go of her arms and pushed her away.

A chorus of *Auld Lang Syne* filled the night air and Snape stepped away from the singing throng, dragging Tonks unceremoniously into the shadows of the alley at the side of the pub. The air was smoky from burned-out fireworks, and the rowdy celebrations of the Three Broomsticks revellers concealed the sound of his angry voice.

"Just what do you think you are doing?" he snapped.

As his eyes adapted to the dark alleyway he could make out the outline of her face; she was illuminated in moonlight: black and white with shades of grey, small, petite, a little bit frightened, and very, very wary.

"You can't tell me you didn't enjoy it," Tonks said, faking boldness.

Snape used the weight of his body to push her up against the wall of the pub.

"Do tell me, Nymphadora, which part I was expected to enjoy? You, arriving two hours late? You, yanking me outside to observe deafening explosives? Or you, helping yourself to my body, as the mood took you?"

His nose was less than an inch away from her now, and he was aware that his voice had risen considerably in volume.

"Severus! Stop! People will hear you!"

"*Muffliato*," he whispered, holding onto his wand. "No-one will hear us now."

Her eyes widened at the implication.

"When you fondled me, you didn't seem at all concerned about witnesses," he growled. "Why be so shy now?"

"I..." she stammered.

"Don't cry wolf, just because you're no longer in control of the situation."

Her head thudded softly on the cold stonework of the wall. "What do you want me to say, Severus?" Tonks asked wearily. "Do you want me to apologise? Promise not to do it again?"

"I want you to do as I tell you."

His tone was menacing and conveyed the authority and power he intended to feel. He would show her who was in charge; he would create the agenda of their relationship, and eventually she would beg him to take her.

Snape Summoned an upturned, empty Butterbeer crate and commanded her to stand upon it. Their faces now at the same level, he could feel her hot breath on his lips. He ran his hands down the back of her knees and found the hem of her long, tweed skirt. His fingers snaked up her thighs and located her buttocks, which he pinched with such force that Tonks jumped. Snape relished the moment, then slipped his index finger under the lower seam of her knickers and traced the hemline slowly towards her core, feeling her rough hair beneath and warm wetness between her legs. Snape felt a flicker of satisfaction: the firework activity had aroused her too.

When he slipped his finger between her folds she melted at his touch. With a low moan, her head fell forwards onto his shoulder. A surge of supremacy made his erection strain uncomfortably against his clothing, and his Auror trembled, weakened and feeble, submitting to his every whim. He pushed her underwear aside, and he almost tumbled over the edge when the sensation of her slick heat encased his penetrating fingers.

Tonks' head rose slightly, and she whispered into his ear. "I'll do anything," she said, shivering. "Anything you tell me."

Her words were his undoing, and he quickly freed his erection, tore her knickers down to the floor, lifted her up until her legs wrapped around his waist, and took her with a forceful thrust.

Tonks screamed a moan into the muffled night air, and the noise excited Snape beyond belief. He pressed her body roughly into the wall, and his movements inside her became ragged and feral, as if some hidden beast had been unleashed from within.

Rejoicing in sinful, intoxicating freedom, he plunged deeper and harder, lost in a dark rhapsody of sensation. Becoming vaguely aware of Tonks' climax echoing down the alley, Snape joined her with a sudden rush of moans and violent shudders, until his increasingly flaccid muscles could no longer hold her weight, and her body fell limp in his arms.

He placed her gently down upon the crate, and she fell whimpering into his embrace, holding onto his shoulders for dear life. Snape cradled her head, stroking her hair away from her eyes, and he became aware of his unexpected transition from untamed beast to gentle lover; all he wanted to do now was hold her and take care of her. The change of emotion was disconcerting and humbling.

"Happy New Year," he whispered softly into her hair.

Resolutions

Chapter 6 of 10

A difficult conversation, and a Death Eater meeting.

Snape stared at the fabric canopy of Tonks' four-poster bed, listening to an owl hooting outside. New Year revellers had long since retired, and moonlight shone faintly through the large leaded windows of the bedroom. It was not necessary to draw the curtains around the bed or even to dress the windows; the room remained sufficiently warm, and the glass had been enchanted with a Reflection Charm, to protect inhabitants from Peeping Toms.

Tonks lay by his side, awake, with one arm curled underneath her head.

Snape arose to check that the tawny owl's cry was not an attempt to deliver a message. It was not. The small brown bird was perched on the hanging board outside Zonko's, surveying the high street for signs of passing vermin. Suddenly, with a silent flutter of wings, the bird of prey swooped towards the road and vanished into the night.

"Can't sleep?" Tonks said quietly.

He ran his fingers through his matted black mane, combing out knots with hair-sore tugs, until most of his hair was fastened in the nape of his neck by his hand. Tonks watched him, fascinated. Snape released the locks of hair and slid back into bed, sitting up against the headboard, wearing only his underpants and an unbuttoned shirt.

She turned over and rested her head on her elbow. "It's not the owl keeping you awake, is it?" she said perceptively.

Snape didn't answer. Ever since they'd returned to Tonks' quarters, his somnolence had been stolen by the thought of the approaching conversation. There were things he needed to know, and he was also worried he would be expected to develop feelings for Tonks. Now that she was attempting to open a dialogue with him, he knew he had to find the courage to respond or be forever trapped in turmoil and uncertainty.

Talking about emotions was usually something Snape avoided, and he felt loath to do it now, even though he knew it would be beneficial in the long run. He assured himself that he would not actually be wearing his heart on his sleeve but merely a fragment of it: one of the tiny, damaged pieces of muscle and sinew.

"What's troubling you, Severus?"

He banged his head gently against the mahogany headboard. "Us. This *relationship*."

Tonks didn't move or speak, and she waited for him to continue.

Snape's heart thudded against his chest wall, and he felt uncomfortably warm. He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and gathered courage from his hidden reserves. "I need to know what *this* is," he said, his voice strained. "I need to understand what we are doing."

Tonks laid a hand on his arm. "We're having some fun, Severus, that's all."

"No, you don't understand," he replied harshly, although he felt partially relieved. "I require some rules of conduct, some behavioural parameters. I have never... partaken... of this kind of relationship before."

Tonks snorted and removed her arm. "Neither have I."

Snape looked at her pale face reflected in the half-light. She appeared insulted.

"I was not implying that you had," he returned.

Mollified, Tonks rolled onto her back and stared at the shadowy canopy above.

"I merely wish to understand how our... arrangement... is to work," Snape clarified.

"It's just sex," she said after a while. "Friends... with benefits."

"Friends," Snape repeated. The word hung in the air like a viper waiting to strike. It seemed wrong, implied too much amity, and sounded... terrifying. He did not require friendship. Not with her. Not with anyone. He needed the boundaries to be clear. "Comrades," he offered tacitly.

Tonks laughed under her breath. "I believe Muggles call it 'fuck buddies'."

"Charming."

"Indeed."

Snape allowed the tight, constricted air in his chest to escape with a long breath out. "So, we each undertake to make ourselves available to the other, within reason, at times of our choosing, without fear of emotional attachment?"

"Blimey, Severus, are you sure you haven't done this before?"

"Quite sure. Emotional detachment is vital for my role. I do not need to be embroiled in romantic mire, whilst dancing to the tune of two masters."

"You do have plenty on your plate," Tonks conceded.

A flush of satisfaction spread through Snape, and he smiled to himself.

"What about outside appearances?" Tonks asked after a short pause. "I don't want our liaisons to be discovered."

"Nor do I," Snape agreed. "The enchantments protecting this residence allow me to Apparate inside the building. I expect you shall be able to make use of one of the secret passages from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts, should you so desire."

"You've got it all figured out."

"There's a lot at stake if this affair becomes public knowledge," Snape replied curtly.

He knew he'd rather not have to explain their relationship to the Dark Lord; that would require weaving yet another tapestry of deceit in front of the eyes of the world's most accomplished Legilimens, and Merlin knew the intricate web of lies was complicated enough already.

Tonks sighed, the weight of repercussion lying heavily on her breath. "There's something else we should talk about," she said nervously.

"Contraception?" Snape asked shortly.

"No, not that," she replied, "but rest assured I take care of that once a month at New Moon."

"What, then?"

"Remus," she whispered.

Snape's breath caught on the back of his throat. "What about him?"

"If he comes back..."

"From the werewolf pack?"

"No. What if he comes back to me."

Snape couldn't answer. An iron-clad fist had grabbed hold of his heart, wringing it dry. He might not have any romantic feelings for Tonks, but he couldn't bear the thought of losing another woman to one of the Marauders.

"He must never know about this, Severus," she continued. "No-one must know."

"Agreed," Snape replied hoarsely.

Conversation died and silence lingered like dense fog. Soon, Tonks was fast asleep. Snape, however, took some time to fall into peaceful slumber.

Snape's mouth tasted like the floor of the Hog's Head when he awoke. His thumping headache suggested he had drunk more than he had realised the night before. Tonks lay by his side, her breathing sounds heavy and rhythmic, untidy mousey-brown hair sticking up in tufts, her lips softly parted. Snape watched her sleeping for a while and then turned to face the morning sunshine which streamed through the windows. Daylight shimmered against the amethyst ornamentation, illuminating the room with the cold, thready light of winter.

It was the first day of 1997, and the year had commenced like no other before. To begin with, Snape had spent the night with a woman and not felt the need to flee the scene. This time the cold light of day had not revealed folly or misconception; instead it revealed tentative buds of contentment and an unfamiliar sense of reparation. Somewhere deep within, Snape was at ease with his choice and satisfied with the situation. He had found a companion who understood his needs and asked little of him in return. She would give herself bodily to him, without demanding his time, fidelity, or love. He would give her the only thing he could offer in return.

She stirred briefly and muttered something under her breath. The sound of her own voice seemed to rouse her, and she blinked sleepy eyes as she resurfaced from a dream. Tonks turned over and pressed her naked body into his back, her breath warm and ticklish through the thin material covering his shoulder. Her hand slipped under his arm and snuck inside his shirt, gently kneading the spare, lean muscles of his chest.

"Take this off," she whispered into his ear, pulling at the front of his white cotton shirt.

Snape felt a knot plunge and twist in his stomach. He had no plans to remove his shirt and allow her to see his Dark Mark; he had shown it once before in public, and that was more than enough for a lifetime.

He pushed himself off the bed and fastened his buttons with nimble fingers. "Do you want coffee?" he asked.

Tonks slumped back against her pillow and sighed. "Yes, please. That would be nice."

Snape found his trousers and socks thrown over a chair, pulled them on, and then picked up his wand. He ambled into the kitchenette and opened the cupboards, to find that all supplies of food and drink had been left untouched. With a sudden pop, Impy the house-elf appeared in the kitchen and jumped with surprise at the sight of the male house-guest.

"I didn't summon you, elf! What are you doing here?" Snape hissed.

The elf shrank a little bit and took a step back. "Impy apologises, Professor Snape, Impy was instructed to arrive whenever Madam Tonks was in the kitchen."

"I am not Madam Tonks," Snape said, sneering.

"Impy realises that now, sir. Impy is sorry. Impy will go."

Tonks appeared at the doorway wearing a towelling robe. "No need to go, Impy. We'd like coffee, black, with a pot of sugar."

Impy bowed and vanished promptly, leaving Tonks and Snape glaring at each other.

"I'm not having Impy punishing himself because of you," Tonks said.

Snape slammed the cupboard door shut. "It's lucky I instructed that elf not to speak of my visits to anyone."

Tonks' lips pursed.

"What are you doing, asking him to appear whenever you step into the kitchen? Are you completely devoid of simple skills?" he asked, aggravated.

Tonks shifted on her feet, and she crossed her arms. "I'm not very good with household spells, and, well, I don't have much of an appetite these days. Plus, the first time I tried to brew up, I was bitten on the nose by a joke teacup. It put me off," she said with a hint of embarrassment.

Quickly, Impy reappeared with a tray. He placed coffee, hot milk, sugar and two large mugs on the small tabletop and left without saying a word.

"You've frightened him," Tonks said as she sat down and dropped two sugar cubes into her cup.

Snape exhaled with a low growl.

"Sit down," Tonks instructed him. "Drink your coffee."

Manoeuvred into supplication, Snape pulled up a chair and took a long gulp of his drink. The coffee was excellent. He closed his eyes.

"Now you know why I ask Impy to make me coffee," Tonks said.

From the tone in her voice, Snape could see her smile, even with his eyes closed. They sat quietly until they had finished their coffee.

The silence was eventually broken by the sensation of burning skin on Snape's left forearm, and he stood up with a jolt, clutching his Dark Mark reflexively.

"I must leave immediately," he said.

Without giving Tonks a moment to respond, he paced through the hallway and into the bedroom, where he quickly retrieved the remainder of his clothes.

He passed Tonks on his way out of the apartment.

"When will I see you again, Severus?"

"Tonight," he replied.

Snape shut the door behind him, took out his wand, and donned his Death Eater robes. Affixing his mask, he was pleased that Tonks had not seen him appearing that way.

He pushed the memory of her to the back of his mind and Disapparated away from the cold, windless air of Hogsmeade.

Snape had not wished to spend New Year's Day at Malfoy Manor with the Dark Lord and his cronies, but he was not allowed the luxury of choice in such matters. Whatever the Dark Lord wished for, the Dark Lord received. It was the way of the things, the way of Snape's world, and it was the only life he knew.

Snape tolerated it as best he could, laughed when laughter was necessary, bowed and kissed the Dark Lord's feet when subservience was expected, and walked a fine line between revealing too little and divulging too much of the Order of the Phoenix's activities. All the while he had to endure the narrow-minded fascism of fellow Death Eaters and pretend to share their ideals. It had been this way for as long as he could remember, and it was difficult not to let the twisted morality of the group seep into his

own frame of reference. In the last few years, Dumbledore had helped Snape maintain his own sense of right and wrong, despite the old Headmaster being prone to harsh judgments of his character from time to time.

And so Snape had endured New Year's Day, listened to plans being hatched to kidnap and torture strategically placed wizards and witches without a single flinch, and enjoyed the hospitality of the beautiful (if somewhat preoccupied) Narcissa Malfoy. She was the only bright light in an otherwise agonising and frustrating day.

When he returned to Hogwarts, he chose to Apparate straight to Tonks' apartment in Hogsmeade.

She was in the small living room at the back of the flat, curled up by the fire, wearing flared jeans and a Weird Sisters T-shirt. It was not how he had expected to find her.

"And what do you call this?" he stated, as if his meaning were obvious.

Tonks arose to meet him by the door to the living room. The smile she had worn when he arrived had disappeared, and she frowned at his hard composure.

"When I tell you I intend to call upon you, I expect you to be dressed accordingly," he said, taking out his wand and running its tip over the curve of her breast.

With a flick and a non-verbal spell, Tonks' clothes Vanished to reveal her black satin underwear. She gasped with surprise and indignation.

"That's more like it," Snape said with a smirk. He grabbed her by the shoulders, drawing her into a hungry, impassioned kiss.

Any protestation she might have made was consumed by the fusion of lips, and soon he was dragging her through the hallway and into the bedroom without care or ceremony.

He pushed her backwards onto the bed, so that she lay sideways across it, and he quickly unbuttoned his trousers. With one more flick of his wand, he undid her underwear, and her bra and knickers slid gently away from her body.

Snape pretended to pay no attention to the expression on her face; he had already noted the look of approving excitement on the young Auror's face and knew she was ready for him, even if her attire had suggested otherwise.

He forced himself on top of her and snatched her wrists into his grasp, holding them tightly above her head. When he looked down at her, her hips bucked to meet him. Snape raised his eyebrows in a deliberate gesture. "Now, now, we are impatient, aren't we?" he murmured.

Tonks closed her eyes, trying desperately to behave. He knew that look from long ago, and it pleased him that she was attempting obedience for him under these changed circumstances. He found it quite... endearing.

"That's better," he whispered into her ear when she had ceased wriggling. She now lay open and waiting for him, her hands no longer fighting against the weight of his grasp.

Snape balanced himself carefully, taking both of her wrists in one hand and brushing his tip against her core. She was wet, warm and willing. He pushed inside her in one slow thrust, until he was enclosed in her hot, welcoming flesh. Snape couldn't stop himself from groaning at the sensation he felt he'd arrived *home* somehow. It wasn't that Tonks was his home; it was more that he felt he'd arrived at a longed-for place. Somewhere he *belonged*. It was a curious feeling, and he took a moment to enjoy and appreciate it.

Beneath him, Tonks' hips bucked eagerly. She snapped him from his trance and broke the moment of serenity.

"What did I just tell you about your impertinence, Nymphadora?" he said, moving again to grasp one of her hands in each of his and leaning his weight onto them, so that she was effectively pinned to the bed. "Learn some deference," he chided, withdrawing slowly from her.

She yelped her compliance, and he plunged into her with such force that she gasped.

"That's more like it," he said, satisfied.

Snape drove into her with an increasing sense of mastery. He exorcised the frustrations of the day with each thrust of his hips, and from each gasp of the young woman beneath him he reclaimed power and a renewed perception of balance. He became so overwhelmed by the heady rush of dominating his Auror that he lost the power of speech.

He heard her screaming his name Severus and he tumbled into euphoria, knowing Tonks did not cry for Lupin, but for him alone. It was enough to send a stunning climax crashing through his body, originating in his groin and spreading outwards in all directions, to the very tips of his toes. He rejoiced when he felt the subtle ripple of Tonks' muscles which confirmed her own orgasm, and he fell down upon her, wilted and spent.

They were both panting and their bodies were hot and sweaty, despite the small amount of time which had elapsed. Snape eventually rolled away onto the bed and Summoned a robe for Tonks to wear, so that he would not feel self-conscious about her nakedness, whilst he remained fully-dressed.

She took the garment gratefully, sitting up and shrugging the robe over her shoulders. Tonks then lay down beside him for a moment and leaned her head on her upturned hand.

Her breath was warm on his earlobe.

"Stay a while longer, Severus, I don't want to be alone just yet."

"An encore may take some time," Snape replied drolly.

Tonks sniggered. "It will be worth the wait," she coaxed.

Snape continued to lie with his Auror by his side for a while longer, and he contemplated that New Year's Day hadn't turned out so bad, after all.

Making Plans

Chapter 7 of 10

The Order of the Phoenix announces a meeting, and Snape and Tonks make plans of their own.

The sound of persistent miaowing stirred Severus from his slumber, and he felt a feathery tickle against his cheek. When he opened his eyes he found a transparent, silvery cat licking his face, whilst a second feline figure sat at the end of Tonks' bed, whining like a small child. He batted the Patronus away from his face and nudged the sleeping woman beside him until she awoke with a sleepy utterance.

"What's going on?" she muttered as she opened her eyes.

The two cats waited impatiently for the recipients of their messages to rouse themselves to full consciousness, prowling over the heavy blanket at the bottom of the bed.

"It appears to be a message from Minerva," Snape said, stifling a yawn. He glanced at his timepiece; it was ten o'clock in the morning.

When Snape and Tonks were sufficiently alert and focused, the Patronus pair opened their jaws to deliver their message in echoing, Scottish-accented unison.

"Your presence is requested for an Order meeting in the Headmaster's office on Saturday, at six o'clock in the evening, when Professor Dumbledore is due to return to the school. Please be prompt."

The cats mewed once and evaporated into the air.

Tonks rubbed sleep from her eyes. "The start-of-term chat, no doubt," she said as she turned onto her side and placed her hand across Snape's chest.

He was wearing a pair of fine silk pyjamas which Tonks had found in the wardrobe. Apparently, she was not particularly taken with his wish to wear his cotton shirt in bed, and she had decided that, if he insisted on wearing something, then the clothing should be tactile. Snape had agreed to her request with some reluctance but found the garments extremely comfortable to wear; he quite liked the sensation of silk against his skin.

Snape had enjoyed spending two nights with a woman, and he lamented that their arrangement would have to alter when the students returned to Hogwarts.

It seemed Tonks was pondering the same problem.

"I'll be back on full-time guard duty, come Sunday," she said sadly. "There'll be no more lying in and spending whole evenings shagging when the kids come back."

Snape pressed his lips into her mousey-brown hair. "No, there won't," he replied.

Tonks sighed. "It's a shame. I've enjoyed this."

Snape did not return the sentiment verbally. He had not allowed himself the luxury of getting attached to their circumstance; he knew nothing stayed the same, and so many other things lay outside of his control. He felt certain that Draco Malfoy would have hatched another plan to eliminate Dumbledore, and when his young charge returned to the school, Snape would once again have to walk a fine line between helping the boy and protecting the Headmaster. Snape had been living moment-to-moment for the last two days, and the thought of the coming term made him feel queasy.

"You know what I'd like to do before the kids return?" Tonks said. The cheeky grin on her face begged him to guess the answer.

"It is too early in the morning for Legilimency," Snape replied sardonically.

Tonks nudged him with her knuckles then hoisted herself up to a sitting position, replacing a long black strap of her negligee which had slipped down over her shoulder. Soon she was straddling him and unbuttoning his pyjama shirt.

"I always fancied having sex in a classroom," she said, running her hands up and down his bare chest.

"Oh, really?" Snape enquired. "And which teacher were you lusting after?"

Tonks laughed. "I never really had a crush on a teacher when I was at school," she said. "Although the current Defence Against the Dark Arts professor is quite interesting."

Snape couldn't stop a little snort from escaping. Tonks' fingers toyed absent-mindedly with his nipples and played with the light dusting of hair on his chest.

"Anyway, what about you, Severus?" Tonks asked mischievously. "Ever had the hots for a student?"

He watched her for a long moment, taking in her hazel eyes and the curves of her black-clad figure.

"No," he replied in a measured tone.

Tonks appeared disappointed and studied him closely. "Ever had sex with a student?"

It amused Snape that she asked the two questions in reverse order. He took a moment to consider his reply and decided that the truth would be much more intriguing than an outright denial.

"Not that I was aware of," he said.

Tonks cocked her head and laughed again. "Ever had sex in a classroom?"

"What is this, a Ministry of Magic inquisition?"

She gasped with fake indignation. "Think yourself lucky I don't have use of Alastor Moody's eye-piece."

"And there was I, fantasising about being interrogated by an Auror..." Snape let the sentence hang in the air, waiting for her to assess it as truth or deceit.

Tonks did neither. "You *have* had sex in a classroom, haven't you, Severus?"

Snape sighed. His ploy hadn't worked. He did not wish to reveal a piece of information which would demystify him; he wanted to retain his air of ambiguity, so much the better to ensnare and enthrall. But being straddled by a pretty young witch was tantamount to inhaling Veritaserum fumes.

"No, I haven't," he replied touchily.

A moment later, he ran his hands up her arms and slipped the straps from her shoulders. The silk of her nightdress fell to her waist, revealing her beautiful breasts and tightening nipples. He took them into his hands and ran his fingers over them with a delicate touch. Her skin was so smooth and round, he felt his crotch respond in kind.

"But there's always a first time," he continued, his voice becoming slightly husky.

Tonks' eyes widened and she lowered herself onto her hands, offering her breasts to him as a reward. He claimed one nipple with his mouth, tracing the outline with his tongue, before taking it in his mouth and suckling gently. He heard her moaning above him, and it spurred him on. Snape moved to take her other nipple and repeated his attention, but this time he snaked one of his hands up her thigh and underneath her negligee, searching for her moistening mound between her legs. He could feel his own

blood pumping furiously into his groin as he stroked her slowly, deliberately, making her quiver.

This was how mornings should be, he decided. He had a young woman succumbing to his touch and a promise of ecstasies to come.

She moved her chest away from his mouth and dipped her head to whisper into his ear. "When can we do it?"

"After the Order meeting on Saturday," he answered, slipping one long finger into her entrance. "Meet me in the Dark Arts classroom at nine o'clock."

"Yes, professor," she moaned.

Vaguely aware that it was wrong for the sound of her reply to be so arousing, Snape grabbed her hips and pushed her towards his erection. She slipped his silky pyjama bottoms away from his hips and took hold of his swollen member. She gave it two firm strokes with her clasped hand and then placed it inside her, pushing down on him in one long, glorious movement.

Snape found himself enfolded in her wet, enticing heat, and she moved slowly at first, seeming to luxuriate in the feel of his hardness inside her. He watched her intently. Her eyes were tightly closed and she was riding him instinctively, using him to find her own pleasure. All he had to do was lie back and relax. It was a magnificent feeling and a satisfying sight.

Soon her movements became more ragged, and she leaned forward onto her hands and rested her weight upon them. Her breasts swayed, hypnotising him momentarily. Tonks looked down at his face, studying his features as if he were a fascinating work of art.

Her stare caused him reach up and pull her towards him, and he captured her in a firm, ardent kiss. Her hips stopped moving whilst her tongue pressed into his mouth, exploring the texture of his own eager tongue. Every so often she moaned gently and slid slowly up and down, sending wavelets of pleasure along his length.

When their lips parted, he released his hold on her head. She opened her eyes, and he saw that her pupils had dilated so wide that her irises appeared black in colour. The sight was completely unnerving.

"Are you alright?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, yes," she replied, smiling and moving her hips around raunchily.

"Your eyes...."

Tonks frowned a little. "What about them?"

Snape reached for his wand on the bedside table and Summoned a small hand-held mirror, which he offered up to her. She took it and examined herself, all the while circling his erection with her hips. Suddenly she laughed, and the contraction of her muscles sent another wondrous ripple through his groin.

Tonks placed the mirror on the bedside, and her black-as-night irises locked onto his, akin to two endless tunnels, fathomless and unsettling.

"I have mimicked your eyes, Severus," she said, laughing again. "I have Metamorphosed into you!"

His hands slowed her hips to a standstill. "But I thought you'd lost your ability?"

"No," she replied, a small smile curling her lips. "I've just not been able to command it."

Snape didn't know what to say. Looking into his own eyes was a most uncomfortable experience, and he now realised the extent of the power held in his ebony stare.

"Just don't go changing your nose and hair as well," he said with a glimmer of irony. "I don't want to shagmyself."

Tonks giggled, and her eyes returned to hazel. "I always liked your nose; it was one of the first noses I learned to imitate."

Snape noticed he felt flattered, and he didn't know how to reply. Life, it seemed, was full of surprises. He marvelled as Tonks returned her attention to her hips, which began to move again with agonisingly slow movements. The sensation stole the breath from his lungs and removed any further need for conversation.

Tonks threw her head back, sitting up straight again and resuming her focus with renewed vigour, deliberately clenching her muscles around his erection to stimulate him. Snape responded by bucking his hips to meet her, and fingering her nub, taking her closer and closer to climax.

The young Auror let out a small squeal as her orgasm erupted, and Snape drove harder and harder into her warmth, pushing himself to come with her in a moment of union. He achieved his aim with a satisfied grunt, and his dampened fingers clutched at her thighs, digging into her firm flesh as his groin pulsated with pleasure and his back arched involuntarily.

After the tingle had faded, Tonks flopped into a heap beside him and covered their bodies with bed-sheets, wrapping one docile arm around his torso.

"I'm going to miss this when it's gone," she said quietly.

Snape agreed, but did not say so out loud.

He was already beginning to plan for Saturday night in the Defence against the Dark Arts classroom.

Waiting in Darkness

Chapter 8 of 10

The Order of the Phoenix convene.

The best-laid plans often go awry, and the first signs of this came when the venue for the Order of the Phoenix meeting changed to Grimmauld Place.

Snape decided that the evening's activities could still be conducted if the meeting did not overrun, so long as he and Tonks could make their way to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom undetected.

He arrived at the scruffy Georgian terrace at six o'clock in the evening, determined to be the last person to arrive, as was his custom. Snape believed punctuality to be a virtue; however, early arrival was also to be avoided, so as not to offend or to impose unwanted company upon others. Arriving after everyone else also conveyed a sense of his importance to the Order.

It was also true that Snape did not want people to notice he had time on his hands, and this was something he rarely admitted to himself. When he was not occupied with his duties, Snape spent his time reading, researching, honing his intellect and talent, and keeping abreast of current affairs. The less time he had to dwell on the past, the better. Conducting an illicit affair with an Auror had been the most recent distraction from his times of yore, and it had been an agreeable diversion.

The yellow glow of street lamps lit the grotty terraced houses, and the light reflected on shiny black bin bags dotting the pavements, in open invitation to vermin and other forms of city wildlife. The sound of loud Muggle music pumped out of a nearby window, lending the street an unwelcoming and inauspicious air. It was truly ironic that the noble House of Black resided in such impecunious surroundings.

The peeling paint of the battered door to Headquarters revealed itself the moment Snape thought of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The serpent-shaped silver doorknocker gleamed as he tapped the door with his wand, and after a few clunking sounds of grinding metal, the black door swung open to reveal the gloomy, dusty hallway within.

It had been months since Snape had visited the late Sirius Black's family home, and the musty smell of ageing décor and decaying parchment accosted his nostrils.

The kitchen was already buzzing with the sounds of the assembled Order. Alastor Moody was standing in a corner near the window, smoking a pipe, and Dumbledore was seated at the head of the long, narrow table, conversing animatedly with Dedalus Diggle, whose violet-coloured top hat kept slipping down his forehead.

Snape surveyed the remaining members: Minerva McGonagall conversing primly with Mundungus Fletcher, Hagrid sitting in front of the large fire, effectively stealing its heat, Arthur Weasley without his wife, and finally, tucked away in an alcove, Snape recognised the long leather coat of a mousey-haired Auror blocking his view of another Order member, Remus Lupin.

Snape felt a cavern of emptiness swell inside his stomach, and moments later his fists rolled into balls. The werewolf had returned.

By now most of the people in the room had turned to greet Snape, and he forced himself to maintain his composure, smoothing his face into his usual sphinx-like mask. He nodded brusquely to those welcoming him, but he could not prevent his eyes from boring into the back of Nymphadora Tonks' head, willing her to turn around and acknowledge his presence.

Lupin found Snape's gaze first and nodded his greeting, prompting Tonks to turn around. At first her face was sad and serious, but when she saw Snape she flinched gauche and quickly looked away.

Snape felt a red-hot lump forming in his throat. It seemed as though he had intruded upon something private, and yet they were all here, in the company of others, as if everything were normal. Snape shut down his feelings, swallowing the fist of fury burning his windpipe.

"Severus! Excellent!" Dumbledore called, waving for silence. "We are all assembled. Shall we begin?"

The gathering moved to assume seats, and Snape pulled up a chair closest to the door. He watched as Minerva and Alastor moved to take seats next to him. Tonks tried to avoid Snape's gaze as she sat down, insisting that Lupin sit beside her, and then she focused her eyes on the Headmaster.

After the usual opening remarks, Dumbledore called upon Snape to deliver his intelligence on the plans and movements of the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. Snape imparted the information he had gleaned from the meeting on New Year's Day, providing a list of witches and wizards who had been selected for special attention. It was agreed that some of the more vulnerable families on the list should be protected or given a tip-off to go into hiding, whilst the members of wizarding society considered more capable of defending themselves could simply be warned of the dangers. Snape felt satisfied that his contribution had been of value, and he sat back in his chair to listen to the tales from the rest of the Order.

Dumbledore explained that his absences from Hogwarts would be continuing throughout the next school term, but he remained cagey regarding his intended whereabouts. Snape wished the Headmaster trusted him enough to confide in him; however, at least the old wizard was uniformly secretive with the entire Order.

The Ministry had agreed to continue with their commitment to provide Hogwarts with a complement of Aurors, and Tonks, Dawlish, Proudfoot and Savage were resuming their posts at Hogsmeade. It appeared that the Minister for Magic had leaned heavily on John Dawlish to tail the Headmaster over Christmas, and Dumbledore had once again been forced to jinx the unfortunate Auror to maintain his privacy.

Dumbledore reported that the Ministry had allowed a one-off Floo connection to Hogwarts Castle, to enable the students to return quickly and safely for the start of term.

Lupin relayed his report on his time spent with the werewolf pack, which had come to a natural and unsuccessful end. Fenrir Greyback's supremacy continued unabated, but this did not mean that the Order's tame werewolf was ready to give up on his mission; Lupin intended to attempt another infiltration by moving further north and finding a way into a disparate pack, rumoured to roam in the Scottish Highlands. It would be a dangerous mission, since isolated communities of werewolves were known to be more feral than their socialised counterparts, but Lupin was insistent upon his choice, despite the concerned murmurings of the Order.

Tonks' horrified expression caused Snape's stomach to twist and churn; he wished she would show as much disquiet whenever he was summoned to serve at the Dark Lord's side. His undercover work was just as perilous as Lupin's, if not more so. It riled him to think that the werewolf was worthy of more attention than he.

Snape tried not to stare at the young Auror, but he accidentally caught Lupin's eye more times than usual etiquette would allow. Lupin, who looked thinner and shabbier than ever, did not seem perturbed by Snape's glare and acknowledged him with his customary half-smile which conveyed patience and tolerance.

Snape had abhorred Lupin's calm composure during the werewolf's time as Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and he had tried many ways to incite the Marauder to anger or ignominy, but had never been successful; Lupin's even temper and gentle disposition had always prevailed. It soon became a game to Snape, but when his methods of provocation had failed to force Lupin out of the school, Snape resorted to the tactic of revealing the professor's werewolf status directly to a Slytherin student. If the insufferable Miss Granger hadn't kept her suspicions to herself, Snape would not have had to win the game by cheating.

Not that he had anything against cheating, per se. He was a Slytherin, after all.

As the meeting drew to its conclusion, Snape was beginning to notice a burrowing resentment residing in his gut. He begrudged the attention that Lupin was receiving from Tonks, despite the fact that the object of her affection appeared uncomfortable in her company. Tonks had glued herself to Lupin's side for the duration of the meeting, and now that the Order had vacated their seats, she showed no signs of leaving him alone. Snape tried once or twice to gain her notice, but she refused to grant him audience.

Torn between leaving without his prize and staying to lay claim to it, Snape eventually left the room, leaving a reluctant-looking Lupin and his Auror companion alone. He said his goodbyes to the others in the hallway and lingered behind, listening in through the closed door to the kitchen.

"Don't do it, Remus," Tonks was pleading. "It's too dangerous."

"I have to, Dora," Lupin replied. "I'm the Order's only hope with the werewolves. I have to try."

"But you've tried already. It's hopeless. We both know it."

"I refuse to argue with you," Lupin stated mildly. "We all put our lives on the line every day in the fight against You-Know-Who. You would do the same, if you were me."

Tonks did not reply. Snape strained at the doorway, desperate to hear what was unfolding.

Eventually, Tonks voice was a discernible, weakened murmur. "I love you, Remus. I don't want to lose you. Please stay."

"We've been through this before," came Lupin's harsh reply. "We cannot be together. I'm not the right man for you; associating with me will only cause you harm, and I cannot give you what you deserve. That is why I ended our relationship."

"Just because you can say those things... it doesn't make them true, Remus. I miss you. I miss waking up to you in the morning, feeling you lying next to me, listening to your heartbeat. I'm incomplete, as if you took part of me with you. I'm still yours. I'll always be yours."

"I've told you already, Dora, our relationship is over. You have to move on."

Snape heard a sob and the pacing of footsteps towards the door. He ducked swiftly into the darkened front room and heard Tonks knocking over the troll's-foot umbrella stand as she ran down the hallway. The front door banged shut behind her as she left number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

The Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom awaited the arrival of Tonks like a carnivorous plant baiting its prey.

The room was deathly quiet, the illumination subdued to the level of dusk, and the furniture arranged in meticulous order. The atmosphere reflected Snape's persona in much the same way as the dungeons: dark and pensive, predatory and calculating, ascetic and disciplined.

His only preparation for Tonks' arrival had been the covering of the paintings on the classroom walls. Snape did not wish to have spectators during his encounter with the Auror.

And so he waited.

He waited long past nine o'clock.

Long past a time which he deemed fashionably late.

And long past a time which he could consider excusable.

And then longer still, into the dwindling hours of the evening.

Tonks did not deign to knock on his classroom door, or make any kind of contact with him, by owl or by Patronus.

Eventually, Snape had to accept the truth. She was not coming.

The following day, the sound of timid door-knocking broke Snape's already-fragmented concentration, and he impatiently shouted "Enter" towards the Potions office door.

He did not lift his eyes from the parchment on his desk containing his seventh-year lesson plan, but heard the creak of the latch and the click of high-heeled boots crossing the stone floor. Snape did not deign to look at his visitor; he wished to maintain an air of superior indifference towards the woman he expected to see.

"Severus," she said, a note of awkwardness present in her voice.

Snape dropped his quill into his inkpot and clasped his hands, raising his eyes slowly from his desk.

"*Nymphadora*," he replied, relishing her squirm of humiliation from the way he had enunciated her name.

The young witch stood quite still, illuminated by the amber glow of the afternoon sunshine streaming through the high windows of the dungeon. She appeared pale, with dark circles beneath her puffy, reddened eyes.

A knot of sympathy threatened to unfurl in his stomach, but Snape closed the feeling down and compressed it into a ball of steel. He would not be sorry for what had happened to her last night, not when she was the one who had stood him up.

He waited for Tonks to speak, assessing the witch's shrunken frame. Her eyes darted around the room. She was discomfited and weak, and he had her exactly where he wanted her.

"I..." she began hesitantly.

"Yes?"

Snape's reply was curt, and she flinched. Tonks appeared to take in a deep breath, straightened her spine, and looked him in the eye.

"I wanted to apologise for not coming last night."

Snape was ready to dissect her words one at a time, intending to make her pay for her discourteous behaviour. "*You wanted to apologise? Have you now changed your mind?*"

"No, I..." Tonks frowned, sensing his ploy. "I'm sorry I forgot to come."

"You... forgot?" The word stung Snape like an arrow to the gut.

Tonks nodded fretfully, then her rigid composure loosened, and she pulled up a chair.

"I did not invite you to sit," Snape observed.

The witch shot him a look of intolerance and promptly sat down.

"Really," Snape continued, "I should have thought you'd be on duty in Hogsmeade, now that the students have begun to arrive. When did you become so lackadaisical in your obligations, *Nymphadora*?"

"It's my hour off," she snapped in return.

Snape scoffed. "So you thought you'd visit the dungeons during your lunch-break for a bit of nookie? Perhaps you really do live up to your name, *Nymphadora*. How... *charming*."

"Shut up, Severus. You know I'm not here for sex."

The fizzing and whistling sound of the Floo Network made Tonks jump in her seat. Moments later the office fireplace roared into life, and its green flames delivered two sixth-year girls wearing cloaks and Slytherin scarves.

"Miss Bulstrode, Miss Greengrass, Happy New Year," Snape said, his tone more agreeable than usual. He couldn't help it. Their timing had been near-perfect.

The girls smiled at their Head of House, glanced suspiciously at Tonks, and returned his New Year greeting. The pair then left the office for the Slytherin common room.

Tonks appeared thoroughly disconcerted. Snape was starting to have fun.

"Then," he said, turning to face Tonks again, "why *are* you here?"

"I told you already," Tonks said, sighing. "To say sorry."

"Yes, yes, fake remorse duly noted. You may go now."

"My remorse is not faked."

"After your little display with the werewolf last night, you expect me to believe that?"

Tonks assessed him shrewdly, and Snape's collar suddenly felt rather tight. He didn't enjoy hearing her light laughter. Presently, her eyes became harder and her laugh turned into a smirk.

"You're jealous," she stated.

"I most certainly am not."

"Yeah, right." Tonks crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow.

Her dismissal gnawed at him.

"What evidence do you have of this so-called jealousy?" he asked tetchily.

"You're clearly annoyed that I didn't show up last night," Tonks replied.

"That is because of your ill-mannered behaviour; you failed to send word of your intention to cancel."

Tonks watched closely for a crack to appear in his demeanour, and Snape resolved to show no such weakness. He was not jealous. Her accusation was absurd.

"So, you're not jealous of me and Remus?"

The Marauder's name on her lips caused Snape's teeth to clench.

He fixed his ebony stare upon the Auror and affected a timbre of ambivalence when he spoke. "You and I are not attached, so why would I be jealous?" He shrugged.

"Besides, from what I saw, there is no such thing as 'you and Remus', although there plainly *has* been at some point in the past."

Tonks fidgeted in her seat and picked at her fingernails.

The Floo hissed again, and this time two boys appeared, stepping over the fender and dusting black ash from their robes.

"Mister Baddock, Mister Pritchard, welcome back to Hogwarts." Snape noticed the greeting sounded a little strained in his ears.

He reprimanded himself silently, and then turned to cross four students from the register. The two Slytherins departed for their House, and Snape fixed his gaze upon the Auror again.

"For how long did you have sexual relations with Lupin?"

Tonks continued to stare at the floor. "Six months."

"And when did it end?"

"When I got out of Saint Mungo's last summer. Ever since the battle in the Department of Mysteries, he'd pretended we were still together... to help me recover from my injuries. When I was better, he ended it."

"How noble of him."

Tonks peered at Snape, clearly in pain. "Don't deride him, Severus. He's a good man."

"Then, perhaps I should deride *you* for your blatant delusions."

"I'm not deluded. We can't choose the people we fall in love with."

"You are deluded enough to believe he is a good man."

"You don't know him like I do."

"He is not the angel you paint him to be. You are fooling yourself."

Tonks' irritation spiked. "Perhaps you *are* jealous, Severus."

Snape's nostrils flared, and he noticed stab of heartburn rising in his throat. He recovered quickly. "And *still* you persist with your delusions."

"I don't know," Tonks pondered. "You seem to want to know all about me and Remus. Why is that?"

"Merely that he was the one preventing your attendance in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom last night. I wish to ensure our arrangement remains mutually beneficial."

"You still sound jealous to me. Possessive, even."

This time the arrival of another student perturbed Snape more than Tonks.

"Miss Parkinson, good day to you," Snape said, attempting a cordial greeting.

The pug-faced girl smiled at her Head of House, lending her face a rather grotesque appearance. She then shot Tonks a supercilious look before heading for the door.

Snape was beginning to feel that Tonks' company had become rather irksome, and he wondered if the acid swirling in his stomach was due to the potency of the house-elves' onion soup at lunchtime. With several names left on the register and his lesson plan still incomplete, Snape wished to relieve himself of the Auror and her not-so-gentle probing.

"I am neither jealous nor possessive," he stated firmly.

"Prove it."

"I intend to."

When Tonks raised a half-smile, Snape dismissed her from his office and settled down to his afternoon's work.

One week later, when a naked and breathless Tonks screamed out his name, the tightness in his chest finally subsided.

Silently Screaming

Chapter 9 of 10

School term recommences.

The start of the new school term provided the perfect opportunity for Snape to implement a self-protection strategy. He had not enjoyed the feelings the Auror had roused in him, and he decided the time had come to strengthen his armour and take control of their relationship again.

Overnight stays were one of the first things to change, they conveyed the wrong meaning and encouraged a closeness for which Snape had no need. Conveniently, such trysts would have been hindered by the presence of students in the castle and the prying eyes of a full complement of teachers, so no explanation to Tonks had been necessary.

However, in the early hours of one mid-January morning, Tonks was nestled in the crook of his shoulder, breathing warm breath onto his neck and playing idly with his sparse chest-hair. He had not got around to leaving and was staring through the window at the soft, plump snowflakes falling from the night sky. The room was lit by candles, and a heavy purple blanket twisted haphazardly around their bodies, showing the evidence of their recent union.

"Tell me something about yourself which no-one else knows," she whispered into his ear.

Snape felt as though his blood had stopped pumping and his heart-muscle had paralysed. He knew he must deflect this kind of question in a swift yet appropriate manner, and he considered several responses.

He settled on, "It's too late at night for playing games."

"It's not a game," Tonks replied indignantly.

"Why the sudden interest?"

"Well, you're so guarded," Tonks said, "and so elusive, and here we are being physically intimate, and I don't know anything about you."

"I was unaware that other types of intimacy would entail from our agreement."

"They wouldn't... not necessarily," Tonks said sullenly.

"So I repeat: why the sudden interest?"

"Because I want to get to know you and find out who you really are."

"You might not care for the answer."

"I'd still like to know."

"You are not taking the hint."

"Come on, Severus! Tell me why you became a Death Eater."

Snape flung the blanket to one side and got out of bed, pulling on his socks and trousers after locating them on the floor.

"Oh, please," Tonks moaned, "just talk to me."

"I am not prepared to discuss any of my reasons with you."

"Alright. Maybe, then, you could tell me why you left to serve Dumbledore?"

Snape did not reply, and he buttoned up his trousers.

"Everyone wonders, Severus."

"Then let them wonder. I have no intention of divulging anything."

A few seconds of silence passed, and then Tonks sat up in bed and spoke quietly. "Let me see it."

Snape halted as he fastened his belt. The Auror was staring at his shirt-clad left forearm with a sense of wistful longing. He suddenly realised what this was all about, and he did not like it at all.

"I am not some broken toy for you to fix, Nymphadora," he snapped. "That's what this is about, isn't it? You think you can heal my scars. I hate to disappoint your misguided altruism, but I do not require mending. I'm not some baby bird you can nurse back to health. Go and find someone else to take care of; I'm not interested."

His words were intended to wound, and wound her they did. She blanched away from him and gathered up the bed linen around her like a makeshift fortress.

Impulsively, Snape walked to her side of the four-poster bed and yanked up the left sleeve of his shirt. The black skull and serpent branded into the tender, pale skin of his inner arm flickered menacingly in the candlelight.

The ugly, disfiguring Dark Mark was the reason why he wore his sleeves so long, why his frock-coats were carefully tailored, and why he never removed his shirt in the presence of a woman. This symbol of servitude was abhorrent to all outside the Dark Lord's circle and widely despised for being synonymous with totalitarianism, eugenics and genocide.

At the tender age of seventeen, Snape had convinced himself that the worthy pursuit of power was reason enough to join the Dark Lord's regime, and he'd expected that, in time, the woman he loved would be won over. Whilst Snape could discard certain elements of his master's ideology, it eventually became apparent that Lily could not. Had he known that becoming a Death Eater meant she would turn her back on him forever, and he would be left with a lifetime of guilt and grief, and enslavement to two wizards more powerful than he, then Snape would never have taken the Mark. But, like many teenagers, he thought he knew all there was to know. He had, of course, been wrong, and he had spent the rest of his life paying the price.

Regardless, Snape had no wish to share his philosophical thoughts with Tonks, and he watched her closely for signs of distaste at the sight of the Dark Lord's Mark.

She appeared enthralled by the black imprint on his skin, and suddenly Snape realised her fascination with him mirrored her attraction to the werewolf; Lupin was damaged too. Tonks loved Lupin despite his lycanthropy, so perhaps she was captivated by men she yearned to fix, men whom she perceived to be broken.

But Snape knew there was no cure for a man branded with the Dark Mark. There was only the long, winding road to redemption the path which Dumbledore had signposted on the night Lily died.

Tonks could not mend him; and Snape did not require saving. Salvation lay in his hands alone.

The Auror tentatively reached out to touch the blackened skin, and he snatched his hand away.

"You cannot save me," he stated.

"Save you from what?"

It was yet another question; a different approach in her quest to catch a glimpse of his soul, and he could not, would not, entertain her. Snape had learned long ago that knowledge was power, and he was not about to give his power away and expose himself to vulnerability.

He rolled down the sleeve of his shirt and buttoned up the cuffs. Tonks appeared dismayed, and she watched him shrug on his frock-coat and cloak.

Snape fastened his boots and left her alone in her bed without another word.

January's snow melted into a cold, damp and dreary February. The return of the sunlight and the promise of spring did little to cheer the wizarding community; more and more people were disappearing and paranoia was spreading. The Order knew of some families who had gone into hiding, but those were not the only ones to vanish, and Hogwarts was under increasing pressure to provide a safe haven for its students.

Snape's attempts to assist Draco Malfoy in his mission had been woefully unsuccessful. The sixth-year Slytherin could not be persuaded to reveal his plans, and the clock continued to tick away the remaining months of Dumbledore's life.

The Headmaster was spending numerous evenings with Harry Potter, and Snape was more annoyed than usual about the amount of faith Dumbledore had in the boy. It incensed Snape that Potter was deemed worthy of such trust, and he wished Dumbledore could trust him as much as a sixteen-year-old juvenile incapable of casting a non-verbal spell.

Apparition lessons on Saturday afternoons provided yet another opportunity for Snape to observe the Chosen One's mediocrity. Not that he had minded too much; supervising additional lessons for the sixth-years had been an excuse to get away from Tonks. The Auror had become quite troublesome in recent weeks, intent upon prying into his private life with constant quizzing and demands for his time. Dodging her questions was tiresome, and her expectation that he should have feelings and, worse still, that he should want to *talk* about such feelings was irritating beyond belief.

Snape had spent his entire adult life summarily hiding feelings away, a process made more efficient when Dumbledore taught him Occlumency. He had no wish to open that box again. The only feelings which he knew to exist were those which caused him pain: they were the ones that seeped out at night during nightmares, exacerbated his insomnia, and caused his viciousness and loss of temper. He had no use for such feelings, and he preferred to keep them locked away.

As such, Snape was not about to hand Tonks the key and allow her to lift the lid on his emotions. Aside from his fear of experiencing the full force of his grief, loss and pain, he was also scared that these powerful feelings might escape, evade recapture, and assume control of his life. He couldn't face an existence dominated by parlous emotions. Worse still, once those agonising and crippling emotions were released, he might find the bottom of the box to be empty. It was, therefore, infinitely preferable to keep the lid rammed down and the key hidden away.

Each time Tonks tried to pick the lock, Snape retreated further into himself. He fortified his defences, ignoring the silent scream of his heart.

"Why aren't you happy now you're the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor?" Tonks asked one Sunday evening in February. "Everyone knows it's the job you've always wanted, but I've noticed you don't seem to like it much."

Snape sighed and wished fervently that he had enough desire and energy to mount a sexual encore to distract the Auror, but their evening's coupling had drained him, and his usual method of self-defence was not at his command.

He was tired. Tired of teaching, tired of deceiving, tired of spying. Tired of living. Tonks had been a welcome diversion from his lonely life, but even this relationship was souring each time he saw her.

When he didn't answer her enquiry, she nudged him gently. The bed sheets rustled as she propped herself up on her elbow.

He wondered if he could get away with half an answer. Would it satiate her need, or would it encourage her to further probing?

"Do you even enjoy teaching?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Irritation spiked like a skewer piercing his gut; she had pre-empted his planned reply, and he had grown tired of her impatience, her expectations, and her erroneous insights into his behaviour.

Tonks sighed and flopped down onto the bed. "You'd tell me if there was something wrong between us, wouldn't you?"

Snape gave a cursory nod, but in truth he knew his answer was 'no'. Entering into a discussion about their relationship might reveal that he did in fact have feelings, albeit unconstructive ones. This was not beneficial when he professed to have none.

To Snape, feelings of any kind were worthless; they only served to impede him and expose him to vulnerability and weakness. He would not, therefore, be coerced into expressing himself, and he began to realise that spending more time with Tonks would increase the likelihood of slipping on the slope of emotions. It was a terrifying prospect, and he needed to maintain his foothold whilst he still could.

A heavy weight pressed into his temples and made his head pound. He did not need to be encumbered by an additional burden; life was complex enough already.

"You can trust me, Severus," Tonks whispered into the darkening room.

Trust.

Such an illusory word.

So many layers, so many nuances, and so much potential for loss. It was an unaffordable luxury.

Snape had spent fifteen years earning Dumbledore's trust, proving his worth, toying the line, endangering his life. The Headmaster professed to trust him; he had shown this when he appointed the twenty-one-year-old Potions master, spoken to the Wizengamot at Snape's hearing, and told countless Order members of the reformed Death Eater's loyalty. Yet still Snape was dissatisfied. He wanted more.

Snape wanted Dumbledore to trust him with *everything*. He needed his acceptance like he needed air in his lungs. He needed to feel worthy. If he could prove his worth to Lily, then one day he might redeem himself.

And, if he won the implicit trust of one of the greatest wizards alive, someday Snape might learn to trust himself again.

So, Tonks' declaration of trustworthiness meant nothing to him. How could he trust her, when he could not even trust himself?

He didn't answer any of her questions. He didn't see the point. Their relationship was going nowhere, and he needed to assert himself and restate his purpose in life.

It was time to confront Dumbledore.

From the Journal of Nymphadora Tonks

Chapter 10 of 10

Tonks reflects on her relationship with Snape.

From the Journal of Nymphadora Tonks

I had known for some time that the end was coming.

I sensed it like a barometer senses rain. I saw the signs: his reluctance to talk, his frequent sidestepping, and the return of his reserved and guarded appearance.

I felt sad. Sad because I'd never really known him. He never gave me the chance. I knew he wouldn't, yet for some reason I persisted. I persisted because, at the time, he was my only option my only prospect for tenderness, sensuality and affection.

When it began, Remus had been gone for over two months, and I still couldn't eat or sleep properly. I would often cry myself into disturbed sleep, and I was desperate to replace the feeling of rejection with anything I could stake claim to.

Severus had been there on that first night of the school term, apparently as lonely as I, concealed behind high walls, hiding his poor heart from the cruel world surrounding him. I saw that. I saw a vulnerable man in need of love. Except that he didn't know he needed loving. I eventually came to realise that I could not offer it, even though I tried.

It began as a distraction from the pain; a way for me to feel attractive again, an opportunity for me to experience an emotion other than loss and rejection. The first time, the sex was angry and needy, and I hated myself for it. I used him. I used him to kick-start my life, to try and find myself again, but I was struck down with self-loathing. I had betrayed Remus and my love for him.

I didn't blame Severus. I blamed myself. But when he mistakenly believed I was pregnant, I lashed out at him. I thought he would never understand how I felt.

That changed on Christmas Day. Severus was so gentle. He reawakened something inside me, and I started to yearn for his touch, the feel of his lean, naked frame lying on top of me, the tickle of his hair on my face, the warmth of his lips on mine.

Somehow, my guilt lessened that day.

But when Severus arranged the lease on the apartment above Zonko's, I began to feel trapped. I was too weak to argue and hated myself for being so easy to manipulate. Yet I still felt gratitude towards my benefactor, and I thanked him the only way I could with my body.

I don't know if he ever realised I hadn't reached climax during our union in the dungeon. The whole thing was for his benefit alone.

When I was late for Slughorn's New Year's Eve party, Severus took me by surprise in more ways than one. He seemed angry with me, and I still don't really know why. I'll never forget the side-alley of the Three Broomsticks. He scared me and aroused me all at the same time. Danger was thrilling.

After he'd stayed the night and attended the Death Eater meeting, he returned to me once more, and I then began to realise that I might need more than just sex. I needed connection. Something more emotional. Something to replace Remus.

And then I saw Remus again, at Grimmauld Place, thinner and shabbier than ever. My nurturing instincts overrode everything; I wanted to take care of him, help him, heal him, love him. But he rejected me again. His words humiliated me.

I ran back into Severus's arms.

I cried myself to sleep every night when Severus was not there. He was a temporary fix to my despair. During this time, I noticed a change in him, too. He became colder,

more distant. He started to retreat into himself. At first, I thought he was jealous. Maybe he was. But he insisted he was emotionless. I didn't believe him. I had seen feelings in him. Things he didn't want to admit.

I tried to coax him, but he became increasingly cagey. Eventually he simply stopped answering my questions. I knew he was slipping away. Desperate, I held on to him tightly, but the stronger I held him the faster he slipped, until I knew the end was near. I didn't want to believe it... but still, I knew it. Deep down.

It was the first of March. Ronald Weasley lay in the hospital wing, recovering from his dance with death after swallowing poison from a bottle of mead intended to reach Dumbledore. When the Order convened in the Headmaster's office, Severus appeared preoccupied and withdrawn. He would not meet my gaze. I thought he had been affected badly by the latest casualty.

Severus arrived at my apartment shortly before midnight, Apparating straight into my bedroom, where I lay in bed, waiting for him. I cannot say how I knew he was coming. I just did. The air seemed heavy with the promise of thunder. Not the meteorological kind.

Dark shadows streaked the room as the light of the full moon shone through the window pane. I could see the blazing, malevolent look in his eyes. I wasn't scared. I had a sense of inevitability about what was to come. I knew it would be fierce and intense. And I wanted him inside me, one last time.

Severus slung his cloak and frock-coat onto the bedroom floor, ripped open his trousers and straddled me, inching further and further towards my head. He took his swollen erection and pushed it into my mouth. I almost gagged. Trapped beneath his knees and the bed sheets, I wished I could Metamorphose to take him whole. But I still had no command over my abilities. So I ran my tongue around his bulging member, sucking him until he almost came into my mouth.

He pulled out at the last second, panting and growling, and then he ripped the blanket from the bed and took me, already soaking wet, in one swift movement.

I remember the feel of him inside me. Hard and whole, awakening my body, enticing me to feel. And feel something I did; it was like it always had been between us, but this time with a rougher edge.

I knew we were together for the last time.

I knew that after this moment it would be over between us. Our arrangement, and whatever attachment we had or had not formed, would be gone.

I clung to him, gripping his buttocks, encouraging him to plunge deeper and deeper, until I climaxed with a rippling, tingling, back-arching shudder. He continued to thrust into me, rougher and rougher, until his orgasm exploded inside me. He growled, almost shouting out. Then he collapsed into a heap on top of me.

His behaviour changed within seconds.

He withdrew from me, turning away to sit on the edge of the bed. I held out my hand to touch his arm, but he shrugged it away, and he stood and buttoned up his crumpled attire.

I watched him, black and white in the moonlight, his tall, slender silhouette imposing and rigid, lurking in the shadows of the room. Soon he was fastened up to the neck, confined by his oppressive clothing, lingering at the foot of my four-poster bed, a look of pained embarrassment on his features. It was strange to see his feelings in direct contrast to his tightly-fastened robes. But it wasn't long before he restored his mask and blinked the emotions away to reveal his usual pale, thin-lipped face.

His words, however, took me by surprise.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I wasn't sure if he was apologising for the rough, dominating sex, or for the abrupt ending. Either way, I knew our relationship was over.

I got out of bed. The length of my black nightdress fell back down, covering my body like a shroud.

"I'm sorry, too, Severus."

And I meant it.

I was sorry for using him to replace my lost love, sorry for hoping he would eventually feel something for me, sorry that I never really knew him.

I don't know how he interpreted my apology. He nodded once and Disapparated.

Weeks later, I descended the stairs to the dungeons at Hogwarts, desperate for news about Remus. I had hoped to speak to Dumbledore, but found the Headmaster was absent again, and I was so worried that I even asked Harry Potter if he'd heard anything. But my search for information came up with nothing, and so I went down to see Severus and ask for his help.

Severus did as I asked, and he returned two hours later with confirmation that there had indeed been a werewolf attack, but it had been the Montgomery family's misfortune, and Remus had not been involved.

Remus was still alive. There was still hope.

That was the last time I saw Severus, until the death of Albus Dumbledore.

I caught sight of him when he arrived at the Astronomy Tower in the middle of the battle, and I watched him leave shortly afterwards with Draco Malfoy, and the Death Eaters in pursuit. I had no idea what had happened, and I let him pass without question.

When I heard of his betrayal, I couldn't believe it.

People were quick to point the finger; the evidence seemed to condemn him as a murderer, but I found the whole thing hard to grasp. The Severus I knew would never be as cold and brutal as to kill a weakened Dumbledore begging for his help. It seemed so... out of character. But as I listened to others' tales of his treachery, I had to concede he was a killer. How could I not?

It was, of course, the death of Albus Dumbledore which brought Remus back to me. He caved in, that night in the hospital wing, at Bill Weasley's bedside.

And for a time, Remus and I were happy. After the wedding, I quickly fell pregnant and I thought our world was complete. But then Remus retreated again.

As I sit here, alone at my parents' house, hoping and praying that he will come back to me and help to raise our unborn child, I wonder if I was right to have told him about Severus.

If I had kept our secret, perhaps Remus wouldn't have left, and I wouldn't be facing single parenthood and a life without love.

I also wonder if the popping sound I just heard was a Muggle exhaust-pipe or Remus returning to me. Mum and Dad aren't due back home for hours.

Who would I prefer to see walking through the garden gate and up the drive?

Will it be a man in dressed head-to-toe in black, his long cloak rippling in the wind, and his dark, hooded eyes promising an explanation for his duplicity?

Or will it be my Remus, scruffy and tired, saying he's sorry and telling me he's ready to be a father?

I see a wisp of brown and grey hair in the distance and suddenly my heart leaps.

My husband is back... for good.