

Prisoners

by morgan

The summer after Dumbledore's death, Tonks receives a new assignment: to watch over Lucius Malfoy, recently freed from Azkaban.

A Very Snappy Birthday

Chapter 1 of 2

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Thanks to my beta, Cherry, who read it not once, but thrice!

He was waiting outside the dining room of Grimmauld Place *his house* where an Order meeting was taking place. At the first meeting after the Headmaster's death, his two best friends had become full members of the Order he couldn't as he wasn't of age yet. His seventeenth birthday finally arrived, and here he was, waiting for his first Order meeting afterwards he hoped they'd have drinks and cakes and, perhaps, a bit of fun, a bit of relief. After what seemed like ages, Lupin opened the door, a malicious smile on his lips.

"You may come in, Mr. Potter!"

Minerva McGonagall was more pompous than her usual self.

"Mr. Potter, I am proud to inform you that you're now a full member of the Order of the Phoenix."

Ron and Hermione were beaming; Moody gave him a Dumbledorish wink; Molly Weasley tried, without too much success, to repress a sob; an empty seat beside Lupin showed that Tonks was probably late, as usual; and Hagrid's hug left him breathless.

"Good, good," said McGonagall, "shall we proceed, now? We have some important matters to discuss today. But while we're waiting for Nymphadora... that is, unless she got trapped in Mr Weasley & Weasley's new invention..." Sitting side by side in a corner, the twins smiled proudly; the previous week, she had been taken hostage by two of their Charging Chairs. "... meanwhile," McGonagall continued, "Mr. Potter, I think you should be informed of the latest developments. "

All the happy faces sobered at once.

"Since the Headmaster's death, some information has come into our possession, which proves, beyond doubt, that what you saw on the Tower that night, Harry... might need to be... reinterpreted."

Harry couldn't remember ever seeing his former Head of House embarrassed and at loss for words before. It took him a few seconds to actually understand what she could mean... but she couldn't mean it, could she?

"Severus did... what he did, at Dumbledore's request, Harry. He is working with us."

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" Harry yelled, and shot up out of his chair, almost knocking it over. It couldn't be true, it just couldn't be. He was rambling on, hardly knowing what

he was saying. "It can't be, I saw him the look on his face he killed him, I saw it happen! Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have it can't be!"

Ron tentatively patted his back (he was shivering too much to even notice); Lupin took a chocolate bar out of his pocket; Hagrid, seconded by the twins, suggested a good bottle of butterbeer; Minerva tried with no avail to make good use of her authority, "Now, really, Mr. Potter!"; while Molly performed a calming spell, which backfired with such a violence that she felt dizzy for the following hours. It was only Hermione's healthy slap in the face that silenced Harry. He sank back down into his chair, and with good sip of the aforementioned butterbeer, he seemed to be able to hear what he was being told and was beginning to understand.

Tonks, her hair bright orange, was hurrying past Mrs. Black's portrait when she heard a painful cry. She dropped the cream cake she had bought for Harry's birthday, which soared elegantly through the air and landed on a rich Oriental rug. Now, this rug might have looked quite innocent, but she knew it to be a flying carpet (the Blacks used to be very fond of such artefacts). Blimey. It would take her hours to clean, as those carpets didn't like to be handled, magically or manually, and tended to show it in quite an aggressive way. She was sick of all this cleaning business, anyway. Who would have thought that she, Nymphadora Tonks, the least homey woman west of Avalon, would one day be the housekeeper of such a big house? Well, it wasn't her actual job or title. She was the "manager of the Headquarters", since Hogwarts was for the time being, and the Head of the Auror office had yet to give her a new appointment. Molly Weasley, who had been doing it for over two years now, had asked for some time off so she could organize her son's wedding. She had been doing a great job and was probably exhausted, and Tonks doubted that she would come back right after the wedding, if at all.

Though she wasn't trying to live up to her predecessor's standards, the young Auror actually ended up mopping and cooking most of the time. No one had complained yet about the rudimentary lunches, or the teatime chocolate chips cookies. But it was hard to keep the whole house to even a minimum of cleanliness, and to half-decently feed all the members that seemed to be always passing by just in time for any given meal. On the top of that, she was unable to secure any help: Kreacher was gone (well, she couldn't really complain about that, could she?), and Hermione had convinced the order that hiring any new house-elves was a security risk.

Now she might not have been able to cook a proper meal, but she certainly knew where to buy one, so when Lupin told her, the former night, that it would be nice if she could have something ready for Harry's birthday, she shamelessly bought it at a French Muggle bakery.

She was still looking at the creamy disaster on the carpet, when she heard some robes swishing behind her. Wasn't everyone else at the meeting? Oh, Snape. Right. She remembered it was the day he was being reinstated into the Order, but it was shocking all the same to see his black shadow for the first time since *that* night.

"Snape."

"Nymphadora."

She could swear he was using her first name on purpose, just to bother her. Of all wizards he had to be the one to find her there.

"Doing some decoration work?"

"No, contemplating the gloomy prospect of having to deal with a dirty, irate flying carpet."

"Oh, it's a flying carpet, is it?" As an answer, the rug started to shake, at first very slightly, just enough to spread the remains of the cake on its whole surface. When they tried to approach it, it retreated to the opposite corner of the room.

"Yes, of course, what else to expect of the most ancient and noble house of Black? Quite annoying, indeed." He seemed to be talking to himself. "Let me try something. What was it, again? Ah, yes, *Tapismortis*. That should do the trick."

The rug fell, just like, well, an old, lifeless rug. She performed a quick cleaning spell, and they walked together into the meeting.

Needless to say, the last part of the meeting was physically and emotionally draining for, well, everyone. His friends and colleagues had more or less succeeded in calming down Harry, before Snape and Tonks arrived. One would be surprised to learn that he didn't say anything bad to Snape. Harry, actually, didn't say *anything* while he was there; fortunately, the ex-Potion master (ex-murderer) left quite early, and Harry's mood subsequently lightened a bit.

Molly had brought a homemade treacle tart, among other delights, so that the loss of Tonks' cream cake wasn't resented, if noticed. Well, one actually *did* notice.

"Pray, young beauty, have my old werewolf's ears misheard, or were you making a fool of my poor, unworthy self when you were promising Muggle delights this morning?" Lupin noiselessly materialized on her side. He said that it was one of the not too many agreeable side effects of being a werewolf, being able to move quietly.

"Ask the rug in the corridor, it ate the whole damn thing. I dropped it in a surprise when I heard Harry shouting, was lucky to find Snape on my way, he helped me clean up the mess."

"I didn't think I'd live to hear you say you were *lucky* to find Snape in your way. One could almost believe that you've developed a fancy for old, wounded gentlemen." He chuckled silently while leaning over her. It was the only public display of affection her friend indulged in. She enjoyed this closeness without touching, his long body surrounding hers, his soft voice in her ears and his blue eyes sparkling. She was calling him her friend for want of a better word. They were too old for the "boy/girlfriend" thing, of course; "lovers" was silly; and he wasn't even her *fiancé*. She was well aware that her inability to name their relationship was only a consequence of his unwillingness to define it. Still, since Dumbledore's death or, more accurately, Greyback's attack on Bill they were somehow together. He admitted that they could perhaps have something akin to a relationship, and spent whole nights with her. That is, when he wasn't on a mission, which was most of the time anyway. Her bed was still empty and cold too often for her taste; the fact that she was used to it didn't mean that she didn't resent it. He always talked about "putting their duties first" he could be so stiff with this damn sense of duty of his. So, no, no talks of marriage.

"Besides," he had said one day with a knowing grin, "if we marry, either we'll be both 'Lupin', or you'll have to get used to Nymphadora."

They say that it was the first step that cost, but how long does it take to make the second one? In any case, she told herself she was happy with what they had or at least happier than before.

Harry was coming towards them, holding the tell-tale heart she had given him (she showed him quickly how to shut it off, otherwise it would never stop babbling nonsense, and even the twins were getting sick of it) as well as Remus' present a bottle of Ever-Freezing Vodka.

"A lad has to turn seventeen properly," Lupin amusedly retorted when Tonks had voiced her doubts about it. "We used to get drunk on it... great thing is, it is guaranteed to have absolutely no after effects!" His eyes sparkled and the corners of his mouth twitched, which was quite rare these days. She loved his wicked look (among other things).

He had insisted that they give separate presents; he knew that Harry, lonely as he was right now, would resent having to deal with them with a couple instead of as individuals. That you couldn't deny, Remus was caring and sensitive.

"He's coping pretty well, don't you think?" she asked, after Harry left to toast with Hagrid.

"Yes... yes... We still have to see what happens with Severus. I hope no harm comes out of this."

"And what about this research they're not telling anyone about?"

"Well, McGonagall told them they could spend their free time as they see fit, as long as it doesn't infringe on their duty with the Order. Speaking of the devil..."

The "devil" in question sported Tartan robes and was walking briskly toward them. She sat down, not before having carefully examined the sofa. With Fred and George around, one could never be too careful.

"You're still talking about this mysterious project of Potter, Granger and Weasley's, are you? Well, since it seems that it's Albus who gave him the idea, whatever it is, and I can but hope that he made no mistake. Besides, they are all of age, and for the time being not attending school anymore, so I do not have any authority over them. Nymphadora, I almost forgot to give you this..."

She extracted a roll of parchment from her robes. Since she was living at the Unplottable Headquarters, Tonks had to have her mail delivered at Hogwarts.

"Well, I'm off. This day was exhausting, and I'm not getting any younger. Good night to both of you.

"Well, Remus, you're not precisely young yourself... What about following Minerva's example and making an early escape into my rooms?" asked Tonks, as soon as the older witch was too far to hear.

"You're not reading your letter?"

"You wicked werewolf, that's only a lame attempt to distract me! No, I'm not. It's from the Ministry, it's probably my next assignment, and I'll need a clear mind, if only I want to understand their jargon, distinguish what they want me to do from what they want me to pretend I'm doing, which in turn is not to be confused with what I should do as by coincidence, or what I should attempt to do, but fail. Tonight there's somebody in my thoughts, and this somebody had better say a quick goodnight to the assembly before following me to my quarters."

It wasn't until very late the next morning, after Remus had left, that she opened her letter. She enjoyed this quiet time, in the middle of the morning, those who had to do things had left, and those who had to report in weren't back yet. She would pour herself a third cup of black coffee while reading her mail, if there was any, or just listen to the silence.

On that very morning, though, her routine was, albeit benignly, upset, as Moody was monopolizing all the space available on the kitchen's table with unfolded maps and several bizarre objects, that she guessed were used to draw the aforementioned maps. She mumbled a "Hi", not wanting to disturb him. She just secured a safe corner for her cup of coffee before breaking the Ministry seal and unfolding the parchment. It was indeed an assignment sheet. Good, she'd soon be rid of this tedious housekeeping job.

Tonks, Nymphadora

Patronus: Wolf

Physical characteristic: Changing

Current address: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Last appointment: protecting the aforementioned school from so-called Death Eaters.

Results: failure.

New appointment: Facilitate the contacts between Mr Lucius Malfoy, soon to be released from the prison of Azkaban, and the Ministry.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, RELEASE MALFOY?"

Oh. Moody had been reading over her shoulder.

Coming soon: A new type of Portkey, another Muggle artefact crackpot at the Ministry, and a view inside Tonks' home!

Ends and Means

Chapter 2 of 2

Where we get a glimpse of Tonks' new home; we get to know a Muggle-fan; and have tea with Snape.

"We know it's a highly unusual procedure, Miss Tonks, but then, we are living in a highly unusual time. Years ago we needn't have bothered with details, only act for the greater good." Mr. Softsickle, Head of Auror Liaison office at the Ministry, had a very mellow and convincing tone.

Unusual it was. Tonks shared a meaningful glance with Kingsley Shacklebolt, her direct superior, who was sitting with her across from Mr. Softsickle's desk. They had been here many times before, and were used to the Ministry's understatements, but that one was probably the boldest so far.

So the guys from the Ministry were releasing Malfoy, and since they didn't trust him, they wanted an Auror to keep an eye on him. That they didn't trust him was perfectly understandable, what she couldn't get was why they'd let him out in the first place. She always tended to be lenient (her Muggle-born father had also been a human rights activist, and she could still hear him arguing that "prison was of no use either for convicts or society"), but this was war against Voldemort, for Merlin's sake. Besides, Azkaban wasn't half as bad as it used to be, since human and part-human staff had replaced the Dementors in fact, Moody tended to think that it wasn't scary enough any more. She didn't agree, of course, but still, they could've kept Malfoy in Azkaban at least until Voldemort was over and done with, couldn't they?

"Mr. Malfoy's trial was under revision, as I understood it," said Kingsley politely. Which meant, as far as Tonks could tell, "What the hell happened; did he bribe someone again this time?" Shacklebolt got quite good at understatements.

"As you know," Mr. Softsickle went on, "Narcissa Malfoy was very affected by her husband's imprisonment and her son's, ahem *absence*. She was desperate, to put things short; now she's getting some rest in Deauville."

So her dear cousin Cissy was going barmy. Tonks knew Deauville, an old and stylish French sea resort by the Channel; she also knew about Barrière's Clinic. A very fancy and expensive place, located on a small island right across Deauville's Casino, it was frequented by the richest and fairest mentally ill wizards and witches. Of course, it was properly warded and hidden from Muggle sight she had heard that, at any given time, six wizards and witches were at work keeping the island safe from Muggles, journalists, and poor wizards alike.

"A meeting with her husband may greatly improve Mrs. Malfoy's disposition, and having him taking care of the Malfoy estate would lessen her stress to a large extent."

Tonks doubted that the Ministry greatly cared for Narcissa's well-being; the well-being of the Estate was another thing altogether. So, it was money after all. Not a question of bribes, but she knew that some 'public' institutions, such as St. Mungo's, were kept running mostly thanks to the Malfoy's money. Most ancient families were managing their money in a very secretive way; and the Malfoys had probably been careful to put up some protection Charms and wards that would keep strangers out of their business. She had heard, in her youth, stories of a biting account book or of a chest that would open only at the touch of a drop of blood from a family member. The Ministry badly needed the Malfoy's money, and they needed Lucius' help to get the money. Still, she considered releasing Malfoy, especially when the Ministry badly needed people's trust, was a bad move, no matter how much money was involved.

"As you can guess," Mr. Softsickle continued, "he gave us all the guarantees we have asked for concerning his occupations. And, that's where you come in, Miss Tonks. Mr. Malfoy has kindly agreed to our request of carrying an Activable Portkey, with a built-in Caller. As you know... well, actually, you probably don't, this is a new device from our services. Let me show you."

From a drawer in his desk, he pulled out a small leather box and opened it; inside was something that resembled a very fine wristwatch. The gold numbers were shining on the black background, and the two small emeralds on its side were probably used for changing the time.

"As Mr. Malfoy will have to wear it at all times, we had to find something that was easy to wear, and which wouldn't attract attention. Something that Mr. Malfoy would have picked for himself. This object is linked to that one, which would be yours to wear."

A red leather box was produced beside the black one; the watch it contained was feminine, adorned with silver and two rubies on its side.

"This one is the Major one. When you turn this key," he said, handling the first ruby while he was talking, "the Minor one reacts that way."

He handed her the black and green watch. One of the emeralds started to glow discretely.

"All that the receptor has to do is push the key, and *voilà!*"

She took the watch and did as she was told. The numbers disappeared, to be replaced by jovial features of Mr. Softsickle.

"It's brilliant, isn't it?," asked the Softsickle-across-the-room, faithfully echoed by the Softsickle-in-the-watch. "Just like those things Muggles have, television, I think?"

She hadn't known they had another Muggle Artefacts crackpot at the Ministry. Perhaps they put them all here on the off chance they might start a club.

"So that's the caller: you push this button, Mr. Malfoy becomes aware that you want to talk to him, and after he secures a discreet spot, he calls you back and you can see and talk to him. Much more convenient than the fireplace, you can reach him anytime, anywhere. The other ruby transforms the Minor into a Portkey. You call him the same way, by pushing the button; and when he pushes his, the holder of the Minor Apparates right beside the Major."

Just like the Dark Mark: you were Summoned, you Apparated. Well at least that one was not branded into your skin.

"The inconvenience of these small objects, however, is that when the bracelet gets loose, it can be dropped, or lost, very easily. To remediate it, our team of Creators has invented a very simple, but strong spell, which makes the watch stick to your arm; nothing can remove it save the counter-spell."

She had been wrong; it was branded into their skins, after all.

Mr. Softsickle looked at them enthusiastically, like a child showing off his new broom.

"So? What do you say?"

"I don't like it, I don't like it at all," said Moody when she started explaining. They were having an informal meeting in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, he, Tonks and Snape. Moody had not discovered a sudden sympathy for the former Death Eater; but when Tonks had told him about her new mission, he reckoned that Snape could be of some help. Tonks accepted without an afterthought. The 'children' (Harry, Hermione and Ron) said that she didn't mind Snape only because it had been too long since she had him as a teacher; she most likely had forgotten how bad he was. Maybe she had been influenced by Remus, the only one who didn't seem to have anything against him. Though they probably knew each other quite a bit (after all they were the same age), all he ever told her about the Potion master was that he was probably very lonely.

It was only the second time she had seen him since he had been back, and he seemed a bit more relaxed. He had greeted her in a civil manner and seemed to remember that she'd rather be called by her last name.

"The man has the possibility not to show up, right? You just *inform* him that you wanna know where the heck he is, then *hemight* call you back, or show up, or not." Moody was almost shouting.

"Well, there's a last resort and they insisted on that, it is only a last resort. If he doesn't show up for a while, and I'm afraid that something bad happened to him that's how they presented it I can somehow Summon him by turning the second key twice," she explained.

"And what if he shows up with a bunch of his 'friends,' all grabbing the Portkey and Apparating a few meters from you? No, I reckon it's worse than useless, it's actually quite dangerous."

Snape, who had been quiet since the beginning of the meeting, interrupted Moody by waving his hand.

"I don't think you should be worried about that, Moody. Lucius is far from being stupid, and he wouldn't try something so bold. If he has something up his sleeve, it's probably a lot greater than just bothering poor Tonks a bit."

He had the voice of a patient teacher lecturing an impatient and not-so-bright student, thought Tonks, amused; they were now both acting as if she wasn't there.

"But," Snape went on, "he might very well have no other plan at all; he is just too happy to get out of Azkaban, and just wants to take care of his name, fortune and business. Never underestimate Malfoy's capacity for self-preservation."

Moody wasn't convinced. He wasn't convinced either that the running of the 'family business' was the only, true reason why Malfoy was being released.

"I mean, he asked, his glass eye spinning in exasperation, does the ministry need money that bad?"

"Well," Tonks replied slowly, trying to remember Mr. Softsickle's last words, "it was mentioned that Malfoy had access to some circles that the Ministry couldn't reach. I think they want him to keep an eye on the "good" society, and perhaps even convince some old pureblood families that it would be to their advantage to cooperate with the Ministry."

"So he'd actually be expected to contact his former friends? With no one else around to figure out what they're talking about?" interrupted Moody.

"Hum, yes."

"Well, young lady" Moody kept on calling her 'young lady', much to her annoyance. "you're not going to start this mission until I give you this."

He took a piece of folded parchment out of his pocket, which opened to reveal a map the moment Moody tapped it and said, "Constant vigilance!"

"I got the idea after Potter showed me a very interesting map of his... Potter's map showed a determined place, and all the people who happened to be moving in it; this one is instead attached to a person; we can see where she is, and with whom, within a distance of a mile. The blue dots are Portkeys. So here you have..."

"Malfoy!" interrupted Tonks.

"Not yet. In order for the Charm to work, the person the map is attached to needs to touch it, while someone else performs the Charms the words are 'I don't trust Malfoy'. I did charm it to follow you, Tonks, for the time being, so that you can see how it works."

He had probably done it Saturday morning, when she put aside this pile of papers of his to make some space for her cup of coffee. So he might have 'seen' her going to the movies, yesterday afternoon, when she talked about 'very urgent private matters' she had to attend to going to the movies wasn't very fashionable among wizardkind, but sometimes she felt some good Muggle adventure was the only thing keeping her from turning completely mad. Come to think of it, if he had suffered from insomnia last night, he probably saw her coming in and out of Remus' bedroom. 'Very unusual times' indeed, when a Ministry-hired witch was asked to submit herself to an experiment that bordered on Dark Magic, when a co-worker would spy on her, just to play with his new Charm. And when the above-mentioned co-worker was Moody, what to expect of him, but childish enthusiasm about his success?

"Look, you're here, you see, the living-room, the street, and Snape, and me! And it even detects this new weird Portkey of yours!"

His excitement reminded her of the twins'; but at least their inventions were harmless.

Well, mostly harmless.

"So, what do you say?"

"I don't like it, I don't like it at all," said Snape quietly. Moody had left in a hurry to attend to some very secret and very urgent business, and Snape had lingered, looking very worried, as if he wanted to say more but wasn't sure how to do it, if at all. Remus' words about his loneliness came back to her mind, and prompted her to invite him for a cup of tea.

To her great surprise, he raised an eyebrow with an expression that probably meant, "Why not?" and said, "I have half an hour to waste and could do with some food," as if he was making a big concession. She now wondered how she could have been so bold to ask for that man's presence; she realized that she had never been alone with him. It's not that she ever was the shy type, quite the contrary; she didn't hate or even dislike him; she tried to convince herself that she wasn't scared; 'impressed' was more like it.

She prepared the tea and a plate of cookies noisily, causing a useless riff-raff, just to postpone the moment when she would have to sit down and speak to him face to face. She was a bit impressed.

"What is it that you 'don't like'?" she finally asked, putting down the cups and teapot on the table. There could be so many things provoking his dislike: his job, Moody, the house, the weather, or even the tea she had just served him. Though the latter would surprise her; she had made a fresh pot of Thé des Magiciens (Magician's Blend), one of the finest blends of the Palais des Thés (Tea's Palace) in Paris. Besides being Muggle and left-wing, her dad had been half-French, and she still liked to do her shopping in Paris once in a while..

"All of this. The fact that we start using darker magic, for one. Moody's childish fits at Malfoy. He grossly underestimates Lucius."

She looked at him, puzzled. She had always considered Malfoy as a bit of a fraud, a bourgeois who liked to play the tough guy, but if he was as dangerous as Snape had said, why, of all Aurors, had she been chosen to watch over him?

"And I don't like either that you've been chosen for this mission," replied Snape to her silent question. She had almost forgotten his Legilimency skills. Mental note to self: never let your mind wander in his presence, if only because you don't want the man to know about your sex life. But he was now looking elsewhere, at some non-existent creature far behind her.

"I hope I'm wrong, but they might have done so to please Lucius; they had figured out that your families were linked and thought he wouldn't resent as much being monitored by someone he's related to. Lucius is not even out of prison and they already try to make him some favors, I don't like it at all," he repeated, still looking unfocused.

He was speaking reluctantly, thinking out loud, barely acknowledging her presence, as if her understanding of the situation seemed to be beside the point. Snape was looking in his teacup, a very unlikely version of a Sybil Trelawney trying to read Malfoy's project in the tealeaves. She phrased her question carefully, taking the role of the student expected to be ignorant, but not unintelligent.

"And how can you imagine Moody could underestimate an enemy? Didn't he go at lengths about all the possible and impossible tricks Malfoy could be about to do?" Though she agreed that Moody's behavior had been somewhat childish, he was well-known for overestimating the enemy, if anything.

He straightened a bit and his black eyes black? Nobody has black eyes finally acknowledge her presence.

"He was bothering about what Lucius is less likely to do," the ex-Professor explained. "If he can avoid it, Lucius will never resort to physical violence. It's so vulgar, so common; it's much easier for someone like him to convince his opponent to cooperate. Lucius rarely shouts or loses his temper he doesn't need to. He'll be seductive, overpowering, pleading, understanding or talkative, depending on what serves him the best in a given situation. He'll instill in you, drop by drop, the will to do what he wants you to, so slowly that you'll never realize it was his idea to start with. This power is much stronger than any Imperius, and if you can't figure it out by yourself, like this poor old fool of Alastor, at least be so nice as to take my word for it, and try to keep it in mind, so that my presence today would, at least, have had some purpose."

There was no answer to that, so she kept quiet as he got up to leave in a swirl of black robes.

"Well, Tonks." He quickly bowed before heading toward the exit.

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned back; she shortly wondered if she would witness a miracle, Snape actually thanking someone, even in a casual manner, for a casual cup of tea.

"Oh, and next time you fancy a nice tea, please do me the favor of brewing it properly. Everyone knows the water shouldn't be boiling, but simmering, and the leaves shouldn't be left in the water for more than four minutes, especially when it's the Thé des Magiciens."

Sitting at her desk a while later, looking out the front window at the late afternoon sun playing with the leaves of the trees, Tonks reflected on Snape's last words. She had

been allowed a suite of two rooms on the third floor of Grimmauld Place (she had never been sure how many floors there were in total, the mansion seemed to shrink or expand at will, and she considered herself lucky to be able to find her way back to her rooms every night). She had left the bedroom more or less as she had found it she was too happy to sleep in the canopy bed every little girl dreams of but converted the office/*boudoir*/living room to her taste. Out went the rug (thankfully it hadn't been a flying one), the five small tables, the golden and black delicate and uncomfortable chairs, and the heavy tapestry hanging on the walls. She emptied the black wooden shelves of all the small, useless, ugly, precious, dusty *bibelots* that the Blacks had gathered over time, which left some space for her books; Muggle and wizard fiction alike, as well as some more 'serious' books for her work. She got rid of the dark and heavily decorated desk and replaced it with a honey-colored Maplewood table Remus had found in the smoking parlor on the fourth floor. He had also helped her to Transfigure the marble fireplace into something more discrete and less ugly. Apart from the table/desk, her chair and the shelves, the only other pieces of furniture were a couple of huge poufs (very convenient for a reader or a couple to sit in), and a hatbox in which she had placed her 'survival kit', namely a bottle of Laguavulin (though not a heavy drinker, she enjoyed a good scotch once in a while), and one of Porto (she always made fun of Remus' taste for sweet alcohols), along with a couple of glasses and some crackers.

Now, with the pale wooden floor showing and the two high windows unburdened by their heavy velvet curtains, her 'study' was bright, clear and cheerful. She liked to spend some time at her desk, not that she got lots of work done, but she was a daydreamer, and she enjoyed the sight of the tree in front of her window. Some wizards preferred to Charm their windows so it would show whatever place or weather suited their mood; but what was the point of looking at something you made up yourself? Far less opportunity for daydreaming. Some members of her mother's family scowled what they called her 'Muggle tendencies.' Fair enough, she did prefer Bordeaux to elf-made wine, and enjoyed thoroughly Asian cinema. Having grown up in a family who didn't make a difference between Mummy's and Daddy's things, she was neither ashamed nor proud of those trivial matters. More than that, she failed to see a real discrepancy between the 'two worlds,' and she didn't see why she would need to chose between them when she could take the best out of the two, and Transfigure her robes into the last Channel outfit.

The sun was getting down, the clouds were golden, and she started to get dizzy, when she heard a knock on her door. She jumped on her feet, as if caught red handed.

"Whozzit?"

"It's Minerva!"

"Please come in! You just arrived?"

"Yes, I'm glad this week is over. Most of the grounds are restored, Hagrid's hut is rebuilt, and next week he will help me supervise the importation of new creatures in the Forbidden forest. I finished the paperwork for three unicorns from Brittany today. You know how those French are with their bumf... Well, now it's done. It's just a shame that Severus can't show up at Hogwarts, we still have the wards to fix, and he'd be such a help!"

Somehow Minerva had managed to say all that before sitting down. One would have thought her too stiff to even consider sitting in a pouf, but after careful examination, she slowly sat down and then leaned back with a sigh of relief.

"Well, these seats of yours are not what I would call dignifying, but they are quite comfortable, indeed!"

Tonks handed her a glass of Port.

"Thank you. Alastor told me you received an assignment. We'll have to find someone else to take care of the place now, I'm afraid. Well, I have an idea of my own. When do you start?" asked McGonagall.

"As soon as they release Malfoy but then, the Ministry is vague, at the best. They seem to be having some difficulties at Azkaban, but I couldn't catch what it was all about."

"Oh, so they've gone on strike!" Meeting Tonks clueless gaze, Minerva went on after taking a small gulp of Port.

"The new Human and Part-Human staff at Azkaban have been repeatedly requesting more... human conditions. The good thing with Dementors, if there is such a thing, is that they don't require feeding, lodging, and they don't have friends or family to keep in touch with. The Ministry had much to do on such a short time period, when the Dementors left. They had to hire new staff, find proper rooms for them to live in, organize the transfer for the change of shifts. Then the Human guards, seeing how the prisoners were treated, requested better conditions for the inmates as well. Well, Hiram wasn't built in a day, and the Ministry is working on all of it, but it seems that the pace is too slow for the guards, hence the strike. It's not as if they have stopped working they wouldn't risk another massive breakout they just refuse to let anybody in or out. No new prisoners, no releases, no visits for the time being. I'm not surprised the Ministry keeps it quiet. You will have to wait a bit before getting your prisoner delivered. That will give you some time to introduce our new Headquarter Manager to her new functions. I'm sure the two of you will get along quite well."

She started worrying, knowing Minerva McGonagall's proverbial lack of social skills.

"But, perhaps, you already know Miss Lovegood?"

Coming soon: Gulping Pimples, Tonks' new hair colour, and finally a bit of Lucius!