

The Gypsy

by Dusty Rose

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Escape From Privet Drive

Chapter 1 of 20

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Disclaimer: This story's characters and background all belong to JKR. I created the characters of Tanya and Raphael.

The rating is for later chapters.

The pairing, although it will seem at first like HP/OC, it is really to be a SS/OC pairing.

PART ONE

Chapter One

Escape from Privet Drive

Harry stood gazing out his bedroom window, thinking. The holiday break had started out so promising. He had come home with the Dursleys, knowing he had to. Also knowing that his friends were all working on getting him over to the Burrow, where they knew he'd be happier and better treated. The Dursleys walked on eggshells for a time, dreading what would happen if Harry got word out that they were bullying him.

But Harry, not wanting to bother the others, knowing they were busy with the Order, allowed some minor things to slip by. Dudley soon found that he could give Harry dirty looks with no repercussions; Uncle Vernon learned that he could snap at Harry and Harry would take no notice. Even Aunt Petunia discovered that Harry was still inclined to do a lot of the household chores that she couldn't get Dudley to help with, and he didn't do a bad job at them.

But soon, Dudley's sneering looks gave way to smart remarks, and he was once again pushing Harry around with impunity. Uncle Vernon began to threaten Harry with imprisonment (meaning bars on his bedroom window and the door constantly locked) and Aunt Petunia had plans to empty out the attic and repaint it. It didn't take O.W.L. intelligence to figure out who would be doing that.

Still, Harry resisted the temptation to cry foul to his friends. He swore he'd tough it out, that these were such minor trivialities compared to what he'd already been through. He knew that the Dursleys, at their worst, couldn't hold a candle to what folks like the Malfoys, LeStrange, Snape, Umbridge, and especially Voldemort could do. And he was surviving all of them. He was still going strong. He reminded himself of this every time he was tempted to leave and flag down the Knight bus, or send an owl to the Burrow, or to pull out his wand and actually use it. He made sure his letters were light and carefree, even when he didn't feel quite that way.

He really didn't expect anything to be done about getting him out of here before the end of July. Apparently, he had to spend a minimum of time here at "home" in order for the blood ties that bound him, however unwanted, to his Aunt Petunia to keep strong enough to protect him from Voldemort. He'd only been here at Privet Drive for two weeks; surely not enough time to justify a rescue mission.

But he found himself lately growing hotter under the collar than he'd care to admit. He was soon to be sixteen years old; far too old to let his temper get the better of him. It was an uphill battle. He'd heard of teenagers being overly dramatic and hard to understand. Now he could see it from a teenager's point-of-view, and it made perfect sense. There were too many times lately that he'd felt his emotions were controlling him, instead of the other way around. He supposed he could blame the hormones bouncing around, trying to keep up with his growing. He didn't mind the extra height, and the interesting appearance of light traces of downy fuzz on his upper lip was comforting, but he could do without the troublesome roller coaster ride he was stuck on. And at odd times, when his mind was supposed to be busy on other things, he felt a rushing need to see Cho. At these times, he missed her pretty face, and the funny little belly-flip he felt when he saw her. Then he shook his head and reminded himself of her overwhelming emotional outbursts when they were together. He'd learned that no matter what was going on, or what he said, she'd burst into tears. Who needed that? The last he'd heard, she was taking up with someone else, and more power to him. If Harry needed to stress out about something, he could no doubt come up with something more important than a goofy crush.

Hedwig nearly bashed into the window by the time Harry noticed that she was flying toward him, parchment rolled up in her beak. He quickly let her in, lavishly praising her for her work. She puffed up importantly, lovingly nipped his finger, and flew to her cage on his bureau to drink the water he'd just put in there fresh.

His vigil had paid off. No, it wasn't an enchanted car to pick him up, but he was almost as happy to hear from anyone from the wizarding world. It had been a long two weeks. As he unrolled the parchment with trembling fingers, he recognized Professor Dumbledore's handwriting.

Dear Harry,

I hope this note finds you well. As you know, better than most, Voldemort's on the warpath once again. You know why you had to go back to Privet Drive. But good news! Certain things have been happening these last two weeks that convince me it's now all right for you to come to be with your true friends. The danger I feared would come to you is at a minimum, and with vigilance and a little self-control, you'll be as safe here as you would be with your blood relative.

Therefore, I am sending a team of good people out for you. We'll use the same methods used last year, and you can expect them tonight at 11:30. We'll try not to upset your relatives, but of course, that's mostly up to them.

I shall see you soon!

Regards,

Albus Dumbledore

Oh, this was good news indeed! He'd have much more time to spend on holiday with the people he considered his real family, and he'd get out of here before he could give in to temptation and get himself expelled from Hogwarts!

Glancing at his bedside clock, he saw that he had about two minutes to pack all his things. What to grab first? There was no point worrying about the Dursleys being upset about this impending visit; they'd gone out for the evening to see the once-bloated Aunt Marge. They wouldn't be back until the middle of the night. He gathered up his schoolbooks from the bureau, next to Hedwig's cage. He hadn't needed to hide them this year, but still, he hadn't cracked open a single one yet.

Before he could even get his trunk opened, he heard commotion from downstairs. He wheeled around, throwing open his door, and raced down the steps. As he ran down the hallway, he could see through the kitchen door when someone turned on a light. He entered the room, looking around to see who would be escorting him to the Burrow. Instead of the Weasleys, he saw Mad-Eye Moody, Professor Lupin, Tonks, and two more people he'd never seen before.

The first, a young man, blond, tall, his face turned away from Harry, was playing with the light switch, turning it on and off, on and off. Moody rolled his normal eye impatiently. "Blast it all, keep it on! This isn't your first trip into the Muggle world, lad!" The man stopped instantly, turning a rueful smile to the rest of the group. Moody caught sight of Harry. "Harry, all right? Ready to go? You got Dumbledore's letter by now?"

"Yes, I got it about two minutes ago. I'm not quite packed yet. Hi Tonks, Professor Lupin."

"Forget the 'Professor', Harry," said Lupin. "I'm not teaching anymore, remember? Well, not officially, anyway. You can call me Remus."

Harry took in the ragged clothing and the tired, wan look of Lupin's face. He wished he could ask what Lupin was doing nowadays, but didn't want to embarrass him in case he hadn't been able to find other work yet. Wizards weren't so quick to hire werewolves.

Tonks came around the counter to wrap her arms around Harry. "It's been a while, hasn't it? Good to see you again!" Harry returned her hug and complimented her on her shocking dayglo-green hair, which stood out all around her head in spikes. Tonks looked different every time one set eyes on her, even several times within an hour. "It's good to see all of you," he said with feeling.

"Well, you wouldn't have met Raphael yet," Mad-Eye said. "He's just been taken on by the Order. Comes straight out of India, where his parents were teaching at the wizard school there. Couldn't keep a job there; times are too hard. So he tagged along with his folks when they transferred back out here. He's hoping to land a teaching job himself at Hogwarts, but he hasn't worn down Dumbledore just yet."

"Nice to meet you," Harry said. "Likewise," Raphael answered. "Dumbledore has some pretty high standards. I'm not likely to get a job there, but I thought I should at least try, to appease my folks. I doubt that even they could get work there. Rahabid, where I went to school, was always desperate for reliable teachers. Anyone could get work there. Hogwarts is different."

"So how come you couldn't find work at Rahabid, then?" Tonks asked bluntly.

"They're closing it down. No one left to teach. Everyone's leaving in droves. That's why Mum and Dad have transferred back here. Dad will end up in a Muggle university, no doubt. He's a whiz at math. He won't mind. But my Mum is afraid to teach Muggles. She thinks they're smarter than she is, so she might not try it."

Harry only heard half of the conversation. His eyes were drawn to the other person there, one of the most beautiful girls he'd ever clapped eyes on. Her hair was black as night, long and loose around her face, and her eyes were almost as dark. They were a soft brown, not coldly black, and when she looked his way and smiled charmingly, he was hooked.

"And this'll be our Tanya, then," Moody continued. "She's Dumbledore's discovery, you might say. Tanya is to be the first gypsy to be accepted at Hogwarts."

Tanya took a few steps and extended her hand to Harry. "I've heard a lot about you, Harry. It's good to finally meet you." A strong bit of an Irish brogue, but with something else in it that Harry couldn't place.

He took her hand, willing himself to speak. It wasn't easy. He suddenly understood why Ginny had run away from him the first time they'd met. Other than wishing he could sink through the floor into oblivion, his mind was totally blank. He tried for a smile, but couldn't help thinking it probably looked more like a grimace.

She didn't seem to mind, as her expression didn't change. She held eye contact for another moment or two, or as far as Harry could tell, another month or two, then looked at Moody, allowing Harry to recover his senses.

Moody cleared his throat. "Well, let's get you ready to go, then, Harry. How much help do you need packing?"

"I'll help," volunteered Tanya. "You can give Raphael a thrill and show him how the light in the refrigerator works."

She headed for the door Harry had come through moments before, then turned at the threshold, waiting for Harry to catch up and lead the way. Harry floated past her, down the hallway and up the stairs, racking his brain for something witty and charming to say to her.

As they entered his room, he still hadn't thought of anything, but Tanya didn't seem to mind. She saw Hedwig in her cage and headed over to her. "What a beautiful owl," she said. "She's truly elegant, isn't she?" Hedwig preened, apparently realizing she was being flattered. But then, to Harry's surprise, Hedwig came out of her cage and onto Tanya's arm, nipping her finger and pulling her beak down through the long strands of Tanya's hair. Just what Harry longed to do himself.

"That's odd," Harry said. "Usually she's standoffish with strangers."

"Aye, but she has good taste, hasn't she?" She turned to him and smiled. "You'll not insult me by denying it, will you?" Her smile invited him to smile with her, and he did, already feeling more comfortable around her.

Tanya gave a slight lift of her arm and sent Hedwig back to her cage. She turned around and with a flick of her wrist, magically opened Harry's trunk. Harry was astounded to see no wand in her hand. "Are those all the books that are going?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "How do you do that? I mean, with no wand?"

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "I haven't learned to use a wand all that well yet, have I? I mean I've almost no wizarding education so far. This will be my first year. I've been doing magic since I was on my grandfather's knee without a wand. I never knew they were used until recently."

"You mean gypsies don't need wands?"

"I guess not. I've never heard of one using a wand."

"How old are you?" As soon as he asked, he wondered if it was too personal a question to ask a girl he'd just met.

"I'll be sixteen at the end of the year," she replied easily.

"Then will you be starting your sixth year, or will you be with the first years?"

"Professor Dumbledore wants me to spend the summer at Hogwarts, getting personal instruction from the teachers in the basics. Then, just before the fall term starts, he'll decide which year to put me in."

"So, depending on how much you can learn this summer, you might not have to start out in first year?" Harry knew that she wouldn't be able to cram five years of wizarding education into the ten weeks left of the summer. It dashed his hopes that they'd have any classes in common.

"Possibly not," she replied indifferently. "It all depends on how quickly I can pick up what you lot have already learned. Professor Dumbledore doesn't seem worried about it. And your Ministry said they'd administer the O.W.L.s at any time Dumbledore decided I was ready."

Harry still had misgivings about 'his' ministry. He couldn't quite forgive Cornelius Fudge for waffling so long about Voldemort's return to power.

"So," Harry said, "have you started your classes yet?"

"Just a little bit of coaching from Professors Lupin and Snape, whenever we've had the time."

"Even Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"*Especially* Defense Against the Dark Arts. And they didn't make me try to use the wand. I was given a free hand to handle things the way I wanted. I'm sure that's the only reason I was able to do anything. That wand is going to take a bit of getting used to."

Harry looked more closely at her. She didn't seem aware of the scrutiny; she was concentrating on piling things he didn't plan to take into the trunk. He removed them as he studied her. What had her life been like that she could do so well in defense without having studied what the rest of them had studied, had experienced? He was just about to ask when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Tonks poked her head in the door and grimaced. "Aw, Harry, you're getting as neat as your persnickety aunt! How come you cleaned your room?"

"I was bored, I guess." Harry grinned. Tonks used her wand to heft his now-closed trunk and Tanya closed Hedwig into her cage before picking it up. "Have we forgotten anything?" she asked.

"No, I think that's everything."

Back in the kitchen, Moody went over the travel plans while Lupin wrote a note to leave the Dursleys. "Okay, same as before. Harry, you keep to the middle of the pack while I fly up front, Lupin to the rear. Tonks, Raphael, and Tanya will be circling around you Harry, so keep your head down. I've seen Tonks fly and it's no better than she walks."

Tonks made a face behind his back, knowing he'd see it with his wonky eye. He chose to ignore it, saying instead, "And Tanya, you keep to your path. No flying off like you're a pup fresh off a leash, now."

Tanya frowned good-naturedly at him. "Now, won't you be giving me credit for a smidgen of self-discipline? *know* why I'm here."

Moody turned to Harry. "Tanya only learned how to fly a broomstick yesterday, specially for this trip. She's like a kid with a new toy, so if she does fly off, don't follow her. Leave her to me. She can't be tamed, but she might come quietly if handled right."

Tanya made a rude noise at his parting back, then picked up Hedwig's cage again. Raphael quickly moved to her side and took the cage from her, smiling widely. Tanya relinquished her hold on the cage and smiled back at him. Harry inwardly groaned. Just his luck that someone had already staked a claim on her. She was too pretty to be lonely. And he couldn't compete with Raphael's charm and Adonis looks. He sighed to himself and followed the rest out to the back garden.

As usual, as soon as he kicked off on his broomstick, most of his cares went flying away as well. There was just no room up here in the sky for worldly troubles. As he felt the wind blowing through his hair and the stars rushing to meet him, he felt he could face anything, good or bad, as long as he could fly.

It was an uneventful trip; all too soon, the lights of London showed through their cloud cover, and Moody began a descent that the rest followed. Tanya hovered over the rest as they touched down, as if to watch how it was done. Harry suspected that although she seemed to enjoy flying, she probably didn't care much for landing. And he was right. She landed hard, throwing herself off her broom. He rushed forward to see if she was all right, but he wasn't quick enough. Raphael was already helping her to her feet.

"It must be the way I lean forward, isn't it?" she asked no one in particular. "Maybe a lighter touch . . ." She didn't seem any worse for the wear, and they began walking away from the empty field they'd landed in. As they walked down the street, Harry looked around. There seemed to be no one in sight. It must be after midnight by now, and by the looks of this neighborhood, one would think that's when the activity started. But the area looked tired and worn, and Moody stopped in front of two decrepit buildings, waiting for the rest to catch up.

"Remember how to get in, Harry?" he asked.

Harry nodded. He concentrated on the address, 12 Grummauld Place, and it appeared between the two other tenement buildings, pushing them aside. The house looked sad and forlorn, empty of the presence a home should have. Harry wondered that they came here instead of the Burrow, but was too taken up with flying and with Tanya's presence to ask. Now that his godfather was dead, he had no real desire to be here.

As they entered the house, and Tonks knocked over the umbrella stand that seemed to be waiting for just such an accident, the portrait of Mrs. Black began screaming about half-bloods and trash in her house. But now there was something new. Her fury seemed to be directed at gypsies, and Harry was surprised. Did Mrs. Black feel gypsies were worse than her much-hated mudbloods?

As Moody and Lupin wrenched the curtains over the portrait to encourage Mrs. Black to quiet down, Mrs. Weasley scurried down the hallway from the basement stairway. She ushered them all to follow her down to the kitchen, where they could talk without having to endure the tongue-lashing from long-dead bigots.

After accepting and then squirming out of Mrs. Weasley's hug, Harry assured her that, yes he was fine, yes he was hungry, and yes they'd had a good flight. She already had food cooking on the stove, and Ginny and Ron had set the table. Tanya had gone into the pantry, lugging back a sack of potatoes and a couple cans of some kind of vegetables. She set to work, peeling the potatoes and adding them to the cauldron she'd taken from the fire. For some reason, Harry felt it was odd that she'd be doing that by hand with all the magic she could do. Maybe she wasn't allowed; what underage wizard was?

"Harry, there you are." Lupin had come into the room and sat down opposite Harry at the table. "There are some things you should know right off. First of all, this is now your house. There is still some red tape to clear up, but Sirius left this property to you. So, even though you can't take possession of it just yet, no one is going to contest Sirius' will, so it's just a matter of time. Since you'll be sixteen in a few weeks, you'll probably be able to take possession of it before you get back to school.

"Therefore, if there's something about it you'd like to change, just let us know. You can't use magic here, of course, not while you're still fifteen, but there are things you can do. If you'd like a wall knocked down, we can do it for you, or if you'd like to redecorate, et cetera, well, it's yours now."

"Sirius left me his house?" Harry swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "Does that mean I never have to go home to Privet Drive again?"

"Well, if I were you, I'd chat with Professor Dumbledore about that. He'll probably tell you that he can't stop you from staying here, but I'm also sure that he'll tell you to keep your home at Privet Drive as long as you can. You'll be of legal age in a few weeks, but you still aren't quite equipped to support yourself while you're still in school. This is part of the Muggle world, after all, and being on your own is harder than it sounds."

It was too much to think about right now. Harry's eyes kept straying to Tanya's hands working with the knife, moving so quickly that she might have been peeling potatoes every day of her life, and looking so comfortable with a knife in her hand that it might have been part of her. Then Raphael sat down next to her, and Harry couldn't see her unless he were to lean over; he was really beginning to resent Raphael.

"As such, you are the new owner of Kreetcher, the pleasant little house-elf hereabouts," Lupin continued sardonically. "He's rather shifty, and my own knee-jerk reaction would be to give him his freedom immediately. However, as I'm sure you realize, he could do serious damage to the Order if he's free. As your property, though, he's obliged to keep your secrets. Just be very careful not to give him clothing. But I'm sure you know all that."

"Sure, I remember," Harry answered. "How's he taking it? I mean, is he aware this is my house now? Does he resent it?"

"He resents it, I'm sure. But he has no choice but to serve you. He knows that. Just don't turn your back on him."

Tanya stood up to put the cauldron back on the fire. As Harry watched the rear view of her, stunning in faded blue jeans, he heard the door open and turned to see Snape entering the kitchen. His stomach suddenly felt like he'd swallowed a lead ball. Did he have the right to order Snape from his house? Of course he couldn't, he reasoned. Snape, like it or not, was a member of the Order, and where else would the Order meet? His hands were tied, and he began to feel that Sirius didn't do him any favors leaving his possessions to him.

Snape ignored Harry and Ron, nodded curtly to Moody and Tonks, sneered at Lupin and glanced at Mrs. Weasley, who was standing at the stove glaring at Tanya. What was that all about, Harry wondered. Perhaps Mrs. Weasley didn't like anyone interfering with her cooking?

Tanya turned and saw Snape. "Top of the evening to you," she said to him. "Or should I say, morning? What brings you out here this late?"

"I have news from Dumbledore. He wants to make sure Potter arrived safely, and obviously doesn't trust any of you lot to do this. Also, he's coming tomorrow to talk to all of us. And Tanya," he added, leveling a look at her that seemed to say more than his words. "He wants a word with you especially."

"Well, whatever it is, I didn't do it," she replied saucily. "Yet," she added with an impish smile.

To Harry's surprise, Snape actually smiled. "No doubt you will," he told her. "That's probably why he wants to speak to you. I'd love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation."

There was something different about Snape, but Harry couldn't place it. Other than the smile, that is, something which Harry had never seen Snape do before. He looked more closely, but looked away when Snape turned to him. "I trust I can tell Dumbledore that his precious Potter is none the worse for the trip out?"

Harry's face burned. Couldn't the snake stop from insulting him even when people were around? Tanya spoke up. "Depends on who you're asking. Whatever Mad-Eye says, he's lying. I didn't put a foot wrong."

"Quit your bellyaching," Moody said, smiling. "I wouldn't dream of making any disparaging remarks about you. I'm afraid I'd wake up a frog or something similar." His eye, his good eye, that is, was twinkling. Apparently, teasing Tanya was something of a sport with this group. Harry was even more intrigued. She seemed to dish out as good as she got. But what was Mrs. Weasley's problem with Tanya? Harry was now sure that he wasn't imagining the dirty looks Mrs. Weasley kept sending Tanya's way. He'd have to ask Ron about that when he got the chance.

"Severus, will you be joining us for a late supper?" Lupin looked as though he didn't want to ask, but felt he had to, for propriety's sake.

"Actually, I'd love to." Snape was full of surprises tonight, Harry thought. "If you have enough to go around, that is," he added, looking hopefully at Mrs. Weasley.

"Of course," she replied. "There's plenty. I never got out of the habit of cooking for nine. Arthur won't be along until tomorrow, Charlie and Bill are out of town, Percy's still refusing to come to his senses, and the twins have set up house of their own now. I'm feeling the empty nest syndrome."

"Well, take dubious comfort in the fact that your youngest son here will probably be with you quite a while longer," Snape said waspishly. "If his grades in Potions are anything to go by, he'll not land a decent job soon."

Ron was crestfallen. "Does that mean I didn't get an O.W.L. in Potions?"

"You'll know your scores soon enough. But I'm curious . . . did you really expect an O.W.L. in Potions?"

"Actually, I'll be surprised if I get any O.W.L.s," Ron admitted morosely. "I kind of fell apart under the pressure of the exams. I was hoping it was my imagination, though."

Snape turned to Harry. "And you, Potter, how do you think you did?"

Harry refused to rise to his bait. "I haven't given it a thought since the last exam. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." Snape merely cocked an eyebrow and turned away.

He handed Lupin a large, stoppered bottle. "That should last for another couple of months," he said.

"Thank you, Severus," Lupin replied. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

"I live to serve," Snape lied acidly. The Potions master had evidently whipped up another batch of the potion that enabled Lupin to lead as normal a life as it is possible for a werewolf to live.

"The dreaded O.W.L.s," mused Tanya. "I wonder how long it will take for me to be ready for them?"

"Remarkably a lot sooner than you'd think," Snape said. "We're all astounded at how quickly you've picked up on things like History, Divination, Charms, and Potions. I know that wasn't part of your education thus far."

Tanya looked at Snape thoughtfully. "Aye, maybe, but surely it will take a couple of years before I'm ready for the O.W.L.s?"

"We'll just leave all that to the headmaster, shall we?" Snape walked over to where Tanya stood near the sink. "I personally think we've been pushing you too hard. There's no point in forcing all that into your brain when you really need to catch up on your sleep. You shouldn't have to worry about schoolwork on top of Order business."

"Worried is a strong word," she answered. "But it will mean the difference between starting off in first year or not. I'm not sure I'd be comfortable being in classes with students four and five years younger than I."

"I thought Professor Dumbledore already told you that you'd be in sixth year?" Lupin asked. "He wouldn't have done so if there was any chance it wasn't true."

"No matter," Tanya said. "I'm enrolled; that's the important thing."

As they began eating supper, conversation lulled, giving Harry time to think. Now he was anxious about his O.W.L.s, and he hoped that Tanya would be in sixth year. It would be nice to share some classes with her. Classes that Raphael wouldn't take part in, having already completed his schooling.

"Is Hermione coming here this summer?" Harry asked Ron.

"Not until later next month. She went on holiday with her parents, I think she said the States. She should be here in time for your birthday, though."

"You have a birthday coming up, do you?" Tanya asked.

Harry nodded. "The end of next month."

She nodded thoughtfully, and looked back down at the food she was mostly just stirring around. Harry wasn't the only one to notice this.

"Aren't you hungry, Tanya?" Snape asked kindly. Another first from Snape, Harry thought. What was different about him, he asked himself for the tenth time.

"More tired than hungry, I have to admit."

Both Snape and Lupin looked up in interest. "You haven't been . . ." Lupin began.

"Oh, leave off, will you?" Tanya bristled. "I don't need to be reminded of things I didn't want to hear in the first place, and neither am I a baby to be molly-coddled."

"Touché," Snape answered with a smile, leaving Harry to wonder what was going on here that he didn't understand. He glanced at Ron, who seemed as bewildered as Harry at the exchange.

As everyone finished up, Mrs. Weasley began clearing the table. "Shoo! Off to bed with you lot, before you'll need carrying up. Tanya, you can help with the clearing up."

Harry was amazed. Tanya was the only one at the table who truly looked like she was tired, yet she was the one Mrs. Wesley put to work. But Tanya stood up obediently and waved her hands to send the dirty dishes to the sink.

"Tanya!" Mrs. Wesley hollered. "No underage magic here!"

"Just file a grievance with Dumbledore and stop ordering me about," she said listlessly, as if it were a running argument she was tired of having. "And be grateful you're not doing it alone. Besides, I have to practice, don't I?"

Ron steered Harry out of the kitchen and up the stairs. "What's going on between those two?"

"Well, I'm not really sure, except that Mum hates gypsies. She thinks they're trashy and filthy, you know . . . trampy. She doesn't understand why Dumbledore admitted her into the school. Gypsies aren't wizards or witches, but you know Dumbledore. He always knows things we don't."

"I've never known your mum to be prejudiced against anyone. What's this thing she has against gypsies? Tanya doesn't seem trashy."

"I don't think so either," Ron said. "But who knows where people get their ideas? Maybe her folks hated them, too. So many people do, wizards and Muggles alike. I think Tanya's used to being hated."

"That's horrible," complained Harry. "Did she ever say anything or do anything to your Mum?"

"What you heard just now was the worst I've ever heard. And I think she was only being impertinent because she's tired. They really are working her hard."

By now they were in the room on the second floor that they'd shared last summer. Harry continued his probing. "And why was Snape and Lupin so interested in why she was tired? What did they think she was doing that she's so tired? It is late, after all. Why shouldn't she be tired?"

"Some of the magic she can do is like nothing a wizard can do," Ron explained. "It's magic of a different kind; gypsy magic. It takes a lot of mental energy or something, and she gets tired afterward. Tired enough to pass out, actually. Or so I've heard. And I think they're afraid she'll use the magic in a way they don't want her to. I guess they have no real control over her; not the way the Ministry has over us."

"What else have you heard?" Harry wondered if George and Fred had bequeathed Ron a pair of extendable ears.

"Only that You-Know-Who has supposedly been spotted in London; I guess he's looking for you. Did you know that the Dementors have left Azkaban? Everyone's afraid that the Dark Wizards will escape again, Mr. Malfoy included."

Harry hadn't thought about any of that, his thoughts having been taken up with Tanya. "Have they?"

"Not yet," Ron said grimly. "But it's probably just a matter of time. Why do you think you came here under the guard patrol?"

"Come to think of it," Harry thoughtfully murmured, "why was Tanya part of that group? She's a student at Hogwarts. None of the rest of us would have been sent. Is she actually a member of the Order?"

"Yeah, she is. The *only* underage member, as a matter of fact. When I protested that if she could be in, then I could, and you and Hermione as well, Dumbledore said that if

we could do what she could do, he would consider it. But he wouldn't say exactly what she could do. Something invaluable to the Order, obviously. But he was very insistent that she be one of your escorts."

Harry lay down on his pillow to digest this information, wanting to know so much more. He tried to imagine what sort of magic she had that no one else in this wizarding world had, and drifted off to sleep to the sound of Ron's voice going on and on about what he'd do if he got all the O.W.L.s he hoped for.

Tanya
Raphael
Snape

□
□
□

Secrets and Mysteries

Chapter 2 of 20

As we see more of a glimpse into what Tanya is all about, we're left with more questions than answers.

Disclaimer: JKR owns what you recognize; I contributed the characters of Tanya and Raphael.

Rating is for later chapters

Chapter Two

Secrets and Mysteries

Harry awoke early the next morning. Ron was still lightly snoring in the next bed, and the sun was reluctant to come out and greet the day. Harry briefly considered rolling over and trying to fall asleep again, but Hedwig had noticed him stirring and softly hooted from her cage. She wanted to get out and get some exercise.

"Sorry, old girl," Harry regretfully told her. "I can't have a snowy owl flying around outside. You'd attract too much attention -- the sort of attention we can't afford." Hedwig hooted her disdain and turned her back on him. Harry sighed and began pulling on his clothes.

He headed quietly down the hallway to the stairs and almost ran into Tanya, just having come down from the upper level.

"Top of the morning to you," she said cheerfully. "Had a good sleep?"

"Good enough. How about you? You seemed real tired last night."

"Aye, but it was a good tired . . . I think we got a lot accomplished."

"What was it you were doing?"

"Business for the Order. I had to track someone down. Can I have a word with you?" Without waiting for an answer, she pulled him upward, to the third floor. Harry went willingly, noticing her frown as she moved up the steps.

"Are you all right?"

"Aye, I'm fine," she answered, slightly surprised. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem like you're in pain."

"Aye, just a bit stiff. It's been a while since I've slept on a floor, that's all."

"Why are you sleeping on a floor? Ginny has an extra bed in the room next door to Ron and me."

"That's for Hermione Granger, when she gets here. I'm in the attic with Buckbeak."

Harry stopped, speechless. "Why in the world would you be sleeping in the attic, with all these rooms available?"

"They're not fit for sleeping in, apparently. Mrs. Weasley put me in there. Now come on, I have to tell you something I'm not supposed to tell you."

She pulled him into the attic, where he bowed to Buckbeak, then went over to pat him. "I guess he really misses Sirius, doesn't he?" Don't we all, he moaned to himself.

"He seems despondent at times, but it's better when we can let him out for exercise. We can't do it too often of course, but he'll be going to a better home soon. You'll stick it out a little longer, won't you, Buckbeak." Buckbeak seemed to understand, and playfully pushed Tanya.

"Where's he going?"

"There's someone named Hagrid at Hogwarts. Do you know him?"

"Oh yeah," Harry said fondly. "I know him well. Buckbeak will be glad to see him again. They're old mates."

Harry looked into the corner and saw a thin, raggedy looking blanket.

"Please tell me that's not where you slept," Harry said, looking directly at her.

"Well, I tried to sleep on the roof, but it got a little too cold out there. I've gone soft, sleeping in beds the last few years."

"I'm trying to understand why Mrs. Weasley put you up in the attic instead of a bed like a normal person. What's going on?"

Tanya's face reddened slightly and she looked down at the floor. "Look, I'm going to tell you some things that might better be left unsaid. I mean, I know what it's like not to

know what everyone else knows, and I'm going to risk everyone's anger in telling you. So, please, for my sake, keep it to yourself." She looked up at Harry for confirmation. He nodded solemnly.

"First of all, I'm guessing it's pretty obvious that Mrs. Weasley doesn't hold me in high esteem." Harry snorted.

"Her hatred is for my people, not specifically me. It's not so hard to take, knowing that. I mean, I've been sneered at by experts. She's just a novice at hatred. So don't go holding it against her. She's thinking about what her parents, her grandparents, and probably her entire ancestral family have always believed about gypsies. Some are true, most are not. But gypsies are notorious for being mysterious. We're taught to be that way. It's not for the gaje to know what we're all about. So we bring on a lot of that fear and hatred ourselves. We're different. People are always afraid of what's different. It's not entirely her fault."

"Who are the gaje?" Harry asked. He'd never heard of it before.

"People who are not gypsies."

"Oh. Still, she could have given you a better bed."

"I think she doesn't want me contaminating linens that other people will eventually use. Like I said, she doesn't exactly think highly of me. But that's all of no consequence. I wanted you to know that you're in danger from Voldemort and other Dark Wizards who are gunning for you."

"That much I know. They finally saw fit to tell me things like that." Harry remembered how frustrated he was with the attitude that ignorance was bliss. But Dumbledore had come clean at the end of term. No more would he keep Harry in the dark, thinking he was protecting him.

"Okay, so you understand why there were so many of us bringing you here last night. But there's more you need to know . . ."

Just then they both heard the footsteps coming up the last flight of stairs. Tanya pushed Harry to the door and they both scampered out of the attic and down the stairs that Mrs. Weasley was just coming up.

"What the devil are the two of you up to?" she asked suspiciously.

"He wanted to say hello to Buckbeak, of course," Tanya lied smoothly.

"He knows where the attic is; you don't have to escort him there."

Harry hated that they were talking as if he wasn't even there. And Tanya didn't bat an eye when lying to Mrs. Weasley. Was she so skilled at it?

"Don't you be worrying your motherly head about Harry," Tanya said. "I wasn't trying to seduce him."

"And I'll have none of your back talk, you sassy thing, you! I could just as easily have you sent back to where you came from!"

"Do you have that much influence over Dumbledore, then? Well, knock yourself out; maybe he will turn me out. But then you'll have to talk Kreacher into helping you out around the house. Good luck with that."

Tanya pushed past Mrs. Weasley, who stood fuming, speechlessly glaring daggers at Tanya's back. Harry followed quickly, not wanting Mrs. Weasley to put him in the awful position of taking sides.

As they rounded the bend to the last flight down, Tanya quickly whispered to Harry, "Come up to the attic after lights out tonight. That's the only chance I'll have to tell you what I have to tell you." With that she turned, not toward the kitchen, but toward the front door. Harry watched her walk away, enjoying the view in spite of his inner turmoil. She moved too near the curtained portrait of Mrs. Black, however, and as the curtain drew away from the portrait, Mrs. Black's dreaded shrieking filled the hallway, waking up the rest of the house.

Harry ran forward, working with Tanya to pull the curtains back over the portrait. "I wish I could remove this stupid thing!" he swore.

Tanya looked thoughtfully at him. "Why don't you, then? It is your house, you know."

"Everyone has tried. She'd put some kind of sticking charm on it to prevent it being moved. Just like the family tree in the den."

With Mrs. Weasley coming down the last flight, followed closely by a bleary-eyed Ginny and Ron, Tanya turned tail and almost ran out into the morning. Harry wished he could follow her.

As he followed the others down to the kitchen, he remembered the conversation he had with Tanya in the attic. He remembered something that didn't register at the time; now he recalled it easily. She was able to say Voldemort's name without flinching, without hesitating. Why was that? Was it because she'd grown up in a gypsy world as opposed to the wizard world?

In the kitchen, Snape and Lupin had been having a stilted conversation, obviously trying to be civilized to each other. It couldn't have been easy, Harry knew. The bad blood between them went back a long way.

Harry expected to be put to work once breakfast was done, cleaning the house. But that had been done a couple of years before, and it had been kept up. Sirius had nothing better to do than housework, Harry surmised. More's the pity. How bored must he have been, cooped up here like a prisoner, while Wormtail wandered around freely. Harry once more felt badly that things didn't work out they way he and Sirius had wanted. He forced his mind away from these depressing thoughts and brought his attention back to the conversation going on at the table.

"So they agreed it would be okay for her to come now," Ron was saying. "I guess even the Muggles mess up sometimes, don't they?"

"Even more than you know," Lupin replied. "So, what plans do you lot have, with the limitations you'll have as well?"

"Oh, who knows, Hermione will be bound to think of something. She always has good ideas. I just hope they don't involve schoolwork. It's too soon to think about that." Ron, typically, rejected anything involving academics, especially since they were supposed to be on holiday.

"So, Hermione's coming here now?" Harry was looking forward to it. He'd always found it easy to talk to her, and Ron was right. Without Hermione, it seemed like something vital was missing.

"Sure, she'll be here soon. You weren't listening, I guess, but their passports have been messed up and they couldn't travel to the States."

"She'll be on us about Kreacher," Ginny said. "That's one thing. I have to admit, I think she's off her rocker about this particular house-elf. He's not worth trying to befriend."

"Dumbledore says Kreacher is what we humans have made him," Harry said. "But still, he's not the only house-elf in the world. Why does he act that way when the others don't?"

"Because of all the years he'd spent serving Mrs. Black," Lupin put in ruefully. "That's enough right there. There's no excuse for him, really, but we're stuck with him."

Tanya had come back into the kitchen silently, taking in the conversation. Kreacher was right on her heels, sneering, knowing it was him they were talking about. For once, he didn't mumble about them, but kept his silence as he headed toward his cabinet under the water heater. Tanya watched him walk away, but before he reached the

cabinet, she said, "He looks like he's dying, doesn't he?"

Kreacher stopped dead in his tracks. Motionless, he waited to hear more, not turning around. Tanya continued. "I mean, you can see death on someone just before it happens, can't you? He doesn't have much longer, you know."

Kreacher skipped the last few steps to sanctuary, and Tanya turned back to the table. Mrs. Weasley hissed her disapproval. "How dare you say such a thing to him! You knew he could hear you!"

"I wouldn't have bothered saying it if I didn't think he'd hear it," she said pertly. "Are you afraid I put a gypsy curse on him?"

"What kind of girl . . ." Mrs. Weasley muttered as she turned to the stove.

Snape replied, smiling, "My kind of girl. I never did like that sneaky elf."

Harry was dying to know what was between Tanya and Snape. He'd never heard Snape speak to or of anyone without that natural sneer in his voice. He acted as if he actually *liked* Tanya, and Harry was bound and determined to find out everything he could about her. Why she was the first gypsy allowed into Hogwarts, why Snape appeared to be her fan, and what was it that she wanted to tell him?

At the reminder of meeting her in the attic tonight, Harry felt his pulse quicken. He was afraid to admit how much he wanted to speak to her alone, in the privacy of the attic. Was this another Cho, all over again? What about Raphael? Didn't she fancy him? And why wait until tonight to speak to him? Was it possible she wanted to be alone with him? Where they wouldn't be interrupted? He felt his face growing warm, and forced his thoughts elsewhere. Ron was giving him a questioning look, and Harry knew he'd either have to make up a story of some kind or admit to Ron what he was thinking about that caused him to blush like the infatuated schoolboy he was.

Harry made it a point to help clear away the breakfast dishes before Mrs. Weasley could demand that Tanya do it. They worked together, under Mrs. Weasley's watchful eyes. It didn't take long, and they headed upstairs to the den, where the others had gone. Mrs. Weasley must have felt she should chaperone them every step of the way, and Harry wondered if it was possible for two people to get up to everything Mrs. Weasley thought they could.

As they passed by the covered portrait of Mrs. Black, Tanya stopped. "You say you would remove this portrait if you could?"

"In a heartbeat," Harry replied fervently. Mrs. Weasley continued up the stairs to the second floor.

The next instant, there was a crash as the portrait slid down from the wall and landed on the floor. Mrs. Black began her tirade once more, and Lupin and Snape came running out to see if they could quiet her. They stopped in their tracks when they saw the portrait on the floor. Harry looked at Tanya, who simply shrugged and went into the den.

Lupin gingerly pulled the portrait away from the wall and looked at the back of it. There was nothing to see except for the wire, which once held it to the wall. He shared a look with Snape, who nodded and helped Lupin carry the braying Mrs. Black from the hall, and, presumably, out the back door to the trash bin. Harry walked into the den and stood staring at Tanya, who pretended not to notice.

"What's going on out there?" Ron asked. "I don't hear the old bat screaming anymore."

"She's gone. They took her out back. I think we're finally rid of her."

Ginny looked wonderingly at Tanya. "Did you do that?" she asked.

Tanya looked anxiously at Harry. "You don't mind, do you? You did want her out of here, didn't you?"

"Sure, but how did you do it? They've tried everything."

"Not everything, obviously."

"Well, thank you for that," Harry grinned. "I think I speak for everyone here when I say, 'Well done!'."

She smiled shyly and looked at the family tree over in the corner of the den. "I can do the same for that one, if you've a mind."

Harry began to worry. Tanya didn't seem to care about repercussions. "Aren't you setting yourself up for trouble for doing magic outside of school?"

Tanya frowned thoughtfully. "I've been asked to do magic, or what can be considered magic, for the Order. I think those that would discourage it are hard put to know where to draw the line. If I'm to be allowed to perform magic for the Order, how can they tell me not to perform magic for anything else? Besides, I think the Ministry gave Dumbledore special permission for me to be tutored in magic here."

She looked up, smiling impishly. "Anyway, Dumbledore's coming today. If I'm doing something he doesn't approve of, I'm sure he'll tell me."

"Yeah, what's he got to tell us?" Ron looked worried. "None of us are in trouble, are we?"

"No," Ginny put in. I think it's a general warning about how careful we're to be because of You-Know-Who bumping around London. He also wanted to speak to Harry when he got here." Ginny seemed pretty well informed, as quiet as she was. Harry wondered how reliable her information was.

"So, we're to expect Hermione and Dumbledore all in one day," Ron said. "What do we do with the rest of the day? Hey, Tanya, fancy a game of wizard chess?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't give you much competition," she said ruefully. "I'm hopeless at chess, and I'm believing I wouldn't be much better at wizard chess, whatever that is. Besides, I have my orders already."

"What orders are they?" Harry wondered if it was connected with whatever had tired her out yesterday. Who was she tracking, Voldemort?

"Oh, same old, same old," she said evasively. "But I suppose I should see Dumbledore first, in case he has different ideas. Severus mentioned that he wanted to talk to me."

Severus? Harry was disconcerted to know they were on a first-name basis. Did Snape call her by her first name, too? He must, because Harry could swear he'd never heard what her last name was.

"Tanya, you never told me your last name," Harry asked.

"It's Relke," she said. "Of the Irish Roms."

"Is that where you're from?" Ginny asked.

"I was born and raised in County Claire," she replied. "But I spent some years in New York City before I came back hereabouts. I found . . . I mean I was in Ireland again when I heard of Hogwarts, and applied as soon as I could get here."

Harry wondered what she'd found in Ireland. And what caused her to hear about Hogwarts. He was sure the name didn't come up in idle Muggle conversation. Oh, did he have the questions to ask her tonight.

A horrible keening was coming from the hallway. They ran out to see what new horror could be there, and found Kreacher ripping his dirty fingernails down his cheeks, blood oozing slowly from the scratches. Ginny tried to restrain his hands from doing further damage, but he backed away from her and pointed a knarled old hand at Tanya.

"You filthy gypsy trash! You did it! You took out my mistress! Murderess!"

Tanya calmly surveyed him, as if she hadn't heard the insults he hurled her way. "But she isn't your mistress, Kreacher; she'd died years ago. Harry is your master, now."

"I'll not be serving any half-blood the likes of him!" he spat.

"True, you'll not be serving *anyone* much longer," Tanya told him quietly. Kreacher stopped his harangue instantly, alert, waiting.

Tanya became solicitous of him, as if he were a patient in the intensive care ward of St. Mungo's. "Kreacher, why don't you come in and lie down on the lounge for a while? You should rest."

Kreacher cried out in fear and ran away, back to the kitchen stairs, presumably to the safety of his cubbyhole.

Ron gaped at her. "Can you really convince him he's going to die soon?" he asked in a very worried tone. "Is that gypsy magic?"

"I'm merely setting up my alibi for when someone *does* kill him," she said evenly. She flicked her braid over her shoulder and turned back to the den.

Ron cast a scared look at Harry. "I never know when she's kidding."

Harry had no answer for this. He figured he'd *never* know when she was kidding. Would someone kill Kreacher? Would she do such a thing? Harry was suddenly not so sure he wanted to know everything about her.

Hermione arrived along with Professor Dumbledore later that afternoon. She threw herself at Ron immediately, and at Ron's confused, uncomfortable glance in his direction, Harry understood two things right off: Hermione no longer thought of Ron as just a friend, and Ron knew it and didn't know what to do about it. Harry himself didn't know how to feel about it. If those two started acting differently around each other, how would it affect him? Would he begin to feel like an outsider? Would they even hang out together anymore?

But then Tanya came into the hallway to see what all the commotion was about, and Harry forgot about Hermione and Ron. She shared a look with Dumbledore, who nodded slightly and ushered them all into the den. Ron, having extracted himself from Hermione's arms, pointed her to Tanya to make the introductions. Saying a quick hello to Tanya, she hugged Harry as if she hadn't seen him for much longer than two weeks. Harry wondered if maybe he hadn't read too much into her hugging Ron. Maybe she was just being emotional. This was confirmed when she hugged Ginny just as exuberantly.

Mrs. Weasley had come up into the den to greet Dumbledore, and ushered them all down to the kitchen. As Dumbledore gratefully sank into a heavy chair and accepted Mrs. Weasley's offer of tea, Hermione said, "That's what's different! What happened to Mrs. Black? We were making enough noise to wake the dead. No pun intended."

"Tanya unstuck it somehow. She's out in the trash bin now." At Ginny's words, Dumbledore looked sharply at Tanya. "And how did you manage that?" he quietly asked her.

"You know I don't know how it works," she said. "I just wanted it unstuck, and it unstuck. No one else seemed upset about it."

"It's not the portrait's removal that would upset anyone, except perhaps Kreacher. It's the magic. I still wonder if these things are beyond your control."

"It took conscious thought to remove it. It's not something I could have done accidentally. Are you having second thoughts?"

Second thoughts about what? Admitting her to the Order? To Hogwarts? Harry was avidly listening, hoping some of his questions were going to be answered, now that Dumbledore was here.

"I think second thoughts, at this point, would be like hindsight," Dumbledore said. "Utterly useless. And to stave off your next question, no, I don't have any regrets. I still think it a wise course of action. We hope to learn as much about you and your people as we can teach you about us."

Harry wondered if the reason Dumbledore did something as unprecedented as admitting a gypsy to Hogwarts had anything to do with his wanting to recruit everyone he could in the fight against Voldemort. If he had sent Hagrid to recruit giants, why wouldn't he want gypsies as well? If they all had a talent for magic like Tanya had, it would make perfect sense, wouldn't it?

"How do gypsies, in general, feel about wizards?" Harry asked her.

"I don't know, Harry," she responded. "The first in my life I ever heard there was a world of wizards was only when I met . . . it was only last year. I never heard any gypsy talk about it. I don't even know if any of them ever heard of wizards. I mean, that you really exist."

"What did you start to say, before you cut yourself off?" he asked. "When you met who?"

Tanya looked around. Dumbledore and Mrs. Weasley were in conversation together at the far end of the table, not paying attention. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were eagerly waiting for Tanya's answer.

"I met one of your wizards last year in Ireland. He was very ill, and I helped him. While he was delirious, he talked of things like magic, and wizards, and things like that. I didn't think much of it; after all, he wasn't in his right mind. But when he got better, I asked him about it, and I could tell it was real. That what he was mumbling about was true. He eventually told me about his world, and told me how to petition Dumbledore for enrollment at Hogwarts. He was very eager, all of a sudden for me to meet Dumbledore. He said I could be of great help to us all; wizards, gypsies, gaje, Muggles. So I did. He convinced Dumbledore that I should be accepted at Hogwarts."

"So, who was this wizard you nursed back to health?" Hermione asked.

"I don't think I should tell you," she said nervously. "He wouldn't like it if you knew. I think he feels he should be above illness, as if it was a sign of weakness, or something like that."

"I know," exclaimed Ron. "It was Lupin, wasn't it? He's always ill because of being a werewolf."

"Let's not be turning this into a game of twenty questions," Tanya said reprovingly. "The least I can do, for all his help, is honor his anonymity." She stood up and went to the sink to begin putting away the breakfast dishes that had been drying in the drain board. Apparently, the subject was closed. But Harry wondered if he could find out more when they had their talk in the attic. Again, he felt warmth spread through him at the idea of Tanya singling him out to tell him something no one else wanted him to know.

Lupin entered the kitchen from the back door, stomping his feet on the mat there. "Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore. Any news?"

"I think it's better kept until we're all here," Dumbledore replied. "I'm expecting Hagrid later; we won't wait for him; but we'll wait for Moody, Tonks, Snape, and Weasley to join us. But in the meantime, Tanya, if you'll come with me to the den, I'd like a word."

Tanya wordlessly left the kitchen with Dumbledore, as Snape entered the back door, and nodded to Lupin. Lupin turned to the rest. "Severus has accomplished the impossible," he began. "He was able to quiet Mrs. Black at last. Her caterwauling was attracting unwanted attention, but when the sticking charm was broken, apparently

so were any charms that protected the portrait from our spells."

Even Harry joined in the round of congratulations sent to Snape. Snape merely rolled his eyes and replied, "Even Potter or Weasley could have rendered her speechless once she was off the wall."

Just when he thought Snape was becoming more human . . . Harry thought bitterly. Always another jab. He wondered how Tanya was faring with Dumbledore. Was he reprimanding her for something? Or was she reporting to him about whatever it was she was doing for the Order?

Just then, Mad-Eye, Tonks, and to Harry's dismay, Raphael entered the kitchen. "And who do we have to thank for our quiet entrance?" Moody asked the kitchen at large. "The silence instead of old lady Black's yelling is making my ears ring."

Lupin smiled. "Tanya found a way to unstick the portrait from the wall. Mrs. Black now rests with the garbage out back, waiting for the trash collectors to give her a new home."

"Brava, Tanya!," called Tonks, looking around. "Where is she?"

"She's in the den with Dumbledore," Moody answered. "Didn't you see them as we passed?"

"No, I was keeping my eye on that blasted umbrella stand."

"So, what's Dumbledore want with Tanya?" Raphael asked Lupin. "I thought he wanted to talk to all of us."

Lupin shrugged. "He does, but obviously he wants Tanya's report about what she found out yesterday. I'm sure he'll bring us all up-to-date."

Raphael continued to look worried. Harry wondered again what it was Tanya was doing for the Order. With the frown that was on Snape's face, it must be something dangerous. He did seem very protective of her. What special talents had she that moved Dumbledore to act so quickly to recruit her, not just for Hogwarts, but for the Order?

Arthur Weasley came into the room and kissed Mrs. Weasley. She jumped up to get him some coffee as he greeted everyone, including Raphael. It seemed everyone knew everyone else, and Harry had been left out of things. Until yesterday. What had Dumbledore's letter said? Certain things have been happening these last two weeks . . . Just about the time Tanya came along. Was it her skills that allowed Harry to leave Privet Drive so soon? And Dumbledore had insisted she be part of Harry's escort. Was this inexperienced, young, non-witch supposed to be his baby-sitter? Harry felt his face burn at the thought. With everything that he'd been through, everything he'd done in the name of survival, did everyone still think he needed a protector?

"What's wrong, Harry?" He had forgotten Hermione was here, and she'd been studying his face, alert as always to his ever-changing emotions.

"Nothing," he lied. "Are you very disappointed about not seeing New York?"

"Yes," she admitted, "but I'm glad to be here, too. New York will always be there. I've already learned so much about it, when we were getting ready to go. Ginny said that Tanya used to live there; maybe she can tell me more about it later."

Dumbledore came back into the kitchen; Tanya was nowhere in sight. He motioned everyone to sit, and conjured up an easy chair for himself to sit in. Harry glanced around the table. Snape, Lupin, Moody, Tonks, the Weasley parents, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and himself. Oh, yes, Raphael was still there. Bloody hell. Apparently, no one saw fit to remove the non-members of the Order from hearing any news. Everyone was looking intently at Dumbledore, waiting for him to speak. Harry turned his attention to him.

"First of all," he began, "you all know how important it is we be discrete about being here. We can't afford any unwanted attention from Muggles, or anyone else." His eyes met each person at the table, one after another. He must have seen something in each to reassure him, because he continued. "Harry, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, I'm afraid it won't be so much fun spending your holiday here, but it would be easy enough to arrange for you all to go to the Burrow instead. What would you prefer?"

Harry piped right up. "I'd rather stay here," he said, looking around at the others for support. "It's always better to be right here to keep up with news of what's going on than wait around, not knowing." Ron and Ginny nodded.

Hermione agreed. "Those things I asked you to help me bring over will help," she said to Dumbledore. "It's amazing how fast time passes when you're busy with them." Ron and Harry looked at her, puzzled. "What things?" Ron asked her.

"Professor Dumbledore was kind enough to help me bring a television and a video game unit over. Once I hook them up, we can play games on them, with the help of a generator, of course." She looked at Harry. "You probably know all about them, having grown up in a Muggle home, like I did. But it will be all new to the Weasleys."

Harry grinned. "I used to envy my cousin his video games," he said wryly. "He never let me play them. So it will be all new to me as well."

Hermione smiled. "I guess it's settled then," she said. "We'd like to stay."

Dumbledore nodded. "I thought you might. Now for some rumor control. It has been reported that Voldemort (flinches from most at the table) has been seen in London, not far from here. But that's an exaggeration. Actually, it's Peter Pettigrew that has been spotted. However, unless things have changed radically, where Pettigrew is, Voldemort is probably not far. We are watching Pettigrew, and if he does anything that looks like he's still working for Voldemort, then we will at least know his whereabouts. That's something, at least."

"How reliable is the report of Pettigrew being seen?" Arthur asked. "The Ministry knows nothing about that."

"Very," Dumbledore replied. "Tanya was the one to find him, and there's no doubt in my mind that she knows what she's doing."

"Has she made any sort of contact with him?" asked Snape, looking very worried.

"No," was the reply. "She's not sure how to approach him. She knows we can't afford to alert him to the fact that we know who and what he is."

"Is he a rat, or a man?" Ron's question was a perfectly normal one, in that Pettigrew was a skilled Animagus. He'd been Ron's pet for twelve years, until they all were made aware of who he really was.

"Mostly a rat, but he's been lurking about a pub as a man. It seems to be his favorite haunt. So, if he is still working for Voldemort, he can't be very busy. Tanya said he spends most of his evenings there."

"She isn't thinking of making his acquaintance, is she?" Snape looked no less worried now than he had earlier.

"It's not always easy for me to tell what her plans are," Dumbledore said ruefully. "All I can do is let her know what we need, and she decides what to do about it. But she's been taking care of herself since she was very young, Severus. No need to fear for her safety."

"With all due respect, Headmaster," Snape said, not looking at Dumbledore, "sometimes I feel I'm the only one concerned for her well being. The rest of you lot seem to feel she's immortal; that she can survive on little food, little sleep, and manual labor."

Mrs. Weasley had the grace to flush at his words, but said nothing. Dumbledore nodded his head in recognition of what Snape had said. "You know her better than I do, Severus. So you know she has a will that can't be bent to our needs. She makes her own rules."

"That's what I can't understand," Mrs. Weasley put in. "She's like a wild thing that has never been disciplined, never had to follow rules! Instead of taking her in hand like you would any willful, wayward child, you encourage her! What if one day she decides that she'd rather use her talents for the other side? Wouldn't You-Know-Who love to have one of her kind on his team!"

"I assure you, Molly," Dumbledore said softly, "if only he knew about her, I'm sure he'd kill to get her. As for lack of discipline and following rules . . . gypsy life, as I understand it, is nothing *but* discipline and following rules. She's had a life you can't imagine. You'd never be able to understand her unless you, too, had that life. Unless the traditions of her people were the traditions of your people. I myself am at a loss to understand. But we can only hope she'll be patient with our ignorance.

"But also," he added, for the benefit of the younger people at the table, "she is in so many ways like a babe in the woods. She's only learned of the existence of our world a year ago, and she's going to have trouble fitting in at school. That's where I'm sure she'll appreciate already having met the four of you. At least she won't feel so all alone upon the start of the term. Because Hagrid and Professor McGonagall are also in the Order, they know about her. But of course, no one else can know about the Order, or about why Tanya is at Hogwarts. Remember, she's just another student. Whatever explanations about why she's starting so late, or who she is, let's leave to her. I don't know what she would like others to know."

They all nodded in agreement. But Harry couldn't help but wonder why someone with all her legendary magical skills would waste her time at school. Was she being sent there to keep an eye on him? A rebellious part inside him vowed he wouldn't make it easy, no matter how pretty she was. She must think of him as a little boy compared to Raphael.

"So where is Tanya, now?" asked Snape. "Does she know . . ."

"I sent her out on an errand. No, she doesn't know. At least, I said nothing about it. We'll discuss it further when she gets back," Dumbledore said, effectively cutting off any more questions. He got up to leave, thanking Mrs. Weasley for the coffee. "Oh, by the way, you can expect Hagrid to show up sometime early this evening. In the meantime, I'll go up and see to the hippogriff now. Harry, he seems to like you as much as he likes Hagrid. Will you come with me, please?"

Harry got up to follow, wondering what Dumbledore had in mind. What did he have to 'see to' with Buckbeak? And why did he cut off Snape? What might Tanya know?

When they got to the attic, Dumbledore wheezing slightly after the three-story climb, Harry bowed to Buckbeak, then approached when Buckbeak bowed in return. As he patted the hippogriff's head, Dumbledore crooned a few soft words that Harry couldn't make out, and he watched in amazement as Buckbeak began to shrink, the heavy chain falling from around his neck, until Buckbeak was roughly the size of a hamster.

"That will make for an easier trip," Dumbledore said, "for both Buckbeak and Hagrid." Harry remembered now that Buckbeak would soon be back at Hogwarts, happily living in the dark forest. Now that the Minister of Magic understood that Voldemort was indeed back, and that Dumbledore wasn't trying to get his job, he had agreed that Buckbeak should not be executed. And about time that old git began to believe us, Harry thought morosely.

He noticed Dumbledore taking in Tanya's blanket back in the corner, but when Harry expected him to ask about it, Dumbledore said nothing. Harry wondered at that. Did no one think it unusual? "Well," Dumbledore said, "she must be an excellent housekeeper. You can't even tell there's an animal living here."

"Yes," Harry said bitterly. "She's getting in lots of practice here."

"You don't approve?" said Dumbledore, smiling kindly.

"It just seems as if Kreacher is being treated with more respect," Harry answered. "There are other beds; she doesn't have to be hidden up here like she's not fit for company. And there are a lot of us here. She shouldn't have to be the one who does the kitchen work all the time."

"I think you'll find as you get to know her better," Dumbledore assured him, "that she enjoys mindless work, such as household chores. It allows her to concentrate on her mental pursuits. It's probably a form of therapy for her. And I know for a fact that she will not be doing anything she really doesn't want to do." His eyes twinkled. "Don't worry about that."

Dumbledore picked up the now small Buckbeak from the floor and gave him to Harry. "He'll probably fall asleep if you keep him in your pocket. But you have my permission to let him fly around in the house, as long as you keep him away from Mrs. Weasley. I'm not entirely sure he's housebroken."

Harry grinned and took Buckbeak. They headed downstairs, Harry stopping at the second floor and heading to his room. He lay on his bed, watching Buckbeak flying laps around the room, Hedwig eyeing him enviously.

He allowed his thoughts to roam freely, as a pleasant drowsiness came over him. Where was Tanya now? And what dangers were waiting for her? Snape seemed worried, but he also seemed to be the only one. All at once, Harry felt wide-awake. The wizard Tanya had helped; that had to have been Snape! It would explain how Dumbledore found out about her. It would also explain why Snape and Tanya were such good friends. Though Harry still found it hard to believe Snape would feel kindly to *anyone*, whether she'd saved his miserable life or not, *something* must have happened to Snape to move him to act so human!

Again, Harry allowed drowsiness to overtake him. One question answered. He'd verify it tonight, along with other questions he'd put to Tanya when they talked. As he drifted into a light doze, he felt warm and fuzzy as he imagined being alone with Tanya . . . talking intimately . . . she would dispel his misgivings about her role at Hogwarts . . . she would assure him that she wasn't even remotely interested in Raphael . . . she did not think of him as a little boy needing to be protected . . . she actually admired him . . . she was impressed with him . . .

Meeting in the Attic

Chapter 3 of 20

Harry has forgotten all about Cho Chang. And are we closer to learning some of Tanya's secrets?

Disclaimer: JKR is the genius behind all the story background and characters you recognize; I only supplied the current story and the original character, Tanya.

The rating is for later chapters.

Chapter Three

Meeting in the Attic

"Come on, Harry," Ron was shaking him. "You've slept away the afternoon. Mum wants to know if you're still breathing."

"I'm up," he said, pushing Ron away. "Talk about a rude awakening. You've spoiled a perfectly good dream."

"Oh, yeah?" Ron asked, interested. "Judging by the smile on your face just now, can I guess who you were dreaming about?"

"Go ahead, give it a try."

"Tanya."

Harry felt his face redden. "Is it really that obvious?"

"It is to me. I saw you checking her out downstairs. Good taste."

"I'm sure Raphael would agree with you. Is there anything going on between those two, by the way?"

"Not that I can tell. Raphael isn't around that much. Are you going to chat her up?"

"I'll see her tonight, after everyone settles down for the night. She says she wants to tell me something I'm not supposed to know."

"Are they starting that again," Ron asked in exasperation. "You'd think by now they'd learned how dangerous their secrets can be for you. What do you think she means, though?"

"Well, we already know that Voldemort is back, so it can't be that. And stop flinching, Ron. It's only a name."

"Maybe she just wants to get you alone," Ron said, leering.

Harry decided it was time to change the subject. He didn't know how he felt about sharing such shaky emotions with anyone, even Ron. "What about you and Hermione?" he asked him.

"What do you mean?" Ron couldn't quite pull it off; his face was reddening, proving that he knew exactly what Harry was talking about.

"That was no ordinary hug she gave you when she got here this morning."

"She hugs everyone. That's no big deal."

"Yeah, there was something different about that one," Harry said insistently. "That was different than the hug she gave me and Ginny."

"Nothing will come of it," Ron said. "You know I drive her batty."

"That's probably *why* you drive her batty. You exasperate her more than anyone I know."

Ron looked closely at Harry. "Do you think?"

"Maybe. Maybe you can ask her."

"Are you daft? I'll come off looking like a complete fool if we're wrong!"

"Well," Harry said thoughtfully, "would she confide something like that to Ginny, do you think? Maybe you can dig out some gossip from her. All girls like playing matchmaker."

"Oh, sure," Ron said derisively. "And the both of them will have a good time laughing at poor, delusional me."

"Well, it was just a thought." Harry stretched and got up from his bed, moving toward the door. "What time is it, by the way?"

"Nearly dinnertime. Snape's been here all day, fretting about Tanya. She's not back yet. Any more time goes by without word from her, he's liable to go out searching himself. What's with them, anyway?"

"I think Snape's the one she was talking about having met in Ireland. The one who wouldn't like us to know how sick he'd been, and who helped get her into Hogwarts."

"No kidding? That makes sense, now you mention it. So that's why the two of them are such mates. Is that supposed to be a secret, you think?"

"Can you imagine Snape admitting to caring about someone? He wouldn't want to admit that he's human, you know."

"But he can't hide his worrying. Do you really think he'd ever go back to supporting You-Know . . . V-Voldemort?" Ron fought past the tremor in his voice upon speaking the name out loud.

"Why would he? Dumbledore seems so sure of him."

"But Dumbledore just about came right out and said he couldn't control Tanya. What if she did go over to the other side, like Mum said? The two of them could be planning something like that right now."

"Well, did you stop to think of what made Snape sick last year in the first place? Remember that he was doing something for the Order last year at the end of term? Maybe it backfired and he was attacked or something. Maybe that's why he was in Ireland in the first place."

"Wasn't Snape there, at Hogwarts at the end of term?"

"My memories of fourth year's end of term are hazy," Harry reminded Ron. "You're talking about after the Tri-Wizard contest aren't you? I was out of it for a while afterward." Memories of that terrible time came flooding back to him.

"He left shortly before the rest of us did. Order business."

"So, apparently, there are still secrets being kept from us about Order business."

"I think that goes without saying," Ron said. "But soon we'll all be sixteen, old enough to join up. Maybe then they'll stop treating us like we need cradles."

They headed down to the kitchen, where Hagrid was taking up quite a bit of room at the table, drinking butterbeer from what could have passed for a bucket.

"A'right, Harry? Ron?" he asked jovially.

"Fine, Hagrid," Harry said. "Good to see you. I've got Buckbeak here for you. I'm glad he's going back to Hogwarts with you. He won't miss the attic, I'm sure. It's not fitting for any living thing to have to sleep there," he added, looking directly at Mrs. Weasley.

"Aye, he'll be glad to live free again." Hagrid wiped away what looked suspiciously like a tear forming at his eye.

Everyone started dishing out the food to their plates, and Harry looked around for Tanya. She wasn't there, and Snape was pacing. "Where's Tanya?" Harry asked.

"Not back yet," said Hermione. "Did Professor Dumbledore say when we should expect her?"

"No, not a word about it," snapped Snape.

Lupin shot him a sympathetic look. "Then we don't really know if it's time to worry, do we?" he asked.

Snape shot him a dirty look and sat down at the table, only to jump up again to pace once more.

The talk at the table moved to other things. The O.W.L.s examination results were due within the week. Hermione still hadn't decided what courses she wanted to pursue; Ron wondered if anyone ever got held back at Hogwarts to repeat fifth year for failing every O.W.L. exam. Harry picked at his food, wondering if he still wanted to be an Auror. Were his grades up to it? And could he change his mind, now that Professor McGonagall was so determined to see him through it? Of course, she might not be so determined about that now that Umbridge was out of the picture.

"What's Professor Umbridge doing nowadays?" he asked the table in general. "I haven't heard anything about her since she left Hogwarts, with Peeves chasing her."

"Oh, she's back at the Ministry, trying to keep a low profile," Lupin said. "No one wants to take her seriously, since her attempt to run Hogwarts. She's a lot quieter than she had been in the past, eating humble pie."

Harry felt a dim satisfaction at the news. If there had been anyone more hateful toward him than Snape, it had been Umbridge. His hand still showed a slight scarring due to his numerous detentions with her. As if he needed any more scars.

Snape had given up all pretense of eating and left the kitchen to do his pacing elsewhere. Lupin jumped up to follow him, and Harry began to feel the tension in the kitchen.

"What exactly is Tanya doing?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Now, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, "it's nothing for you to worry about. She can take care of herself. She's been doing it for years, now."

"Yes," Hermione cut in, "what's the story on Tanya? How is it that she's only fifteen years old and already on her own? Doesn't she have any family?"

"Well," Mrs. Weasley responded, "she's a bit secretive about all that. There was some sort of trouble there. I think she's been turned out. Those gypsies, they don't really raise their kids, do they? That's most likely why she's been running wild. No parental control."

"But how has she lived?" Hermione persisted. "Not many places would give work to a girl so young. What did she do for money?"

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips. "Probably things better left unsaid in polite company."

"Mum, you're not being fair," Ron piped up. "Her grandfather left her quite a bit when he died. She's only been on her own for a couple of years now. She can't have gone through it all yet. Besides, she can find money any time she needs it, most likely. She's a whiz at picking pockets." He glanced at Harry. "She entertained us before you got here by picking everyone's pockets when they came in. For a short while, you'd have to check for your wallet before you left the room."

"That's what I mean about them gypsies," Mrs. Weasley said disapprovingly. "They have no sense of right or wrong."

"Oh, Mum," Ron said, rolling his eyes, "she always gave everything back. She's good at sleight of hand, too," he added for Harry's benefit. "She said she learned it at her grandfather's knee."

"Oh, sure," Mrs. Weasley persisted, "it's a way of life for them."

"Still, it would be a great way to pay the rent."

"*Enough*, Ron," Mrs. Weasley said, sternly. "I'll not have you picking up bad habits from her. The twins are a bad enough influence over you."

"Still, sleight of hand would be useful skill to develop," said Hermione musingly. "I wonder if she'd teach me."

Mrs. Weasley sighed, giving up. She began to clear the dishes from the table, Ginny leaping up to help. "She already promised to read the tarot cards for me," she said. "And she said that my protective stone was turquoise. She said she had a necklace and earring set that she wanted me to have for warding off the evil eye."

"Codswallop!" cut in Mrs. Weasley, "Evil eye indeed! She'll have you taking risks you shouldn't take because you think you're protected!"

"Well," Ginny continued, "she probably won't have time to go back home to get the turquoise, seeing as how the Order never gives her any free time."

Hagrid agreed. "It's all a matter of priorities, you understan', but young people should ha' the time to enjoy their holidays, too."

Lupin had returned to the kitchen, catching Hagrid's words. "I wonder if she's had a holiday, ever. I don't think she was ever really given a chance to be a child."

Again, Harry wondered what her life had been like. He resented that most everyone else seemed to know Tanya so much better. How much better would he be permitted to get to know her?

After the dishes were done, Mrs. Weasley went to her room, muttering about some darning to be done, and Hagrid left for Hogwarts with the miniature Buckbeak. Lupin and Snape were heard arguing out in the back room off the kitchen, so Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Harry went into the den to play the video games Hermione had brought with her.

The time seemed to pass slowly, Harry constantly watching the clock and waiting for Tanya's return. Several times, Snape had come into the den, glanced around quickly, and left silently. Lupin had taken to his room.

It was 10:30 before they finally got tired of the games, and Harry stood up to get the kinks out of his back. At the sound of the front door closing, he headed for the hallway, almost being run over by Snape, who seemed to appear from nowhere. Tanya had returned.

She looked badly shaken up, her face white, her hands trembling. Snape put his hands on her shoulders and leaned down slightly to her eye level. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. She nodded, not speaking. Harry heard footsteps on the stairs and saw Lupin rushing down to meet them.

"Tanya! Where have you been? Did everything go all right?"

She turned to look up at him, pushing the hair out of her eyes. "Aye, as well as anyone can expect, I guess," she said. "It didn't come to much, I'm afraid. I'll have to try a couple more times before he'll mess up, though. He's afraid of his own shadow."

The effort of talking seemed to be too much for her. Her eyes rolled up in her head, and she silently collapsed into Snape's arms. He picked her up and carried her into the den, lying her down on the lounge. As Snape tried to revive her, patting her hands, and her face, Lupin left the room. He returned momentarily with an amber colored liquid in a glass. He handed it to Tanya, who by then had roused herself sufficiently to sit up, pushing Snape away. She drank the stuff down, choking a little, but Harry was

relieved to see some of the color come back into her face.

"Brandy!" she spat. "Are you trying to kill me, then? You don't just give someone brandy when they think it's water they're drinking!"

Snape looked relieved, and Lupin smiled broadly. "It's the Muggle cure-all, didn't you know that?"

"They must have to acquire a taste for it," she said. "It's awful!"

Snape had resumed his pacing. "You can't go back," he said. "Not for a while, at least. What you need now is plenty of rest. Everything else will have to wait."

"I agree," Tanya said. "It's no good showing up every night when I've never been there before. It will only make him more suspicious."

"Who's suspicious?" Harry demanded. "Who are you meeting?"

Tanya looked at him, then at Snape and Lupin. Then she defiantly turned to Harry and said, "Peter Pettigrew. I've made contact with him and I'm trying to get into his confidence. We're hoping he lets something slip and we can figure out where he's staying, at least. He's very good at making sure he's not being followed, so we had to try a different tactic. He won't be far from Voldemort at any rate."

"You mean he's not passing himself off as a rat anymore?" said Ron bitterly. "He played me for a fool for years."

"Aye, some people are rats even when they're people," she said darkly. "But I don't know how I'd get away with following a rat about. He'd know that we know. Right now he has no idea that I have anything to do with your world. He knows I'm a gypsy, and that's the only reason he even gave me the time of day tonight. He thinks we're kindred spirits, both outcasts from the world." She still seemed kind of shaky, and confirmed this by pleading fatigue and heading up to the attic.

That seemed to bring Mrs. Weasley around to her senses. "All right, you lot, there's no point losing sleep now. Up to bed, all of you." No one argued, as the only reason they were still hanging about downstairs was to wait for Tanya.

Harry was thoughtful as he followed Ron into their room. Did he dare to go up to the attic tonight? Tanya might be too tired to talk to him. Did she even remember asking him to stop by later?

He pulled on his pajamas and gave Ron a grunt now and then as he pretended to listen to his chatter. He waited until Ron's words became farther and farther apart, until finally, they stopped. Harry listened to his even breathing and wondered if Tanya was sleeping yet. And what about the others? Would they hear the stairs creak and come out of their rooms? Lupin's room was on the first floor; he'd probably not be alerted to Harry's moving about. But Mrs. Weasley was also on the second floor, and for all Harry knew, she'd sleep with one ear tuned to the hallway.

He gave it another hour by Ron's bedside clock, then he couldn't stand it anymore. He could at least see if Tanya was awake. If she were sleeping, he could just as easily retrace his steps and try to talk to her tomorrow. And if she were awake, wouldn't she be miffed if he didn't show up at all?

He pulled on his robe and slippers, trying not to make a sound as he moved toward the door. Trying to remember whether or not it would squeak, he slowly opened the door and closed it behind him. Not a sound in the hallway; even the portraits lining the walls were asleep. He slowly moved up the stairs and pushed open the attic door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. There was a light coming into the sole window. It allowed him to see into the corner, where he could just about make out Tanya lying there, still. He decided he'd have to move closer, just to make sure she was asleep.

She seemed to be, the blanket half on and half off of her. He allowed his eyes to roam over her leg, which was partially exposed and not at all bad to look at. He could make out part of her white panties, where her nightshirt had ridden up. He realized that he was taking unfair liberties, and he felt slightly ashamed of himself, so he moved closer to adjust her blanket to cover her legs completely, thereby removing temptation from his wandering eyes. But the blanket was caught between her knees, and in moving it out, she moaned in her sleep, rolling over. But now the blanket was free, and he moved to cover her with it.

He decided it wouldn't hurt to kill a little bit of time, just sitting here quietly. She might wake up. And it would also give the others in the house more time to fall more deeply asleep. He leaned his back against the wall at her feet, watching the rise and fall of the blanket that covered her chest.

She was murmuring now, still sleeping, but Harry couldn't follow the words. She was speaking a language he'd never heard before; perhaps it was the gypsy language she'd grown up with. She was rolling over again; it must be quite a dream. Harry was again feeling like a voyeur, and thought maybe he should just leave. It would probably be quite a shock if she were to wake up and find him sitting here.

Just then, Tanya sat up with a yell, staring at something that wasn't there. She obviously wasn't awake yet, or at least not aware, and Harry instinctively pulled her into his arms, holding her close, soothing her. "It's just a dream," he said to her softly, "only a dream." There was something emanating from her, something that felt almost electrical, and Harry began rubbing her back, smoothing down her hair, rocking back and forth with her. Nightmares he could relate to, and he wished he could take this one away from her. She was gasping as if she couldn't catch her breath, and Harry kept up his senseless crooning, trying to make her aware of reality by his physical contact. Little by little, she got her breath back, and buried her face in his neck. He could feel her breath on his neck, and he began to be aware of her heat beneath the nightshirt, of the soft hair through his fingers. She was almost sitting in his lap, and he'd never been more aware of the differences between the sexes. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable, but he dared not move until he was sure she was awake and alert. He was holding her close enough to feel her heartbeat against his chest, and when it slowed down, he tried again to talk to her.

"Are you awake, now?" he asked.

"Aye, I'm all right. I'm sorry," she added, trying to move away.

He held her tighter, not sure himself why. "What were you dreaming about?" He thought if she talked about it, it wouldn't have such an impact on her.

"Old memories, the ones that never fade," she answered. "It's been a while since I've had this one, though. It always feels like so much more than a dream; it feels like I relive it every time."

"How often do you have this dream?" he asked. Were they anything like the dreams he used to have of the Chamber of Mysteries? The dreams that weren't really dreams?

"Oh, just now and again," she replied evasively. "Just often enough so I don't forget, I guess."

He was still holding her closely, and as he leaned back against the wall, he drew her with him. She came willingly, and lifted her face to his. He could see her dark eyes searching his, and saw them go to his mouth. She seemed to be drawing nearer, and his eyelids got heavy as her lips came closer and closer to his. The touch of her lips on his was so soft he almost wondered if he was imagining it. Then she moved her lips across his and he felt his entire body growing warmer, the tension going through his body; he could feel every place on him that was in contact with her. He allowed his hands to run through her hair, and he could feel her backbone through her nightshirt. His right hand moved to her left leg, running up the smooth length of it to her panties; his left hand moved to the back of her head to pull her even closer into the kiss. She sighed softly, and moved her hands to his face, to his hair, running her fingers through it. She lifted his glasses off his face and put them somewhere nearby. Her lips left his to kiss his neck; Harry felt shivers running through him, could feel his muscles tightening all over. He could feel something else tightening too. It brought him to his senses.

He held her arms and moved so they were both sitting up straighter. Tanya looked at him questioningly, but said nothing. He painfully cleared his throat. His voice came out hoarsely, as he tried to explain what he was even doing here.

"I thought, if you were awake, we could talk," he tried, lamely. "I wasn't sure you remembered we were supposed to meet here, or if you weren't too tired."

"I remember," she said. She shifted so that she was sitting back against the wall next to him. She covered herself with the blanket, and looked at him. "You need to know something that I'm not even sure the Order knows yet."

"What?" He forced his mind to pay attention to her words.

"You put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban. It won't be coming as any surprise to you that he'll be wanting his revenge on you. The Ministry is now aware he's still in Voldemort's service. You've destroyed his life as he's lived it."

"It was the least I could do," Harry put in.

"Well, what you need to know is that he's no longer in Azkaban."

"He's out?" Harry was nonplussed. "How is it the Order doesn't yet know about it?"

"I'm not sure if they do or not," she said. "They haven't mentioned it to me. But, they might not, anyway."

"Why wouldn't they?"

She didn't answer that. "Do you think they'd tell you if he were?" she countered.

"I'd like to think Dumbledore would. He's more or less promised to stop trying to protect me as if I couldn't handle the news." He thought back to Dumbledore's words cutting off Snape's question about what Tanya knew. He replayed it for Tanya's benefit.

"So, maybe they don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I have to assume he'll come looking for you. And he was trusted somewhat until you exposed him, so he might know about the Order; he might know this was Sirius Black's house."

"No, they kept it from him," Harry said, confidently. "I don't think Dumbledore's ever trusted him."

"Well, that's all right, then," she said. "As long as you know to watch yourself."

"How did he get out?" Harry asked. "How was he able to get past the Dementors?" Sirius Black did it by becoming a dog. The Dementors didn't seem to sense animals. Was Mr. Malfoy also an Animagus?

"There are no more Dementors at Azkaban," she told him. "It's being guarded by goblins, at least for the time being."

"So, I guess the Dementors went over to Voldemort, after all. That's what everyone in the Order was dreading. But goblins? Mr. Malfoy must be pretty powerful to get past them," Harry marveled. "Goblins are not a race to mess with."

"It was an inside job," she said. "The goblins hired a bunch of Aurors-in-training to help guard the prison. Malfoy managed to bribe a few of them; those that really weren't destined to complete their training. They'll end up on the Dark side, mark my words."

"They know who let him go, then?"

"Not yet, but some clues are left for them to find."

"How do you know all this?"

"It's not just Pettigrew I was busy with today. I keep my eye on other things as well. And if I could figure out what happened because of the evidence left behind, the goblins should be able to. If they can't, then I'm going to have to change my mind about what I've heard about their intelligence."

"Why didn't you tell the others? They'll need to know."

"If they don't already know, they'll find out soon, I'm sure. If not, I guess I'll have to tell them. It's just that. . ."

"Just what?"

"Severus tends to get uptight about this sort of thing. I wasn't supposed to be doing anything but watching Pettigrew today."

Severus. Not Snape, or even Professor. Severus. Harry was reminded of all the questions he had wanted to ask her.

"How is it you're on a first name basis with Snape?" he asked.

"Oh, we go way back," she said, looking away.

"He's the wizard you helped out last year, isn't he?"

She looked at him, clearly not sure if she should answer. But then, "Aye, he is. He wouldn't want you to know that, though, I'm sure. You could do me a great service if you wouldn't let it slip that you know about it."

"Why does it bother him so much?" Harry wondered if Snape was purposely perpetuating the idea that he hated any and all others.

"I think it's in his nature not to let anyone know anything, and I mean *anything*, about him. He's not used to having friends."

"I don't wonder. He has a lousy personality. He's positively hateful toward me."

"He mentioned you to me a few times," she admitted.

"What did he say?"

"Well, he told me all about your history. About your parents and Voldemort, your survival, your scar, and how you were brought up not knowing anything about wizarding until you came to Hogwarts."

"Snape hates my scar, hates my fame. He always thinks I enjoy being the center of attention. Truth is, I'd give almost anything to be rid of this stupid scar, and all the notoriety that goes with it."

Tanya contemplated that information, clearly about to say something. But then, Harry was sure, she abruptly decided to say something different.

"Then he told me about your father. They were at Hogwarts together; I don't know if you're knowing that or not."

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Those were terrible times for him. He'll never forgive you for being James Potter's son."

"Sure, this supposedly intelligent wizard is going to hold my parentage against me. It's not my fault he was bullied by my father and his friends."

"He still feels strongly about it. He just never got over it. It's affected him ever since."

"I know," Harry was still bothered by unanswered questions. "Did Snape ever tell you how it all ended?"

"All he said was that it was the way he was treated at school that had sent him to support Voldemort way back then. He felt accepted for the first time in his life. But then, he sort of came to his senses and realized that Voldemort was a fake, using simple psychology and fear to win people over to his side. It was then that Severus came back, coming clean and vowing to do everything he can to stop Voldemort. And apparently, he really did take a lot of risks to help."

"That's why Dumbledore trusts him, when no one else would, I guess."

"Dumbledore's a very wise wizard, isn't he?" she asked.

"Probably the wisest wizard I've ever met," agreed Harry.

"So now maybe you understand why Severus treats you the way he does," she said.

"Not really. He's supposed to be smart enough to realize that I'm not my father, yet he treats me like I killed his parents."

"Aye, but he's not perfect. His problems didn't begin with school; he only thinks they did. His problems began before he was born. He had an awful childhood. He blocked a lot of it out, but some of it he remembers. He's never gotten over it. I think a lot of the time, he's in denial."

"Bully for him," Harry said snidely. "I hope you're not trying to recruit friends for him."

"I wouldn't presume any such thing. People have to choose their own friends. I try not to interfere with anyone's destiny."

"Is everything a matter of destiny with gypsies, then?" Harry asked, remembering some dim rumor he'd heard of gypsies and their beliefs.

"No, I don't think so. But some things seem to be."

"And what about you?" he asked, while she was still willing to talk. "What kind of life did you have? The others have said it was a hard life, and that you had some bad feelings in your family that caused you to leave them."

"Well, there are some things it would be hard for the gaje to imagine. You'd have to understand about Rom traditions, what's *merime*, what's acceptable, and things like that. I don't believe a simple answer will satisfy you. You'd end up with more questions than answers."

"Try me," he insisted.

"When we have more time," she said, conclusively. "If you don't sneak back to your room, I'm going to fall asleep on you, and I don't want to be rude."

Harry remembered her exhaustion, and was surprised she'd been able to stay awake as long as she had. "One last question for tonight, and then I promise I'll go quietly," he coaxed. "What is it you were doing that made you so tired you passed out?"

"To find Pettigrew, I had to use . . . a . . . a method that not many wizards, or even Muggles for that matter, understand. It takes a lot of mental energy. I must burn up quite a few calories doing it, because I notice that I tend to lose weight when I do it too often without resting up. I'm usually so exhausted afterward that I sleep like a rock for hours. And, in addition to looking for Pettigrew, I was also keeping an eye on Malfoy. The combination is exhausting."

"So that's what Snape and Lupin were worried about last night," he mused. "When you snapped at them to leave you alone and that you weren't a baby to be molly-coddled."

She grinned. "I was throwing Severus' words back at him from the time I had to get him back on his feet. Those were almost exactly the words he said to me. That's how I knew he was on the mend. Some people just don't like being fussed over."

Her eyes were drooping. Harry decided to take pity on her and he moved to stand up. He adjusted his robe to a semblance of order and turned to say good night to her, just to find her eyeing him up. He felt his face grow hot and forced himself to leave while leaving was still on his mind. At the door, he turned back to her, and she waved silently. He crept back down to his room undisturbed, and settled in his bed, hoping his dreams would take him right back to the attic.

Birthday Wishes

Chapter 4 of 20

Harry celebrates his birthday at Grimmauld Place. Now that he's old enough to join the Order of the Phoenix, he's hoping he'll finally learn some of Tanya's secrets.

Chapter Four

Birthday Wishes

The next week or so passed in a seemingly never-ending sameness. Members of the Order came and went, without enlightening the non-members; just a quick word or two reminding them to be careful about being seen, and the occasional update about Voldemort's suspected activities. Harry kept trying to corner Tanya, knowing she'd tell him more, but she was kept busy with learning theory as well as practical magic. They'd more or less given up on Pettigrew being a font of information.

He lay in his bed the night before his birthday, considering invading the attic. He rolled over to his side, barely registering Ron's mumblings; Ron had lately taken to dreaming of Hermione, by the sound of it, and Harry wondered if, in his dreams, Ron was brave enough to approach Hermione in a manner he'd never try awake.

But Harry couldn't reproach him for his cowardice; he was no closer to chatting Tanya up than Ron was to Hermione. He rolled over to his other side, wondering if Tanya was sleeping, whether her blanket was covering up her long legs, and what her dreams were like.

It was no good; he couldn't settle down long enough to get sleepy. If he couldn't clear his mind, his eventual dreams wouldn't provide him with any rest. Since his thoughts were so taken with Tanya, his hormone-racked dreams prevented him from looking her in the eye the next day. He finally rose from his bed to stand at the window, looking out at the dark lot below him. He could almost see the trash bins where Mrs. Black's portrait had been finally quieted, before the trash collectors had hauled her away. Looking further out, he could see the occasional car quietly speed past. Up in the sky, he could see some of the constellations Professor Sinistra had tried to teach him and his fellow classmates about. He still couldn't believe his destiny lay in them.

Turning back, half-tempted to wake Ron up, just to talk, Harry flopped back down on his bed, looking at the ceiling above him. He tried to imagine himself seeing through it, searching mentally where Tanya would have been asleep, lying on her shabby blanket, possibly tossing and turning in her sleep. He trained his eye on the corner of the ceiling farthest left and opposite the foot of his bed, willing himself to see her.

His mind began drifting, lazily turning thoughts over in his mind, his eyes getting heavy . . . he saw Tanya smiling at him, ignoring everyone else in the room . . . walking toward him . . . not even noticing that Raphael was trying to get her attention . . . he reached out for her . . . Ron gave a loud snort, and Harry sat up in his own bed with a jolt. Henry looked again up at the ceiling, coming to a decision. He'd get no sleep tonight, not while he couldn't stop thinking about her. He'd go up, and just sit quietly near her. If she woke up, fine; maybe they could talk. He resented that everyone seemed to know more about her than he. If she stayed asleep, he'd sneak away and she'd never know he had been there.

He quietly shushed Hedwig, who hooted questioningly at him. She turned her back on him spitefully as he slowly opened the door and tiptoed out to the hallway. With a quick glance toward the door that was the senior Weasleys' bedroom, he crept up the stairs and pushed open Tanya's door. Allowing himself a minute for his eyes to adjust to the dim moonlight coming in through the only window, he turned to the corner where she had set up her blankets. He fought down the yelp of surprise to find her sitting there, calmly watching him. She was sitting quietly on her blanket, as if waiting for him to approach. He did so, racking his brain for a plausible reason to be there.

He felt better as he neared, seeing her smile at him. He returned her smile as he sat down next to her, his back leaning against the wall. "So, you're not able to sleep either, ay?" she asked amicably. "I'm glad you came up."

This heartened Harry, and he began to relax. She took his hand in hers, and he felt the same magnetic electricity he'd felt once before, when he'd taken her in his arms to comfort her after her nightmare. It wasn't an altogether unpleasant sensation, and his belly did a small flip. "I was going to sneak back downstairs if you were asleep," he said nervously. "I didn't want to bother you."

"Nonsense," she said, making his heart thud. "I never seem to get a chance to talk to you unless you come up here after everyone is asleep. You'd think it was a conspiracy to keep us apart." Harry had time to revel in her attention as she shifted to sit closer to him. All the questions he had for her flew out of his head. It didn't help that her legs were bare, and he struggled to keep his eyes on her face, hoping it wasn't as red as it felt.

"You're officially sixteen, now," she said. "It's been your birthday for two hours."

"Is it really that late?" he asked, just for something to say.

"Aye. How long did you lie in your bed wondering if you should come up here?" she asked, seeing right through him.

"It seemed like quite a while," he admitted.

Her hand was warm in his, and he began to notice other things . . . her breathing . . . her eyes, so direct, looking into his . . . the way the moon highlighted her black hair . . . her soft fragrance . . .

"Why were you sitting here, awake?" he asked.

"Sometimes I have a little trouble falling asleep," she told him. "And I was thinking about you. Thinking about how you were going to feel about the birthday present I'll be giving you."

"You didn't have to do that," he said shyly.

"It gave me a lot of pleasure, deciding on what it would be," she murmured. "It will help you pass the summer, as well."

He didn't have time to wonder what it was, because she leaned toward him, her lips coming nearer to his, and his eyes got heavy as he leaned closer to her. As her lips softly brushed his, he felt her hand tighten around his, and her other hand came up to his head, running her fingers through his hair. It was such a pleasant sensation, and he lost himself in it. As her lips became more demanding, he put his hands on her hips, pulling her closer. To his surprise, she came willingly, and more so. She straddled his legs, sitting on his lap, both her hands in his hair now. He ran his hands down her legs, feeling the silky smoothness, and allowed himself a small sigh. As he moved up her legs, traveling under her nightshirt, his hands froze at the realization that he couldn't feel any panties on her hips. He felt her tongue prodding at his lips, and he opened his mouth to let it enter. He tasted the sweetness of her mouth, moving his tongue against hers, and moaned when she rocked against him. His breath was coming in gasps now, and he blazed a trail of kisses down her neck as his trembling hands moved up to her breasts.

He was gratified to realize that she was breathing just as heavily as he was, and he daringly touched her breasts over her nightshirt. He wasn't sure what he expected them to feel like, never having been this close to any girl, but he liked what he felt. He felt her hard nipples through the shirt, and he lightly rubbed against them, becoming even more excited when she moaned softly into his ear. She had unfastened his pajama shirt buttons, and Harry loved the feeling of her hands on his bare skin; he never imagined how good it would feel to allow someone so close.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down with her to the blanket. He leaned on his arms, amazed at how good it felt; his hard body pressed into her warmth, her sighs and soft moaning at what he was making her feel, the way her hands were touching him all over.

Suddenly, he felt her freeze up. Had he hurt her somehow? He felt her quick intake of breath, and lifted his head to look in her eyes, questioning. She began pushing him off her. "I heard someone downstairs, something's happening down there."

Harry remembered where they were, and knowing it would not do to let anyone know what he and Tanya were doing up here, he readjusted his pajamas. He glanced at Tanya, who had wrapped her destroyed nightshirt around herself, and was now reaching for her dressing gown. He hadn't realized how carried away they'd gotten. He dimly remembered ripping open her nightshirt, scattering the buttons everywhere. They both fought to get their breathing under control, then Tanya was pushing him in front of her toward the door. "Wait, we have to find out where it's coming from. They can't see you leaving here; we'll not hear the end of it."

She opened the door just a crack; the ruckus was coming from the first floor. Harry heard Ron's voice, sleepily complaining that he didn't know anything. Harry hoped fervently that Moody wasn't among the folks moving around down there; his eye would see right through the ceilings and doors to find Harry lurking about where he didn't belong.

Tanya pushed Harry forward, and followed him quietly down the stairs to the second floor. Hermione was just coming out of her room when she caught sight of them. She stopped, speechless, and Tanya pressed her finger to her lips to signal to Hermione not to say anything. She pushed Harry down the hall toward his room. Hermione was smiling annoyingly now; apparently, they had her seal of approval. Tanya waved her hand, and amazingly, she was now carrying a tray of snacks and a couple of soft drinks. Before she could say a word, however, Ron and Mrs. Weasley were coming up the stairs. As they all faced one another, Mrs. Weasley frowned. As she opened her mouth to speak, Tanya cut her off. "What's going on now?" she asked innocently. Amazing how composed she sounded.

"I could ask the same of you lot!" Mrs. Weasley responded suspiciously. "Ron woke and found Harry's bed empty, so naturally, we were all concerned that he'd gotten himself in some kind of trouble."

"We only wanted a snack," Tanya lied. "We did try to be quiet about it."

Hermione jumped in. "We didn't mean to alarm anyone. We were just sitting up, talking."

Harry turned quickly to hide his grin from Mrs. Weasley. She narrowed her eyes at the lot of them, then turned and called down to Lupin, "It's all right, he's up here, safe and sound." She turned a jaded eye to Tanya. "You all should be asleep in your beds, this time of night."

"Well everyone gets insomnia now and then," Hermione said. "And we don't want to wake Ginny, do we?"

"C'mon, then, finish your snack and then it's off to bed with you." Mrs. Weasley looked like she didn't want to take her eyes off them, but then, apparently assuming Hermione would make a good chaperone, she grudgingly passed them by to go back to bed. The sandwiches did look good, so they all went into the boys' room to eat. As Tanya leaned the door closed behind her, she mouthed "Thank you" to Hermione.

Tanya and Harry sat on Harry's bed; Hermione and Ron sat on his. Ron didn't look as if he was fully awake, but he grabbed a sandwich anyway. "You lot pick a fine time to get hungry," he said around a mouthful. "But I'm glad you brought enough for everyone." Hermione rolled her eyes at his obtuseness. Harry gave a quick, but slight shake of his head to signal her not to mention what she knew Tanya and Harry had been up to. She smiled and took her own sandwich. Harry felt secure that she'd not tell Ron anything he didn't need to know. It was bad enough that Hermione knew, but at least she wasn't a gossip. Not when she didn't need to be, anyway. Some things were best left private, at least for a while. Harry needed time to sort out all these new feelings, and he wouldn't have that with Ron's demands for all the details.

"So," said Tanya. "Happy birthday, Harry."

The others looked briefly surprised, then added their good wishes. "That's the ticket," Ron said, a little more alert by now. "Start the birthday good and early; that way you get to enjoy it longer."

Harry smiled. He'd almost gotten more than he had bargained for upstairs. That would be taking birthday presents to the extreme.

Hermione asked the question that Harry forgot about in all the commotion. "I wonder that Mrs. Weasley didn't ask how you managed to pass her on the stairway. After all, you would have had to pass her by, right?" Harry and Tanya froze, taking it in. They glanced at each other, then at Hermione. Ron was puzzled, but not really understanding what puzzled him.

"Well," Tanya put in, "here's to hoping that question doesn't occur to herself."

"Here, here," said Harry, nervously. "Tanya," he added thoughtfully, "how is it you can conjure up an entire tray of food with just a wave of your hand? None of us could do it."

"None of you are gypsies," she said conclusively.

"I wonder why you wanted to come to Hogwarts," Hermione asked. "Is there really something you still need to learn? Something you can only learn at a wizarding school? Not that we mind your being there, of course," she added hastily.

"I'm just trying to find a world to belong to," Tanya said defensively, shrugging. "That's all there is to that."

Harry wasn't so sure. It seemed too coincidental that just when Dumbledore needed all the help he could get in fighting the dark forces, a gypsy just happened to show up actually asking to be part of their world. And why? What could his world possibly offer to gypsies that she didn't already have? He glanced over at her, disturbing thoughts of how easily she could lie going through his mind. But Tanya ignored Harry's questioning look, pretending to be interested in opening her can of soda. Harry felt a heavy ball in his stomach. Why did Mrs. Weasley raise the alarm when Harry was found not to be in bed? Would she have done the same if it were Ron or Ginny, or even Hermione? Was he still under the care of babysitters?

When the girls cleared out and Ron and Harry once more climbed under their covers, Harry tried to rekindle the wonderful feeling of being so wanted that he'd shared with Tanya such a short while ago. He had no doubt what would have happened if Tanya hadn't heard Mrs. Weasley raising the roof. Was he ready for that? And what about Tanya? Did she make a habit of it? She couldn't be as inexperienced as he was; she seemed to know exactly how to touch him to make him crazy. Was that the real reason Mrs. Weasley didn't like her? Because she knew that Tanya would try to seduce him? Was Mrs. Weasley right in thinking that Harry needed protection from Tanya?

Did he *want* protection from Tanya? He still got warm fuzzy feelings just thinking about her and the attention she gave him. Was it all an act, or did she really fancy him? Remembering how she'd let him touch her, and how she'd touched him, he wondered if gypsies took a less serious view about things like romance and sex than other people did.

With all these questions churning inside him, it was a wonder he fell asleep at all, much less slept as soundly as he did. If he dreamed, he didn't remember, and when he awoke a few hours later to Hedwig's hooting, the sight of birthday presents at the foot of his bed sent all those lingering doubts away, at least for the time being.

What a loot! He engaged Ron's help in opening them. From Hermione, he got what was labeled an auto-checker. After turning it around a few times, he decided he'd have to wait until he could ask Hermione what it did. It no doubt had something to do with lessons, knowing her. Mrs. Weasley, true to form, had given him some mince cakes, some assorted candies (some of which she must have gotten from the twins; Harry was happy to see that she'd begun to come around to accepting their choice in profession), and a pullover sweater. Hagrid had sent along a miniature replica of a Norwegian Ridgeback dragon, just like Norbert. He could keep company with the mini-dragon Harry still had from his Goblet of Fire events.

Harry put the Norbert-look-alike in the drawer where he was keeping the other dragon, but when they began snorting fire at each other, he felt it would be wiser to put them out of reach of anything flammable. They'd calm down once leadership was established.

He opened the gift from Ron, and found a bottle of Old Spice cologne. He looked questioningly at Ron, who grinned and said, "I heard Tanya tell Lupin that she liked it. She said it's dead sexy." Harry flushed and opened the bottle. It smelled quite nice, so he put some on his neck, hoping he hadn't been too lavish.

Hermione and Ginny came into the room, with Tanya not long after them. Hermione explained that the auto-checker would scan his essays and automatically point out where his errors were. Harry thanked her, knowing it would be less work for Hermione, as she was the one who kept Harry and Ron both from failing all their subjects at school.

Tanya narrowed her eyes and looked around the room. Her eyes settled on Harry, and she smiled. "Is that Old Spice I'm smelling?" She came to sit next to Harry on his bed, and to Harry's somewhat embarrassed chagrin, she nuzzled his neck and whispered in his ear, "It's an aphrodisiac, you know." He wasn't entirely sure what an aphrodisiac was, but he could guess it was something he didn't want the others to know he was using. He felt the hot flush creep up his neck and face, and quickly tried to get everyone's attention elsewhere by opening another present. He mentally kicked Ron, who wasn't going to let him off so easily. "Should we leave you two alone for a while?" Ginny rolled her eyes and cuffed Ron, who, unabashed, stole a chocolate frog from Harry's pile of goodies.

Harry opened a package from Lupin, and found a Pensieve inside. It looked just like Dumbledore's, except a little smaller.

From Ginny, he got more candy, and as he dumped the boxes onto his bed, Ginny warned him, "Most of those came from Fred's and George's shop, so mind what you try." Still another package came directly from the twins' shop, and in it were things that Harry was loath to try without direct instructions from them. Still, as he was the main investor in the business, he supposed he'd better keep up with what went on there.

Hermione tossed him another package. Tonks had given him a small crystal ball, with a note attached: "Just in case you miss your Divination classes!" As if. But since he could look into this crystal without the nuisance of Trelawney breathing down his back, perhaps he might just see something in it one day.

Moody had sent something as well; it looked like a hand-held mirror, which Harry took to be Foe-glass, something Moody would not want to be without. If Harry were to become as suspicious as Moody, he might do well to consider a different line of work.

At last, he opened the present from Tanya. Four books fell out of a box onto his lap. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*", Mark Twain's *"The Adventures of Tom Sawyer"*, Ray Bradbury's *"Something Wicked This Way Comes"*, and one from an author he'd never heard of before, a David Bowery, entitled, *"The Wanton Adventures of Lucy Braddox"*.

He smiled at her. It had been a while since he'd read anything but textbooks and books about Quidditch, but it would help pass the time. He thanked everyone and Hermione and Ginny rose to leave. Tanya hung back a bit, and whispered to Harry, "They're bewitched, you know." She smiled secretly at Harry, and followed the girls out of the room.

What are bewitched? he wondered. The books? He opened the top one, and quickly skimmed the pages. As he read about Marley's ghost, he tried to imagine the scene in his mind. The dark house, cold because Scrooge couldn't bear to spend money on coal, the rattling of chains, Scrooge's fear . . . Harry felt himself being pulled toward the pages. Whoa! The last time he felt anything like it was when he was trying to steal a look inside Snape's Pensieve. The books are bewitched? Ron was prodding him to get going, so Harry closed the book and put it aside to get dressed. He promised himself that he would find time today and check into this further. He wouldn't mind actually falling into one of these books, and living adventures he'd only previously read about.

After thanking everyone at breakfast for his gifts and receiving many well-wishes, Harry helped with the washing up and asked what everyone's plans were for the day. Seems the adults all had things to do, and Ron and Ginny were happy to spend most of the day dueling in the video game world. Hermione was talking about re-reading *Hogwarts: A History*, and Tanya mentioned something about sorting out the Herbology lessons that she had to finish before Snape's arrival today. They all wanted to get together this evening though, and find something different to do to commemorate Harry's birthday. Hermione suggested a trip to the nearest video rental store, and Mrs. Weasley decided that if Lupin would escort her, she could pick out movie or two to entertain them this evening. She'd pop some popcorn and they'd make a party of it. So, Harry had the morning, and probably most of the afternoon to peruse his books.

Harry wasted no time in returning to his books. He picked up the Bradbury book, and was soon running through a quaint American town, with his two new friends, preparing to see the circus come to town.

A couple of hours later, Harry lay back on his bed, marveling at what can be done to books. To actually live these adventures! One would scarcely ever have to leave the house! He glanced at the bedside clock, and decided he had time to peek into another book. He couldn't remember which ones he had, and he grabbed the first one his hand touched. It was the Bowery novel. Reading the title, his pulse quickened. *"The Wanton Adventures of Lucy Braddox"*? Perhaps he'd better read this one through before actually jumping in. It wouldn't do to get in over his head. It did sound a little racy.

He opened a page at random. As he read, his ears began to burn and his hands began to tremble a little. This was no ordinary adventuress in here. This Lucy Braddox had no inhibitions at all, from what Harry read, and he wondered if he was ready for such a novel. Surely Tanya knew what was in this book before giving it to Harry? Was she teasing him? Was she hoping he'd get his education from "another" woman before coming to her? Harry felt pangs of self-doubt creeping into him as he wondered exactly what Tanya had been thinking in bewitching this particular book? But curiosity won out, and Harry opened the book to the beginning to read the normal way, at least to start with.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

Chapter 5 of 20

Severus remembers how he'd met Tanya, and wonders what her future will bring, now that he'd brought her into his world.

Chapter Five

Looking Back to Look Ahead

Severus Snape looked around the staff room, wondering who, besides Dumbledore, was still to arrive. He normally detested these meetings, especially when classes were suspended for the holidays, but he was interested in this one. The sole purpose for the meeting was to determine whether or not Tanya was prepared for O.W.L. testing, or when she might be. He'd escorted Tanya here to Hogwarts, to get her settled in and to concentrate on the lessons she'd need to master before Dumbledore could decide where to place her.

He'd been there in Dumbledore's office with Tanya and Albus when she'd tried on the Sorting Hat. To his chagrin, she'd been placed in Gryffindor. Pity, he'd thought at the time. Minerva McGonagall had put her in the room normally reserved for the Head Girl, were she to be a Gryffindor, until such time as the exams decided which year she'd be in.

Snape felt a kind of paternal pride in Tanya; she'd caught up to her peers in Potions at an astonishing rate. With only eight weeks of private lessons, he'd be ready to put her up against any new sixth year coming in for the fall term.

But was it wise to push her so hard? Her health was declining, if the dark circles under her eyes were anything to go by. Her clothes were beginning to hang on her frame.

She should enter the school as a fifth year, possibly a sixth-year, considering her age. But the normal rules didn't apply to her, he knew. Her powers as a witch, never mind a gypsy, demanded that she not be held back by something so prosaic as her age. What difference did it make that she was only fifteen? She had the skills of wizards more than four times her age, and she was more than a match for Muggle-types who would have done her harm. He had seen that for himself more than a year ago.

As he waited for the rest of the staff to trickle in, he let his mind go back to that horrible time, the end of June, just more than a year ago . . .

On Dumbledore's orders, he'd gone to a quiet village near County Claire, in Ireland. There had been reported suspicious activity there, some goings-on that concerned the local citizenry. No one had filed official complaints to their law enforcement agencies, but the gossip eventually caught the ear of those in position to inform the Ministry. Snape had been dispatched to check it out, on the chance it might be a meeting of dark minds.

If Potter was to be believed, then Voldemort was now a flesh and blood wizard once again. He hadn't been able to kill Potter, and the golden boy hadn't been able to give much information as to how strong Voldemort was now.

The fact that Snape hadn't been summoned by the Dark Lord had been ominous. Although the mark on his left arm had become irritated and had even begun to burn somewhat, it had not even begun to come close to the pain that meant he was being invited to seek the Dark Lord's company. And so, he had stayed at Hogwarts, anticipating with dread the calling.

But, to the surprise of everyone in the Order, the mark had begun to fade again. Potter had mentioned Voldemort's counting off his followers after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. There had been a reference to one at Hogwarts that was probably forever out of his graces; of course that must have meant Snape. He wasn't foolish enough, or optimistic enough to think otherwise. When next summoned, he'd no doubt be tortured before exterminated.

So it had been with more trepidation than normal that he'd journeyed to Ireland to spy, once again, for the Order.

It had turned out to be nothing that needed to be feared; some petty thieves had set up house out there in the near-wilderness. Snape had tracked them down to a shabby-looking shed, not much more than a lean-to, really, and the relief he'd felt at not yet having to face his death made him approach them with quite more vigor than was absolutely necessary. Their crimes hadn't been so bad as to assure them a place in Azkaban; a simple warning to be careful of magic in the presence of Muggles would have sufficed.

But Snape's personality was the wrong one to offer that warning. They'd taken offense, and had become quite defensive as well. By the time Snape had come to, they were long gone, his wand broken to pieces around him. Night had fallen, and Snape had seemed to lose all sense of direction. He had been ill prepared to rough it out in the countryside.

He'd wandered around for a while, injured, nauseous, and not just a little worried. A light rain had begun to fall, making the hillside rather more slippery than his boots could deal with. After slipping painfully down a particularly steep hill and landing unceremoniously in a stream that seemed far too cold for the time of year, he was so angry with this turn of events that he ended up lost in a woods, probably having turned himself around while venting his rage.

As he had cleared the woods finally, he couldn't find any sign of local life. It seemed only animals appreciated the relative beauty of his new surroundings. He walked until he could walk no longer, and fell to the base of a tree to sleep, or pass out, or whatever term meant that his body had finally given up on him.

The early morning sunshine had not improved his situation, and before he was fully rested, he had pushed himself onward. He'd long since lost track of the stream that had frozen him, and he knew he was dangerously dehydrated. It seemed to do nothing but rain here, and he wondered bitterly why there were no more frequent sources of water than what he'd fallen into the day before.

His entire body had been one huge mass of pain; he'd felt as if he'd been run over by a huge Muggle vehicle . . . twice. He had forced himself to stumble onward, hoping it hadn't been his imagination that showed what looked like a farmhouse up ahead.

His intention was to search the grounds of the small farm before its inhabitants awoke, hoping to find a well where he could drink to his heart's content. With any luck, he'd also be able to find a place to finish his sleep; the fact that he'd fallen asleep (passed out) wearing soaking wet clothes didn't help him. He'd alternated between sweltering in his own feverish body heat to freezing each time a breeze wafted by him, and he knew that he was much worse off than he'd thought possible. He had been prepared to face Voldemort, and so had not been ready for something so much more trivial. He'd been taken completely by surprise, and it didn't improve his mood.

As he neared the farm, he caught sight of movement at the side of the house. The figure was too far away for him to see who it might be, so all things considered, he chose discretion, and veered his path to take refuge behind an outcropping of rocks and trees to the right of the path.

He'd just settled down to rest, trying to see the figure he'd spotted earlier, when he had been startled by the sound of someone stepping on a twig. As his head whipped around to face this new development, his overtaxed body revolted and he felt himself swaying, the ground rushing up to meet him. His last thought before the blackness was that he'd thought he'd seen a child peering up at him, a question on her face.

His next memory was bathed in comfort; he had felt something soft under him, and the warmth on top of him. He could smell a wood fire burning and something else as well . . . could it be coffee? And definitely the half-remembered smell of bread baking in an oven. Instead of forcing his heavy eyelids open, he drifted back into the healing sleep that he didn't really want to fight against.

She'd brought him back. She'd fed him, comforted him, ignored (or so he thought at the time) his delirious mumblings, she'd *bathed* him. That alone would have been enough to send him fleeing at the first chance he saw. But there had been something else as well. She'd talked to him. And he had found it pleasant, and even stimulating to talk to her. She had proven to be surprisingly well read, and interested in anything and everything he had said. Too soon, he found it impossible to think of her as the child she was. There was simply too much intelligence (and something else he couldn't quite place) in her eyes. She just seemed to *know* things.

When he was once more his old self, she began to pepper him with questions. It was then he became aware that she'd not dismissed any of his delirious babblings. And she began to tell him a little about herself. About why she had prevented him from approaching the farmer, who would have contacted the authorities; about why she was so young, yet so alone; but mostly about how she wanted to be part of this wizarding world he told her about.

She had no world of her own anymore; most of her nomadic people had been wiped out years ago. The remaining gypsies had more or less turned their backs on her because she was too willing to embrace the gaje ways . . . the ultimate betrayal, in their eyes. The gaje (Muggles, he redefined mentally) were no more willing to open any doors to her either; the prejudice against gypsies was too great in these parts. She had decided that she wasn't cut out to be so alone. She needed to be needed, needed to be a part of something she was too young to define.

And so he began to learn about her powers. He began to see that she could do so much for the Order, so much to fight the Dark Wizards that were such a plague in his world. And he decided then that Dumbledore must learn about Tanya.

Without so much as a backward glance, she'd closed up the small cottage and traveled with Snape back to Hogwarts. It had been an uneventful journey; save for the encounter with an amorous drunk in London. Despite Tanya's young age, the man in question didn't have any qualms about trying to take what he assumed was his due; after all, isn't that what gypsy women were for? Before Snape could even move to protect her, she'd dispatched the man with a well-placed knee and a couple of wicked kicks and slugs to make sure the message hit home. Just barely out of breath, she simply took hold of Snape's arm and steered him away from the alley. Her eyes had been sparkling, and Snape had suspected that she had enjoyed the encounter.

The rest of the trip had passed quietly. He didn't even mind traveling a la Muggle, with her there to help him with things like the confusion of tickets, and reading maps and such.

As expected, Dumbledore was open-minded about welcoming Tanya to their world. The Ministry must know, of course. If she was to become a witch, if such a thing was possible, then she'd have to learn to do it the witch/wizard way. She didn't seem to mind; however, Snape already knew enough about her by then to know she'd always keep a little gypsy magic in reserve. It wouldn't be in her nature to give up her talents, finely honed after years of looking out for herself.

Fudge hadn't batted an eye when Dumbledore informed the Minister of his intention of educating Tanya. He agreed that having a gypsy on the Light Side would only be to their advantage, especially if she could eventually convince others to join her. Of course, Fudge wouldn't think twice about anything Dumbledore said these days, Snape thought wryly, after almost condemning their entire world to darkness in his inability to believe in Voldemort's return. Because the entire Wizarding world now knew about it, Fudge was trying to keep a low profile, knowing his days in office were numbered.

However, it wasn't just Fudge they'd needed to convince. The International Wizengamot Panel took forever to decide that they had nothing to lose, and everything to gain to allow her enrollment at Hogwarts. Tanya, meanwhile, had returned to her cottage on the Irish hillside to await their decision. It must have been an inordinately long year for her, Snape realized. They'd maintained an owl correspondence, but her letters had been purposely light and optimistic; Snape's letters to her had been comforting and with requests for patience.

His thoughts were abruptly brought back to the present as Dumbledore, Madam Hooch, and Professor Binns made their entrance. The meeting had come to order.

"Well," said Dumbledore, "let's see where everyone stands on Tanya's accomplishments so far. Minerva, how has she been coming along with Transfiguration?"

"It's amazingly as if I was simply reviewing these lessons with any one of you," she said, incredulity showing in her voice. "She's just a tad clumsy with the wand, but she

was able to transfigure everything I gave her, and back again. And that includes living things, be they reptiles, mammals, invertebrates, or not. I'd say she's more than ready for her exams in that area."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, turning to Madam Hooch. "Her flying?"

Madam Hooch pursed her lips thoughtfully. "She could use more practice, actually. I can see that she loves to fly; she handles it beautifully. She's doesn't like to land, but I'm sure that will work itself out with practice. But surely she doesn't need to be tested in anything so rudimentary?"

"No, there are no exams for flying; it's just that it's something she, like everyone else, needs to know. Madam Sprout, how is her knowledge of herbology coming along?"

"She's a natural," Sprout said, beaming. "I tell her something once, and she'll remember it forever. A lot of the plants I've introduced her to she's already familiar with; sometimes the gypsies called it something else, but it's the same. She's ready for her exam there, no worries."

"And Hagrid," the headmaster asked, "what of Care of Magical Creatures?"

Hagrid's face lit up. "I never seen anythin' like it," he began. "Those creatures took to 'er like she was one of 'em! The thestrals didn't even 'ave to be called, they came willin' to 'er. The unicorns weren' shy at all, and even the centaurs wanted to be in 'er company. She knows more'n I do, I think, about creatures." He obviously thought someone with such a way with animals was heaven sent. Tanya had yet another fan for life.

Madam Sprout sent a mournful look to Hagrid. "She could see the thestrals, then? Poor dear. I wonder who she's seen die."

"Her family, friends, almost everyone in her nomadic community, I'm afraid," Dumbledore answered, quietly. "She doesn't speak of it, but I understand from Severus, here, that she's seen far too many people die in her younger years."

"Enough about what we cannot change," Dumbledore said. "Professors Lupin, Flitwick, how about Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts?" Snape noticed that everyone seemed to lean forward, awaiting the reply.

Flitwick deferred to Lupin; the two had teamed up to handle Tanya's education in these areas, Dumbledore having brought Lupin into Hogwarts for the summer to continue the lessons he'd started with her at Grimmauld Place.

Lupin frowned, obviously choosing his words with great care. "She can cast charms both with and without the wand," he began. "She shows no hesitation; she's very confident that what she tries will work. And it does. Her grasp of Latin is excellent; if she doesn't know a curse or charm, she's tried faking it, with impressive results. She can protect herself with the best of them, and, like our Harry Potter, she can produce a full patronus."

This was news. Lupin had been sitting on that little piece of information, Snape thought, but why?

"What was her patronus, Remus?" Dumbledore asked.

"An eagle."

"Interesting. An eagle." Dumbledore sat quiet for a moment, giving McGonagall a chance to voice her question.

"And what did the boggart become for her?"

"I couldn't really make it out, to tell the truth," Lupin replied sheepishly. "It looked like a ruined city, but also in an atmosphere of blackness I couldn't even begin to fathom. It might relate, rather it *probably* relates to the loss of almost her entire clan years ago. Whatever the devastation was that orphaned her. Besides," he added with a chuckle, "she wasted no time getting rid of it. She turned it into a shimmering lake of bubbles. Pink bubbles. Always interesting to see what people find ridiculous."

"Well, that's the tough class," Dumbledore put in. "How is her History of Magic coming along?" he asked of Professor Binns.

"I keep giving her books, she keeps devouring them. Enough to inflate any teacher's ego. I'd be willing to bet that she's ready to sit that exam right now."

"And Divination?" he asked of Professor Trelawney.

"She has a sight I've never seen before," Sybill said with a sniff. "And she's very well-versed in reading the planets' and stars' positions. She can sit the exam, but I don't much like it that she tried to tell me I've been doing it wrong all these years. The impertinence! She told me that I shouldn't try to look *into* the crystal, but simply to gaze *onto* it! What codswallop!"

Snape stifled a grin. He should have known Tanya wouldn't refrain from putting Trelawney in her place. He knew Tanya well enough to know that she wouldn't pretend to buy into Sybill's attempts to be ethereal.

"That just leaves Potions," Dumbledore said, looking at Snape. "How is that going?"

"Many of the potions that I know to be on the exam are second nature to her," he said, almost proudly. "Her family used them on many people, mostly gypsies. They don't believe in Muggle forms of medicine, apparently, and cure their own. Most commendable, in my opinion. She's also well versed in the antidotes for poisons, and I have no doubt that she'll achieve her O.W.L. in Potions, and all her other exams, whenever you decide she'll sit them."

"Even better than I anticipated," Dumbledore said approvingly. "I'll contact the Ministry immediately. I'll let you all know when we can expect the official testers here."

So signaled the end of the meeting. Snape hung back, contemplating his tea, long gone cold. Once again, his thoughts turned back in time, to last June. He'd been sent to fetch Tanya from her cottage to begin life as a witch.

He hadn't seen her in the year since they'd met. She'd grown taller, although thinner, her high cheekbones dominant in her face. But her brown eyes still sparkled, her white teeth flashed in pleasure when she'd opened the door to Severus. She had unhesitatingly thrown herself into his arms in welcome and relief, and he'd been too surprised to withdraw. It continually surprised him that he felt actual affection for anyone, let alone this child he was coming to know so well.

No, she's hardly a child. She hadn't been one for quite some time. He'd surprised himself even more by returning the hug; he, who'd never encouraged physical contact of any kind.

He remembered the look on her face as they'd first approached the gates of Hogwarts from the Hogsmeade road. The rapture as she'd first set her eyes on the castle, looming up, looking almost close enough to touch. The flash of fear in her eyes as she must have thought of entering this strange new world that had such people in it. The way she unconsciously moved nearer to him in that uncustomary bid for comfort. The way he'd put an arm across her shoulders to reassure her that she wasn't getting into this alone and friendless.

Coming back to his surroundings, Snape hoped she wouldn't regret this decision to start a new life here. He knew he'd feel responsible for her and her future.

He stood up, stretching out the kinks that sitting still for too long brought to his body, and headed down to his rooms in the dungeon.

End of Summer

Chapter 6 of 20

Everyone's headed back to Hogwarts for another year. Another eventful year. There are mysteries to be discovered and doubts to confront.

Chapter Six

End of Summer

Harry packed the last of his things into his trunk and turned to his bureau. Hedwig's cage would need cleaning before packing up for Hogwarts; it would be a good time to let her fly freely around the room. It wasn't much, but he didn't dare let her out the window. She was angry with him, not having had as much attention from him as she was accustomed to. She'd probably stay away for weeks in retaliation.

He let her out, and began sweeping away the droppings at the bottom of the cage. Hoping the wastebasket wouldn't spit them back out, he emptied his dustpan into it, and looked around the room, making sure he wasn't forgetting anything.

His two miniature dragons had finally found a way of living peacefully together. They were currently asleep, and he would simply put them in his pocket for the trip. They'd probably sleep the whole distance anyway.

His eyes landed on his night table. With a start, he realized he'd almost forgotten to take the book, "*The Wanton Tales of Lucy Braddox*." It had proven to be quite a book. He hadn't worked up the nerve to actually "dive" into it; it didn't leave much to the imagination. Just reading it was nerve-racking, and, he could admit, if only to himself, highly stimulating. It also led him to believe Tanya knew much more about sex than he did; he suspected as much the last time he dared to enter the attic. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He packed the book into his trunk, hiding it under some folded robes. The other books Tanya had given him were there already. Tanya had been right; the books had made the summer fly by.

But he missed her. A couple of days after Harry's birthday, she'd left with Lupin and Snape to go to Hogwarts, where she could continue her concentrated lessons in preparation for her exams.

He'd been thrilled the night before she left; he had noticed how tired she'd been, and didn't have the nerve to go upstairs after everyone had turned in for the night. So she had come to him.

His heart had jumped into his throat when he'd sensed a presence and opened his just-beginning-to-get-heavy eyes to find her standing by the side of his bed. With a quick glance at Ron, sleeping in his own bed, she'd sat down next to where Harry was lying. She had smiled at him. "Weren't you even going to come up and say good-bye to me?"

"I thought you'd need to get a lot of sleep," Harry had answered, grinning. "I didn't think I should assume you'd be glad to see me."

"That's ridiculous," she said, leaning down to kiss his lips. "I'm going to miss seeing you everyday. Talking to you . . . and other things. . ."

Harry's face, even now, got hot when he remembered her hands touching him, sliding under his pajama shirt, getting more demanding, and his breathing becoming more labored under her attention.

She'd lain herself down on his bed, half covering him, and he'd let his hands do their own examination of her warm, willing body. She had begun kissing him; his neck, his chest . . . her lips traveling lower and lower, tantalizing, teasing, and he had not been able to suppress a moan as he'd felt her hot breath tracing a path down from his chest, moving lower.

But that moan had roused Ron, who had sat up in bed, looking into the darkness for some monster unknown. Quick as a flash, Tanya had slid off the bed and hid herself from Ron's view, should he turn toward them.

Harry had turned to his side, hiding his erection in case Ron's night vision was better than his timing. Harry silently cursed Ron for once again thwarting what would most likely have been the loss of his virginity. After Ron had fallen back down to return to his dreams, Tanya sat up to whisper to Harry, "Thwarted again! There are just too many people around here." She'd sounded regretful, and Harry felt, once again, the warm fuzzies at the thought of her wanting him. The way Lucy Braddox wanted her men. She kissed him once again, lingeringly, and left the room.

Harry at last had fallen into a fitful sleep, dreaming about what might have been, had they had the privacy they both wanted so much.

So now Tanya was working hard to catch up at school. The rest of them had gotten O.W.L.s in nearly everything; Ron and Harry both had missed the Divination O.W.L., but neither of them was about to lose sleep over it. Hermione had an O.W.L. in every area she'd sat the exam, and Harry couldn't figure out why she'd been anxious about it. He would have thought it was a given.

But he was surprised that both he and Ron had O.W.L.s in Potions. Snape had made it sound like they'd failed. Maybe Tanya was mellowing him out, Harry thought ruefully.

No, that couldn't be it. After all, it wasn't the professors who set the exams, it was the Ministry. Impartial. He began to feel a little less antagonistic toward Snape. Potions really was an art, and if Snape hadn't been so hard on them, he doubted he would have passed it. Could this be a glimmer of understanding into the methods of the sinister former-Slytherin Professor?

He dragged his trunk out of the room and down the stairs, to add it to Ron's, Ginny's, and Hermione's trunks. Pigwidgeon was already encaged and ready to go, and Crookshanks refused to be caged. Hermione would carry him on, as usual. They had about another forty-five minutes to kill before they had to leave for the station; he wondered if he could talk Hedwig back into her cage by then.

He went into the den, where the others were watching the clock. Ginny was admiring the necklace she wore; Tanya had retrieved it for her and sent it back by owl a few days ago. Mrs. Weasley had quite a bit to say about that; the very idea of sending anything by owl. Why not put up a banner and neon lights to let everyone know wizards were here? But Harry was glad she'd sent it. It meant that she'd had enough time away from her studies to go get it, and he was glad she wasn't the sort of person to forget promises made to other people. Ginny was certainly a fan of hers, if she hadn't been already.

Hermione had been a little disappointed at not finding enough time to grill Tanya about her tenancy in New York. However, they'd heard from Lupin that Tanya had been sorted into Gryffindor; there'd be plenty of times in the common room so that Hermione's New York education could commence there.

Ron was glowering by the fireside. Although he and Harry were now legally adults, and were at last permitted to join the Order, Ron still felt they weren't allowed far into its confidences. Mr. Weasley explained to them that it didn't matter that they were old enough; they were still at school. Their studies would have to be given priority, because without their proper education, what good would they be to the Order anyway? Could they honestly say that persevering with the mundane studies hadn't taught them valuable skills needed for the coming war, should there be one?

They had no argument for that, and so the subject was dropped. Hermione had been paying close attention; her birthday was in September, and she would be joining the Order then. She obviously wanted to waste no time arguing the same points when her time came.

Harry had also learned, by pumping Lupin for information, that Tanya had sat her exams, and was now waiting for the results. They wouldn't be expected for another week or two, so Tanya would be in sixth year with the rest until such time as she'd have to go back to whatever year her test results dictated.

"But don't worry," Lupin had said, "we all crowded into the testing room during the practical exams, and there's no doubt in anyone's mind that she got all her O.W.L.s. Otherwise Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have placed her in so high a year, knowing she'd have to face a demotion later."

So, all that was left to do was get on the Hogwarts' Express and take up life again. He was so eager to see Tanya that he knew this would be one of the longest train rides of his life.

Cornelius Fudge was still trying to get back in the Order's good graces; he'd provided Arthur Weasley with two Ministry cars to take the students to the station. As Lupin and Moody struggled to get all the baggage into the cars (with supervision from Mrs. Weasley) Harry coaxed Hedwig back into her cage with promises of early release upon entering Hogwarts. They set off for Kings' Cross.

Back to School

Chapter 7 of 20

First day back at school, and there are adjustments to be made.

Chapter Seven

Back to School

When at last they arrived at Hogwarts, Harry searched the Great Hall for a glimpse of Tanya. As he took his place at the Gryffindor table, he spotted her sitting further down, almost to the empty area where the newly sorted first years would sit.

She turned to watch everyone file into the Hall and caught Harry's eye. She smiled happily, and at Harry's beckoning wave, moved to take a place next to him at the bench. Hermione sat on her opposite side, with Ron and Ginny taking seats on each side of her.

"It's so good to finally see you all again," she exclaimed, speaking more to Harry than to the others. At least that's how Harry chose to interpret it. "How was the rest of your summer?"

Harry took advantage of the others' catching up with the students all around them to capture Tanya's attention. "I've missed you terribly," he said shyly, making sure no one else overheard. "Are you ready for term to start tomorrow, then?"

"Aye, as ready as I'll ever be," she said. "I still don't have the results of my examinations, but everyone keeps telling me not to worry; I seem to have done well."

"Good, I hope you'll be in sixth year. Then we might have some classes together."

"Aye, I've been counseled by the staff about career choices. I'm heading for a career as a caretaker of Magical Creatures. So Professor McGonagall scheduled classes for me to prepare me for those particular NEWTs next year."

"Then you'll be under the immediate supervision of Hagrid," Harry said. "Do you get on well with him?"

"Aye, he's the best! I'm glad to be involved in something I feel so natural about. And he's so enthusiastic about teaching. He acts like I've bestowed a gift on him by being interested in his beasts."

"Yeah, that'd be Hagrid, all right. Mind you, he doesn't always realize that some of the more dangerous animals aren't really fitting for pets."

"Aye, he treats them all like kittens. I have to keep on my toes around him."

Harry looked up at the staff table and gave a start. "What's Raphael doing up there?" he asked incredulously.

Tanya smiled. "Oh, I forgot. Raphael will be apprenticing with Trelawney in Divination. Dumbledore offered him a job." She lowered her voice to avoid anyone hearing. "Trouble is, he can't do much. I suspect Dumbledore put him there to keep him out of harm's way."

Harry laughed, a load being lifted off his chest. It appeared by the laughter in her voice that Tanya didn't take Raphael very seriously. And yet . . . Harry's laughter died out, seeing the intensity of the look Raphael was giving Tanya, as if willing Tanya to seek him out. Harry guessed Raphael must still be considered a rival for Tanya's attention.

"Will you have to be taking any Divination classes for your NEWTs?" he asked nonchalantly.

"No, thank the gods!" Tanya laughed out loud. A lovely, uninhibited sound, Harry thought. Lowering her voice once more, Tanya said, "I think neither Trelawney nor I have the patience to get me through any more of her lessons!"

A hush fell over the Hall as Professor McGonagall marched down the aisle with the usual frightened-looking bunch of new first years following. It was time for the sorting to begin.

Dumbledore rose. "Welcome back to another Hogwarts year," he began. "A few announcements." His eyes considered the room at large, commanding them to take his next words seriously.

"If you don't already know, then hear this . . . Voldemort is back. Even the Ministry has decided to acknowledge this fact. For those first years among us who aren't yet

acquainted with our current state of affairs, rest assured, your history classes will begin by bringing you up-to-date with the troubles in our midst.

"For everyone, be vigilant, be cautious, be alert. Now is not the time for petty squabbles and too much concentration on competition among Houses. It is, now more than ever, a time for unity and strength.

"Now, for you athletes and spectators at large . . . fear not, we will still have our Quidditch matches and the House cup at the end of the year. But I would like to think that we'll all keep the competition at an appropriate level. A little rivalry is good; it keeps us sharp; but let's not let it control us.

"Now on to things more academic. First years, be aware that the dark forest is strictly off limits; you do not know the dangers yet that lurk there. The rest of *yodo* know; let that be enough to keep you out as well.

"We have a new apprentice Divination teacher this year; Mister Raphael Driver will be working with Professor Trelawney, perfecting his teaching skills." As Raphael stood up slightly, acknowledging the introduction, he once again looked to Tanya and smiled. Harry couldn't see from sitting behind her whether or not she'd smiled at him.

Raphael sat back down and Dumbledore continued. "We also have a transfer student with us." Harry frowned. Transfer? Tanya turned to him. "That sounded easier than explaining to everyone why I advanced so quickly," she explained to Harry. "It's easier for me." He smiled in understanding.

"Tanya Relke has been sorted into Gryffindor House, and I'm sure we'll all make sure she feels most welcome." He smiled, and Tanya stood up and sat down again so quickly, Harry was startled. Apparently, Tanya didn't like being the center of attention any more than he did.

"And now, the Sorting!"

After the new students had been sorted and everyone had their fill of the feast, the prefects led the way to the dorms.

They entered the common room, and as Tanya hung back to let others go around her, Harry followed suit. They drifted toward the corner fireplace, and sat down on the couch opposite, just happy to be in each other's company.

Everyone else was tired enough to drift up quickly to their dormitories, so it was only a matter of minutes before they found themselves alone. Harry looked at Tanya, running a finger down the arm of her new robes.

"So, you're now officially a witch," he said.

"There's something about these robes," she said with a smile. "They make you feel magical, don't they?"

"For me, I think it was more that I'd entered a world I hadn't known existed until about two days before my first term here. Once I got my letter accepting me into Hogwarts, everything seemed to happen so fast."

"I had to wait more than a year before I knew I'd ever be a part of it," she said. "It was a long year, but I'm glad it came out all right. I'm glad I'm here."

"I'm glad you're here, too," he said, looking directly into her eyes.

She leaned forward slowly, silently inviting him to do the same. When their lips met, Harry fought to still his breathing, allowing his hand to touch her hair, which she'd worn loose today. All those dreams and all that reading made him anxious once again for her touch, but he would not rush her. He would not push her in such a way that they ended up wrestling on this couch. He wanted something special, and he wasn't sure they'd ever find it here, at school, especially in the common room, where they could be disturbed at any time.

It was a good thing too, that he reined himself in. The Head Boy, a Ravenclaw that Harry didn't know well, someone by the unlikely name of Chance Mince, chose that moment to enter the room. Harry silently cursed the rule that allowed Head Boy and Head Girl to go into any Tower or dormitory, and stood up, trying not to look as though he and Tanya had been up to anything.

"It's quite late, you know," Mince said bossily. "You should both be in bed by now. Your ~~own~~ beds," he added insultingly. Tanya rolled her eyes and Harry clamped his mouth down tight, not wanting to begin the new school year by having points deducted from Gryffindor.

In spite of Mince's presence, Tanya deliberately stood up, and moving closer to Harry, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, pressing her body into his. Harry's arms, of their own accord, came up to her back, pulling her even closer to him as he returned the kiss, his brain's inability to function patently obvious.

"I'll see you at breakfast," she breathed. Without a look at Mince, she walked purposefully up the stairs to the girls' dorm.

Harry's eyes followed her, nonplussed. As Mince turned to look back at Harry, Harry was grateful for the way his robes draped over him, lest Mince see exactly how much his body was affected by Tanya's wantonness. He turned away and strode up to his own dorm before Mince could get obnoxious.

A Glimpse Into the Past

Chapter 8 of 20

Severus notices that Tanya is forming new friendships, but denies that it's jealousy he's feeling.

Chapter Eight

A Glimpse Into the Past

Snape surveyed his class. Gryffindors and Slytherins again. It was a much smaller class, now that O.W.L.s were behind them. Only a small handful had made it through the natural filtering process that the exams were. These were the students who would have to take Potions more seriously than ever before, if they were to continue their chosen paths. And thank the gods that Longbottom wasn't here.

His own house was represented much less fully than that of Gryffindor, he was depressed to notice. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had washed out, Lucius Malfoy's once-powerful influence with the Ministry not good enough to carry his son for yet another year. Snape dimly wondered what would become of Draco, now that his father was no longer able to throw his wealth around the Ministry. As for Draco himself, Snape noticed that he was keeping a low profile.

So, he had three Slytherins left to teach: Pansy Parkinson, who planned a career in healing---pity to those in need of her 'tender, loving care' in years to come; Millicent Bulstrode, whose ideas about her future were seemingly nebulous---she'd probably end up to no good end; and Scott Sneed, a boy Snape had rarely noticed before. Sneed seemed to want to crawl into the woodwork, and go through life unnoticed by all. If Snape remembered correctly, his plan was to go into research and development; a choice Snape envied. Well, no matter. If Voldemort would be kind enough to stay hidden for a while, Snape could get on with his own research; something that had been sorely neglected for these past several years.

As for the Gryffindors, he still had to deal with Golden Boy Potter, who thought he might be an Auror; the wretched Mr. Weasley, who thought he might also have what it takes to be an Auror. Snape snidely wondered if his choice would be the same if Potter had decided on a different goal. That Granger girl was still here, not sure where she'd be in ten years' time; Dean Thomas, seeking a career in healing as well.

And Tanya. He was happy that she wanted a career in Magical Creatures. There was definitely something there, he knew. Animals seemed to seek her out. Was it part of her gypsy magic? Or would it be the same if she were an ordinary witch, or even a Muggle? At any rate, she'd need a NEWT in Potions if she were to provide care for these beasts.

He'd had a bad night after he saw his class roster. Although he knew he'd be teaching her in class once he found out what path she'd chosen, he wouldn't allow himself to think how he'd treat her in the company of the other students. He was honest enough with himself to know that he treated her better than he would ever have allowed himself to treat any other student. It was because he'd never be able to fully think of her as his student. Not considering the way they'd met, and the experiences they'd shared. But their history was no one else's business, and he'd tossed and turned last night wondering how to approach the situation. He didn't want to hurt her feelings by behaving as coldly toward her as his other students had come to expect. But there'd been no chance to explain ahead of time. He hadn't found any opportunities to speak to her privately before the other students began arriving in the Great Hall.

He'd just have to plunge ahead, and hope she'd not take it personally.

Now the class of eight students was watching him, not knowing where to begin this new year.

He began the speech he made to all sixth years, his words coming automatically after years of it. "Just because you have managed to get through your O.W.L.s, don't even begin to think you're past the hardest part of your education. On the contrary; it's just beginning.

"Now you have to prepare for your NEWTs. I realize they're not until next year, but that's hardly enough time to cram into your resisting brains all you need to know to get through them. And those exams are much more important than the O.W.L.s. If you're planning a career that needs knowledge of Potions, then you'd better have a Plan B; once you fail your NEWTs, it's not as though you can return to sixth year and start all over again.

"I will work you harder than you believe I've ever worked you before. The first time you get a grade of failure, you're out the door. There is no margin for error left to you. And for those of you who have declared definite career choices, you *do* need Potions, or you wouldn't have been scheduled for this class. If you fail, you'll have no career to fall back upon. Those of you who aren't sure yet what you'll do," he glanced at Granger and Bulstrode, "you'd do well to make up your minds quickly, and get out of this class if you don't need it after all. I won't be pleased to learn that I've wasted any time teaching you something you can't grasp, or have no need of."

He gave them a moment to let his words sink in before continuing.

"For those of you who have not taken the hint to vacate these rooms, turn to page 596 and we'll start with a seminar on substitutions when rare herbs and plants aren't readily available in emergency situations."

As he continued his lesson with only half his mind on it, he took in the subtle body language of his sixth years. Bulstrode seemed of half a mind to simply walk out now, before wasting any more time. Parkinson seemed, as usual, to be only giving half her mind to his lecture, and Sneed was writing furiously, afraid to miss a word. Why didn't he simply invest in a dictating quill?

On the Gryffindor side, Potter was actually paying attention. Weasley, as usual, simply looked confused; he'd be using Granger's notes again. She, on her part, only wrote sometimes; kudos to her for reading the lecture ahead of time. She might actually make it through another year.

Dean Thomas seemed his usual self . . . half paying attention, half confused. Tanya, he was amused to see, had chosen a seat in the middle of the classroom. A stranger entering the room wouldn't know if she were a Gryffindor or a Slytherin. She was writing, but he could tell she was listening as well.

Out of curiosity, he began walking the length of the classroom, up and down the aisles, so he would have a chance to see what ended up in their notebooks. As he glanced down at Tanya's writing, he abruptly stopped talking. The symbols were nothing he'd ever seen before. A type of shorthand? A foreign language?

"Miss Relke," he sniped. "Pray tell me what hieroglyphics are these? Are you playing games in my class?" Any other student would have wet his pants at his tone of voice. He inwardly winced.

But she rose to the occasion beautifully, as if she'd never heard him speak kindly to her before. "It's Rom, Professor," she answered. "It's the only thing I can write quickly in."

"I trust you're able to write in English for your essays and exams?"

"Aye. I wouldn't expect you to be able to read this."

He looked quickly at her eyes, wondering if she was being impertinent.

He decided to let it go, knowing full well, as did she, that he knew all about her English writing abilities. Hadn't they conversed in writing for more than a year while she awaited entrance to Hogwarts? He had detected no hurt in her eyes at his snide tone. Perhaps he'll be able to carry this off after all.

He continued through the lesson, docking twenty points from Gryffindor simply because he was tired of the confused look on Weasley's face. Business as usual.

For homework, he assigned them fifty-four inches of parchment on how to best brew a potion for bleeding and shock in the outdoors, with only a small list of herbs and plants available, and only a certain amount of time before death. Exactly the sort of thing they *should* learn if Voldemort insisted on making his presence known.

Snape headed to the staff room after class, and was almost glad to see McGonagall there. He pumped her for information about how Tanya was adjusting to school.

"She seems to be doing well, so far," Minerva said. "I suppose it helps that she's already become close to Potter, Weasley and Granger. I don't have her for Transfiguration until this afternoon, but she's been doing exceptionally well in that area already. How is she with the Slytherin students in your Potions class?"

"She doesn't seem affected by the usual separation of the Houses," he said thoughtfully. "That may be a good thing, as our esteemed headmaster pointed out at the Welcoming Feast last night."

He wondered aloud at what her schedule was, and Minerva supplied her timetable to him. She didn't seem to think twice about his interest, he realized. It seemed that all the staff looked to him to be her mentor, Gryffindor or not. It must be because he'd been the one to bring her here.

Madam Sprout came into the room, and as she and McGonagall talked between themselves, Snape tuned out and examined the schedule Minerva had given him.

True to form, Dumbledore stressed Defense Against the Dark Arts for her, as he knew it was true for all students currently enrolled at Hogwarts. It also stood to reason that her chosen profession would also be keeping her busy. He sighed, wondering how boring his Thursdays and Fridays would be without seeing her in his class.

He stopped his breath with a start. What was wrong with him? Was he actually jealous of the time she spent away from his scrutiny? What was he worried about, that she'd actually develop friendships and interests that didn't include the Order, or conversations with him? He snorted to himself. For a brief moment, he'd almost felt like he might be harboring a schoolboy crush on her.

As if, he muttered to himself. A child.

No, he qualified. He knew she'd passed by childhood. But it was important for her to form friendships with her own peer group. Let her enjoy being young, while she was. Too bad she allied herself with that Potter group. She could have done better.

He wondered if she was apt to continue working so hard, now that the O.W.L. testing was finished. He really didn't want to think about having to give her detentions, or failing grades because she didn't come up to par after all.

He wouldn't, he decided. He'd find a way to privately tutor her if she needed it. It was for the Order, he told himself. It had nothing to do with wanting to spend time in her company. After all, he'd been without companionship for so long, he still didn't know how others seemed to always want to surround themselves with people. He was uncomfortable with people always hanging around. He needed his solitude.

But still, the honest part of his mind ruthlessly reminded him, he wasn't uncomfortable around her. And a little solitude went a long way. He knew he'd be seeking out her company now and then. He just hoped she didn't begin to grow away from him. It would be such a shame for someone like her to regress to the point of taking on the characteristics of some of her peers.

Harry was glad he'd talked McGonagall into scheduling him for Care of Magical Creatures classes. Although they weren't necessary for Aurors, she'd bought that line about having the class as a second choice in career in case he couldn't make it as an Auror-to-be. And if he were to be honest about it, he wasn't sure he *would* make it. He had a feeling that Snape would be trying harder than ever to fail him in Potions.

So, he happily joined Tanya and Ron as they made their way out to Hagrid's cabin, wondering with a little trepidation at the creatures they might face this year. They were bringing Tanya up-to-date on Hagrid's lessons in the past, when Harry became aware of movement in the path behind him.

"So, another year of having to share classes with the Gryffindor trash," drawled Malfoy.

"Speaking of trash," Harry shot back, "why didn't we see you in Potions?"

"I don't need Potions anymore," he replied snidely. "I'll be going into finance, and Potions isn't necessary."

"Did you choose finance *because* it didn't involve Potions?" Harry asked cruelly. He had it on fairly good authority (Lupin) that Malfoy had failed his O.W.L. in Potions miserably.

"Watch your mouth, Potter," he said. "Soon, I'll have the ability to completely destroy your credit rating, if you ever manage to get one."

"And where are your hired hands? Crabbe and Goyle no longer part of your entourage, now that you're in disgrace?"

"There's no disgrace here, Potter! My father couldn't be held by Azkaban, and he'll be back on top once again. As for Crabbe and Goyle, they're not here anymore. And they weren't hired hands."

"Do you mean to say they failed every exam?" Ron was instantly gleeful at the thought that there were those who did worse than he did.

Through all this verbal battle, Tanya had been watching Malfoy closely. When he noticed her scrutiny, he turned on her.

"So, this is the filthy little gypsy Dumbledore allowed into Hogwarts, eh? This place has sunk to a new low."

Before Harry or Ron could jump to her defense, Tanya had stopped to openly stare at Malfoy. "Your father . . . is . . . Lucius Malfoy?" she asked incredulously. "The one that escaped from Azkaban?"

"So, even the gypsies have heard of him, eh? None of you are fit to wipe the dirt from his shoes."

"*One* of us has heard of him," she said mysteriously. "Are you in the habit then, of running to Daddy when things go wrong? Does Daddy fix everything for you?"

"Watch your mouth, gypsy trash! My father wouldn't spit on you if you were on fire!"

With that, he shoved roughly past them and they slowly followed up the path to Hagrid's. Harry looked at Tanya, who, instead of looking insulted, simply looked deep in thought.

"You don't want to mind anything that prat says," said Ron, loyally. "He's said worse to Hermione ever since we started here. He doesn't like Muggle-borns, either."

"But do you think," she asked, "that if someone were to abuse Malfoy junior in some way, that Malfoy senior would come around to set things right?"

"I doubt it now," Harry said. "He's on the run. It looks like Draco is on his own for a change."

"But what if it were something life threatening?" she persisted. "Something that only he could help? Surely he'd not leave his son to the wolves."

"What difference would it make?" Ron asked. "Who's going to bother him here, under Dumbledore's care? It's not Draco that's in danger, it's Harry."

Further conversation was cut off as Hagrid beckoned them all closer. Besides Draco, Ron, Harry, and Tanya, there was Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. Holy cow, Harry thought. Not only was Draco without his mates, he was the only Slytherin in the crowd. That ought to keep him subdued.

As Hagrid introduced his lesson plans for the next couple of weeks, something involving treating injured mammals, Harry watched Tanya. She, oddly enough, didn't seem too interested in her chosen career, but instead seemed to draw deep within herself, her thoughts apparently elsewhere. He wondered how much of Malfoy's taunts was the cause of it.

By the end of the class, she seemed to have come to some sort of decision. She looked more chipper than she had at the beginning of the class, and shook away Harry's questioning look as they headed to the Great Hall for lunch.

During the meal, they caught up with Hermione, who had spent the morning in Arithmancy and Muggle Studies. They'd all be sharing Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts classes this term, but it hit home for Harry for the first time that they were beginning to go their separate ways. It was the beginning of the end of a period in their lives, and Harry sadly wondered how distant or close they might be in ten years' time.

After lunch, Harry was disappointed to find out that those pursuing a career in finance were strongly recommended to take the advanced Transfiguration classes, if only to know when valuables had been transfigured from something much more useless. Sort of an anti-counterfeiting class. So, another class they had to share with Malfoy. And, since everyone was required to master Defense Against the Dark Arts, they'd all be there, too. Harry began to wonder, in amazement, if Potions would end up being his favorite class, simply because of Malfoy's absence from it. Snape might appreciate that sort of irony, he thought.

It turned out to be an exciting class, Harry thought. McGonagall informed them that if their interests lay in becoming an Animagus, she'd be offering extra lessons for those that had scored high enough in their Transfiguration O.W.L.s. Anyone who wanted to pursue this was welcome, at the end of class, to confer with her to get their exact score, and schedule a time every week when their class would be held.

He was happy to find out that he made the grade. So did Hermione, Dean, and happily, Tanya. All four of them wanted to learn the art of transfiguring into an animal. Ron lagged behind, even after finding out he didn't score highly enough, to ensure that he would still be able to pursue a career in the Auror field.

McGonagall smiled kindly at him. "Yes, Mr. Weasley," she said. "Not all Aurors are Animagi. But I'm afraid that the class requires stronger skills in Transfiguration to attempt to learn this skill. The mistakes that a student who isn't up to it would make are far too dangerous for the casual student."

"Oh, that's all right, then," he said, brightening. "I didn't really want to make myself more schoolwork. I just was afraid that I'd have to drop this line of study to find another profession."

"No worry of that," she replied. "If your grades weren't up to it, you wouldn't have been permitted the classes that I scheduled for you."

It was determined that Hermione, Dean, Harry and Tanya would have to take these classes on Saturday, 5:00 pm. That would enable all of them to take the classes together, and still play Quidditch. Harry brightened, knowing that all of the laws Umbridge had put into effect last year as High Inquisitor were abandoned, and his "life-long ban" of playing Quidditch was no longer an issue. He would again be Seeker!

The next few weeks passed by in a blur of activity. Potions demanded at least two essays every week, and Transfiguration was becoming more and more challenging. Defense classes were becoming even more interesting, if that were possible, and learning to be an Animagus was proving to be more difficult than Harry imagined. He couldn't wait to master it to the point of actually changing. He wondered what his Animagus would be. A stag, like his father? A dog, like his godfather?

The only one of them so far that seemed to be making any progress was Tanya, of course. Although this wasn't any sort of magic she'd ever done before, she was amazingly talented. Her Animagus looked like it wanted to be a raven, but she wasn't far enough advanced in her changing for them to be sure. Some sort of bird, obviously, but what sort, they had yet to find out.

Hermione was becoming frustrated. She wasn't in the habit of being bested by other students, but Harry didn't think she was holding it against Tanya, at least. McGonagall had to keep reminding Hermione not to try to will a certain animal onto herself. It was a magic beyond any of them as to what they would turn into.

Dean had lightly suggested a beaver, remembering how large Hermione's teeth had once been, but Hermione was not amused. Dean himself said that he'd begun to feel very large, and powerful, so perhaps his animagus would be a hippogriff. McGonagall had her hands full keeping them from trying to second-guess their results, but she seemed happy that they were progressing at all.

In the evenings, brain-tired and sleepy after the evening meal, Harry enjoyed sitting at the table in the common room doing homework with Tanya sitting across from him, looking up now and then to share secret smiles. Harry was beginning to go mad, wondering if he'd ever get the chance to be alone with her again. And then, Hogsmeade weekend!

Sure, there were plenty of students milling about, but at least it was time in each other's company, with no pressing business like schoolwork to get in their way.

As they walked down the road to Hogsmeade behind Ron and Hermione, Harry asked her how Malfoy was treating her. She looked at him, eyes narrowed, and countered with her own question. "If he were to insult me again, would you be leaping to my defense?"

"Of course I would," he replied easily. "He almost spits when he talks to you. You, of all people, don't deserve to be talked to that way."

He swore her eyes had tears in them when she answered. "That's sweet, Harry, but you have to realize that I'm more than able to take care of myself." She looked directly at him. "It's important that you don't interfere with anything between himself and me. It's *very* important."

Harry got an uncomfortable feeling of impending disaster in the air. "You sound as though you're *replanning* there to be something between the two of you," he said carefully.

"Don't you worry, Harry," she said, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder. "I've been handling people like Draco since before you ever knew you were a wizard."

She changed the subject by nodding toward Ron and Hermione, who were walking up ahead. They smiled at each other when they noticed Ron's nervous attempt to hold Hermione's hand without Hermione noticing. But Harry was happy to see Hermione reach out and grab Ron's hand herself.

When they reached the village, Harry asked Tanya if she'd like to browse the shops, seeing as this was her first foray into the town as a student. She surprised him, however.

"What I'd really like to see is the famous "Shrieking Shack". I've heard it's haunted."

"It isn't really," Harry told her. "My father, Sirius, Lupin and that sneak Wormtail only pretended it was, and got others to believe it, so that Lupin could stay there while he was a werewolf without the villagers knowing."

"Then it's empty," she asked. "No one's tearing it down?"

"No, Hogwarts owns it. Dumbledore made sure of that because he needed it for Lupin."

"Then show me."

So, Harry turned down the side path that would take them there, giving Ron and Hermione time to assess the new turn in their relationship without an audience. It was the only way it would come to anything, Harry knew. Ron was way too bashful to chat up Hermione if there was anyone within hearing distance. Hermione would have her job cut out for her if she wanted to pursue that relationship.

The shack stood up on a high hill, and Harry picked out a trail through the fallen leaves that lead to a back door. He'd never entered the shack from the outside before; the only time he'd been inside had been via the underground tunnel that began at the Whomping Willow.

The door was locked, but a simple *alohamora* charm took care of that. He locked it again behind himself, and they stood in the kitchen, looking at all the accumulated dust.

Tanya moved further into the house, ignoring the rickety looking stairs in favor of a sitting room toward the front of the house. She found a sofa that didn't look too uncomfortable, and took off her cloak to drape it over the cushions. Harry followed suit, and they sat down, Harry suddenly trying to swallow, fighting the dryness of his mouth.

Tanya took his face in her hands, lifting her lips to his. Harry kissed her, moving his hands to her waist. She'd dressed casually for the outing; button-down oxford shirt, softly faded blue jeans, and scrunch-boots. He took in the soft smell of her shampoo, jasmine, and allowed her to remove his glasses. She placed them carefully on a table behind her. She turned back to him, and began to unbutton his shirt. As she lowered her lips to his neck, and began to blaze a trail of kisses down his chest, he removed the clasp from her hair so he could lift it in his hands and let it slide through his fingers. He loved her hair. He leaned back into the sofa, pulling her with him.

A moment later, he sat up abruptly, startling her. "Tanya," he began, not knowing what he could say that wouldn't make her think the worst of him. "I've never . . . I mean . . . we seem to be heading somewhere . . ." He took a deep breath. "We have to stop this. I'm not ready for this."

"I can tell you want me, Harry."

"It's too much, too soon. I . . ."

She put her finger on his lips to silence him. "I understand, Harry. We should take the time to know each other better."

"You do understand, then?"

"Aye, of course I do."

She leaned over to pick her hair clasp. Her necklace swayed away from her, and she clapped a hand to it to settle it back against her skin.

"Does that necklace have special meaning for you?" he asked. "I've never seen you without it, except when you're in your school uniform."

"I just got into the habit of wearing it. It's special, I guess." She looked as though she had made a decision. Continuing to put herself in order, she spoke to him through a curtain of her hair.

"It was given to me many years ago by my sister, Natalia. She said it would protect me, bring me good luck."

"I didn't know you had a sister," he said, hoping she would open up to him.

"I don't, not anymore," she said softly. Harry held his breath, not willing to push for information, but hoping she'd give it.

"I have a brother somewhere; that's all that's left of my immediate family. We don't keep in touch," she added sharply.

"Do you hate him?"

"No. He is a stranger to me. When I was very young, when I had my family with me, I hated him. He used to live for delivering bad news to me, taking great delight in telling me things I lived in fear of."

"What things?" He asked quietly, trying not to dispel the mood.

"My father used to play poker," she said, not looking at him. "He was good, but even he sometimes ran into a string of bad luck. When I was four, my brother, Petro, almost broke his neck running into the camper, waking me from my sleep, and almost wet his pants telling me that Papa had promised my hand in marriage to the ante."

"At four years old? How is that possible?"

"If he had lost, I could hope that the winner of the pot would take me into his own family, and raise me as his ward, until I was old enough to be married. Otherwise . . ."

"And how old would that have been?"

"Thirteen. In the meantime, his daughters or current wife would have taught me the things my mother should have been teaching me. Things like how to raise children, cook, sew, tell fortunes, mix potions, read the tarot, whatever."

"Wasn't your mother teaching you these things? And how did she feel about this bet of his?" Harry couldn't believe that in this day and age, such things happened.

"My mother never taught me anything," she said, without rancor. "All I remember about her is that she was . . . *there*. Just hanging around, like a shadow. Whatever my father said, she agreed with. It was Natalia who raised me, who taught me to read, against my father's wishes. Papa was one of those who didn't believe a woman with any education at all was a good idea. Natalia wanted a better life for me. She was the one who kept giving me books to read, and telling me about the gaje, and encouraging me to live life the way I wanted, not according to Papa's plans."

"Didn't your father try to stop her from doing that?"

"He couldn't. Natalia was already married. She was about fifteen by the time I was born. Her husband, Paulo, adored her, and would never have allowed Papa to interfere. Papa was happy that Natalia had found such a good man, and he never tried to interfere. You see, once the girl marries, her new husband owns her, not her father."

"Wow. I never knew gypsy culture was so . . . primitive." Too late, Harry worried that his words would offend Tanya. But she smiled.

"We could maintain our primitive culture because we were so cloistered away from the gaje. We had nothing, sometimes, and the less we had, the more important tradition seemed to be. And when we were rolling in wealth, tradition seemed important then, too, as proof that we were living right."

"So, your father didn't lose, right?"

"Not that night. I found out that over the next few years, he would put his promise of marriage to me into the pot. It had a lot of value; because of my young age, it was understood that I was pure. Also, my greatpapa, or what you would call your great grandfather, was our King. I was almost royalty, and so whoever married me would be elevated in status. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Ascension to the leadership of our tribe was by no means a given. If things went right, and the King knew his death was approaching, he'd give his medallion over to whomever he thought should replace him as King of the Gypsies. But it was also understood that this new leader would be challenged for his right to lead the rest of us. Only the wisest, strongest, and toughest would be the king. It was important for our survival.

"One night, when I was seven years old, Petro burst into the camper again. Natalia was there, listening to me read. It was a ritual we did every night; Talia was bound and determined that I learn everything I could. Petro said that Papa had lost his hand; my marriage would take place the next day at sunset. Then he told me who my husband was to be."

"Who?"

"A man named Samuel Lemke. He was a close mate of my Papa's. He was ninety-three years old."

"But you wouldn't have had to worry about a wedding night, then, would you?" How terrible it would have been to have a husband that old, but maybe she would have thought of him more as an old relative than a husband.

She smiled ruefully. "Rom men are usually virile until they draw their dying breath. He would have wanted his honeymoon, all right. And he had cancer. It went pretty much untreated, so it had begun to eat a hole in his face. I remember once when I was around six, I looked up from our meal around the campfire and caught sight of him chewing his food. I could see it right through his face. It put me off my food for about three weeks. This was to be my husband."

She shuddered, and Harry knew she was reliving the experience. He moved to put his arm around her, knowing she'd have to finish this memory and be done with it. He tried to make it better, comforting her. She leaned into his embrace and continued.

"Talia immediately started throwing things into a bag. She scribbled something on a piece of paper, grabbed me, pushed Petro down and threatened him with his life if he moved, and shoved me out the camper door."

"She pulled me after her, running as if the devil himself was at our heels, out to the road that passed by our campsite. It was pitch black out there; you could barely see your hand in front of your face. She gave me the paper she'd scribbled on; it was an address. She told me to follow the road until I came into the village. Then I was to search for that address. A friend of hers lived there, a gaje friend of Paulo's. This friend's family would take me in and keep me from being found.

"So I did. It took me until morning to get to the village, and I was too afraid to ask any of the gaje for directions. I was trying to avoid the law, as 'Talia warned, because they'd only return me to my father.

"I must have looked quite a sight by noon. I was thirsty, hungry, frightened out of my wits, hiding from anyone who, from a distance, ever**looked** like my people, and hiding from anyone in a uniform.

"A friendly-looking woman spoke kindly to me, offered me some water from her canteen. She had set up a booth in the marketplace, and she let me rest in the shade of the stand. She made sure I had enough water, then she made me share her lunch. Her name was Bridie O'Hara, and to this day, I make sure she gets a gift from me for Mother's Day and Christmas. She saved my life.

"She took me to the address I showed her, and, like 'Talia promised, the Geritys took me in. 'Talia had planned for this, I knew. She'd already cleared it with the Gerity family. I was there for three days before Papa showed up."

"How did he find you?"

"I found out later that he tried to beat it out of 'Talia, but before he could hit her the once, Paulo stepped in and flattened him. Normally, that would mean he'd have hell to pay, because Papa was a tribal elder, well respected. But no one cared about that when they found out that Papa was going to beat up another man's wife. They turned on him. So, he backed down. I would have been safe from him if not for my loving brother. Petro told Papa where he might look, seeing as how he knew where 'Talia and Paulo went when they visited the village.

"So Papa came to the house of Gerity. They hid me out back in the barn, and stood up to Papa. When neighbors came to help, not wanting gypsies causing trouble, Papa subsided. Mr. Gerity called me out to the front, where Papa gave me his version of the evil eye and spat at my feet. He ripped the sleeve of his jacket; his way of telling me that I was no longer alive in his eyes. Rom men tear a sleeve to mourn the loss of a loved one. My mother, who was with him, grabbed the knife from Papa's belt and began hacking off her hair. That's how Romany women show their grief. I was dead to my parents."

Harry suppressed a shudder next to her on the couch. That she could tell him this without apparent emotion in her voice . . . what had to be the most painful experience of her life . . .

"But 'Talia and Paulo were there as well," she continued. "I was so happy and felt I'd always have their love because when my mother handed 'Talia the knife, 'Talia spat on it and refused to cut off her hair. Likewise, Paulo refused to tear his sleeve. Papa was livid, but he knew he couldn't force it. Paulo would have killed him. Natalia left the horse she was on to speak to me, pulling me away from the others' hearing. Papa couldn't stop this either, as I was dead to him.

"She gave me another piece of paper, with another address. She said the Geritys would help me get to the United States, and I could stay with my grandfather, who had given up the gypsy ways and was living as a gajo in Manhattan, in New York. She made me promise to enroll in a public school; pursue my education so I would never have to rely on any man to take care of me.

"Then they left, returning to our encampment. The Geritys gave me space, enough time to sort out my feelings, knowing it hurt. And then, just before I was to leave for America, I went back to the encampment . . ." her eyes clouded for the first time in her recitation, and Harry waited to see if she'd continue. But she shook herself and looked up into his eyes.

"But aye, the necklace is special to me. And now that I'm at Hogwarts, I can believe that she knew what she was talking about, that she must have foreseen this. I feel blessed to be here."

Harry didn't know what to say. He may never say another unkind word about the Dursleys ever again. He wanted to ask her about what happened at the encampment just before she left Ireland, but he could see the toll this narration had taken. She smiled tremulously and allowed him to pull her to her feet. He pulled her close, trying to erase years of pain, knowing he could not, but also knowing he could share that pain with her, now that he knew.

They quietly left the shack, locking the door behind them. It was understood that they'd come back here, that they would grab any chance they could for this closeness. Heading down the road, they agreed without speaking to return to Hogwarts, not really wanting the company of others right now.

As they entered the gates of Hogwarts, they met Snape on his way out. Snape did a double take when he saw Tanya, and looking closely at her, he glared at Harry.

"What have you done to her?" he demanded.

Harry was confused. He looked at Tanya, but didn't see anything wrong. Tanya too looked confused. She looked at Snape. "What do you mean? There's nothing wrong with me."

Harry worried that what they had almost done this afternoon was apparent to those who knew better than he the ways of the world. But, looking at Tanya again, he could see no real difference, other than that she looked a little depressed. He knew well the reason for it, but what did Snape fear had happened?

"You look as though you've been through quite an ordeal. Has anyone been bothering you in town? Someone making trouble for you?"

"No, Harry and I spent the better part of the day just talking," she answered, her evasiveness apparent only to Harry, and only because he knew what they'd started off doing.

"Talking?" Snape questioned, looking at Harry. "What conversation could possible make you look so drained?" He glared at Harry, silently demanding an answer.

"Tanya was reliving some painful memories," he conceded. "And you're right; it was a draining experience for her." He looked compassionately at Tanya, and for once, didn't feel the anger he would have expected to feel toward Snape. He now understood what it felt like to be so concerned about another person.

"Severus," Tanya said, "I'm perfectly all right. Harry didn't exactly force me to talk, you know. There ~~was~~ some free will involved." She smiled to take the edge off her words.

Snape looked as though he didn't want to let Harry off the hook so easily. But he nodded curtly at the both of them and continued on his way to town.

Harry and Tanya continued to make their way up to the Tower. "Snape sure seems protective of you," he mused, hoping for comment from her. "I've never seen him even remotely concerned about anyone. I mean, unless he was ordered by Dumbledore to protect someone."

Tanya simply murmured her agreement, so Harry was forced to let the subject drop. They entered the common room, after convincing the Fat Lady to let them in just on the strength of their password, instead of listening to her pathetic attempt at singing. Although Harry would have loved to spend the rest of the day with Tanya, he was content to let her go up to her dorm, knowing she'd need a nap before Animagus class this evening. She'd need all her energy.

He also went up to his dorm, hoping that today would be the day he would find out what his Animagus would be.

Changes and Hopes

Chapter 9 of 20

Severus is worried as he realizes that Dumbledore may have some very dangerous plans for Tanya.

Chapter Nine

Changes and Hopes

Snape contemplated the budding relationship between Potter and Tanya. He knew they were becoming closer all the time; he could see it in the way Potter's eyes kept straying to Tanya during class; by the way Tanya seemed happier than he'd seen her all summer. He just hoped Potter never disappointed her. There'd be hell to pay, he silently promised.

He was concerned for this memory she'd relived for Potter today. It obviously took a lot out of her; therefore, she must have told him what she'd hinted at to him a year ago. How her world changed thanks to some obscure tragedy that had wiped out her family and most of the rest of the gypsies that made up the small community. He never could get details from her about that time; he found himself jealously hoping that she didn't tell Potter anything she wouldn't tell him.

He stopped in at the Three Broomsticks for his usual whiskey. He needed it after an entire week of dealing with these wishful thinking adults-to-be he was forced to deal with. He didn't mind the first half of the week, knowing he'd see Tanya. But Thursday and Friday dragged on. He mentally kicked himself for sounding like a jealous boyfriend. But he never fully felt the impact of his lonely lifestyle until Tanya had taught him that simply conversing with someone who shared like interests was a good thing. He missed her laughter at his sarcasm, seeing right through it. He missed the feeling she gave him, with knowing that she could spend her time anywhere, but chose to spend it with him. He never in his life could have believed someone would actually seek out his company, simply for the sake of being together. Until she did.

Now, understandably, she was busy with schoolwork and forging new friendships. Thinking about what he did know of her earlier life, he realized that this could very well be the first time she was learning the joy of companionship as well. He knew, at least on an academic level, that she'd been lonely, never fitting in anywhere after her tragic loss of family. She would surely bloom here at Hogwarts.

And already, the happiness was showing up in her physical appearance. She was eating better, the adolescent body filling out nicely. And yes, just to himself he could admit it; he noticed. Her eyes sparkled when she laughed, her skin was glowing, and her hair was shiny, full and soft enough to tempt any man to want to bury himself in it.

Potter better watch out, he thought ruefully. He's going to have some serious competition once the other boys discover her.

As he sipped his whiskey, he saw Weasley and Granger enter the establishment. They looked around, apparently looking for someone. They stopped at a nearby table and spoke to the students there. "Have Harry and Tanya been in here?" he heard Granger ask.

"No, we haven't seen either of them," came the answer.

So, the group begins to part ways, thought Snape. Our youngsters are growing up and apart. He never thought he'd see the day when he'd see Potter without Weasley close behind, and more often than not, Granger as well. But now things were different. He wondered how the group dynamics would shift, and then laughed at himself for caring, if even idly. He saw Granger's hand on Weasley's shoulder, directing him outside. So that was one pairing, he thought. No real surprise there, although he thought perhaps Granger could do better than Weasley.

With no real place to take his musings, he found himself wondering if today's breed of young adults were prone to pair up long-term, or would it be a different pairing every weekend? And what of Tanya? She seemed mature beyond her years, and he wondered if Potter would be able to keep up with her. He grudgingly admitted to himself that Potter's life experiences would have had some effect as to his maturation as well, so perhaps it wasn't too bad a match at that. She certainly wouldn't settle for anyone not deserving of her attentions. Not her.

He soon grew tired of unwanted, overheard conversations, and he paid his tab and rose to leave. On his way out the door, he was almost knocked over by Hagrid, no surprise there. "Professor Snape," he roared happily, "jus' leavin', are yeh?"

"So it would seem," he conceded sardonically. "Unfortunately, the door seems to be blocked by a rather large obstruction."

Hagrid apologized and moved aside. Snape continued on his way, deciding a return to Hogwarts was the best idea, his need for escape thwarted by the very people from whom he'd been trying to escape.

Things were not destined to improve, he thought cynically, as he entered the castle to find Dumbledore heading for him, moving as though he had a purpose. Stopping when he faced Snape, he watched him quietly for a moment before he said, "Severus, I wonder if I might have a word with you in my office?"

Snape was taken aback by the intensity in Dumbledore's eyes and in his voice. Clearly, this was serious. He nodded briefly, and continued on to his rooms to collect his robes. It had always seemed to Snape that it would be sacrilegious to enter that particular office in civilian clothing.

Approaching the gargoyle that guarded the moving stairs to the headmaster's rooms, Snape struggled to remember the current password. "Lemon drops . . . Fizzing Whizbees . . . Orange Sherbet . . ." Snape fought to hold on to his temper.

"Orange marmalade."

He started to hear Dumbledore's voice right beside him. He stepped aside to allow the headmaster to lead the way up into the office. Upon entering, he was slightly surprised to see that the meeting would be just the two of them. He began to feel the first fluttering of trepidation. Was he to be reproved for something? He squashed down the feeling, hating that even at his age, he could be made to feel like a wayward schoolboy by the venerable old man.

He sat before Dumbledore's desk and waited silently for the old man to begin.

"We have received the results of Miss Relke's examinations. She has achieved O.W.L.s in all subjects, with high scores. So, it seems our confidence in her has been well founded."

Snape wondered if there had been any doubt at all in Dumbledore's head. Surely, her academic prowess had been a given? There had to be more to this meeting than that, he surmised.

"I trust," continued Dumbledore, "that her progress in her studies thus far is satisfactory?"

"More than satisfactory, I'd say," replied Snape. "She shows natural, instinctive ability. I'd even go so far as to say she knows almost as much about Potions as I." He was

surprised he'd admit that, even to himself.

"According to her other teachers, it's the same across the board. Any class now, Minerva is certain, Tanya will be able to completely transfigure into her Animagus. Minerva suspects a raven."

"That will come in handy," Snape thought, nervously. "Do you think she really understands the risks?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore replied, after a moment's thought. "I rather think the risks are less for her than for the rest of us, however."

"What makes you think so? Powerful as she is, there are many powerful wizards and witches who have been destroyed, in one way or another, by the Dark Lord."

"Have you ever wondered why there are no gypsies among Voldemort's followers? Powerful magic, yet no representation among his troops?"

"It was my understanding that he hates gypsies, won't have any near him."

"True, but didn't you ever wonder why? He hates many of his followers, doesn't he? Wormtail, for one. Yet he has them at his disposal. What of the gypsies?"

Snape frowned in thought. "Could it be possible that he isn't aware of that particular resource?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "We must assume that he knows at least as much as any of us know. Yet still, he wants no gypsies."

Snape gave up. "You have a theory?"

"I do," Dumbledore answered, gravely. "But, keep in mind, it is only a theory. Only Voldemort himself would know for certain."

"I suspect that there was a time when he may have approached the gypsies, in his own inimitable way, and was rebuffed. Possibly punished for his arrogance and impudence. He must have tasted the awe-inspiring powers of a race he'd only held in contempt previously. Imagine hundreds of Tanyas attacking Riddle, who must have realized when to cut his losses and escape with his life."

"So he fears gypsies, does he?"

"I would think so."

"Do you think he knows about Tanya, then?"

"I don't believe we have any of his spies in a position to report our recent activities. But, alas, there is no real way to be sure. It would be nice to be able to hold this particular ace up our sleeves until such time as might prove necessary to reveal her. I fear the only thing to do now is go about our daily lives, keeping ever alert to any intelligence that comes our way."

"Is there anything new, Headmaster?"

"No. Voldemort still hasn't been sighted, Pettigrew seems to be at loose ends, and Malfoy is still at large. No one seems to have any ideas as to where he'd go."

"Surely, his family must have some contact with him."

"You know Narcissa," Dumbledore said. "She packed up her bags and left the family homestead. Last news was that she established her new home with some old college friends. I fear young Draco will be tossed from relative to relative for a while until such time as more permanent arrangements can be made."

While Snape never particularly liked the Malfoy boy, as a carbon copy of his father, he felt a stab of pity for him. Potter had made possible the arrest and imprisonment of Lucius, and there was a considerably noticeable change in Draco. He was also without his usual cronies, and the Malfoy wealth was no longer a handy tool to buy more friends. This alone, Snape thought, might be enough to alter the future of the world more than anything else. That, and Dumbledore's new "weapon". He wondered if the headmaster ever thought of Tanya as more than that.

Since Snape was not inclined to small talk, the meeting concluded on the agreement that Tanya was continue to be encouraged to pursue her studies on a more independent basis, allowing her to progress according to her skills, as opposed to a scheduled curriculum.

Snape had tried to debate this point, arguing that she was still only fifteen years old. What good would it do for her to enter an adult world while still so young? Would she never be permitted youth? And wouldn't independent study alienate her from the friendships she was now forming?

"I think you'll find that Tanya will live her life as an adult much the same way she's lived it as a child, Severus. Age doesn't seem to mean anything to her. I am simply bowing to the inevitable. I challenge you to even try to slow her down," he added, with a twinkle in his eye.

That evening, to no one's surprise, Tanya transfigured into a raven. Fully transfigured. She flew a few laps around the grounds of Hogwarts, enjoying her new freedom, before McGonagall could persuade her to return, and allow her coloring and markings to be noted for registration at the Ministry.

Harry grinned as he watched her land on the ground before him. It was apparently easier for her to land as a bird, than from a broomstick. He didn't mind that he was no nearer to transfiguring himself than he was at the start of term. The average wizard or witch took up to three years to become skilled enough to become a true Animagus.

He looked carefully at Tanya. An Animagus typically showed some characteristics common to their human forms, and Tanya's markings were around her neck. Silvery feathers ringing her neck were because of the necklace she habitually wore, with a pendant shaped drop at the base of her throat. Everywhere else she was all sleek, black feathers.

Dean Thomas seemed to be making some progress as well. His Animagus kept trying to make an appearance, but it was Dean himself who slowed the process. He tried to get his shape to resemble a large powerful animal, as he knew his Animagus was to be, but obviously it was the wrong animal. Much as Dean wanted his shape to be a lion or bear, Harry suspected it would be more like an elephant or a hippogriff.

Hermione seemed to be getting nowhere, but after a pep talk from McGonagall, she appeared to be reining in her frustration. That could only help.

Harry didn't get any impressions at all about what his Animagus would be, and he wondered if it were too soon to worry that he'd be able to pull it off at all.

Heading back to the common room after class with the rest, Harry was surprised to see Cho Chang heading his way. He'd almost forgotten she was still here. She was in her final year, and must be keeping busy, but she caught Harry's eye and held it. Obviously, she wasn't ignoring him anymore.

She stopped in front of him, ignoring the others. Dean and Hermione continued on, but Tanya held back. They'd been having a conversation about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend when Cho had spotted him, and she wasn't aware that Harry and Cho had once tried dating.

Cho looked pointedly at Tanya. Harry mumbled introductions and wondered what she wanted with him now. "Oh, yes," Cho said, disdainfully. "The gypsy."

Harry inwardly groaned. Either he was about to witness a catfight, or he was going to have to see the hurt in Tanya's eyes as yet another insult was thrown her way without warning.

He tried to catch Tanya's eye, but she'd already turned away. "I'll see you upstairs, Harry," she said. Harry couldn't tell what she'd thought about Cho's remark.

"So, what's up?" asked Harry, trying for a neutral tone.

"I just wanted to apologize for the dotty way I acted last year," she said, not quite meeting his eyes. "I don't know why I was so upset all the time. You must think I'm a real idiot." She looked up at him for his response.

"No," he said, stalling for time to think. "I don't think you're an idiot. I was the one. I should have realized that you would have needed to talk about Cedric. I was just too stupid to understand."

"You weren't stupid," she said, smiling. "The truth is, I didn't even know Cedric very well. After you two competed in the tournament, you probably knew him better than I did. I think it was just the idea of someone I knew, *anyone* I knew, was dead. I never went through anything like that before."

"Well, I guess it hits everyone that way. Nothing to feel stupid about."

"So, how are your classes going this year?" Harry was glad that Cho felt it was time to change the subject. He began to relax slightly.

"They're going okay, I guess. I'm still trying to figure out what Animagus I might end up as. Are you one?"

"Heavens, no," she said, laughing. "I did get an O.W.L. in Transfiguration, but I don't think anyone in my year scored high enough to take those classes. Are they really that difficult?"

"I think it depends on what you mean by difficult. I can't do it yet, but it usually takes a few years anyway. There are only four of us in class. That makes it seem like it's not really schoolwork. That right there might make the difference."

"Four? Who are they?"

"Me, Hermione, Dean Thomas, and Tanya."

"Really. And how are they doing?"

"Tanya's accomplished it. She's a raven."

"That seems awfully quick, doesn't it? Did she start these classes at her old school?"

Harry shuffled uncomfortably. He was no good at upholding previously agreed upon prevarications. "No, actually, this is the first she's tried it."

"She seems to be doing exceedingly well in everything, from what I've heard." Cho sounded disapproving.

"Well, yes," Harry stammered. "She's sort of a natural."

"Yes, that would be that gypsy stuff."

"What gypsy stuff?" Harry felt his hackles beginning to rise.

"Oh, you know," she said in exasperation, *'gypsy stuff'*! All she probably has to do is to drink some magic gypsy potion and then do whatever she wants to. That's not real magic."

Harry spoke through his gritted teeth. "What's the difference between real magic and gypsy magic? It's that gypsy magic that's probably going to save all our hides some day."

"Harry, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to . . . I've just put my foot in again, didn't I? And you're right, of course. As long as it works, who cares what sort of magic it is, right? I spoke without thinking." She looked anxiously into Harry's eyes, waiting to see what he'd do. Harry wondered why she was apologizing instead of walking off in a huff.

"Look, it makes no difference to me what beliefs you have, Cho. It's just that Tanya is my friend, and, yes, I get uptight when people insult my friends."

"I know, and I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I really just wanted to ask you if you wanted to spend the next Hogsmeade weekend together."

Did she just ask him for a date? Harry was speechless for what seemed a long time, long enough for Cho to fidget in embarrassment. How was he going to get out of this without insulting her?

"Actually, Cho," he began nervously. "I've been spending my free time with Tanya, mostly."

Sure enough, Cho looked at him, allowing him to see the hurt in her eyes. But Harry wondered if it was just her feminine pride that had been hurt.

"Are you sure that's what you want, Harry?" she asked waspishly. "Or is it what *she* wants. Maybe she just slipped you a Love Potion or something."

"Why is it so hard to believe I would be attracted to Tanya?" he asked. "She's pretty, she's smart, she's fun to hang around with, she's . . ." Harry forced himself to stop before he revealed more about his relationship with Tanya than he wanted to.

"And we all know how much of a drag / am," Cho spat, stomping away.

Harry continued his bemused way up the stairs to the common room. He noted with relief that it was empty, except for Tanya, who'd begun her homework at the table.

He sat down across from her, still digesting Cho's words. Were there such things as gypsy Love Potions? Had he ever drunk anything Tanya had poured out for him? He shook himself, realizing that he wouldn't really have cared anyway.

"Everything all right, Harry?" Tanya was watching him, looking worried.

"Sure. Why wouldn't it be?"

"You seem . . . I don't know, not quite upset, but *something*."

"Oh, I always get that way after talking to Cho. She's a confusing person." He smiled, then looked down at the parchment she was writing on. "What's that?"

"The Potions essay."

"Oh, yeah. The Veritasium Potion."

"I don't understand it, really. It doesn't sound like these ingredients would mix together at all, let alone in just this certain way. Sometimes I wonder if he makes these lessons intentionally complicated."

"I already finished my essay for his class. No doubt it's worthless, but at least I followed his lecture to the letter. If the theory is wrong, he'll only have himself to blame."

"I thought I'd try a different approach. I've already written about my reservations regarding the ingredients he mentioned. Now I have to try to explain what I think will work better."

"He's not going to like it that you try to improve his potions, you know. He's too arrogant for that."

"I know. But if I'm totally wrong about this, better to find out now than wait until I try it for real with disastrous results."

"Well, you're a braver soul than I," said Harry. "Now, to more important things. Weekend after next is Hogsmeade. Shall we spend it together?"

"Aye, I'm surprised you'd even have to ask. I want another tour of the Shrieking Shack."

For a moment, Harry was struck dumb. She may as well have just told him that she wanted him to make wild, passionate love to her. He grinned. This is one of the reasons he'd always felt so comfortable in her presence. He didn't have to worry that he was trying to play a game whose rules he didn't understand.

The following Monday, true to form, Snape tore apart the essay Tanya had handed in at the start of class. Tanya stood her ground, defending the points she had made, but not pushing too hard, either. She seemed to be taking the measure of Snape, Harry thought. That might be bad news for Snape, he was thinking. He'd seen that look before, when she'd met Malfoy. Harry remembered the feeling of dread that came over him then, expecting that soon he'd have reason to pity Malfoy. He felt no different now.

And yet, she didn't seem to be angry, or hurt, or even frustrated at Snape's evaluation of her work. She was simply sizing him up, as if she was considering her next move. Snape was ruthless. Tanya now had a detention that night, and Harry felt for her.

Harry's musings were cut short when Snape tossed down Tanya's parchment to pick up another. Soon, Harry was trying to match the facial expression he'd seen on Tanya's face a moment ago as Snape dissected the essay Harry had turned in. He wondered if he would be joining Tanya for detention, but to Harry's relief, and the good of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, he was spared as Snape began verbally tearing apart Ron's essay.

Later, as they were drifting down the path to Hagrid's cabin for their next class, the inevitable albatross-around-the-neck that called itself Malfoy caught up to them to darken their day.

"No one's seen fit to expel you lot yet?" It was almost a friendly comment, considering.

Tanya was staring at Malfoy. When Malfoy noticed, he turned on her. "And what're you looking at, you filthy little gypsy?"

Ron whispered to Tanya, "Don't worry about him. He says the same things to everyone." Tanya gave a little flip of her hand, as if to brush away a pesky mosquito, turning to head to Hagrid's.

Harry darted a quick look behind him, to make sure he knew where Malfoy was. It didn't pay to leave your back exposed to people like him, Harry knew from past experience. Then he did a double take. As he watched, Malfoy's platinum blond hair was shortening. It began to lose its glossy look and become . . . well . . . kind of . . . frizzy. And it was getting bushier. And it was . . . it was beginning to . . . were Harry's eyes deceiving him? Malfoy's hair was looking decidedly pink!

Harry had stopped in his tracks, mouth open, staring at Malfoy. Malfoy was about to send off a nasty remark, when he, too, stopped and lifted his hand to his hair. He must have felt it changing, thought Harry. He looked around at Ron and Tanya, who had just noticed that they'd lost Harry.

Tanya's eyes were unreadable, and Ron dropped his bookbag in surprise. "Malfoy! What happened to your hair?"

Malfoy's hair, meanwhile, had continued its metamorphosis. The fuzzy pink fluff had shortened until it resembled no more than puff balls above his ears. The top of his scalp was bald, the skin there looking even paler than Malfoy's normal complexion. As Malfoy turned around and around, trying to figure out what horror was attacking him, Harry saw that the pink ball of fluff was continuing around the back of his head. Malfoy had clown hair!

He looked quickly at Tanya, remembering her little wave toward Malfoy. He shut his eyes, not willing to submit to the laughter that was trying to force its way up from his stomach to his mouth. Malfoy ridiculed was nothing to toy with, unless he was ready to face the consequences. He really didn't think he could afford suspension, or worse, expulsion, and keeping his eyes away from Tanya at the moment was crucial.

Malfoy turned and snarled at the rest. "Which one of you did this? Which one of you suddenly got tired of living?"

The change was still happening. As Malfoy's face began to fade to pure white, Harry noticed black lines tracing their way horizontally and vertically across his eyelids and down to his cheeks. His nose was turning deep red, and blowing up until it was shaped like a ball. A path of the same shade of red was growing in ever-increasing width around Draco's lips. And then Malfoy yelled, frantically pulling off his shoes. His feet were growing at an alarming rate, the toes beginning to spread out until they resembled duck feet, except much larger and longer.

Malfoy could take no more. He turned and ran, or rather, tried to run. It would take some practice to move around with those feet. The other three wordlessly continued on to Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class, Harry and Ron in shock, Tanya acting as though nothing had happened. Harry chanced a quick look at Ron. His mouth was still hanging open. Tanya evaded his look.

"Yer runnin' late today," said Hagrid. "I was jus' about to send out a search party. And where's young Malfoy?"

"I think he might be headed for the hospital wing," Ron offered. "I think someone's hexed him."

Thankfully, whatever creatures were in the crate Hagrid was holding began demanding attention, and Hagrid's mind was diverted. Harry looked at Tanya, feeling it was now safe to make eye contact, but she just looked away. That seemed to confirm it, and he wondered how long before Madam Pomfrey would be able to fix things. He rather hoped more of the school would be able to witness this humiliation of Draco's. It might make him more keen to keep away from the rest for a while.

In the back of his mind was the idea that maybe he'd better be careful not to upset Tanya.

By evening, Snape had worn a path in the carpet in his private sitting room, wondering why in heaven's name he'd assigned Tanya to a detention? Her essay was good; he knew it, and worse, he knew that *she* knew he knew it.

She hadn't called him on it. Obviously, she wanted to speak to him without the other students around. So, she didn't object to this unfair detention.

But what was he going to say to her when she arrived in his classroom? He knew why he didn't want the other students to know how good her essay was. It would raise too many questions, for one thing. How could this girl know how to create a complicated potion with substitute materials, a girl who had only learned of the world of wizards a year earlier? How much more difficult would it be for her to blend in with other students if this sixth year student showed that she was better off being his research assistant, rather than his student. How much longer before Voldemort would get word of this prodigy in their midst?

He left his rooms to enter the Potions classroom. She wasn't there yet; it was only ten minutes before seven. He busied himself at his desk, marking papers from his first-year students.

He knew the moment that she entered, although she hadn't made a sound. He stole a few more moments to organize his thoughts, pretending to be immersed in the essay before him.

"Professor?" How odd to hear her call him that. He had become used to the sound of his name on her lips.

"Yes, Miss Relke?" Perhaps it was better to keep this off a personal level. Maybe he could be more objective.

"It's 7:00. I have a detention to serve." He looked up at her, looking for the amusement that would surely show up in her expressive eyes. There was none. She was merely waiting for him to show his hand first.

He tossed aside his quill and motioned her to sit. She sat on the desk in front of his, swinging her legs, patiently waiting for him to speak. He cleared his throat. He didn't know how to begin. He hoped Dumbledore hadn't been guessing; he could never tell when Dumbledore was tossing out ideas or if they were all well planned in advance. And how much of Tanya's welfare was the headmaster considering, in any event?

"I'm sure you know full well that your essay was exemplary. You also know that you didn't deserve a detention." He paused, watching her reaction. No change. She was way ahead of him.

"Your suggestions for an impromptu Veritaserum Potion needs checking out. If it actually can be brewed, it must be tested. You understand?"

"Aye. Are you suggesting a field test?"

"It would appear so. According to your paper, this potion can be brewed anywhere there is moving water and vegetation. Is that right?"

"Aye. I have no doubt it can be brewed. But how does one test a new potion? An unsuspecting bystander?"

"That's only one of the things we need to discuss." Snape decided to jump right in. For all he knew, it would work out better this way than allow her to continue this facade of normalcy.

"What else?" Tanya's legs had stopped moving, and Snape knew that up until now, she had expected every word he'd said.

"Dumbledore has suggested that there isn't all that much left to teach you. He recommends independent study. You'll be able to sit for your NEWTs whenever you're ready, as opposed to waiting until the end of next year.

"This will enable you more free time to pursue independent research. You'll be able to apprentice with Hagrid now, instead of waiting until you graduate. You'll be able to choose which research projects interest you, and in some cases, go out into the field to test your theories."

He looked at her, letting her know that the next move would be hers. She looked up at him, shrugging.

"I don't know what all the fuss is about, really. Of course I'd like the opportunity to actually apply what you've all taught me. It will be very exciting to be an active part of new development. Is this all to start right away?"

Snape had not expected this answer. He really thought she'd be reluctant to change her daily life yet again, now that she had adjusted to life as the average Hogwarts student knew it.

"Do you understand what it will be like?" he asked. She had to understand while there was still time to back out. "You won't be a sixth year student anymore. You won't have the same schedule your friends have. You'll be busier than usual. Just as if you'd already graduated, had already taken a position with an employer. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Severus," she said, smiling. "I don't know how much longer I could have taken the rigid schedule that had been set for me. I'm looking forward to this."

"You probably won't be able to find as much time to spend with your friends, what with your new duties."

"I can always find time for important things," she replied, giving Snape no clue as to what she considered important.

"Field testing alone can be dangerous. We don't know what Voldemort's doing, and we don't know how much he knows about what we're doing."

"I'm not worried about Voldemort."

"If I thought for a moment that you're underestimating him, I'd pack you off to St. Mungo's fourth floor before you can say 'Napoleon'".

She laughed, clearly understanding the Muggle reference. He knew she would. "It's not that I underestimate him," she qualified. "It's just that we all choose our fights. I have different priorities, that's all."

"I think Professor Dumbledore is hoping that your priorities are the same as those of the Order."

"I won't forget my loyalties to him or to the Order," she said seriously. "But I know Voldemort's not the threat you all think he is. At least, not anymore."

Snape looked sharply at her. "What do you know that the rest of us don't?"

"He's no more powerful than any of you. He must have lost something upon recreating himself. The answer lies with the ritual and potion he used that night in the graveyard. Also, it has something to do with the bone and the blood."

"How do you know this?"

"Empathy."

"You're an *empath*?" he repeated, incredulously. "How is it that this amazing fact escaped notice of any of us?"

"It requires physical contact," she said. "I don't go around touching people all that often. I danced with Pettigrew last summer at the pub." She shivered in disgust at the memory. He suppressed a grin. She continued, "And it doesn't always happen anyway. It takes conscious effort."

"There was some physical contact between us," Snape said quietly. "What have you learned about me?" He was afraid she would answer. He was afraid to know what she knew about him.

"Well, I have to tell you first," she began, "that I don't enjoy invading people's privacy in such a way. Thoughts, memories, feelings . . . those things are the most intimate part of people. I don't enjoy the 'voyeur' feeling that I can sometimes get using this particular skill."

"I do have some control over it, you know," she said almost defensively. "When I first met you, I read you only enough to know that you wouldn't do me any harm. That you weren't using some sort of trick to trap me somehow, and truly did need my help. After that, I just didn't try it." She looked into his eyes, showing him that she was serious. "I knew you'd not like my prying into your life."

"I appreciate it," he said dryly, hoping he could believe her.

"Of course," she continued, impishly, "now you've piqued my curiosity and I'll be peppering you with all kinds of personal questions."

He decided a change of subject was in order. "Would you be willing to perform the research on this new Veritaserum Potion yourself?"

"Aye. Do I have a choice in where I go?"

"Well, we should leave that to the headmaster. He may already have a place in mind, but in any event, if you were to choose your own location, it may invalidate your arguments about anyone else being able to do this. The whole miracle of being able to reproduce potions with more convenient ingredients and a shorter preparation time is important to wartime situations. It would be a great help to everyone if we could brew Potions as they're needed, in any environment.

"Now the times being what they are, you will not go unescorted. I plan to petition the headmaster to delay this study until the holidays, when I would be free to go with you. Would you have any objection to this?" He held his breath, wondering at his sudden reluctance to let her go.

"That would be great," she said happily. He let out his breath. "Then I think our next meeting will be with Professor Dumbledore," he said, "when he has made a decision, one way or another."

"I won't see you before then?" she asked. "Am I to stop attending the classes I'm now scheduled for?"

"I would advise you to continue as before, until we hear differently from the headmaster," he said. "We must always continue to behave as if the wrong eyes are watching us. I think anything too far out of the ordinary will alert our enemies that something is afoot.

"By the way," he continued, "I know you'll want to let your closer friends know of these changes. Please be circumspect. You know whom you can trust."

It was patently a dismissal. Anyone else would have gone scrambling for the door by now. But this was Tanya, not someone else. She sat grinning, swinging her legs once again.

"It's been good seeing you again, too, Severus." He couldn't help but return her smile as he watched her hop off the desk and stroll from his sight.

Tragedy Revealed and Avenged

Chapter 10 of 20

Who knew what Tanya was really capable of? Had popular opinion of gypsies been right after all?

Chapter Ten

Tragedy Revealed and Avenged

Snape turned away from the sight before him. Madam Pomfrey shifted aside, thinking he was going to leave the room. But he forced himself to stay. Something had to be done about this. At Dumbledore's words, he forced his eyes back to the hospital bed in which Malfoy lay, looking ridiculously like his name should be Coco, or some such thing.

"And you saw no wands at all?" Dumbledore was asking.

"No, but they've had lots of practice, haven't they? They could have hidden them by the time I realized I'd been hexed." Malfoy's voice was grating even at the best of times, but when he added that nauseating whine, it was all Snape could do to listen.

Dumbledore's eyes met Snape's, and nodded imperceptibly. It had been Tanya. There was no longer any doubt. Only Tanya could have done this without using a wand.

Madam Pomfrey had not been able to lift the charm that had turned Malfoy into a clown. She hadn't even been able to reduce it, and neither could the two visiting mediwizards imported for the occasion from St. Mungo's. Draco's skin was now milk-white, with his eyes and mouth an exaggerated red, with the pink, fuzzy hair and the huge comical feet. All the mirrors in the hospital wing had been removed, in case Malfoy might be provoked into hurting himself with broken shards of glass.

"Any word from Narcissa yet?" Snape asked Dumbledore.

"Yes, but she didn't seem too sympathetic. I had rather anticipated protest from Lucius, in spite of his outlaw status. After all, he's usually coming to rescue his son from one misfortune or another."

"Perhaps if it were something endangering his life, rather than his pride," Snape suggested.

"I'm more concerned at the motivation behind this, Severus," Dumbledore continued. "I feel perhaps there is a reason she chose this action, as opposed to something else."

"We may be reading too much into it, Headmaster," Snape suggested. "Perhaps this is just her way of telling Malfoy that she couldn't take him seriously. It wouldn't be surprising to find out that he was hurling the usual insults her way."

"We'll need to ask the three of them some questions, of course."

"Yes, Headmaster. I'll summon them immediately."

He turned to leave the hospital wing, heading for the Gryffindor Tower. He mentally checked a list of where Weasley, Potter, and Tanya might be at this time of day. He glanced at the clock tower, and decided that dinner must be ending right now, and changed his route to pass by the Great Hall.

He cut a path through the thronging students, searching over the heads of the crowd for the three. The doors leading into the Entry Hall were wide open, and students were heading in and out of them. He'd better take a quick look out there, knowing that Tanya wouldn't be inside if she had a choice.

His hunch was right on the mark, he noted with satisfaction, as he saw Tanya, Potter, Weasley, and Granger walking toward the hall. Judging from their casual clothing, they were just returning from Hagrid's cottage, where she liked to spend most of her time these days. How she had managed to talk the others into accompanying her, Snape didn't know, because he knew for a fact that the creatures Hagrid was currently breeding were something quite less than docile.

Before he could address them, there was a commotion outside the grounds about halfway between the forest and the main gate. A great ball of grey smoke, accompanied by a huge popping noise effectively cleared the grounds. Some students scrambled up to the Hall, causing something of a traffic jam near the top. Simultaneously, the great doors slammed shut, locking, and the sound of doors and windows slamming shut all around them could be heard above the frightened voices of the students caught outside.

A form was appearing in the middle of the grey smoke, and as some students scurried as far away as they could, and some more reckless students fought to get a better view of the smoke, the figure became clearer, more defined.

Snape felt a nasty sense of déjà vu, half-expecting Voldemort himself to appear. But the figure didn't look like Voldemort. The hair wasn't black, but silver-white, and the clothing wasn't long, black, and flowing, like Voldemort's robes. As the purple robes became clearer, Snape realized with a start that it was Lucius. The one and only Lucius Malfoy, and he looked angry.

So, he comes to avenge his son, Snape thought snidely. At risk of being apprehended and returned to Azkaban, where the Dementors were once more back in force. As a matter of fact, they were even worse than before, seeming to need to show the Ministry that they were sorry for their temporary disloyalty. Apparently, Voldemort didn't deliver whatever he'd promised them for their services.

Lucius arrogantly strolled into the grounds, smiling snidely as Dumbledore joined the crowd gathered. Snape noticed Tanya circling for a close-up look, and he moved to stop her. She simply shook off his hand from her shoulder and continued on, Potter on her heels. At least Granger and Weasley had the sense to keep their distance.

Tanya continued pushing through the crowd until she was standing face-to-face with Lucius. He looked down his nose at her, sneering. "Ah yes, the little gypsy girl Draco's told me about. Charmed." So, Malfoy had indeed known how to contact his father.

"Do you not remember me, then," Tanya said, to Snape's surprise. When had they ever met?

Lucius must have had the same thought, peering more closely at Tanya. "And where would I remember you from?" he asked. "Surely we don't move in the same circles."

Tanya ignored the implied insult. "We met eight years ago. Let me refresh your memory." She turned quickly and made a graceful move of her arm. There was now a scene from a green hillside in place of the air above the Quidditch field. There were people on that hillside; some busy with chasing children, some were cooking beside a campfire, some were dancing.

"Do you recognize this campsite?" Tanya asked Lucius. "Do you recognize any of the faces, or did you never look at them?" Lucius didn't reply, a vacant expression on his face. Snape realized she must have rooted him to the spot somehow.

As they watched, the peaceful hillside began to change. It became darker somehow, although it was still obviously daytime in the scene. People were screaming now, running away. There were explosions, people falling down where they stood, some falling to their deaths, some falling to twitch and scream. Victims of *Crucio*, most likely.

There was a shift in the angle of the scenery, and the crowd on the grounds gasped as they saw Lucius Malfoy's face, it's traditional sneer in place, wand in hand, shouting out curses in every direction.

Another shift in angle, and a green light from Lucius' wand had cut a path through long grass, hitting and throwing aside a small girl. Snape's heart went to his throat as the girl picked herself up and faced her attacker. Tanya. A younger, more innocent Tanya, bleeding profusely from her neck, the blood saturating her clothing, choking her. Yet still she came toward where her attacker stood.

Snape locked his knees to keep from falling to the ground. He forced himself to continue watching.

"Do you remember any of it now? Do you dare to lie to me now? Can you convince me that you don't relish this memory even eight years afterward?" Tanya's voice was quiet, commanding. Snape had never heard this tone coming from her before.

Snape looked back up into the Tanya-fashioned film screen to see the little girl she once was coming forward to Lucius, seemingly unafraid and horribly enraged. Lucius, standing on the grounds of Hogwarts, made a move as if to flee, but Tanya was too quick for him. She raised her arms and sent something powerful out, powerful enough for Snape to feel its force as it swept past him on its way to Lucius.

Lucius was picked up to a height of about six feet from the ground, held there, bound by nothing anyone could see. "You were trying to earn points with Voldemort by destroying the gypsies!" she threw at him. "He had been destroyed, so everyone thought, but you were still looking to be his golden boy!"

She turned and waved to the scene in the sky. "Do you recognize anyone now? Do you see that face there?" There was a lovely young woman lying on the ground on the destroyed hillside, bleeding from a pole that had impaled itself into her chest. "My sister!" The scene shifted to an old man that had been crumpled to his death as if by a huge, invisible fist. "My Greatpapa!" She kept showing different bodies, different screaming victims, calling out her relationship to them.

Finally, the angle shifted once again to the little girl coming up the burned path toward the memory of Lucius. The girl raised her hand, and the green light that had been emitted from Lucius' wand headed straight for her. Snape tried to close his eyes; he didn't want to witness Tanya experiencing *Crucio*; but his eyes refused to close.

The girl blocked the green light with her hand, sending it directly back to Lucius. Lucius screamed, writhing in agony, looking as though 2000 volts of Muggle electricity were running through his body. The scene in the sky began to fade.

Now Snape remembered the three months that Lucius Malfoy had spent in St. Mungo's all those years ago, allegedly with no idea of what had happened to him.

He turned his attention to the view around him. Everyone stood riveted, looking to where Tanya and Lucius were facing each other, Lucius still hanging in the air, Tanya stopping before him.

Tanya lifted her hands, concentration creasing her forehead as she spoke quietly to Lucius. "*Annullo cervico altera cervico tertius cervico quartus.*"

Snape watched, horror-filled, as Lucius screamed, the veins in his neck stretched out in agony. At the end of the seemingly-never-ending scream, Lucius fell silent, his body relaxed, but still being held by an unseen binding. He was slowly lowered to the ground and his limbs fell limply askew, as if the bindings had been removed.

For what seemed an eternity, no one moved; no one spoke. Snape looked at Tanya, and found her staring at Lucius, and he couldn't read the expression on her face. But the peace was shattered as Draco came around the side of the castle to where his father lay, broken and unconscious on the ground.

It would have been pitiful enough to see Draco screaming for his father, but since he looked so much like a clown, it was worse somehow to hear muffled laughter from the crowd around them. Dumbledore at last found his voice. He ordered the prefects to make sure everyone got back to their common rooms. His tone brooked no argument, and the sound of the great door at the Entrance Hall could be heard opening once again.

Tanya made no move to leave, so Dumbledore didn't bother telling her to stay. He waved Potter away, but the boy stood his ground, glaring at Dumbledore. The old man merely shrugged and turned his attention back to the suffering mass that was Draco. Professor McGonagall made to pull Draco away from his father, but he pulled away and threw himself down near his father's feet to wrap his arms around his legs and rock to and fro in his misery.

When the last of the students had entered the castle, Dumbledore looked down at Tanya, who had not moved from her position near Malfoy.

"Tanya," Dumbledore started, waiting for her to look at him. "What have you done to Mr. Malfoy?" His soft question invited her to answer honestly, which Snape was sure she would have, anyway.

"I pulverized a couple of small bones in his spine," she said without inflection. "He's paralyzed now from the neck down."

"Why? I must admit, if I knew you were going to throw a curse his way, I would have expected you to kill him."

She looked back at the inert bundle that was Malfoy. "I don't want him to die," she said simply. "I want him to be alive, to be able to think; I want him to feel the helplessness, the *hopelessness* he made me feel."

"But why paralyze him? Surely the mediwizards will be able to repair the damage you've done to him."

"You mean like they're able to remove the hex I put on Draco?" she asked maliciously.

That made Dumbledore stop to think. It was true; none of their attempts were able to lift the curse from the boy. He was still walking around looking like Bozo.

"You're telling me that we won't be able to lift this, aren't you? Either of these curses."

"Aye. Even / won't be able to reverse this one." She lightly pushed her foot against Malfoy's leg, watching it fall back into place limply.

Dumbledore sighed, closing his eyes as if in pain. When he opened his eyes, it appeared to Snape that he had aged twenty years in as many seconds. "Tanya, was this my mistake? Was this the sole purpose for your petition to enter Hogwarts?"

She finally looked up to meet his eyes. "No, Professor." Her eyes proved that she was being truthful. "I didn't know Malfoy had anything to do with Hogwarts until after I'd met his son."

Dumbledore considered her words, and coming to a decision, nodded thoughtfully. "The Ministry is going to send someone to investigate. I had sent for Cornelius as soon as I realized it was Lucius Apparating. I ask you to return to your room and keep yourself available to answer questions that will no doubt arise from this incident."

Tanya nodded, looking down at Malfoy Senior once again. Then she turned on her heel and headed back to the castle. After a brief moment of indecision, Potter followed her. Snape was still rooted to the spot, his mind backtracking over every conversation he'd ever had with Tanya. In no memory was there any indication that she was tracking down a wizard for revenge. So this was why she kept straying to Azkaban in her travels when she was supposed to be following Pettigrew. He never made the connection. Who would? She had been so secretive about the tragedy of her past.

Lucius was regaining consciousness. As his eyes registered where he was and who was surrounding him, Snape watched the different thoughts that must have been coursing through him and showed up in his eyes. Apparently, he'd discovered that he couldn't move his hands to grab his wand. Snape knew that Lucius' magical powers had never extended to the point where he wouldn't need his wand.

Since words wouldn't help him, there seemed no point in hanging around. Let Fudge deal with him. And his snotnosed son as well. Snape headed back to the dungeons. He needed quiet and solitude to process all he'd learned today.

Tanya walked up the stairs toward the Tower, not even acknowledging Harry's presence on the steps next to her. He left her to her own thoughts, because he was still trying to make sense out of what he'd seen. He'd recognized her from that vision, of course. She was the little girl that had taken a glancing blow from Malfoy's wand. He felt sick as he remembered all the blood, marveling that she could have lost so much of it and still keep walking.

It had come from her neck. All the blood had come from the injury at her throat. By now they had reached the top of the staircase, and Harry took her arm to stop her progress down the corridor. She stopped, looking at him as if she'd never seen him before.

His eyes strayed to her throat. No school robes in the way. She'd dressed this morning in a zip-up sweater, which displayed however much of herself she wanted to show. It was modestly zipped, but still, she'd needed the necklace to hide what Harry knew must be there.

Before she could stop him, he pulled hard at her necklace, breaking the fine chain and laying bare her throat. She gasped and lifted her hand to her neck in an oddly out-of-place femininity, but not before Harry saw the scar. The lightning bolt shaped scar right at the base of her throat. How had he never seen it before? How could she never have told him about this significant happening in her life?

When Harry thought of the times he'd mentioned how uncomfortable he was when people stared at his own scar, he was hurt that she never offered this information to him, if only to share his misery. He'd have done the same for her, wouldn't he? She'd allowed him to go on and on about this dark curse he'd survived, and how he hated the notoriety that went with it, but never mentioned that she, too, had that unique scar. She, too, had survived a dark curse. Was everything they'd shared a sham? Had she just been amusing herself with him? He had thought they'd achieved a closeness, an intimacy that invited secrets to be shared. Hadn't he told her of very painful memories he had at the hands of his cousin? The losses he had with his parents, his godfather, and a schoolmate who had only wanted to help him?

"How could you have kept this from me?" he asked angrily. "How could you let me go on about my scar, when you had every opportunity to tell me about yours? You intentionally hid all this from me. Would you never have shared this part of you with me?"

She was still covering her scar with her hand, and Harry roughly pulled it away. The scar looked raw, as if the meeting with Lucius had irritated it. That made sense to Harry, as his own scar began to burn whenever Voldemort was near.

"Are you able to read his emotions through your scar?" he asked. Had she known Lucius was coming?

She said nothing.

"Everyone must have been right. Never trust a gypsy." He turned away from her, knowing there would be hurt in her eyes but feeling that she didn't have the right to be hurt at his words. He felt his stomach muscles clench up, but didn't break his stride. He had a feeling his stomach would be hurting for quite a while. That would be good, he told himself. Better the physical pain than the mental pain.

He slammed into the common room after growling the password at the Fat Lady. He was dismayed to see all the Gryffindors milling around, waiting for news from the outside. He didn't feel up to telling them anything.

He strode over to the corner and slammed himself down onto the couch. He made sure his body language told everyone not to bother him. Slowly, the room began to clear, some muffled grumbling mingling with footsteps on the stairs leading to the dormitories.

He felt the presence of someone next to him. Hermione. "I really don't want to talk, Hermione."

She sat down in the armchair next to him anyway. "Where's Tanya?"

"I don't know. More importantly, I don't care."

"Oh, my," Hermione said. "You think she was wrong to attack Lucius that way?"

"Don't you? What sort of monster cripples a man like that? And lures him here by making a living fool out of his son?"

"Perhaps someone whose family he'd cruelly wiped out eight years ago. Would you feel this way if it were Voldemort instead of Mr. Malfoy?"

"That's different," Harry insisted. "Voldemort was a threat to the whole world. Malfoy was in hiding. He wasn't threatening us."

"He was in hiding only until such time as he could make his move," Hermione argued. "Voldemort killed your parents. Wouldn't you like to see him dead?"

"She didn't kill Malfoy, she crippled him!" he spat out. "Like a cat toying with a mouse! It would have been more merciful if she ~~had~~ killed him!"

"Who are you to judge her?" Hermione's voice was rising to match his. "He didn't just kill her parents, he killed everyone she knew and cared about! She was left orphaned and alone from the age of seven! At least you'd been delivered to relatives. There was no Dumbledore to look out for her; she had to do it herself!"

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to think about it anymore. But Hermione was still studying him.

"What's that in your hand?"

Harry didn't know what she was talking about at first. He opened his hand, surprised to see Tanya's necklace still there, broken chain and all.

"It's the necklace Tanya always wore to hide her scar," he said bitterly.

"What scar?"

"Didn't you see that memory? Malfoy's *Avada Kedavra* curse hit her, but she survived it. That's where you get the scar." To illustrate his point, he pushed his hair off his forehead and pointed to his legacy from Voldemort. "She has one at the base of her throat. She kept it a secret, using high collars and this necklace." He tossed the offending piece of jewelry to the table.

"Well, what do you expect?" Hermione shot back. "Do you think she should have made announcements? 'Hello, I'm Tanya Relke, and this is my scar.' I would have thought you'd understand about scars. You, of all people." She shook her head in disgust.

Harry looked up at her. "She didn't have to make any announcements," he persisted, through gritted teeth. "She could have told ~~me~~, though. She knew all about *my* scar."

"Oh, Harry, *everyone* knows about your scar. Would you wish that sort of fame on her? I thought you cared about her. Or do you think you own her and her memories just because you've had her in bed?"

Harry looked at her, flabbergasted. "We have not been to bed, Hermione."

He waited for his face to heat up in embarrassment, but he must have been too emotionally spent for that. He sat, saying nothing. Hermione clearly decided he wouldn't see the light on this day and stood up to leave him to his thoughts. "You'd better not leave that necklace there," she told him, "as it probably won't be there in the morning. And perhaps you'd better have it repaired before returning it to her."

As if. Harry looked at the necklace as Hermione's footsteps faded away. Tanya probably *would* appreciate having it back, seeing as how it's the only thing she had left of her sister.

He thought about the time Tanya had told him how her father had tried to marry her off to that old gypsy. She'd mentioned going back to the encampment just before leaving for the States. That's when Lucius must have shown up there. If she were a day later, or even earlier, she wouldn't have that scar. But she'd still be missing her family. Lucius didn't seem to care who was there when he wiped them out; clearly he hadn't taken count.

But then Tanya had stopped her narrative. She'd purposely decided not to tell Harry about Lucius' devastating attack. Yet she'd shown no compunction about letting the whole school in on it today.

It was hard for Harry to realize that she must have planned for this, or she wouldn't have bothered to curse Draco. She'd used the boy as bait, and she probably wouldn't even lose sleep over it.

He heard the portrait open, and he turned to watch Tanya enter the common room. She glanced at him, but without breaking stride, continued to the stairway up to her room.

He was glad; he had no more words left for her. He scooped up the hated necklace and headed up to his own bed.

Ron was sitting on his bed, looking as confused as he ever did. "Do you want to talk?" he asked.

Harry shook his head, but smiled to let Ron know he appreciated the company even so. He opened his fist and considered the necklace. He put it down on his bed, straightening out the chain and adjusting the pendant to where it would hang, hiding her scar. The chain had broken near the clasp, and he tried a simple Reparo charm. It worked. He opened and closed the clasp again, and turned the pendant over to make sure everything was good.

He didn't want to see her long enough to return it, though. He put it into a small box and addressed it to Tanya. He'd give it to Hedwig in the morning, with instructions to deliver it when she was alone. No note. None would be necessary. He had no doubt that Tanya knew how he felt about her now.

As Harry pondered his breakfast next morning, he watched as Tanya made her way into the hall, and listened to the instant hush that fell over the crowd inside. Good, he thought hatefully. Let her see what it feels like to be the subject of whispering. It was about time she paid her dues. He voiced this thought aloud to Hermione and Ron. Ron said nothing, as his mouth was full of porridge, but Hermione protested.

"Honestly, Harry," she objected. "You are so self-centered. Don't you think she's spent her *life* paying dues?"

Tanya didn't seem to notice the others' reaction. She headed to a seat at the Gryffindor table, not reacting when the other couple of students nearby suddenly sought to be elsewhere when she sat down. Harry watched her pour herself a cup of juice, and then he glanced up at the head table.

Dumbledore was watching Tanya, a concerned look on his face. Everyone else seemed to be looking for something interesting in their breakfasts. All except Snape. He was looking intensely at Tanya, as if willing her to look up and make eye contact.

At the sound of the owl post flying in the high windows, Harry remembered the necklace. He was dismayed to find Hedwig heading toward their table; he'd specifically ordered her to deliver it while Tanya was alone. Hedwig must be upset with him. Either that, or she interpreted alone to mean metaphorically, instead of physically. Because it seemed that Tanya was definitely alone. Yesterday's incident seemed to put renewed fear of gypsies back into everyone's mind.

He watched Hedwig drop the package in Tanya's hands, then drop to the table to drink from the juice cup Tanya poured for her. He kept his eye on her as she opened the package, and she looked directly up at him, not giving him time to look away. He was caught in her eyes, but he couldn't read them. It could have been his imagination, but he thought he saw her nod. Whether she was thanking him for returning it, or she was acknowledging that she was indeed *persona non grata* with him, he told himself it didn't matter.

As the level of conversations around them went back to normal, Harry turned at the noise of Hagrid entering the Great Hall, on his way to the Head Table. He stopped when he reached Tanya, leaning down to speak to her. As Tanya nodded, Hagrid stood up and Harry caught his last words. Apparently, he'd started a new project, probably breeding fire-breathing dragons, and Tanya had just received her day's assignment as his new apprentice.

As people began leaving the Hall, stomachs full, Harry reached for his bookbag, which he'd stashed under the table. He saw Tanya pass by him, her legs recognizable

because she chose not to wear robes. Her new status as a non-student, and her choice in career entitled her to wear civilian clothing. He was relieved that she didn't stop to speak to him. He wasn't ready to face up to the cowardly way he'd avoided her in returning the necklace.

Before she could exit the Hall, Dumbledore had cut her off, placing a hand on her shoulder and leaning to speak into her ear. She nodded, and stepped out of the flow of student traffic to accompany him to the rear of the Hall. Harry watched the two of them disappear through the back door, where staff normally entered and left the Hall, and wondered now what was happening.

With a glance at his watch, he grabbed his books and sped off to Potions, wondering when Dumbledore would decide to let the student body know what was happening.

The strangeness that had permeated the school for the last twelve hours continued in the Potions classroom. They were supposed to be brewing a medicinal mixture to assist those unfortunate souls who had been hexed with Crucio, but Snape didn't seem to care about their mistakes. And, judging from the fumes and clouds of vapor rising from the various cauldrons, no one had gotten it quite right. It was supposed to be a very viscous potion, with red smoke at this stage, but Harry only saw pink, white, and in Millicent Bulstrode's case, black smoke.

Snape was pacing back and forth at the front of the class, occasionally trying to sit at his desk. But a second later, he would be up and pacing again. He only seemed this agitated where Tanya was concerned, so Harry assumed Snape was also curious about why Dumbledore pulled Tanya aside this morning, stopping her from going out to Hagrid's. He forced his mind to the task at hand, telling himself to let the others care about what was going on; he had more important things to do. If this potion drew a failing grade from Snape, he could kiss his future Auror career good-bye.

Snape catalogued all the samples his sixth years had turned in, intending to test them later. His mind was too far removed from the potions work to be able to determine safely if they were even fit to remove the stoppers from the bottles, let alone decide whether or not they were properly brewed. He warded the classroom and took off for Dumbledore's office.

The gargoyle allowed him entrance, but the office was empty when he arrived. Dumbledore's meeting with Tanya was concluded, then. He decided to seek her out rather than Dumbledore, since there were only a few places she was likely to be, this time of day.

He had just decided to head to Hagrid's cottage, knowing that's where she would most likely be, when the door opened again to admit Dumbledore. The headmaster didn't seem surprised to see Snape, and conjured up a kettle of tea and some biscuits. Inviting Snape to sit down and relax, he poured the tea and settled in an armchair opposite Snape before the fire.

"Well, before you ask, Tanya's gone with Fudge and a few others. She went quietly, with my assurance that we'll do everything we can to help."

"She went where?" Snape asked, knowing the answer before the old man could supply it.

"Azkaban. She'll be there pending a full investigation. She'll have to meet before the Panel, once they've had the chance to check out the story."

"Why couldn't she have stayed here to await the hearing?" He didn't want to think of Tanya sitting in a cell in that awful place, Dementors hovering over her. Anyone but her; he'd gladly take her place if it meant she could stay here.

"They felt she was a flight risk. Especially now that she's an accomplished Animagus, and one that flies, they wanted to make sure she was where they could keep an eye on her."

"That's entirely unnecessary!" Snape protested. "She's no more a threat to anyone here than you are. She did them a favor, dealing with Malfoy. And no one should have to go to Azkaban unless they're sentenced there. It's not meant to be a temporary holding cell. They have already decided on her guilt, haven't they?" The last question was asked in almost a whisper, Snape desperately hoping Dumbledore would contradict him.

"I fear so."

"Well, you told her we'd do everything we can. What does that mean? What can we do?"

"We can make sure her side of the story is known. We can make sure they understand that she poses no threat to anyone except Malfoy, and she's already expended her rage upon him. She could have killed him; she didn't. That must work in her favor. And we are allowed to visit her at Azkaban; being she hasn't been sentenced yet, she's allowed at least that privilege."

"How was she, when she left?"

"She didn't say anything. She didn't fight them. She went stoically."

"She's given up! If she had any hopes for the future, they never would have been able to take her."

"We'll have to make sure she knows she's not alone. We'll go see her there, and begin to plan some sort of defense. There must be leniency because of the extenuating circumstances, after all."

"Do you really want to rely on that? On the compassion of that Panel?"

"I don't know what else we can do."

Snape looked steadily at Dumbledore. "You've given up as well, haven't you?"

"I must admit," the headmaster replied, "that I have some doubts as to her loyalties. I'm wondering if her sole purpose in coming here was to exact her revenge on Lucius. If that's the case, the Ministry is not going to look too kindly upon her."

"She could have done this without having anything to do with our world. She came here because she wanted to be a part of us. She wanted ~~needed~~ to belong to a world, somewhere. The gypsies won't have her because she's too gaje, and the Muggles won't have her because she's a gypsy. And now, she'll lose whatever place she's carving out for herself here, because we're afraid of her power? What about what that power can do for our world? Are you forgetting the confidence you had when you first found out what she could do?"

"But does she really care if Voldemort lives or dies? What's important to us is not necessarily important to her. She's done what she came here to do. What further use for us does she have?"

"That's not what's happened," Snape argued. "She didn't know Lucius would come here. It couldn't have been planned."

"But then why did she put that hex on young Malfoy? A hex that she still hasn't removed, by the way. Poor Malfoy won't come out of his room."

Snape had no answer to this. But he knew Tanya. And except for her blind spot where the Senior Malfoy was concerned, she didn't wish ill on anyone. There had to be a way to get her out of there, give her back her freedom.

"With all due respect, Headmaster," he said with steel in his voice. "If it were Potter in Azkaban, you would, no doubt, have already managed to secure his freedom. Why is it any different for Tanya?"

"Because I never had doubts about Harry. I'm having doubts about Tanya. With her talents, she could stop Voldemort before he could actually gather enough power and

followers for the upcoming war that I'm sure will take place. But will she?"

"So that's what it boils down to, then, is it? If she agrees to destroy Voldemort once and for all, we'll rescue her from Azkaban?"

"It won't be a trade, Severus," the old man said. "I fully intend to get her out of there. But we'll need her help. She'll have to confirm or deny whatever allegations are made. And right now, I don't think she has any intention of cooperating. She's not answering any questions at all. She's climbed into her own little world, and I'm afraid we won't even be able to reach her. Especially after she spends much more time in the company of the Dementors. They're bound to affect her more than the average prisoner, because she's had more tragedy in her life than they had. We'll need to act quickly. I want you to accompany me there in an hour's time. I have been asked to wait until then to allow the prison to process her. Get her in a cell, establish a schedule of sorts. Then we'll see what her frame of mind is. She'll have to remain strong to fight this. If she appears mad, they'll never let her go."

To Prepare the Defense

Chapter 11 of 20

Tanya languishes in Azkaban, while Dumbledore and Severus search for the way to obtain her release.

Chapter Eleven

To Prepare the Defense

Tanya was *not* cooperating. When Snape and Dumbledore had appeared before her cell, she wouldn't even speak to them. There was no evidence that she'd even known they were there. Snape suspected that the Dementors were doing their job only too well, and had reduced her to this depressed-more-than-depressed state, but Dumbledore disagreed. The Dementors themselves showed no signs of having fed on her misery. It seemed they were leaving her pretty much alone. Therefore, her depression came from within herself, not caused by the Dementors.

She was sitting on a built-in cot in the corner, leaning back against the cold, stone wall. She had a tray of food in front of her, but it didn't look as though she'd eaten any of it. Dumbledore left to speak to the Keeper, the goblin who was responsible for the running of the prison, and Snape took that opportunity alone with Tanya to appeal to her sense of survival.

"I can't believe that after all you've been through, all that Malfoy took away from you, all the people who've ever tormented you, that you'd give up now that you need to be strong!"

"Tanya, all you need to do is take off Draco's curse; that will prove you have no intention of harming anyone, except possibly Voldemort, and with Dumbledore's influence, you'll be out of here! Free again, to pursue your chosen profession. Free to re-establish your friendships!"

Too late, Snape realized that he probably shouldn't have mentioned friends. Just before she'd been taken from Hogwarts, he'd become aware that her relationship with Potter had taken a nose-dive. He didn't know the details, but Potter wasn't plaguing them with questions and concerns about her welfare. It didn't bode well.

Tanya turned to look at him. Well, at least she knew he was there, Snape thought. He'd been beginning to believe the Dementors had taken her soul, never mind what Dumbledore said.

She stood up slowly and walked over to the bars, nearer to Snape. He looked at her. There was such an expression of hopelessness in her eyes. He longed to take that away, somehow, impossibly. He wished he could find some way to give her back her will to live. Her will to survive. She'd need it to get out of here. Even the headmaster couldn't do it without her.

But all she said was that she'd take the curse off of Draco. She'd do it after lights out, because she couldn't afford to be disturbed. This was the power Dumbledore wanted from her. A power Snape didn't understand. The reason the headmaster had wanted Tanya for the Order. She was going to use that power to return Draco to his normal, insufferable self. But she wouldn't fight to save herself. Snape tried to reach her. It was time to knock down the wall of isolation he'd spent his life building around himself. He looked at her hand, grasping the bar of her cage. He covered her hand with his.

"Tanya, please . . . please don't leave me. You are the only person I've allowed myself to care about since childhood. If you just sit back and allow yourself to be shut away forever in here, I don't know what I'll do." He thought he saw something in her eyes just then, but he was afraid it was only wishful thinking. But then he saw that she was gathering strength to speak.

"Severus," she said quietly, in a whisper he could barely hear. "It took a lot of energy to do what I did to Lucius Malfoy. It will take all I have left to lift the curse from Draco. I have to do this across a great distance. When I come back to my physical self, I might not have enough energy left to draw a breath."

"If I could choose where I would die, it won't be here. I'll try. I can't promise any more than that."

With that, she turned away and lay down on the cot. Dumbledore returned, but Snape urged him out to the corridor. "There's nothing more for us to say to her," he said. "She needs to rest. Tonight, she'll try to lift Draco Malfoy's curse. I suggest we push the Panel to convene in this matter as soon as possible. I believe she does want to get out of here, but she's weakening. I fear for her health."

Dumbledore wisely didn't ask for clarification. It was time to wait.

Back at Hogwarts, Dumbledore asked McGonagall to summon Harry Potter and Hermione Granger to his office. He asked Snape to stay as well, and poured coffee for him. Snape settled into an armchair by the fire to wait.

McGonagall led Harry and Hermione into the room, then left. After serving the youths tea, Dumbledore settled himself behind his desk.

"I've asked you here to see if we can pry some information from you about Miss Relke. We're facing a Panel inquiry that will decide her fate."

Hermione spoke up. "I've heard a rumor that you've been to see her in Azkaban," she said. "How is she?"

"She could be better," he answered. "Azkaban is not a place to put someone who needs to keep her spirits up. Has she ever told you anything about her early life? Any problems she'd had?"

Hermione looked surprised by the question. "No, not really. I picked up some details from Ron and Harry, and maybe a little bit of stuff from Mrs. Weasley, but I don't think

it's anything you don't already know."

"And Harry," Dumbledore began, shifting his attention to him, "has she ever confided anything to you?"

Harry thought back to all the time they'd spent together. "I don't really know where to begin," he said. "What information are you looking for?"

"Well, we know that Lucius Malfoy, eight years ago, wiped out her family. We know she's been harboring a grudge, to speak lightly, against him all this time. We know she has powers that would put fear into even Voldemort's heart, but we need details of everything so that we can verify certain things. It's the only chance she'll have of convincing the Wizengamot that she shouldn't be locked up in Azkaban. I think the Ministry, at least, would be willing to put this behind us all, considering that she enabled them to recapture Malfoy. And certainly, he's no longer a threat to our world.

"For example, had she ever mentioned to you that she planned to destroy Malfoy?"

"No. I remember her telling me last summer that . . ." his voice trailed off, not wanting to reveal things she'd told him that the Order might not appreciate.

"Please, Harry, now is not the time to be squeamish about telling tales. It's her life we're talking about."

"Last summer, I was concerned that the Order was still keeping me in the dark about things I should know about. And Tanya also believed I should know everything I could. So she told me that Voldemort was probably searching for me. That much we all knew, or took for granted, anyway.

"But she told me that Malfoy had escaped from Azkaban, and was probably also looking for me, since it was I that caused him to be sentenced. She told me that because she thought the Order either didn't yet know about his escape, or that you all knew and didn't want me to know.

"A while ago, she told me about how her father was trying to force a marriage on her that she didn't want, and was too young for anyway. Her sister helped her run away, and Tanya stayed with friends until she could go to her grandfather in America. It was just before she left Ireland that Mr. Malfoy killed all those people."

Both Snape and Dumbledore leaned forward on hearing this. This could be what they were looking for.

"Is her sister still alive?" Dumbledore had taken a quill and a piece of parchment, poised for his answer.

"No. She died when Mr. Malfoy . . ."

"Oh, yes, I remember now. In the vision Tanya recreated, her sister had been impaled. And both her parents?"

"As far as I know, she only has a brother left. She doesn't keep in touch with him. They didn't get on."

"What about the friends she stayed with, awaiting her trip to America?"

Harry racked his brain to come up with the name. "She told me who they were; they were friends of her sister's. Gerity. They were the Gerity family, and they had lived down the road from the encampment. There was a village down the road there, and there were some neighbors who also might know a little bit about what happened."

"All right, we'll search both Wizard and Muggle news archives for any major event that took place in Ireland eight years ago. Do you remember where the encampment was?"

Snape supplied that one. "It was somewhere in County Claire. That's what she considered home."

Harry lit up. "I remember another one. There was a woman in the village; she'd helped Tanya find the Geritys' house. Her name was Bridie O'Hara. She does keep in touch with her; she said she sent a gift for Christmas and Mother's Day every year. Maybe she's still there!"

Dumbledore added the name to his parchment. "Does anyone know who her grandfather is, or how we contact him? We need to search Tanya's personal belongings; maybe there will be an address book or something."

"Her grandfather is dead now," Snape said. "It was he that left her his estate, and that's what she's been living on, supplemented by working wherever she could find a job."

Dumbledore looked at both Harry and Snape. "All this might illustrate that she was under a great deal of stress and perfectly justified to react to Malfoy as she did. But I certainly hope she can lift the curse from Draco. It will help immensely."

There was nothing left to do that night.

Entering the Great Hall the next morning, Snape was relieved to see Malfoy at his usual spot at the Slytherin table, platinum hair slicked back in place, all his features back to normal. But he wished he could contact Tanya right now, to make sure she was all right.

He looked to Dumbledore. Questioned with his eyes, glancing pointedly at Malfoy. Dumbledore nodded in understanding and came over to Snape's place at the table.

"I see she's been successful."

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape said, "but she told me that it would take a lot out of her to do so. I'd like to know she made it back all right."

"Made it back? I don't follow."

"She told me that she had to do this 'across a great distance'. I think she was talking about some special magical talent she has, and she might not have enough energy afterward to draw another breath. I want to know that she's okay."

"I would have been contacted immediately, otherwise," Dumbledore assured him. "Remember, she's only there in temporary custody. They'd have sent an owl by now if there were anything wrong."

"And what about the information we gave to the Ministry? They're checking it out?"

"Yes, they've sent a few inquisitors out in the Muggle world to search for the Geritys and Mrs. O'Hara. We should hear from them by the end of the day."

Snape nodded and stood up to leave. He knew that he was too nervous to sit still long enough for breakfast, and his sixth years were due in Potions in twenty minutes. He'd set them to work on some trivial potion, more of a review than anything else. He'd be useless to actually teach today. Time was alternately dragging and speeding up. He'd be a nervous wreck by the time the Wizengamot actually met.

But even Dumbledore did not have enough influence to push the convening of the Panel before they were ready.

It took an eternity to find the Geritys, and even longer to convince them that answering their questions would only help the lost little girl they remembered. Mrs. O'Hara proved to be more garrulous, thankfully, and she was able to provide information as to the grandfather's estate in Manhattan.

The American Muggle system of records (or non-system, as the case may be) added to their frustrations. Records of real estate transactions had to be searched, and the Ministry had to take the time to learn which documents would need to be forged in order to persuade the Administrative Muggles into parting with any tangible leads.

It was true that the grandfather had left the world when Tanya was just thirteen years old. After that, only the most meager paper trail allowed the investigators to follow Tanya's path back to Ireland, and to the cottage on the Taggery Farm, where Severus had first met her.

Although the Taggery Farm was owned by one Sean Taggery, the cottage that abutted it belonged to Tanya. Mr. Taggery had not been willing to help verify any information about Tanya, as he believed that if she were in prison somewhere, the cottage would fall to his possession; a goal he pursued at every chance. Mrs. O'Hara provided testimony that Tanya had been harassed almost all the while she was in residency there; the friendly woman had made it a habit to check on Tanya almost daily during the time she lived there. When Tanya was away, it was Mrs. O'Hara that made her weekly visits to the cottage, using the 'special' key to gain entrance. Mrs. O'Hara kept the place clean, dust-free, and stocked up on groceries and firewood for Tanya when she knew her young friend was due to return.

The Ministry dutifully turned over all the information it collected to the Wizengamot Panel, but it was more than a year before they felt ready to convene.

Return To Hogwarts

Chapter 12 of 20

Tanya had spent the past year in Azkaban. It's time for her to return to Hogwarts and try to take up her life again. She's no longer the child she once was.

PART TWO

Chapter Twelve

Return To Hogwarts

The lone figure on the hill caught his eye, if only due to the stillness of its stance. He stared, willing his eyes to focus sharply, because he wasn't sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing.

Tanya.

She was looking over the moors to the looming castle that was Hogwarts. He could see her breath in the chill air of February, and he could see that she was breathing very slowly, lost in thought.

He carefully walked nearer, not wanting to upset her reverie. She appeared taller, after all this time, or maybe it was an illusion created by the trench coat she wore, unbuttoned, the black leather slightly flaring out in the frigid breezes coming up the hillside.

Her hair was unbound, blowing across her face; she didn't move to stop it from blocking her view of the castle. Perhaps she was really looking inward, and didn't notice. Her clothing was dark, and Snape realized with dread that he'd never seen her wear anything that wasn't full of bright and happy colors. Colorful blouses had in the past, accessorized even simple blue jeans.

He continued to study her as he moved ever more closely, still not sure he wanted to break her concentration. Would she rather be alone with her thoughts, or would her eyes welcome him after so much time had passed without word between them?

He looked down sharply, cursing the stepped-on twig that had betrayed him. He looked back up at her, and she was looking at him. No change of expression. Just looking, perhaps waiting for him to reach her.

As he did, he turned to take in the view as she'd been seeing it. The castle was ethereal, the upper reaches almost obscured by fog. Most of the windows were lit, night coming early this time of year. The occasional dark specks on the grounds were the students returning from afternoon classes in the greenhouses or Hagrid's hut.

He turned back to her to find her still watching him, silent, brooding. He found himself unsure, not knowing whether to turn and walk away, or to break the silence and utter some inane, useless welcome. Useless because he knew one could never feel a welcome unless one wanted to feel it.

Before he actually began to fidget like the nervous cretin he felt he was, she moved toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his neck. He unreservedly reciprocated, noting in the back of his mind how much easier it seemed to do this; she really had grown. He was content to hold her, taking in the smell of her shampoo, the warmth of her too-lean body against his, the intensity of her embrace, and then he felt he could speak.

"Why haven't you kept in touch?" he asked. "I've been going out of my mind with worry."

"I didn't know what to say," she answered simply.

"Why don't we go somewhere and warm up?" He'd noticed how cold she was, and wondered why she didn't at least button her coat. The wind must have been cutting into her; couldn't she feel it?

"Well, The Three Broomsticks seemed a mite crowded," she said, "and I wasn't sure I wanted to see the Hogwarts gang yet."

"Did that include me?" he asked hesitantly. Perhaps he had been wrong in approaching her after all.

"Somehow, I don't think of you as part of that crowd," she said, finally smiling. "I'll probably always associate you with a kind of bridge, of sorts, into this world from the one I was in."

He wasn't sure if that was something to be happy about or not, but it didn't matter. She was here, she seemed healthy enough, and she didn't hate him. He pulled her along with him, down the hill, down the side street that would take them to Rosemerta's place.

He ordered a butterbeer for her, knowing she needed to warm up, and a whiskey for himself. As she sipped her drink, he looked more closely at her. The changes were there, he noted. Her cheekbones were more pronounced, and he could see her collarbones in sharp relief under her skin. The necklace was in place, but the sparkle in her eyes was missing. It was to be expected, he supposed. She'd been in the company of Dementors for longer than any innocent child should have been. He wondered if she had any innocence left now.

He decided if he didn't start the conversation that must take place, it wouldn't happen. He realized that she'd have to be drawn out; she'd never been one to speak simply to avoid silence, in spite of her Irish blood.

"Professor Dumbledore never did explain to any of us what happened at your hearing," he began. "We know you were cleared of all charges, but that's all he would say." He watched her closely, looking for any sign that he could push it. When she simply returned his gaze, he plunged ahead.

"What happened? Why is the headmaster so reluctant to discuss it?"

She lightly ran her finger around and around the rim of her glass, no doubt organizing her thoughts. She'd probably not allowed herself to remember the hearing, trying to block out all the unpleasantness. Either that, or she thought of nothing else, wallowing in the depression he knew she had never let go of in all the time she'd been imprisoned.

"Fudge was running the show," she started, "and Umbridge was there, looking for all the world like a toad. I recognized her right off from Harry's description of her. One of the Weasley's was there, taking notes. The famous Percy, I guess. There were many others, but I don't remember their names. It wasn't important.

"And Dumbledore was there, but not sitting on the Panel. He was sitting off to the side, on a comfortable-looking armchair, true to form. He was planning on actually defending me," she added thoughtfully. "It surprised me."

"Why did that surprise you?" he asked in astonishment. "Surely you knew he'd be fighting for your freedom."

"I wasn't so sure," she admitted. "I could see the doubts and regrets in his eyes right after Lucius . . ." Her eyes were far away now, remembering the pain and confusion of the trouble that had landed her in Azkaban in the first place. She shook those thoughts away and continued.

"I suppose I should thank him," she said indifferently, "because I'm sure that if he hadn't said the things he did, they would have sentenced me to life in Azkaban." She pushed away her half-finished butterbeer. "Not that it would have done them any good."

Snape didn't know what to make of that. What would she have done if she had been given a life sentence? And did he detect something in her voice that spoke of antipathy toward Dumbledore?

Picking up on her subtle signals, he paid the tab and led her out into the falling night sky. Wordlessly, he led the way down to the road that would take them to Hogwarts. When they reached the bend in the road, he looked questioningly at her.

"Do you have a place to stay?"

She looked at him, smiling sadly. "I do. I just didn't know if it was the right time to claim it." She shrugged at Snape's unasked question. "I've been invited by Dumbledore to return to school and continue my apprenticeship with Hagrid. He's prepared rooms for me there."

"But you're not sure you want that?"

"I think it's going to be a long time before I'm sure of anything," she said, mocking herself. "But I supposed I'd better; I have nothing else lined up that I care to get on with."

They began walking toward the gates of the castle. "And what of your Potions research?" he asked. "Before all hell broke loose, you were preparing to field test your Veritaserum Substitute Potion."

"I'd like to get on with that," she said, sounding almost chipper. "I would like to eventually try out all the important Potions with substitute ingredients."

He was gratified to hear it. He had been pushing the idea of alternate recipes to Dumbledore with enthusiasm, seeing as how practical the research would be. But alone, he couldn't find the time to prepare these solutions. With Tanya's help, it would be possible. But how much time would she need for her work with Hagrid?

As if reading his mind, she spoke. "There is probably a realistic way of combining the two fields," she said. "After all, there is a lot of flexibility caring for the beasts Hagrid wants to breed. If I could escape any other duties, I expect things will work out."

They entered the grounds of Hogwarts, working their way to the Entrance Hall. Once inside, she hesitated, and Snape turned to face her. "Are you hungry? It seems dinner is served."

She looked toward the Great Hall, listening to the hum of voices there. Seeing the reluctance on her countenance, Snape suggested a tray could be delivered to her.

"I'm not hungry," she said. "But you go ahead; I'll have to speak to the headmaster. I don't even know where my rooms are. That is, if he hasn't changed his mind about my being here."

Snape looked into the Great Hall, searching for the silver of Dumbledore's beard in the crowd. It was there, at the Head Table, but he couldn't tell how far along his dinner was.

"He probably won't be much longer," he ventured. "Would you like to go up to his office and wait? I could let you in, or even stay, if you'd like."

She looked grateful. "You must be starving, though."

"No, I'm not."

"Then, aye, I'd like to wait there. If you'll wait with me."

"My pleasure." He might actually learn something more than either Tanya or Dumbledore had been willing to disclose individually.

"Chocolate Cockroaches," he said to the stone Gargoyle at Dumbledore's private entrance.

Tanya shared a wry look with Snape. "I've often wondered why such sweets were ever invented," she said. "Would you eat anything that had the word 'cockroach' in it?"

"You're asking the wrong person," he said with a grin. "I'm not partial to sweets in any event."

They sat in the armchairs near Dumbledore's fire, allowing the silence to settle once more around them. It was a comfortable peace, Snape not willing to question her any further just now. He would rather make sure she had no reason to avoid his company.

They turned at the sound of the heavy door opening. Dumbledore entered, smiling at them, not at all surprised to see them there. He was almost never surprised, thought Snape, wondering if it was empathetic wisdom, or something much more prosaic, such as a surveillance system of some kind.

"Welcome, welcome," the headmaster said, sitting behind his desk. "Miss Relke, I'm very happy you've decided to accept this post. I think I can speak for all the staff when I say it's about time we had you back." Snape noticed that he didn't mention the other students. He looked at Tanya, wondering if she noticed this omission.

Her face was unreadable. "Thank you for offering it," she said demurely, not offering any more.

"I've prepared a suite of rooms for you near the Gryffindor Tower," he said. "If for any reason you find you'd prefer something else, please let me know. It will be no trouble at all to change things around, or relocate you." He held her gaze steady, letting her know that he understood how uncomfortable she might find herself so near the students of Gryffindor, maybe a couple of them in particular.

"I'm sure it will be fine," she answered evenly. "I suspect that in this final year, most of the students I've met will be preparing for NEWTs, and too busy for much social life,

anyway."

Dumbledore let it go, obviously not wanting to push for anything more than that. Whatever else he was, Snape thought, he was great for picking up signals. Snape wondered exactly how things stood between her and Potter. Had she communicated at all with him during the two months since her release?

"I'm putting you directly under the supervision of Hagrid, of course," Dumbledore continued. "Unless you've had a change of heart, he'll be eager for his apprentice back."

"No change there," she said to his unspoken question. "Will I also have the time for Potions?"

Dumbledore glanced at Snape, smiling. "I think we'll have to make sure of that," he said, "as Severus is chomping at the bit to try some of your ideas. As a matter of fact, with a lessening of his regular teaching duties, the both of you will be able to hit the road in search of substitute recipes for our existing Potions."

"Lessening teaching duties?" she asked, looking at Snape.

"Yes," Snape answered. "I have the NEWTs students, of course, but other than that, we have an apprentice that has been advanced to taking over my first through fifth years. One Raphael Driver."

"So, Divination didn't work out for him, then?"

Dumbledore cut in. "We felt it was unfair to subject him to Professor Trelawney and her methods. She's rather too inflexible for his impressionable years and we don't want to frighten him away from the noble profession of teaching."

Tanya smiled, the light reaching her eyes at last. "And how is he doing with your younger classes," she asked, looking at Snape. "Or should I ask?"

"Actually, he does quite well," said Snape. "It came as rather a shock to me. I still read the essays, and set the exams whenever necessary, but I think he could begin that as well."

Tanya was regarding him thoughtfully, and Snape knew she was wondering how much he'd changed. A year ago, he would never have relinquished control of his Potions to a newcomer. Well, he mused, it had to happen sometime, or he'd never get anything important accomplished. Like these new substitute potions.

"Well, let's get you settled into your new rooms. Hagrid will expect you to report to him around 11:00 tomorrow morning, unless you have a previous engagement?" Dumbledore looked to her for confirmation.

"Nothing at all."

"Good. Severus," he said, standing up. "If you would be so kind as to show Tanya the rooms near the portrait of Sir Worster?"

"Certainly."

As they walked down the corridor, he noted her nervousness. He hoped they didn't encounter any of her friends, or former friends, until she was better prepared for the meeting. He was afraid that this meeting with Dumbledore, and the return to Hogwarts had taken more out of her than he'd first thought. What had been running through her mind while she wiled away the hours, days, and months in Azkaban? What had she been doing since her release two months ago? Delaying this day? Renewing her strength?

"Where are all your things?" he asked, just now aware that she didn't have any baggage with her.

"I've left everything at home," she answered, looking at him. "I really didn't know if I needed them or not until now." That could mean either that she wasn't sure the offer of a position here was still good, or if she really wanted it.

"I'll just Apparate later on to the cottage, reduce everything, and Apparate back again. Shouldn't take long."

"You're keeping the cottage, then?"

"Aye, if only to upset Sean Taggery." A joke? "Besides, it's home. I'll need escape now and then, and I can't think of anywhere I'd rather go."

He remembered the cottage from his days of illness, and then the brief trip out there again when he'd escorted her to the old Black house when she'd joined the Order.

"Are you still planning on working for the Order?" he asked.

"If they'll have me. But I don't know if I'm still trusted." She looked around at him, her face contrite. "If they don't trust me, it will do no good to be involved anyway." She looked down at the floor as they walked. Almost in a whisper, she said, "Trust is everything."

They stopped at the portrait of Sir Worster. "The password, if I remember correctly," Snape said, "is Codswallop. I suggest you change it immediately. There's no way of knowing how many people know this one. You'd never have any privacy."

She nodded, and followed him into a sitting room, nicely furnished in deep green carpeting, a heavy, overstuffed sofa, and a matching armchair before a good-sized fireplace. There were shelves, currently empty of books, lining the three walls opposite the fireplace. He showed her through a doorway that led into a kitchenette, and pointed to another door opposite, where her bedroom was.

She continued along to check out the bedroom, and turning to Snape, she said, "This is great! Exactly what I need. Scary how he does that, isn't it?" He knew she meant Dumbledore, his having furnished this room with no input from her. "Yes, one can never quite get used to his seeming telepathic tendencies."

"Do you think he is, really?" she asked.

"I think it's probably more along the lines of empathy and wisdom, plus a little common psychology thrown in for good measure. Why?" he added. "Are there thoughts you'd rather he not know?"

"Of course," she said with amusement, "doesn't everyone?"

He smiled. "Everyone."

He left her to get acquainted with her new home, with an offer of his assistance in collecting her things, which she declined. More's the pity, he thought wistfully. He wouldn't have minded seeing the cottage again, set into the lush Irish hillside.

It was perfect, Tanya thought. She'd be able to bring over all her books, all her clothes, and whatever else she wanted. Maybe she'd feel at home enough here not to miss the cottage so much. And after all, with her ability to Apparate, home was never more than a few seconds away.

She moved through the bedroom, with its queen-sized bed in the heavy wooden frame, past a large dresser, on to the bathroom, with its claw-footed tub. She was please to see the curtain around it, and was glad Dumbledore saw fit to include a shower. Bathtubs were good for soaking away all your troubles, but she usually preferred a quick morning shower to bring her to her usual level of brisk energy.

She splashed cool water on her face and looked up into the mirror. Her eyes taunted her. She was startled to hear a voice interrupting her thoughts. "You can smile, put on

a little make-up, and pretend to be happy," the voice said. "but you can't erase the age in your eyes. They are the gateway to the soul, after all."

With a start, Tanya realized it was the mirror talking to her. We'll have no more of that, she vowed. She'd simply replace this mirror with one from the cottage. She walked around her rooms, carefully looking at each object, wanting to remove any that seemed to have a brain of its own. Aside from the outspoken bathroom mirror, the only other thing that worried her was the fireplace. It wasn't a thinking object, of course, but she'd not have uninvited, unexpected guests crashing in on her.

With a wave of her hand, the fireplace disappeared, leaving a Franklin stove in its place. Much better.

She found a square of parchment on an end table, and thought she recognized Dumbledore's handwriting.

Miss Relke,

If there are any changes you'd like that you don't feel you can do, let me know and we'll put everything right. The house-elves take a lot of pride in keeping all our private and common rooms clean and well furnished with firewood, so please don't insult them by cleaning your own. They've become very sensitive in recent years; something about spewing and inadvertently coming upon clothing they fear is left to trap them into unwanted freedom.

You'll find a wicker basket in your bedroom; all the laundry you put in there will disappear to the facilities next to the kitchen. They'll be returned to you in an average of two days.

If ever you find you prefer to eat or drink in your rooms, rather than in the Great Hall, simply push the green button near your kitchen sink; it will summon an elf to you for your order. They're only too happy to oblige.

As you are not technically a student, the usual curfews don't apply. You have access to the staff room (the password is 'tranquility'), your own lab (which will actually adjoin Professor Snape's lab; see him for details), free access to the Dark Forest (take care, please) and Hagrid's paddock.

If there is anything I've forgotten, my password is "Chocolate Cockroach". You'll need to change your own passwords, both to your rooms and to your lab, once you've been let in.

Welcome back,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster

Tanya put the parchment back down on the table. The fire that the elves had built up in the fireplace had been transferred to the stove, and she became aware of the warmth permeating her body. It was almost uncomfortable. Over the past year, she'd become accustomed to the never-ending chill in the prison cell; when she'd returned home after her hearing, she was loathe to light too many fires, not wanting to deal with either Bridie O'Hara or Sean Taggery.

She buttoned up her coat, tying the belt at her waist, and ignored the scarf draped under the collar and hanging down each side of her lapels. She slowly pushed open the door to the corridor, hoping she didn't see anyone. She wasn't yet up to facing Harry.

Luck was with her, and she made it all the way off the grounds with no witnesses. She hadn't really been able to let go of the 'criminal' feeling; not since she'd sat in that cell, sure she'd never again see the light of day unless she used all her powers to destroy the walls that held her in. But she refrained from doing that; it was the hardest thing she'd ever done. The only thing that kept her inside was the hope that she'd be released on *their* terms; she'd be accepted back into *their* world.

However, once it had finally happened, she irrationally felt she didn't want their world. She didn't know any longer how to look at people while hiding the fear she felt; the horrible I-am-not-worthy-of-your-notice feeling. She didn't know how to hold a conversation anymore. She didn't know how to simply walk, keep walking, knowing no one would stop her. She'd forgotten how to be *free*.

Had she really been inside only a year? She'd spent her sixteenth birthday behind those bars. And her seventeenth was spent in solitude in Ireland. It had been too long for her; she'd forgotten what it felt like to be in someone's company.

She remembered how she'd felt upon seeing Severus standing next to her on the hill overlooking the school. Her first impulse had been to run; she was glad she'd held her ground. It really was good to see him again, glad he wasn't inclined to talk much. At least in him, there were no significant changes.

She'd expected something different from Dumbledore, though. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. There was no censure in his warm words of welcome; was she disappointed? Would she never be able to shake off this feeling of deserving punishment or judgment?

She crossed the road to get closer to the forest. As she chose a spot between two thick oak trees from which to Disapparate, she knew she was putting off the inevitable. She would have to face Harry, sooner or later. Better sooner, she thought. Get it over with. It would be better to give him his chance to snub her, or rip her apart verbally; then she could get on with her studies. But should she seek him out, or wait for him to find her?

She Disapparated with a small 'pop' and concentrated on the copse of trees just down the road from her cottage. When she arrived, she automatically checked for signs of Sean moving around his farm. When she saw none, she headed for the cottage, glad to see it was still dark and no smoke was coming from the chimney. Bridie must have decided not to brave the February weather to come calling. Tanya had already told her she'd be leaving for a while. She'd have to leave her a note saying that she'd be staying at school, and probably wouldn't be back until the summer holidays. As for Sean, she'd pretty much given up on the two of them ever reaching a stalemate. But at least he wasn't prone to vandalism while she was away. As a matter of fact, he'd seemed almost friendly in their last meeting. It made her wonder if his bitching was more out of habit than any real hope of chasing her away.

She opened the door and waved her hand to light the lantern on the coffee table. Moving to her bedroom, she began reducing all her books and most of her clothes to be able to fit into a small shoebox. Moving to her kitchen, she decided she'd take only a few favorite coffee cups, knowing that her kitchenette at Hogwarts had everything she'd ever need in kitchenware.

Emptying her bathrooms of any personal effects took only about another thirty seconds, and then she was packed. She looked at the shoebox, ironically amused that this small box summed up her life so far. And books took up most of the small space. Some life, she mused.

She wrote Bridie a note, reminded her to keep in contact via the owl message service, and locked the door behind her. Walking out to the woods again, she Apparated back to the dark forest outside of Hogwarts, box in hand.

Walking down the corridor to her new rooms, her footsteps slowed as she spotted Harry coming toward her. Her eyes were trapped in his; if she'd entertained thoughts about hiding from him, it was moot. She couldn't look away, much less walk away. She felt like a deer rooted to the spot with headlights.

She quietly waited to see how he felt about her being here.

He thought he was seeing a ghost at first. No one had alerted him to Tanya's return. He didn't even know she'd been released. So much for being a full member of the Order, he thought maliciously. He could have done with some warning.

She had stopped, facing him, waiting.

He pictured himself simply continuing past her, not saying anything. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had to acknowledge her in some way. Why not just pretend they were never anything more than casual acquaintances? He'd spent a long time trying to forget their times together; why not put it into practice?

"Hello, Tanya," he said, stopping.

She nodded at him, obviously waiting for more. He imagined this scene so many times, but now he didn't know what to say. He glanced down at her necklace. Of course it was still there, as would be the scar beneath it.

"So, you've been cleared?"

She nodded yes, still silent.

"And you're continuing the classes you had before?"

She took a deep breath, making Harry think she would finally say something. But he was disappointed, and slightly embarrassed at stating the obvious.

"Lucius Malfoy is still in St. Mungo's," he cruelly reminded her. No change in her expression. "Draco's left school. He's probably transferred to Durmstrang."

She nodded again; she knew all this. Wouldn't she have been told upon her return?

"So, are you in the dorms?"

She shook her head. "I've been given rooms. I'm actually more of a staff member than a student."

Finally, she speaks, he thought. He thought he heard hoarseness in her voice. This was something new. On the other hand, if she wasn't in the habit of using her voice, it might be a little rusty. Or was it emotion making her sound that way? And maybe she was talking to other people; maybe it was just him that she didn't want to talk to.

"You're getting ready for your NEWTs?" she asked.

"Yes. They're really pushing us, of course. Do you have to take the NEWTs?"

"Aye. I imagine I'll be scheduled for them with the rest of you."

"Are you ready for them?"

"I suppose by then I will be."

"So, we won't be seeing you in the Gryffindor common room, then?"

"No," she said softly. "There's no reason for me to be there. I'm not a Head Girl, I'm not your Head of House, I'm not anything."

Not anything. Harry forced his face to show nothing. He wondered if she was fishing for a certain response from him? Did she ever think about the times they'd spent together? Did she regret it, like he did? Like he told himself he did? Or did she secretly wonder how stupid a guy could get? Did it mean nothing to her?

"Harry," she said, as if tired of playing with words. "Am I right in assuming that you hate me?" She said it simply, as if the answer were of no consequence to her. It infuriated Harry. He'd just been a small part of her life; a sideline as she awaited the chance to attack Lucius Malfoy.

"Hate's a pretty strong word," he said, knowing his next words would hurt her, and wanting them to. "It's more like I don't feel any way about you. Like I'd feel about someone I'd never met."

He turned away and headed for the common room, willing himself not to look back. He didn't want anything to do with someone who could so callously and irrevocably cause such harm to another human being, even if that person was Lucius Malfoy.

He slammed his books down on the table, startling Hermione and Ron, who'd been busy comparing notes from their Defense class. "What's up, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"Guess who's back?" he spat. Without waiting for an answer, he swore and told them of his encounter with Tanya.

"She's back?" asked Ron, incredulously. "She's been released? How come nobody told us?"

"Maybe they don't want Voldemort to know," Hermione offered. "After all, she's still our most powerful weapon against him."

"Does the Order still plan on using her?" asked Harry.

"Yes, of course they do. Weren't you paying attention?" She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry, I would have thought that you'd treat those meetings with more respect than your lectures."

"My mind might have wandered a time or two," he admitted. But wouldn't mention of her name have captured his attention?

"Well, admittedly," said Hermione, "they've only been referring to her obliquely. It's almost as if they're more inclined to use Voldemort's name than hers."

"Does anyone see a worrying pattern developing here?" asked Ron. They looked at him. "I mean doesn't it seem like they're sort of . . . I dunno . . . changing roles?" They didn't look any more comprehending.

"Well, we use the name 'Voldemort' nowadays as if we never shied away from it before. But now we can't say, 'Tanya'. And they keep saying how she seems much more powerful than he is now. And they're wondering, even if they don't come right out and say it, if her loyalties are still for the Order."

"I don't think we need to worry about that," said Hermione decisively. "She's never shown anything *but* loyalty."

"Oh sure," Harry answered. "And if Lucius Malfoy weren't a Dark Wizard, if he were a member of the Order, would she have refrained from cursing him? Would he be sitting in a wheelchair right now, moving by pushing buttons with his chin, if he were on our side? Of course he would! Do you honestly think she would have put Order business before her thirst for revenge?"

"Do you honestly think anyone other than a Dark Wizard would have wiped out her people?" she shot back quickly.

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, knowing that Hermione's defense of Tanya's rage didn't change the doubts it left behind. She had acted calmly, willfully, as if every move had been planned. That was no young girl lashing out suddenly to ease the pain of past tragedy. They'd all been there. Tanya had been cool, deliberate; she'd had the spell all ready to employ. And now Lucius Malfoy would never walk again; he'd never lift his wand hand again.

"We can't know for sure what motivated her," said Hermione weakly. "Just be glad that she removed such a powerful threat from our midst."

"But do you ever worry about what's going to happen in the future?" Harry argued. "How is she going to use that power? What's stopping her from getting rid of Voldemort and taking his place?"

"Choices, Harry," said Hermione. "Didn't you tell me that Dumbledore once told you that it was the choices we make that determine what sort of people we are? What makes you think Tanya would prefer an existence like what Voldemort's after? What makes you think anything other than that she simply wants a place in a world where people don't automatically spit on her because of what she is? What appeal would the Dark Side have for her?"

"The power," Harry said simply. "Just the power. What else draws so many people over to his side?"

"She *has* the power," she replied angrily. "There's nothing on the Dark Side that she doesn't already have!"

"How do you know?" he asked, not willing to give in. "How do you know what life would be like as a Dark Wizard?"

Hermione blew out her breath in exasperation and gathered up her books. "I give up. I just hope you weren't unkind to her. I have a feeling that she'd been dreading running into you again. All that she was facing, knowing she could spend the rest of her life in Azkaban, and all you could do was rip into her for hiding a stupid scar from you! Why don't you just grow up?"

As Harry's face heated up in indignation, she flounced out of the room to her dormitory. Ron sat there, nonplussed. "She's on another of her campaigns again, isn't she?"

Harry snorted his indifference and opened his books, trying furiously to block Tanya from his mind.

Memory of the Hearing

Chapter 13 of 20

Harry attends Tanya's hearing, a la Dumbledore's Pensieve, and is horrified at what he witnesses. Severus and Tanya begin to test the new Potion.

Chapter Thirteen

Memory of the Hearing

Harry sat before Dumbledore's desk, wondering once again why he'd been summoned here. He didn't recall doing anything against House rules; his schoolwork was coming along fine. He even had a glimmer of the beast his Animagus would be; a wolf. So why was he here?

Dumbledore had finished pouring tea for the two of them; he handed Harry his cup and offered a plate of what he assumed were biscuits, which Harry declined. Dumbledore's tendency toward sweets was too much, even for Harry.

"Harry," the old man began, "you remember, of course, the chat we had about the Prophecy?"

"Of course I do," said Harry. Was Dumbledore going to tell him the time was drawing near?

"It had been predicted," Dumbledore continued as if Harry hadn't spoken, "that you will have to kill Voldemort, or he would have to kill you."

"I remember."

"How superstitious are you?"

Harry was taken aback. "I don't think I'm superstitious at all," he replied. "What does that have to do with . . ."

"Simply that there are those who would believe that the only way to vanquish Voldemort is to wait for you to do it. If anyone else manages it, they'll live in fear that he will return."

"Are you suggesting that someone else will kill him?"

"It's a possibility."

"You're talking about Tanya, aren't you?"

"Yes. And no. I have no inkling that things are coming to a head. I just wondered where you stood with that Prophecy."

"I'd rather *not* believe in it, to tell the truth. I've never been able to accept the idea of my killing someone. Voldemort or not."

"I know what you've experienced in past times," Dumbledore went on. "I know that if you could have, you would have killed him already. In the heat of battle, your conscience doesn't always rule. The bigger problem would be to deal with it later, when you've had time to think from a safer harbor."

Harry digested this, and had to agree. When Voldemort killed Cedric, and then tried to kill him, Harry had been aiming to kill. He'd never thought of it in that way before. He had only known that he wanted to survive.

"Have you seen Tanya since her return?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, briefly."

"And how do you feel about her being here?"

"It's a free country." Harry couldn't hold his eyes up to Dumbledore's scrutiny, and looked down at his tea.

"That simple sentence speaks volumes," Dumbledore said. "As a fellow member of the Order, you'll be running into her from time to time. Perhaps even working together. Will that be a problem?"

"I'll make sure it's not," Harry said truthfully. Dumbledore had no more wish than he to keep the peace. Especially after Hermione had told him off. He hated being told how immature he was.

"Have you had this chat with Tanya as well?" he asked nonchalantly.

"No, I didn't see the need."

"So, I'm the only one handling this badly, then?" He felt the resentment burning in him again.

"I frankly don't know how she's handling it," Dumbledore disputed. "I have to admit I'm a little bit reluctant to approach her. She doesn't strike me as someone who would appreciate my insight." His eyes were twinkling, and Harry suspected the headmaster was partial to the fiery personality, and the independence Tanya had always displayed.

"What else are you not sure about?" Harry asked. "Is there any doubt in your mind that she'll put Order business before anything else? That she won't turn on any of us if we upset her? Cast a spell on whomever upsets her? Like Mr. Malfoy?" There. He'd said it.

"There is no doubt in my mind," he said simply. "I would trust her with my very life. And I can honestly say that anyone else in the fight for good against evil might say the same."

Harry said nothing; he just sat there, swirling his tea in his cup, wondering if he'd be able to discern anything in the leaves. Probably a grim. He wondered if his meeting with Dumbledore was over. He looked up at the Professor, waiting a dismissal.

Dumbledore sighed softly, apparently figuring he'd said all he could. He'd have to wait and see how the two worked together. And it was inevitable; they would be working together. How could they not? The two of them together would be a force beyond reckoning. But it would require trust. If they couldn't depend on each other, who knew what would happen? Unity. Just as the Sorting Hat had been preaching the last few years, there would have to be unity.

Snape stood before his window, looking out at the black night. The fire behind him was just bright enough to show the most shadowy reflection of himself in the glass. He could see the stars easily enough, but had never been tempted to try to divine anything from them. Astrology was a Muggle hobby, he thought, not worthy of contemplation by any self-respecting wizard. Thus the Sybill Trelawney types.

He was about to let the curtain drop back into place when a shadow flying past the moon caught his eye. A little late for owl delivery, but one couldn't hope to get an animal on a regular schedule, anyway. He opened his window, but as he neared, he realized it wasn't an owl with a message; it was a rather large blackbird. A raven. How perfect an Animagus for the average Dark Wizard.

His first instinct had been to shut the window before the raven could gain entry. But as the raven hovered briefly, preparing to land on the window ledge instead of flying directly inside, he vaguely remembered some comment from Minerva about Tanya doing so well in her Animagus lessons. He stood back from the window, giving the bird room to enter.

The raven crossed over the windowpane to perch on the back of the chair next to it. It looked at him for a moment, and he wondered if he was mistaken in his identification of the animal. But as he watched, the raven jumped off the chair, and before it reached the floor, it had transfigured into Tanya.

She was standing fully balanced, not having stumbled, as was usual when students were just learning to transfigure into and out of their Animagi. She must have been practicing hard, he noted. She was smiling, her entire face glowing, the sparkle back in her eyes full force. Clearly, she came here to show off. He smiled back, enjoying her pride, knowing she had the right to that pride. She'd accomplished in a short time what usually took years to master. And her year in prison hadn't hindered her new skill.

She spun around, laughing like the child she once was. "No feathers anywhere, right? No cawing, no looking for disgusting food that only birds eat! I did it!"

He took her in his arms and danced a few steps across the room, celebrating her happiness he'd been afraid he'd never see again. She was too excited for that, however, and threw her arms around his neck. He held her tightly, picking her up off her feet slightly. He breathed in essence of her; her jasmine scented shampoo, the light scent of an herbal perfume; he felt her heat through his robes.

Suddenly, he stood straight and pulled her arms from around his neck. With trembling hands, he held her arms and took a step backward, not looking in her eyes. It was getting increasingly difficult to think of her as someone young enough to be his daughter, someone whom he'd more or less thought of as his daughter. Or had he?

She held his eyes until he was forced to meet them, questioning him silently, and he knew she was asking herself if she had offended him somehow. He tried a smile, but knew she wouldn't be fooled. He turned away from her, willing his frozen brain to come up with something, anything that would make the last minute or two disappear.

Of course! He'd almost forgotten Dumbledore's last message for him. He heaved a silent sigh of relief and turned back to her.

"We have our field test assignment," he said, perhaps more heartily than was warranted. "I have the location coordinates; we'll be able to use a Portkey that Dumbledore is charming even as we speak. Is there anything going on here you can't reschedule?"

She brightened immediately. "No, nothing. Hagrid already knows I'll be popping in and out for this. And my studies are ahead of schedule, depending on how long we'll be. Where are we going?"

"All I know for certain is that it's out in the back of beyond up in the high country somewhere. Lots of wilderness, the headmaster assures us, and none of the ingredients I had been in the habit of using for this potion. A perfect chance to test your theory."

"Aye, we can brew the potion, but how will we test its performance?"

"Perhaps we can test it on each other. We know there would be no harm, at any rate. The only thing we'd be risking is our deepest, darkest secrets."

"Careful, now, Severus," she shot back, "you'll be wanting to leave something behind for your Pensieve, won't you?"

"As I already know you're an empath, it would do no good anyway. However, there are things in my past that wild centaurs wouldn't induce me to subject you to. We'll have to give the potion to you."

"Ah, but then I wouldn't retain the aura of mystery that surrounds me," she laughed. "You'll grow tired of having me hanging around."

Never. "You are an enigma, wrapped up in a riddle, and surrounded by a myth. No amount of Veritaserum would ever change that. And I'm only half-kidding. I've learned a little about gypsies the past year or two. And with each layer unpeeled, there is revealed only more layers."

She cocked an eyebrow at that. "What have you learned about gypsies?"

"I found all kinds of documentation at Muggle libraries, here and there." He pointed to his bookshelves. "Some of them were almost informative, enough to keep, rather than simply borrowing them from libraries and then try to find them again."

She looked at the books he indicated. "*The People*", "*Strangers In Our Midst*", and "*The Society of Kalderash*". She smiled at him. "You do realize, don't you, that I'm not

Kalderash? I'm of the Rom gypsies. These books aren't likely to tell you anything about my people."

"They wouldn't even if you *were* Kalderash," he said. "I've never read anything like these books. The more I read, the less I learned. It seems as if all the different gypsies are determined to maintain their secrets."

She shrugged, looking over the rest of his titles. "You're missing some of the works of Shakespeare," she noted. "Have you lost them?"

"I never had them," he admitted. "I stole those books from primary school, many, many years ago. I couldn't steal them all."

She laughed. "I have the missing plays. You can borrow them anytime."

At last. Someone who shared his tastes in literature. "I'll take you up on that. As a matter of fact, bring them with you on our trip. I'll have to find a way to keep busy, as you'll be doing most of the work."

"Are we to be camping out, or is there shelter waiting for us?"

"We'll have to rough it, unless we happen to find shelter. I do have access to a fairly comfortable tent, wizard style. But it depends upon whether or not there are any meddlesome Muggles nearby. If so, then I'm afraid things will be much more difficult."

"Oh, we'll manage. It's like riding a bike." Snape, who'd never camped out, nor ridden a bike, decided that the practicalities of a camping trip were better left to her. He would concentrate on making sure they had all the supplies they'd need for the actual potion making and storage of samples.

They began to discuss the more pedestrian details of the research, and planned to leave at first light.

Another Hogsmeade weekend. Harry just couldn't get enthused about them anymore. He wasn't bored enough to actually hit the books for some extra studying time, but since Ron and Hermione had begun dating openly, he'd been to feel like a fifth wheel. So, when he saw Ginny sitting morosely in the common room, he asked her to join him for a couple of butterbeers. She accepted eagerly, and they walked down the road to Hogsmeade, dodging the third-years, who were still enthusiastic about these weekends.

They sat in the Three Broomsticks, and as Ginny brought him up-to-date on what all the Weasleys were doing, students came and went with distracting regularity. Ron and Hermione eventually came in, joining them just as Ginny was beginning to become upset at Harry's lack of attention. He couldn't help it; his eyes were drawn to the door each time it opened.

"If you're looking for Tanya to come in," she said snidely, "forget it. She and Snape went off on some sort of research expedition."

"What research?"

"Some sort of Potions field test," Hermione put in. "Don't you keep up with anything? They have to field test something Tanya came up with."

"I thought she was apprenticing with Hagrid?" Harry wasn't sure what either field involved, but the idea that Tanya wasn't even in the area deflated his desire to be sitting here in the crowded pub, watching the door constantly. He didn't want to admit to himself that she factored into his actions at all.

"Both, I guess," Ron said. "Or maybe she needs to keep up her Potions skills to recuperate from whatever injuries she sustains from working with Hagrid."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Look, if you're just going to ignore me, I may as well go off with someone who actually appreciates my company." She got up and headed over to a table full of sixth-years. Harry didn't blame her. He wasn't the best of company lately.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione voiced, "why don't you just make it up with her? You're being way too hard on her, you know. You're only making the both of you more miserable."

"She's miserable, is she?" Harry was ashamed to realize how good those words felt. He didn't want to be the only one.

"Well, she doesn't say much these days, although you can see she's trying to be friendly. I mean, I know she's especially busy lately, but she used to be quick with a conversation, at least. The last few times I've talked to her, it's almost as though she forgot how to use words. Do you think that's because of Azkaban? She talked to no one for more than a year. Does one fall out of practice?"

"I think she's harboring a grudge against every one of us who didn't go to prison with her," he said snidely. "Like it's our fault she couldn't hold on to her temper with Mr. Malfoy."

Hermione bristled. She apparently still considered Tanya her friend, and as such, leaped to her defense. "Like you could ever hold on to your temper!" she spat. "Who is it that blew up his aunt when she insulted your mother? Who kept getting all those detentions with Umbridge because you played right into her hands while she pushed your buttons? Who threatened to kill Sirius Black when you thought he betrayed your parents? What makes you think you're any different than Tanya?" She stood up so violently that her chair flew back and almost caused Rosemerta to lose the tray of beers she was carrying. As she left the pub, Ron looked at Harry, clearly unable to decide whether to follow Hermione, or commiserate with Harry.

"You'd better go," Harry said, "or she'll give you the silent treatment for days."

Ron appeared to think it over. "It might not be a bad idea at that, you know. She's running out of causes to support, and she's been threatening to start up with house-elf rights. We just now got them to clean the common room again. I'm not sure I'm up to getting dragged into her campaigns."

"No, go on," Harry said, smiling. "I'm about to go back anyway."

"Don't take her so seriously, okay? You know Hermione. She just blows hot or cold, probably as some form of exercise. You know she's not really mad at you."

Harry smiled his thanks and they both headed out the door; Harry turning right to return to Hogwarts, Ron turning left to follow Hermione.

Harry wanted nothing more than to return to the common room, and start his studying while he had half the mind to do so. But Dumbledore cornered him on the stairway, and requested his presence in ten minutes in his office. Harry couldn't think of any good reason why not, so he dragged himself to the gargoyles.

Dumbledore eventually returned, levitating a tray with an assortment of biscuits and sweets, as well as the perpetual teapot, on it. After pouring and settling himself down on the armchair opposite Harry, he asked how his schoolwork was going.

"I'm keeping up," Harry said suspiciously. Had it really been necessary to call this meeting simply to ask about his work? Of course not, he realized at Dumbledore's next words.

"I've been thinking about the distance between you and Tanya," he said. "I still worry that ill feelings will eventually get in the way of the trust that is needed in order for any sort of teamwork effort that may be required in the future."

"Therefore, I think I should point certain things out to you. And the easiest way to do that is to show you. I believe we can start with her hearing, last December. You remember how to use the Pensieve?"

Harry looked up with a start. Again, he was being invited to jump into Dumbledore's memory. Why was that hearing so important to how Harry felt now?

"I've already been through this with Professor Snape," the old man continued. "I felt that as he was working closely with her, and seems closer to her than anyone else, that he should know what she cannot bring herself to reveal to him. I don't believe she really minded; she just couldn't force herself to relive those particular times."

With that, he stood, and reaching into the cabinet behind him, brought out the heavy grey bowl, already swirling with a silvery mist that Harry knew must be his memory of the hearing.

With a tremulous look at Dumbledore, who was swirling his wand in the silver vapor of the Pensieve, Harry fixed his attention on the memory, peering closer and closer until he felt the draw he had become so familiar with, especially after all the time he'd spent entering the novels Tanya had given him for his birthday, seemingly so long ago.

When it pulled him in, he wasn't surprised to find himself in the murky dungeon's hearing chamber he was becoming all too familiar with. There, in the middle of the floor on the lowest level, was the dreaded chair, complete with chains loosely hanging by the legs and arms of the chair.

Looking around, he saw that a panel of dour-looking wizards and witches was already seated, waiting. Off to the side, in an armchair that was ridiculously out of place in this chamber, was Dumbledore himself, also waiting.

Two Dementors entered from a door at the back of the chamber, escorting Tanya. Harry stared. Her hair was hanging down around her face, looking like she hadn't combed it for weeks. Her clothes were draped loosely on her, her weight loss apparent; clearly the cooking at Azkaban wasn't handled by house-elves. She sat in the chair, and Harry willed the chains not to engage. But after a brief moment, they wrapped themselves around Tanya's arms and legs.

Tanya looked down at them in surprise, gave an unladylike snort, and moved her fingers. The chains burst apart, some links flying toward the Panel. He saw the few that were still attached to the chair give off a thin tendril of smoke. Defiantly, Tanya sat back, crossed one leg over the other, and folded her hands in her lap. He looked up at the Panel.

Cornelius Fudge was sputtering. "Miss Relke, your behavior is being closely scrutinized. Such a blatant display of disrespect for policy is not working in your favor!" She merely waited, watching him, not answering.

Dolores Umbridge was scribbling frantically; no surprise there. Percy Weasley was also there, at the end of the row of Panelists. He was gawking at Tanya, apparently too surprised to take his customary notes. He seemed to suddenly collect himself, and his quill was now keeping pace with Umbridge's. Through all this, Dumbledore sat patiently, as if he knew all along that she would allow no chains to hold her.

The Dementors had left the room as soon as the chains had burst. This surprised Harry, as he would have expected them to stand closer to where she sat, in the event she'd need to be removed from the chamber.

"May we begin, please?" The first words uttered from Dumbledore.

Fudge nervously ruffled some parchment before him. "Miss Relke," he began, glancing suspiciously at her from time to time. "You are being charged with using an Unforgivable Curse on Lucius Malfoy. This curse has proven so far to be irrevocable, and thus you have destroyed his life for all intents and purposes. You are accused of doing this crime without provocation, and with more than the required two witnesses. How do you plead?"

Tanya sat silent for what seemed, to Harry, like an eternity. But it couldn't have been long in reality, for only Harry seemed to be afraid that she wouldn't answer at all. The others were watching her calmly, waiting her out.

"I will enter no plea," she finally said. "It will make no difference to my case."

At this, Dumbledore stood, asking to be heard. Tanya looked at him as if noticing for the first time he was there.

Fudge bowed acquiescence to the request. Dumbledore approached Tanya's chair to face the panel.

"The charges aren't accurate," he began. "as there are three Unforgivable Curses recognized by the Panel, and this isn't *Imperio*, *Crucio*, or *Avada Kedavra*. Therefore, what Tanya did to Lucius is not an Unforgivable Curse and should not be tried as one. As to her committing this curse without provocation, that is patently false. Your investigators have information that points to nothing but provocation, from any angle. Malfoy destroyed her family, her friends, relatives; everyone and anyone she knew, leaving her orphaned and alone at only seven years old.

"As for the witnesses, they have all given depositions that they saw what provoked Miss Relke into attacking Malfoy. A good 79% of these witnesses also testified that, were they in her situation, they also would have attacked Malfoy. The other 21% polled swore that even without Malfoy's destruction of her family, they would have attacked him on the grounds that he was trying to succeed Voldemort and his Dark Ways.

"All things considered, she should not have been brought to hearing. It should have been dealt with at ordinary Ministry level. She should not have been stuck in a prison cell for all these months waiting for a hearing that could have taken place within a week of the incident."

Dumbledore stood quietly, waiting for his words to sink in. Harry glanced at Tanya, and found her staring, open-mouthed, at Dumbledore. She looked for all the world as if she'd expected quite something else come out of Dumbledore's mouth.

"Hem, hem," Harry recognized the awful woman's prelude to interruption immediately. The toad strikes again, he thought. "Hem . . . I wonder if I might be permitted a few words, Minister?" Harry had hoped he'd never have to hear the sugary-sweet voice again.

"Certainly. The Panel recognizes Madam Dolores Umbridge."

"Thank you, Minister. Professor Dumbledore, are you suggesting that these heinous crimes go unpunished? She paralyzed Mr. Malfoy, who had been a respected governor in good standing for many years. Head of one of the finest wizarding families our world has ever known. And now he can't even put himself in his wheelchair. He can't do anything. And it's because of her. How can you wish to excuse all that?"

"Malfoy is hardly a respected governor, Madam Umbridge," Dumbledore rejoined. "Need I remind you that he's been found guilty of supporting Voldemort in his efforts to conquer all that is good in this world? He was an escaped prisoner whom the Ministry had been searching for at the time of his appearance at Hogwarts. And his fine family is not on trial here today, nor are they here to offer any testimony. One would wonder why you chose to bring them up."

Umbridge's face began to look bloated in her indignation. Clearly, she had reverted to form, and Harry wondered if she would remain so smug if she heard the clapping of centaurs' hoofbeats again.

Tanya was standing now. "I would like to address the Panel," she said. Without waiting for Fudge to permit it, she began to speak.

"I cursed Malfoy because he deserved it. I paralyzed him instead of killing him because I wanted him to live long enough to regret destroying my life. I wanted him to have plenty of time to think, sitting in that wheelchair, or lying in his bed, to wish he could turn back the clock and avoid our campsite all those years ago. I wanted him to be powerless to feel of any value to Voldemort, or even his own family. I wanted him destroyed. And so I destroyed him.

"If you're waiting for me to show any remorse, then you have a long wait coming. I'm no more sorry that I did this terrible thing than I am to be alive. But before you decide upon my sentence, I want to show you something."

She turned to Umbridge, raising her arm, and as Harry watched in fascinated horror, Umbridge began to melt, her skin falling off her face like candle wax dripping to the

floor under her feet. Her hair began sliding off her skull, and the glob of . . . the mass of . . . well, it must be Umbridge . . . at her feet was growing larger.

Her vocal cords still worked, and Harry covered his ears at the screaming coming from Umbridge. But it wasn't pain, he could tell; she was terrified. As wizards and witches began scrambling to get away from Umbridge, Tanya lowered her arm and looked at the Panel, now spread farther around the chamber.

She once more raised her hand to Umbridge, and within seconds, Umbridge was as she was before, no worse for wear. She stopped screaming, and meekly stood, watching Tanya.

Tanya turned to another wizard, and he began floating up toward the ceiling. She kept him there, even as she turned back to Fudge. Other wizards began calling out breaking spells, trying to get their fellow wizard back to the floor. Nothing seemed to be working. A few of them tried sending Stupefying Curses her way, only to have them deflected back onto themselves. Her reflexes were amazing.

Tanya lifted her arms to the podium in front of Fudge, and the podium became a snorting, pawing dragon. As they all scurried out of harm's way, she turned it back into a podium, smoke still wafting upward.

The gypsy began slowly turning around in place, and there was light everywhere, so bright that Harry, and everyone else began yelling and covering their eyes. As the light dimmed somewhat, there was an explosion, and the wall opposite the Dementors' entrance was blown away, and a stairway and part of a corridor could be seen through the gaping maw.

Tanya stood silently, waiting for the rest to calm down. When they did, all at a loss for words, Tanya once again addressed them.

"As you can see, your powers are useless against mine. I can walk out of here any time I choose, and none of you can stop me. Even your Dementors fear me. That's why I didn't enter a plea. It can make no difference. And if you decide I'm to be sent back to Azkaban, you have to realize I will not be going. You will only lose some of your Dementors, if they'll even attempt to apprehend me, and possibly some of your more worthy wizards and witches.

"All that's left is for you to decide if I'm to be banished from your world. However, it will do no good to banish me unless you can physically remove me. Do you think you can do that?"

Harry's head was reeling. She was worse than Voldemort! How could anyone entertain the idea of allowing her to stay? How could Dumbledore still profess his faith in her loyalties?

He couldn't take anymore. He forced himself backwards, until he felt the draw that propelled him back into Dumbledore's office. He was thrown back into the armchair, panting heavily and trembling from head to toe.

Dumbledore sat patiently in the chair across from him, waiting for him to collect himself. Harry briefly wondered if this came anywhere near Snape's reaction when he witnessed this memory.

"I couldn't finish," Harry admitted humbly. "What happened?"

"She was acquitted," Dumbledore said simply. "They knew they could do nothing. Fudge decided that since we had brought her into our world, we were stuck with her. There was really no choice; better to hope she's on our side than most assuredly make an enemy of her by trying to banish her."

Harry looked closely at Dumbledore, who met his gaze unflinchingly. "Why is it you're so sure of her?"

"Because she has a good soul. You saw for yourself what she's capable of. Yet even when she cursed Malfoy, she did it as painlessly as possible. Even while carrying out the attack she'd thought of so constantly for eight years, she couldn't bring herself to cause any more pain than was necessary. He got off easy, Malfoy did."

Snape Makes a Couple of Discoveries

Chapter 14 of 20

The two of them . . . out alone in the wilderness . . . his growing attraction for Tanya is not the only discovery Severus makes.

Chapter Fourteen

Snape Makes a Couple of Discoveries

Snape looked at the page he had been pretending to read for the last hour. *As You Like It*, one of the plays he'd missed in his early education. Thanks to Tanya, now he could catch up.

But he couldn't concentrate on the words. Tanya was busy stirring the Potion, which, he had to admit, smelled much better than any Veritaserum potion he'd ever worked on. And she didn't need to mature it under the light of a full moon.

She'd finished gathering the vegetation she needed, showing Snape where these things were likely to grow; he taking copious notes. It truly was a marvel, he'd thought. For centuries, wizards had been searching for rare herbs, sometimes risking their very lives to collect them, and here gypsies had been simply concocted the same potions all along, using everyday ingredients.

He stretched out his legs, flexing his muscles. He'd been sitting too long. He stood up, leaning over the cauldron she had on the fire. She smiled up at him. "Almost finished," she said. "It will take a while to cool, but then we can bottle it."

"Good," he responded. "I think we should leave here as soon as we can. I'm getting a bad feeling about being here."

She nodded. "Me as well. Have you noticed that there are no small animals around? There should be squirrels, birds, the odd burrowing mammal. They're all quiet, as if in hiding. I don't think it's us."

"I know it's not us," he told her. "Otherwise they'd be hanging around, waiting for you to pay attention to them." He never took for granted the way animals seemed to gravitate to her, wanting even the slightest consideration from her.

She doused the fire beneath the cauldron, and lay down on the grass, looking up at the early evening sky. "I'm going to fall asleep, I expect. I wasn't able to sleep much last night."

Snape agreed that there was nothing more to do until the Potion cooled. He lay down next to her, but soon he was all too aware of her lying next to him in the open air, alert to every move she made, knowing when she finally fell asleep.

She moved closer to him as she slept, seeking the warmth of his body in the cool evening air. He wrapped his arms around her, offering what body heat he could, but it was an exercise in anguish. He felt ashamed at the way his body so wanted to respond to hers; it felt wrong. She was his student, after all. Well, more his associate; but still, she was so young. He had nothing to offer her. Only his loneliness. She needed to be with young people, needed to experience her young adult life through their eyes.

This brought back memories of his earlier life with the Dark Side, and he tried to force them back into his subconscious, knowing that he didn't want her picking up on them empathically.

As he had feared, he began to detect a low-wave energy coursing through her body. An almost electrical charge flowed into him from her. He knew it was her empathy, or some sort of magic he still didn't understand. He forced his thoughts to more mundane memories, willing her to awaken, yet not willing to break contact.

The feeling intensified, but he also noticed that her breathing had slowed down to the point where he checked to see if she had a pulse; it too, had slowed down. Her body temperature plummeted. He half-sat up, searching her features in the fading light. She was alive, but barely; what was happening?

He tried reviving her; touching her face, trying to get her to sit up. He was completely at a loss. He mentally inventoried all the potions he had on his person; he usually had a few tucked into the pockets of his robes. But dressing in civilian clothes for the trip, he'd neglected to bring anything but what they'd need; empty sample vials would do no good. He wouldn't know what to give her anyway; he had no idea what was happening to her.

He fought to stave off panic. She'd seemed fine when she first lay down; what had happened since then? It couldn't be empathy; that would have stopped as soon as contact had been broken between them. But had he actually broken contact? He forced himself to step back, making sure there was at least two feet of space between them. There didn't seem to be any change.

Maybe it needed more time, he thought. But after sitting back from her for what seemed like an hour, there was no change. He vainly thought of capturing an owl, hoping to send a note to Madam Pomfrey, but also knowing the only owls hereabouts weren't wizarding owls.

His attention was caught by some change in the air. He sensed the difference, but couldn't understand it. There was a presence here that hadn't been here in the last few minutes.

Tanya began stirring, sounding a soft moan, and Snape realized that it was her presence that he'd felt. So where was she a moment ago, when he'd been afraid she'd slipped into some sort of coma?

She opened her eyes, taking in the moonlight. He moved to touch her, to sit beside her, and she shifted her eyes to his, smiling weakly. He helped her to sit up, supporting her obviously weakened body by pulling her back against him. "What happened to you?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh, I just went off for a moment. What's wrong?"

"I thought you were dying." He knew he sounded surly, but for crying out loud, he'd been scared.

She looked contritely at him. "Oh, you don't know about this, do you?"

"Know about what?"

"Astral projection. Out-of-body experiences." At his look of confusion, she added, "Well, that's what the gaje call it, anyway. I let my astral self go off to see what I could find out about that malevolent presence we'd felt earlier."

Snape remembered reading about these projections, but had never put any stock in them. It had sounded like Muggles applying their tired theories to ordinary magic. But apparently, there was something to it, he surmised.

"But you almost stopped breathing. Your heart rate slowed down to near death."

"Aye, it's to be expected. Everything needed to slow down so I could use that energy to project. It's exhausting." He could see, even as she spoke, that it was all she could do to keep talking.

"Are you all right now?"

"I need to sleep. But I can put it off a while longer, I think. We have to get out of here. Let's bottle the Potion and clear out. Let's go to the cottage in Claire."

He started quickly ladling the cooled potion into as many vials as they'd brought with them. "Why not just go right back to Hogwarts? The Portkey is ready any time we are."

"Because we're not finished. I need to go back to where I was, but not until I've rested. I really didn't mean to do this, it just happened. I'll be better prepared next time, and I'll be able to actually get some information."

"On what? What did you find?"

"Voldemort."

He froze, stunned. It was the last thing he'd expected her to say.

"You saw Voldemort?"

"Aye. He's not far from here." She saw his shock, and quickly went on. "He doesn't know we're here. I want to leave before he realizes it. We can take ourselves farther away to the cottage. I expect we'll be all right there."

They finished bottling the potion, and waving her hand, she cleared away what was left. She magically cleaned the cauldron and removed evidence of their campsite. Reducing the sample vials to thimble-size, Snape packed them away into the velvet-lined box he'd brought, and dug in his pockets for the Muggle-type skeleton key that was their Portkey.

"No," she almost yelled at him, "we can't use that yet. Let's just Apparate to the cottage."

He'd better start thinking again, he admonished himself. The Portkey could be used only to return to Hogwarts. Any more slip-ups like that and he'd probably put both of them in jeopardy. As Voldemort was nearby, they couldn't afford any mistakes. He dimly wondered if Dumbledore knew this before sending them here.

They arrived on the front porch of her cottage, and she leaned against the door, gathering her strength to unlock it. He helped her walk inside, and she waved to light the lantern on the table as he positioned her on the sofa. She was almost out, that little bit of effort taking its toll.

"Why don't you just sleep," he said, "and when you wake up, you can tell me all about it."

"But you have to know what's going on," she protested. "If you don't, you'll be worried, and that may be bad, deadly even, for me."

"What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath and forced herself to go on. "You already know that my vital signs slow way down." He nodded. "What's so important for you to know now is that when I'm . . . well, when . . . I'm gone . . . I can't be moved. I mean my physical self cannot be moved. If I were to come back and not find myself, I'll be lost in the astral, searching, all the while using up what little energy I'll have left. When I run out of energy . . . I'll just not be able to come back. Ever."

She looked at him, and he processed this information, knowing she was really making sure that he knew she'd be depending on him to guard her. He looked into her eyes, making sure she knew that he knew how important this was.

"I'll be here when you return," he said gravely. "No one will bother you while you're . . . out."

He saw the relief in her eyes, and felt humbled that she trusted him with what was her very sanity. Life as she knew it.

"So, you sleep, then we'll prepare you for another trip. If you're sure that's necessary."

"It is."

She was almost unconscious again, and he carried her to the bedroom and lay her down on the bed. He quickly removed her shoes, her coat, and helped her get under the heavy quilt. He hovered anxiously, waiting for the signs of sleep. Her breathing had already become shallow, and he touched her arm, looking for the electrical feeling he'd felt out at the camp. There was none. And he could definitely feel she was still here with him. He began to relax.

Moving back into the front room, he lit a fire, and headed into the kitchen to see if she had the makings for coffee. It might prove to be a long night.

But only two hours later, she came into the room looking rejuvenated. She took the coffee Snape handed her and drank deeply. "Thanks, I needed that. Is everything all right? No visitors?"

"Were you expecting anyone?"

"Not really, but sometimes Sean will come over to 'pay his respects' if he sees smoke coming from the chimney. And Bridie stops by now and then to dust. Not at night, though. She has her family to keep her home."

"And what of this Sean character?" He hoped he didn't sound as jealous to her ears as to his own.

"He has this sort of rehearsed speech he always gives me about how gypsies weren't supposed to own property, and how he'd give me a fair price for the cottage and the land it's on, and things like that. I usually just give him a cup of tea and send him on his way. It's become sort of a ritual."

"But he doesn't really harass you?"

"No, not for a long time."

"So, your sleep did you some good, I see."

"Aye, it always does. Wonderful remedy. If we could bottle sleep . . . and I'm not talking about potions . . . then we'd be world-renown."

"So what did you see that put the fear of death into you?"

"There was this small house up on the wayside. Voldemort was there, sitting in a chair in front of a fireplace, drinking brandy or something. He was talking to a man I'd never seen before, but I guess he was some sort of servant.

"Voldemort was different than I expected. He looked just like an old man, no one to be feared, really. Can you describe him? I've always had a different image of him in my mind."

Snape thought. "Well, when he was a younger man, he looked no different than anyone else. Light complexion, dark hair, well-groomed, aristocratic-looking, really.

"When he was at the height of his power, he more resembled something otherworldly. He was more essence than form, and his eyes were a horrible red color, and reptilian. His face was death-shroud white, but he kept the rest of himself, whatever was there, concealed beneath black robes."

"Who's the last of us to have seen him? Harry?"

"Yes, and Dumbledore, as well as a few assorted idiots from the Ministry. At the end of his fifth-year, Harry faced down Voldemort right at the Ministry. He and his followers were trying to retrieve a Prophecy from the Department of Mysteries. He would have killed Harry then, if not for Dumbledore showing up to fight him off."

"Did Harry ever tell anyone what Voldemort looked like after that happened?"

"I don't know. Would he look different, do you think?"

"I don't know about that, but I know that now he looks like any other wizard, perhaps about seventy years old, but with failing health. Would he be about seventy? I never knew when he was born."

"Yes, about that. You say his health is failing?"

"Aye, he looks like a man whose health had taken a drastic turn for the worse. From what I've learned, it sounds like he became mortal again when he drank that potion for his rebirth. But it also stands to reason that all this back and forth to mortality and then immortality, and his drinking of unicorn blood aged him quickly. Now that he's mortal again, he'll face death the same as any of us. It's my understanding that once you've taken unicorn blood into you, you live a cursed life. When he took Harry's blood, Wormtail's hand, and the bone of his late, mortal father, he condemned himself to a mortal life."

"Most wizards live well past their hundredth year," Snape said thoughtfully.

"Aye, but do most wizards have all that dabbling in their systems?"

"You may have a point there," he conceded. "But how can you be sure it was Voldemort you saw? Did the servant call him by name?"

"No, he called him Master. But I knew it was Voldemort. I don't know how to explain the knowledge, but I was as sure of that as I was that I was me."

"Do you really feel you have to go back?" he asked, wondering if it would be possible to talk her out of it.

"Aye. I hope to hear something about his plans. It will be easier now that I've rested. In addition, I think I'm better prepared mentally to do this. It came on me as a surprise earlier."

"So," he drawled, yielding to the inevitable, "what's the best, safest way to do that?"

"I'll just lie down, and you watch the door for our dear Sean Taggery. If he comes in here and can't wake me up, he'll probably think you've done me in. If he manages to have me removed to a hospital and you to a jail cell, I'll be lost forever."

"No worries there," he said. "I can be most intimidating. However, is there any way to call you back, if I need to? If the house catches fire, or if Taggery has summoned the local law enforcement?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I'll just have to hope you'll manage to come back here so you can lead me to my physical self before I simply wear out."

"It doesn't seem we should take the risk," he said softly, hoping against hope that she'd change her mind.

She looked at him, amused. "And why do you think Dumbledore has gone through all this trouble to persuade the Ministry that he needs me? For my wit?"

"You mean," he said in amazement, "this is the skill, the talent he wanted you to employ for the Order?"

"I thought you knew," she said. "All this time, I thought you knew exactly what I was doing."

"I knew no more than Dumbledore was willing to tell me. And that was only the barest facts."

"But I thought you knew before you ever talked to Dumbledore about me. What was it that made you decide to take me to Hogwarts back then, if not this talent?"

"I just knew that gypsies were a force to be reckoned with, that's all. He had been trying to recruit trolls, giants, tried to make sure the goblins were all on our side, but I wondered why he didn't try the gypsies. It made so much more sense, especially seeing as how unfriendly the goblins are, and how stupid the trolls and giants are."

"Perhaps he was afraid of us. Lately, I think he feels he has reason to be."

"I should admit now," he said, not quite meeting her eyes, "that he allowed me into his memory of your hearing. I saw everything, as if I'd been there." He glanced at her, hoping she wouldn't hate him for it.

"It's just as well," she said sadly. "You have to know what you're dealing with, after all."

"It doesn't bother me that your powers are so strong," he said. "I don't believe you'd ever turn on me. On the Order," he qualified.

She smiled at this vote of confidence and lifted her hand to touch his face. He felt held by her eyes, and he wanted to do anything, say anything to prevent her from this astral trip she was planning.

She seemed to read his mind, however, and stood up resolutely. "It won't be any easier putting it off. As it is, I have to hope he's not an early sleeper. What time is it, anyway?"

"Nearly eleven. If he's asleep, you'll come right back?"

"Aye, there'll be no reason to stay. But there's no way of knowing how long I'll be if he's awake and conversant. You won't be able to tell by my physical self what's going on over there."

"Not even if you're in danger?"

"The only danger to me will be the unknown and normally unseen entities in the astral. I'm quite adept at outmaneuvering them, though," she added hastily.

"What other dangers should I know about?" he demanded.

"None. I'm going."

He followed her to her room, waiting for her to protest. But she didn't. She made herself comfortable and he saw her willing herself to relax. She was much more tense than she'd let on, and he looked on in amazement at her self-discipline. Too soon, she was entirely relaxed, and he thought that if he tried to pick her up, it would be like trying to pick up a sleeping cat.

It didn't take long. Snape was aware of the very moment she left her body. Going from feeling as though he were invading her privacy to getting the feeling he was babysitting an empty shell took only a matter of minutes. He sat there, watching her for a while, then went out to stoke the fire. He tried to return to Shakespeare, but couldn't concentrate. He kept checking on her every few minutes, wondering when it would be time to worry.

He stoked up the fire once more, enough to last the rest of the night, fully intending to sit by her bedside, waiting. At least then he wouldn't wear a path through the floorboards traversing from the sofa to the bedroom, and back again.

She was still gone, he could tell. There was simply no presence in the room, save his own. He sat on the edge of her bed, watching her neck for the pulse. She was trembling, he noticed. He put his hand on hers over the counterpane of her quilt, and was dismayed to find that it was as cold as ice. She hadn't mentioned hypothermia; was it an oversight?

Although the quilt was heavy, the room itself was chilled, though not unduly. He wrestled with his mind for a moment, then leaned over to remove his boots and jacket, slipping under the quilt next to her and pulling her body into his arms. As he held her close, running his hands up and down her arms, her back, willing her to take on some of his body heat, he was gratified to feel the shivering begin to subside.

He kept her close, pulling the quilt up until only their faces were free of it, concentrating on sending his heat her way. He had more than enough to spare, and his eyelids were getting heavy. He allowed himself to drift off, knowing he'd awaken if anyone came to the door.

His dreams were of the upcoming war with Voldemort. He dreamed that Dumbledore insisted he infiltrate Voldemort's coven once again. He tried arguing that his duplicity had been discovered by the Dark Lord and he wouldn't be able to gather any intelligence before being killed. But Dumbledore had insisted, so Snape had no choice but to report to Voldemort. Just before Voldemort could say the *Crucio* spell that Snape knew was coming his way, he felt a protective arm pulling him away from the graveyard where the Death Eaters were gathered.

He came back to himself, realizing that the arm belonged to Tanya. He remembered where he was, and could also sense that Tanya was fully returned to him. She was asleep; his attempts to rouse her amounted to nothing. So, this was now the healing sleep she so desperately needed to restore her depleted supply of energy.

Grateful that nothing harmful had come from her astral foray into the unknown, he relaxed, not wishing to disturb the comfort of holding her in his arms. She didn't seem to mind, and he hoped her dreams were of a much better sort than his had been.

Her arm was back on his chest again, and she'd brought up her knee, causing her leg to fall across him. He started as his body began to react; he tried willing the less disciplined part of him to ignore the feeling.

It wasn't working. He surreptitiously pushed her leg carefully down until it no longer pressed erotically against him. But now her hand was open on his chest, almost stroking, and he could feel her heat through the thin material of his shirt. Would she be able to feel his quickening heartbeat? Gods in Valhalla, was *every* part of him an erogenous zone?

He prayed for unconsciousness as her hand swept slowly lower and lower, stunning him motionless. By the time he came to his senses and tried to reach for the inquisitive hand, she'd touched him where he never imagined she'd touch him, and the human part of him, the part he normally tried to repress, sprang to attention, seemingly shocked that it was receiving this attention. He muffled a groan, and forced himself to take her shoulders and remove her from his person.

She rolled over, facing the wall, murmuring in her sleep. He lay there, almost gasping, trying to collect himself. It had been a long time since these feelings were a part of his life, and he'd thought he'd succeeded in repressing them.

All it took was one weak moment for those supposedly forgotten feelings to come crashing down on him. He looked over at her, seeing her chest softly rising with her breathing. Convinced she was unaware of what she'd been doing, he carefully left her bed, making sure she was covered completely with the quilt. He didn't want her to wake up before he could regain his senses.

His bout with Tanya's wayward hands had increased his body's temperature uncomfortably, and he stood in her kitchen doorway, hoping to catch the night breezes coming in from the south. He was still hard, and he knew he'd get no more sleep tonight.

He went into the bathroom and examined her fixtures. No primitive culture here, he was glad to note. The shower had taps for hot and cold water, and he turned them on, undressing quickly. He stepped into the spray, trying to drown the memory of her hand seeking him out, but he couldn't do it. He turned the hot water tap until the temperature was almost icy. Grabbing the bar of soap, he began to lather himself up, knowing that the cold shower was as much a punishment for his mind as his body.

As he tended to all his body parts, he couldn't stop himself from lingering over the part of his anatomy that was causing all this turmoil. It was no good, he was only human, and as he stroked, he imagined her hand in place of his own, and his breath began coming faster and faster, until he was panting, groaning, hoping that she'd not wake up to hear him moaning her name.

Tanya woke, feeling as though she'd spent the night climbing mountains. Coffee, she decided. Caffeine and a quick shower. Then she'd fill Severus in on what she'd heard last night.

She grabbed some clean clothes from her closet, glad she'd seen fit to leave some behind. Murmuring something reasonably coherent to him as she headed for the bathroom, she hoped he wasn't one of those alert morning people. Not before her coffee, anyway.

She scrubbed the campfire scent off herself, and shampooed the tangles from her hair. Now this was more like it, she thought. Briskly rubbing herself down with a towel, she dressed, pulled a comb through her wet hair, and headed to the kitchen for her plasma.

He was already there, pouring a cup for her. She inhaled the aroma gratefully, thanking him with her eyes. Uh, oh, he wouldn't look at her. Had something gone wrong last night? She'd come back to find him lying beside her, sleeping, and she didn't have the heart to wake him to tell him any of what she'd learned. No matter, she thought at the time. She wouldn't have been able to keep awake long enough to say much. And so, she fell asleep. Passed out, more like.

But perhaps he didn't understand all that. Maybe he thought she didn't want to tell him anything. "Severus," she asked, "is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine," he answered unconvincingly. "Are you feeling well? Did everything go all right?"

"I suppose so," she said, "he was ranting and raving at his servant; something about how nothing was working out, and it's all that damn Potter's fault." She smiled. "I don't know why he's blaming Harry," she said. "After all, it wasn't as if Harry invited him to take his blood. Or to use his father's bone. I think, knowing the gypsy beliefs, anyway, that the bone might be his downfall.

"I think that because his father was a Muggle, it destroyed any chance Voldemort had of immortality. I mean, after all, how mortal can you get, if not being part Muggle?" She stopped talking and looked at Severus, who looked interested, but still . . . something wasn't quite right.

"Severus," she said insistently, "I don't remember ever seeing that look on your face before, but if it were on anyone else's face, I'd swear it was guilt. Tell me what's wrong!"

He started, and she knew she'd hit the nail right on the head.

He brought his hand up to rub his temples, hiding his eyes, so she didn't know if he had a headache or if he was hiding from her.

"It *is* guilt," he admitted. "When you came back to your physical self, what did you see?"

Oh, so that's what was bothering him. "Really, Severus," she chided, "I didn't expect you to lie awake all the night, watching and listening for the least possibility of a disturbance. And didn't I tell you I had no way of knowing how long I'd be? You've nothing to feel guilty about, falling asleep. I've done this many a time without *anyone* watching out for me. I was glad to find you there. You've no idea how much it helped."

He looked thoughtfully at her, not immediately responding. Then, "You don't mind that I fell asleep in your bed?"

She smiled. "Not at all. I'd have felt terrible if I had come back to find you trying to find a comfortable way to stow your length into that torture chamber of a sofa."

"Well then," he said a little more lightly, "suppose you let me grill you with questions about your reconnaissance mission, then we'll test the Veritaserum Potion."

Snape allowed her to believe that it was guilt at having fallen asleep, rather than his lustful behavior of the night. He really wasn't prepared to deal with anything more than that yet. Perhaps one day, he might admit to what had transpired in the night, but the realistic part of his mind told him it probably would never happen. Ignorance is bliss, he thought. But he'd never allow himself to be that close to her again, physically.

They ended up agreeing that Voldemort wasn't the power he once was, and Snape wondered idly who would rise up to take his place? Not Malfoy, certainly. Tanya had seen to that. He wondered if the Ministry would ever see that she'd done a major service, eliminating that particular threat. If they would ever give her the recognition for the heroics she'd displayed by cursing Lucius.

There was some general teasing about who would actually drink the Potion, but she good-naturedly gave in, agreeing that his past research better qualified him to administer a more thorough and debatable test.

Just like the normal Veritaserum Potion, this one theoretically should work instantly. She watched him put three drops of it into her coffee, and cheerfully raising the cup in a toast, she drank most of it down. Snape immediately began to question her.

"What is the name of your sister?"

"Natalia Karovitch."

"And what happened to her in the summer of your seventh year?"

Her face clouded, and she shot him a look of misery. But she answered. "She was killed by Lucius Malfoy."

"And what is your scariest memory?" Shooting blind here, he knew. He didn't know what an honest answer would be.

"The night I learned that my father intended me to marry Samuel Lemke."

This was interesting. "Why did that scare you?"

"Because I knew nothing about the ways of marriage, and Samuel Lemke wasn't the man I would have chosen."

"How old were you?"

"Seven."

Seven! What kind of man would marry off his daughter at so young an age?

"You didn't love Samuel Lemke?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I was afraid of him."

"Explain."

"He was old, very old. Ninety-three at the time. He had a rotting hole in his face where the cancer had run wild. He wouldn't have cared that I was a child; I would probably have borne his child before I saw my twelfth birthday."

Snape was dumbfounded. All this in the same year her people were wiped out? How much could one girl take? He felt more in awe of her now than ever before. To have survived all that and still show a spark in her eye, a lilt in her voice?

"Did you, in fact, marry this Lemke?"

"No, I ran away."

"How did you come to be at the campsite when Malfoy showed up?"

"I returned to say good-bye to Natalia because I would be leaving the next day to live with my grandfather in New York."

Snape shut his eyes against the fates. One more day, he thought, not unlike Harry had thought long ago, one more day and she would have been spared witnessing the annihilation of everything in her life. How differently would her life have played out then? Would he ever have met her? Would she ever have been a part of this wizarding world that kept her, even with their misgivings?

She sat, calmly watching him. Not fearing more questions. Again, he felt that humbling sense that she was so much stronger than he.

"Tanya, I'm afraid of asking anything more. I don't want to hurt you by bringing up memories of something you'd no doubt rather forget. And I don't want to get too personal."

"Severus," she said, putting her hand on his arm. "I don't believe for a minute that you're asking questions out of morbid curiosity. I don't blame you for being curious, but it's different, isn't it? I think your curiosity comes from your friendship with me. It would be horrible if it were someone like Fudge or Umbridge asking these questions."

"As for personal questions, go ahead and ask. I think it's safe to say no one knows me like you do. And even you don't know everything about me. I've lived with secrecy for so long, I actually feel some comfort from knowing there will be someone that knows me as well as I know myself. I'm glad it's you here with this Potion."

He looked uncompromisingly into her eyes, silently giving her one last chance to opt out of this test. Her eyes remained firm.

"Are you in love with Harry Potter?" He couldn't look at her while asking, but quickly glanced when the words had left his mouth.

She raised her eyebrows at the question, but of course, she had to answer. "No, I'm not."

"I thought you two were becoming quite close a while back," he tried.

"I thought we were as well," she ruminated. "But it just didn't happen. I think perhaps we just pushed it too fast, too soon. Seems to me that he was looking for an excuse to stop our relationship from progressing."

"Why do you think that?"

"He became upset because I never told him I had the same scar he had. That seems a pretty lame reason to turn away from me. He also thinks I was too hard on Lucius, although he was in a better position than most to understand what motivated me."

"Potter always thought he was better than everyone else," he sniped. "This is proof positive." Then it dawned on him what she said about a scar. He'd never known about it either. He looked at her, wondering where that scar was. Then he remembered the vision of Lucius' vicious attack on her people, and all the blood pouring from her injured throat.

He hesitated, but knowing she wouldn't stop him, he reached over and tenderly moved aside her pendant, finding the lightning shaped scar hidden there. She calmly watched him, making no move to stop his investigation.

"All this time, even after I knew about the attack, even after I saw you survive Malfoy's curse, it never occurred to me that you'd bear the scar. Why was it so important for you to hide it?"

"After you had told me all about Harry and his fame, I realized people would be staring at me, too, being the new kid on the block, and a gypsy to boot. The scar would only have made it worse. Cowardly, I admit, but simply being different by nature of my birth was hard enough, without enduring curiosity about things that had happened in my past. I didn't want strangers to know so much about me."

"And it's all right with you that I know?"

"Aye."

Said so simply, he felt reassured. "And how do you feel about the Order?" At last, he thought, a question of which even Dumbledore would approve.

"I believe in the Order. I believe in being ever aware of fighting for the good of all. I have no hesitation in doing everything I can for the cause."

He believed her. He'd have believed her even without the Potion.

Acceptance

Chapter 15 of 20

The new Potion is tested, and Severus stops fighting so hard to live in blissful denial. This is the chapter that warranted the rating.

Chapter Fifteen

Acceptance

Harry pushed the bacon around on his plate, wondering why he'd bothered coming into the Hall for a breakfast he didn't want. Hermione punched his arm, then gestured with a nod at the Head Table. He looked up, surprised to see Snape there. He looked down the table, looking for Tanya, but didn't see her.

"He's back," Harry said, "but where is she?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do, " she said.

He pulled his books from under the table and stood up. "Well, no doubt we'll hear about it through the grapevine soon. Wouldn't it be great to find out that there's a better Potions expert out there than Snape?" Even if it is Tanya, he added to himself.

Hermione and Ron followed along with Harry until they parted at the end of the corridor; Hermione to get to her Muggle Studies class, Harry and Ron to Potions. He supposed Snape would take the class, unless he'd given up all his teaching duties in the name of research. Would they learn anything about this new Potion?

The class was even smaller than it had been last year. Millicent Bulstrode had opted out, and Harry had no idea what courses she was studying now; didn't care, either. Sneed was still there, plugging away, as was Pansy Parkinson, not prone to giggling anymore, now that she had no one to giggle with.

He and Ron were keeping up, almost surprisingly so, and Harry wondered sometimes if they were actually finally getting it, or was Snape easing up. No, that couldn't be it, he thought. No way Snape would ease up just before NEWTs.

Therefore, he and Ron must have finally transcended the ranks of the fumbling amateurs to the qualified potions-makers of the adult wizarding world. It was a satisfying feeling, not having to dread this class as he had in years past.

As he set up his cauldron for the day's lesson, he glanced at the slate where Snape usually listed the ingredients and instructions for whichever potion they were to make. The slate was blank, though, so there was nothing to do until Snape arrived.

And with the usual swish of his black robes, arrive he did. He leaned imperiously against the desk and said that on this day, they were to make and bottle a Veritaserum Potion.

Harry bit back his surprise. That was a potion that required a month's time, stirring in the final ingredients under the light of a full moon. Did he actually mean to bottle it by the end of the class?

Then he remembered what Snape's field test had been all about. He pressed his brain to remember Tanya's essay from the year before, but all he could recall was that she thought she'd found a theoretical method to brew this potion from different ingredients.

Snape began walking around the classroom, passing out rolls of parchment. "You each have a different list of ingredients, though you'll all be brewing the Truth Serum. This is to prove that this serum can be made from any number of substitute ingredients. Please follow directions carefully as your results will affect more than your grade. You are all taking part in an actual scientific experiment. As such, I expect you to record on the space available, everything that happens as you brew. Be very descriptive about color, viscosity, odor, et cetera."

Harry looked at his parchment, and his knowledge of herbology told him that most of these items were ordinary plants found almost anywhere. This would yield a truth serum?

He dutifully mixed them together, taking note that there was no counting revolutions of his ladle, no timing of the boiling. It was as easy as making a cup of hot chocolate, and he marveled that no one had ever come up with it before.

He ladled a vial full, stoppered it, and was just labeling it when Snape approached his desk. "Potter, Weasley, there's Order business requiring your attendance this afternoon at 5:00 in Professor Dumbledore's office."

"Yes, sir," Ron said, and Harry looked up at Snape to see if he could get a clue about what the meeting was about. Would he see Tanya there? Should he allow himself to be friendly toward her? He did feel somewhat foolish carrying on a grudge she didn't seem upset about.

But Snape's countenance offered no clue, and he left the Potions classroom, feeling slightly nervous. Not about the meeting. About the possibility of seeing Tanya again after what seemed a long time.

The end of the school day found Harry and Ron heading past the yielding gargoyle and up the hidden stairs to the headmaster's office. They entered to find the room crowded with wizards. He nodded to McGonagall, Moody, Lupin, Arthur Weasley, and tried to ignore the friendly wave from Raphael. Tonks was there, streaking her hair magically, and there were several more wizards talking, most of whom Harry knew only by name. They joined Tonks and Hermione.

And Tanya was there. Leaning on the ledge of the window, listening to something Mr. Weasley was saying to her. He almost talked himself into walking across the room to say hello when Snape entered the room, a ledger in his hands.

Dumbledore asked for everyone's attention, and the room quieted down. Harry glanced over to Tanya, who noticed the movement and looked his way. He nodded at her, noting the surprised lift of one eyebrow. He hurriedly turned back to the front, afraid to find out whether or not she would have returned his nod.

"Some of you are already aware of the research that has been planned to test theories for short cuts to making some of our most important Potions.

"To bring the rest of you up-to-date," he continued, "the Veritaserum Potion seemed the most straightforward. And so, Professor Snape and Miss Relke here have been sent out into the wilds to concoct this potion that uses the vegetation that is so abundant in the European countryside."

People began murmuring softly. The very idea that such a Potion could be brewed more simply was laughable.

"Yes, I know it sounds impossible," smiled Dumbledore, "else why hadn't someone come up with this idea years ago? Well, I must take responsibility for that. I kept Severus here too busy with other matters, and his research has been forced to the bottom of his list of things to do. But now, he will inform us as to how that experiment has progressed."

Snape turned to address the crowd. "Last year," he started, "Tanya had turned in an essay in my Potions class which revealed that she, or rather, certain members of her family, had brewed certain potions regularly. This Veritaserum Potion, or as she called it, Truth Serum, had the same effect as what I had described in Veritaserum.

"She insisted that it could be brewed from plants that grew anywhere British or Irish water flowed, and I dragged her out to the wilderness to prove it.

"And prove it, she did," he said proudly. "I have here all the scientific notes cataloging every step of the process, including any of the vegetation that could be used. The possibilities are almost endless. This potion, may I add, was brewed within the space of two hours, in broad daylight. My seventh year students have replicated the test just this morning, using various substitutions, within the two hours allotted for the class."

More muttering from the wizards in the office, mostly the older ones who were always reluctant to depart from tradition.

With a wave of his wand, Snape listed the ingredients, as well as possible substitutions, in the air above Dumbledore's desk. "We did test the Potion; it seems to work. However, we'll need to test it further to convince all of *you* that it works. I will leave that to our headmaster. He can choose his own subject." With that, Snape walked over to the window, speaking quietly to Tanya, who smiled and shook her head.

"Well," Dumbledore said, lifting a bottle of the Potion, "do I have any volunteers?" There were a few nervous laughs, but no one stepped forward. "Mr. Ron Weasley, I believe you'll do just fine for a start."

Ron nervously looked to Harry to bail him out, but Harry just grinned and said, "Better not tell him anything about you and Hermione; she won't appreciate you telling her secrets." Ron glared at him and shuffled to the front of the room.

"Now, now, no need to worry," Dumbledore said kindly, "we won't penalize you for your past indiscretions and crimes. Now first, the serum." He added three drops of the serum to a cup of pumpkin juice and encouraged Ron to drink it. With obvious misgivings, Ron drank, and turned to face the small assembly, his face screwed up tight.

"Does it taste as bad as all that?" asked Dumbledore.

"Actually, it tastes rather good. Sort of like the pumpkin juice has a peppermint under taste."

"Good, good. Now then, second question. Why do you want to be an Auror?"

"Because then I'll be important," Ron said unhesitatingly, blushing furiously at his own words. "None of my brothers are Aurors, and you have to be really brave to do it. They must get all the women they want."

There was good-natured laughter in the room, and Ron looked as though he wanted to crawl under the desk. Hermione rolled her eyes.

Dumbledore ruthlessly pushed on. "And when you think of your worst fear, what do you see?"

"Spiders. Large, fast moving spiders."

"And your best memory to date?"

Ron's face seemed, impossibly, to redden even more and he began, "about three months ago, when Hermione and I . . ." Dumbledore mercifully cut him off before he could finish. Ron heaved a sigh of relief and looked down at his feet. He glanced at Hermione, who was hiding beneath a curtain of her hair.

Dumbledore appeared to be considering his questions more carefully. "What's your favorite food?"

"Fried chicken."

"Least favorite food?"

"Carrots."

Dumbledore looked over at Arthur. "Are these correct answers, Arthur?"

"As far as I know, they are."

"All right," said the headmaster. "Now to something more conclusive. Ron, I want you to tell me your name is Harvey Smith. I'll ask you, then you tell me that's what your name is, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay then, what is your name?"

"H-H-Har-. . ." he shook his head and tried again. "My name is H-H it's H-H-Har-RONALD WEASLEY!" He widened his eyes in amazement.

There were more approving murmurs going through the chamber now. Snape stepped forward slightly. "And now, Headmaster, is your chance to ask him to list all the crimes he and his friends committed from first year on." Harry quickly glanced at him, alerted by the sound of humor in his voice. As the rest of the crowd laughed, Harry simply stared. Snape teasing? Ridiculous.

However, Harry's mouth dropped open in surprise when he saw Snape lean back toward Tanya and put his arm across her shoulders, embracing her in congratulations. Snape, touch another person? Snape laughing? It wasn't real. He'd wake from this dream soon. He must. His world, as he knew it, was turning upside down.

"That'll do, Ron," Dumbledore was saying, "I think we've frightened you long enough." Ron quickly darted back to Harry's side, avoiding Hermione. Dumbledore raised his voice to be heard over the others.

"I'm told the effects last approximately thirty minutes," he said. "I will personally go after anyone who takes advantage of Mr. Weasley's vulnerability to ask him questions he doesn't want to answer. And now, is there anyone among you that doubts the effects of this Potion? The only way to be sure is to take some and allow me to question you. This may be your only chance to safely convince yourself it works."

Three or four of the strange wizards went forward, and allowed themselves to be tested, making a game out of it, yet were unable to help being impressed. More wizards were looking at Snape's elevated list of ingredients, and a few were gathered around Snape and Tanya, obviously offering congratulations.

Harry and Ron approached that group, and Harry was surprised to see that Snape wasn't taking any credit at all for the breakthrough. Although Tanya seemed a tad uncomfortable with all the attention, Snape wasn't letting her escape, and Harry could see that's just what she wanted to do. Was it because of her reluctance at being the center of attention, or was it because she'd seen him approaching?

He caught her eye as he and Ron joined the small group at the window. He smiled at her, and after a brief hesitation, she smiled back. Ron grabbed her hand, pumping it furiously, and swore to her she'd be in history books of the future; he understood how important this deal was. As Ron started barking questions at her about what else she was working on, and how cool it was that she was working as a staff member, instead of a student, Snape moved away and Harry relaxed slightly. If Ron could control the conversation, there would be no awkward silences. Now that Snape left, he wouldn't have to be worried about the Professor's protective feelings toward Tanya. Harry figured Snape must be aware by now of how poorly he'd treated her. And he must admit, however late, that he had treated her poorly. Oh, if Hermione could read his mind now . . .

Snape put another log on the fire, and stood looking into the blaze. It had been a good meeting, he reflected. There seemed to be no one who doubted the potency of the Potion, once a few of them tested it. And it was just the beginning. They'd begin work on some of the medi-Potions that were so essential to St. Mungo's and Madam Pomfrey. He supposed he should move Lupin's Wolfsbane to the top of the list; it was a time-consuming potion. If he could whip out a batch in an hour or two, then most likely Lupin could learn to do it himself. The less Snape had to deal with Lupin, the better he liked it.

They'd need potions for shock, bleeding, broken bones (something that didn't taste as bad as Skele-gro), something that restored sanity for those poor souls that had taken too much of a *Crucio* spell . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by a soft knocking at his door. Knowing the hour was late, he assumed it was Dumbledore. No one else ever called on him. Opening the door, he was surprised to see Tanya standing there, holding a bottle of what appeared to be whiskey in her hand.

He pulled her inside, afraid some stray student would have reason to be down in the dungeons at this late hour. It wouldn't do either his or Tanya's career any good to have to withstand the rumor mill.

"What are you doing here?" he asked incredulously.

She held up the bottle. "I was hoping we could toast each other's success, and drink to our future successes."

It seemed harmless enough. He motioned her to sit, and collected a couple of glasses from his kitchenette. Coming back to the sofa, he set the glasses down on the coffee table and took the bottle from her. Pleasantly surprised to see she remembered his taste in whiskey, he poured a shot for each of them, and handed her a glass. Picking up his own, he said simply, "To a lifetime of accomplishments." They drank, savoring the flavor and the burn.

"So what are we working on next?" she asked.

"I thought maybe the Wolfsbane potion for Lupin. And of course, others who suffer the same fate."

"Uh, oh," she said, putting her glass on the table. "I'm afraid I have no ideas there. Gypsies believe the werewolf to be an apostle of the devil, not some innocent victim who'd been bitten. We never had a cure."

"No matter," he said confidently. "With your understanding of herbology, I'm sure that between the two of us, we can at least start throwing together some ideas. We just have to start analyzing what powers we get from each ingredient, and make a list of possible substitutions."

"You love being involved in research, don't you?" she said, smiling.

"I've been trying to get back to it for years."

"You don't like teaching?"

"Not Potions. There really aren't very many who get past O.W.L. level. It's frustrating."

"Was there ever anything else you taught?"

"No, but I had been trying to get the Defense Against the Dark Arts post for years. I finally gave up, knowing the Ministry would never approve my appointment to that field. They don't trust me."

"But, you have to play to your strengths. You did have a lot of practice there, didn't you?"

"How much do you know about my Dark Arts phase?"

"Just what you showed me when we first met."

"I don't remember showing you anything," he protested.

"Do you remember me telling you that when I first saw you, I took a reading from you? Some of what I saw I later realized was your being part of a group of Death Eaters."

"Why didn't that scare you away from me?"

"Because I didn't understand what I was seeing. Not until much later, when I began to learn more and put two and two together. But I know that you were never really comfortable being there. Even then, you felt out of place."

"You're very perceptive; I keep forgetting. But make no mistake; I was fully aware of what I was doing. It took me more than three years of it to run back to Dumbledore, practically begging for forgiveness and another chance."

"Which he wouldn't have given you if he had any doubts."

Snape eyed her thoughtfully. "You might remember that a little more often when you think he has doubts about you."

She smiled lazily. "Touche."

He felt his pulse begin to race at the way she was looking at him. He had to do something fast. He stood, pulling her up with him. "And now that we've had our toast, I suggest you return to your rooms before someone realizes that you're down here."

She pressed her body close to his and ran her hands up his chest to lock her arms around his neck. Whispering in his ear, she replied, "But I don't want to leave, Severus."

His body's reaction was instantaneous. He felt her push against his arousal as she lifted her lips to his. He could taste the whiskey on her lips, feel the heat of her mouth, as well as her body that was molded against his.

He returned her kiss, his arms around her pulling her even closer, and tried to ignore the little voice in his head telling him to push her away, this was wrong! She was unbuttoning his shirt, and he was powerless to stop her. She touched her lips softly to the sensitive spot in the hollow of his throat, and he was still powerless to stop her. He ran his hands down her back to feel that she wasn't wearing anything under her robes, and he knew he'd never be able to stop her. She'd come here planning to make love with him, and he didn't *want* to stop her.

He placed his arm under her legs and lifted her. He carried her into his bedroom and carefully lay her down on his bed. The bed that had never held anyone's body but his

own. She'd kicked off her shoes on the way in, and he stilled her hands so he could unclasp each button on her robes, slowly, opening the robes as far as he could with each button undone. Her exquisite breasts with the dusty pink hard nipples begging for attention; her flat stomach that quivered with the breathing that she was trying to control, then lower, he pulled open the last clasp and took in her long legs, her trimmed bush that hid her most precious secrets.

She sat up slightly so the sleeves fell from her shoulders and lifted her hips so he could sweep away the robes. He undid the buttons on the cuffs of his shirt; she pulled it from his belt so he could take it off. He kicked off his boots while she pulled at his belt, trying to work the buckle. He helped her undo it, and allowed her to work at the fly, tugging his slacks down to reveal his arousal.

He stood up long enough to toss aside his slacks, pulled off his socks and approached the bed again. Looking deeply into her eyes, he silently gave her time to change her mind. Apparently that wasn't what she had in mind, and he no sooner stretched his body out full length next to hers than she, with strength he wasn't aware she had, flipped him over to lie on his back.

She softly ran her lips over his, teasing him, moaning quietly when he demanded more. He tasted the inside of her mouth, his tongue melding with hers. She pulled free and traced a line of kisses down his throat, licking at his Adam's apple, teasing again that hollow she couldn't have known was so sensitive for him. He moved his fingers through her hair, loving the silky feeling running over his skin wherever the loose strands touched him. She'd found his male nipples and began licking and lightly sucking at them, growing bolder at the sound of his moan.

She moved her warm lips down the path of his chest hair until she was teasing his stomach, spending more time just above his belt-line, his hardness twitching in response to such skillful teasing. She detoured around until he could feel her lips lightly caressing the sensitive skin of his hips, and she kept going. He moaned when her lips and tongue found the inside of his thighs, taunting him with her nearness; getting closer to his throbbing erection, then pulling away to tease his thighs again; moving closer, then pulling away.

How could she make him this excited without touching him? Never before had he felt so hard with no direct contact; even the skilled professionals he'd seen a time or two in his younger days couldn't do this, and he was swept away by the idea that she was here, doing these things, not because he'd paid her, but because she chose to be here; she'd planned it, making it obvious by not wearing anything but her robes, the easier to disrobe.

He was panting shamelessly now, ready to beg her to touch him there, he'd promise her whatever she wanted to release him from this incessant need, and just then he felt her hands on him. He glanced to see her looking at his hardness with no coyness, no shyness. He almost lost it when he saw the want in her eyes; the passion that she'd elicited in him was reflected back in those eyes, and he'd never thought he'd live to see the day when a look like that was directed at him.

She lightly wrapped her hand around him, and tried a couple of strokes. His breath came out in gasps. It seemed to encourage her, and he felt the fluid seep from the tip, oh god he was getting too close . . . he moaned out loud when she ran the palm of her hand over the head of his cock, spreading the wetness down to her hand on his shaft. She stroked again, and he grabbed the sheets in his fists, gasping his need to the room.

She bent down to him, and as he realized what she had in mind, he felt her seeking tongue trace a line up the underside, tickling just under the join of the shaft and the head, and he groaned out loud . . . "Oh, yes . . . aaahhh, *Tanya* . . . yes, oh yes . . ." She kissed and licked the head . . . his hips bucked in response . . . he felt the heat of her mouth a fraction of a second before her lips closed over him . . . "Oh, oh, oh, god yes . . . *OH* . . . *YES* . . ." He felt her tongue swirling around him as she took more of him into her mouth . . . he could feel the back of her throat as she took more of him in than she probably should . . .

"Tanya, oh god . . . Tanya . . . aaaaaahhhhh . . . yesssss . . ." He could feel everything in him tensing up, his hips were keeping time with her mouth . . . he wanted her to stop because he couldn't stop himself . . . yet he wanted her to go on . . . "please don't stop . . . ohhhh . . . yes, yes, yes, oh god, Tanya, yes, *yes*, oh, oh, she was humming against him; he couldn't take it anymore. "Oh god, Tanya, *OH* . . . *AAAHHHH* . . . he exploded in her mouth, he couldn't stop his hips from thrusting upward, he was pulling the sheets from the bed in his fists, she was still sucking . . . OH, OH, OH TANYA, OH *OH GOD* . . . Ohhhh . . . he blew out the last breath, swearing to himself that he'd seen stars . . . Oh god, that was the most incredible experience he'd ever had in his life.

He told her so, still out of breath. She smiled and moved up to where he grabbed her, rolling so that she was under him, and kissed her. He was enchanted to see that she was still breathing heavily. Was it because of what she'd just done or was there something more? He followed the same path she had, spending a lot of time teasing her hard nipples, happy that her heavy breathing was turning into moans. It was passion he'd seen in her eyes, not exhaustion. She'd gotten turned on by doing what she'd done, and it amazed him that his excitement could cause such a reaction in her.

He waited until she was pulling at his hips to maneuver him between her legs; he headed the other way instead, teasing her the way she'd teased him, delighting in exploring the many folds and the wetness between her legs. He'd found a hard little nub where he pretty much expected to, and teased her until she was thrashing around on his bed. He slipped a finger into her, surprised at the tightness. He didn't figure she was a virgin, as passionate as she was, but he almost wondered if he'd fit. He added a second finger and reached into her depths, amazed how deep he could go. He moved around, and she called out to him, "Severus, Sev, now, I need you now!"

Showing that amazing burst of strength once again, she pushed him over onto his back, and straddled his hips. Surprisingly, at least to him, he was hard again, and held her hips while she guided him inside her heat, his delight in her resulting moan fleeing in the wonder of it all. He'd never before had such sensitivity there, but he could feel all of her, could tell just when he was about to hit bottom, holding back because he was afraid he'd hurt her; he could now tell just how to move so she gasped out loud, he was learning just when to thrust hard and when to teasingly pull back. She called out his name when he rubbed his thumb over her nub, and without pulling out of her, flipped her down to the bed and positioned himself over her.

He settled a little more of his weight on top of her, knowing by her reactions that she liked the feeling of his chest rubbing over her breasts. He barked out his breath when she rocked her hips to make sure his pelvis hit her nub with every thrust. He could feel it building up in her, her body tensing, begging for release, the heat increasing until he thought he was on fire inside her. For the first time in his life, he experienced what it felt like when a woman came, her muscles clenching him even tighter, throbbing around his hardness, pulling him deeper into the void. Her nails were leaving their marks across his shoulders, his name on her lips as she gave herself up to her climax . . . the final surrender as he let go, pouring himself inside her, his hips bucking and jerking beyond anything he could control. Looking down into her face, seeing the swollen lips and the passion-darkened eyes, he knew that it was him that she wanted this with, not because it was convenient, not because she felt sorry for him, not because she was curious, but because she wanted him.

Tanya slowly became aware of the heat beneath her cheek, the steady beat of a heart under her ear, the comfort of a body under her leg, the mesmerizing sensation of a hand unhurriedly smoothing down her hair. She kept her eyes closed, savoring the memories of the night just past.

She had acted on impulse. Fearing that he'd rebuff her, afraid that he thought of her as a child, she'd brought down the whiskey as an excuse to see him. That he didn't immediately eject her from his premises had encouraged her, and she'd let herself follow her heart. She'd been incredibly aroused at his body's reaction to her, and promised herself that she'd never again try to second-guess the outcome of anything she wanted to do. If she had thought twice about it, last night might have never happened. And she wouldn't know this happiness now, lying in his arms, feeling his touch on her. Knowing that he didn't touch other people gave her that needed feeling of being special, if only to one other human being.

She shifted her leg slightly, to ease the growing ache in her back. Under her ear, his heart began to beat more quickly. She removed her leg completely, giving him room for the rest of his body to respond. She traced lazy circles lower and lower down his chest, gratified to feel and see how quickly his arousal manifested itself. Now his breathing quickened, and the fingers that had entwined themselves in her hair pulled slightly to lift her face to his. He kissed her, a soft, undemanding touch of his lips on hers.

She wrapped her hand around his cock, lightly stroking, and felt the first strong wave of pleasure shoot through her at his answering moan. He moved until he had her on her back in his bed, half covering her body with his, and she went willingly, content to give him full command of her passion.

He blazed a trail of hot kisses down her sensitive neck, shuddering when he spent more time in the hollow of her neck, kissing away the memory that went hand-in-hand

with the scar he found there. He teased her thigh with his hand as he took one hardened nipple in his mouth and toyed with it, changing her soft moan to a more demanding gasp. She opened her legs to his increasing pressure, inviting him to explore at will. He took her up on it, putting one leg between hers and teasing her growing heat with a languid finger, and she felt him smile around her breast when her hips began pushing upward, wanting more of what he was giving.

She let her hands smooth the skin on his back, tracing scar tissue she found there. She ignored the stiffening of his muscles, catching his eyes to show him that she didn't find the scars abhorrent. He relaxed, little by little, and she pushed upward against his chest, loving the feel of his weight on her body. He moved his other hand slowly down the length of her, shaping and molding her flesh to his broad hand. She sighed contentedly, feeling protected and alluring at the same time.

But his finger was forcing her blood to flow more quickly, and her breathing was becoming more audible. She ran her hands down his back, cupping his butt and pulling him closer to her, loving the feel of his hardness pushing against the softer flesh of her belly. She wriggled her hips, catching her breath at his groan.

Never one for a lot of self-discipline, she allowed herself to touch him all over, impelling him to come up to her level of excitement. He moved to tease her other nipple, and slipped a finger into her, stroking her internally, searching for that spot that would make her crazy.

She felt her juices drip out of her, and he pulled his fingers out in spite of her moan of protest. He stroked upward, finding her nub and putting just a little pressure on it, rubbing in tiny circles until she was gasping, opening wide her legs, silently begging him to enter her.

He put his other leg between hers, and her hips automatically adjusted to get ready for him. He teased her by penetrating only so far, waiting for her to rise up and let him in. "Oh, Sev, please, now, take me now . . ." He pushed slowly in, so slowly, and she gloried in the fullness of him, helplessly tightening around him. She pulled until he brought his mouth up to hers, and she made love to his tongue, loving the fact that he couldn't control his breathing anymore. She did this to him, she made him moan her name; it sounded so good on his lips. She felt powerful.

He began thrusting more insistently, taking her breath away, and she squeezed her eyes shut when he moved his hips, searching for every niche inside her. She pulled up her knees and wrapped her legs around him, grabbing at his upper arms until she'd pulled them down on her own arms, wanting his full weight on her, moving until she was holding his hands. He held her there, his hands tightening, his hips bucking harder, and he'd found that spot, yes, he'd found it, and her world began spinning away. She was barely aware of her voice sounding harsh and guttural, her ears straining to hear every moan, every gasp, every sound of passion coming from him into her ears. Her entire body arched upward, caught in a tidal wave of passion, carrying her out to sea. She mentally begged him to join her. She felt his hot liquid burning inside her, his hips banging against hers, his velvet yet harsh voice calling her name, and she looked up into his eyes, seeing deep into their mysterious depths, and she knew she loved him; she'd loved him since she met him, since before she'd met him, and she knew that she always would.

Confrontation and New Talents

Chapter 16 of 20

Harry takes a painful trip down memory lane while Severus faces imminent death.

Chapter Sixteen

Confrontation and New Talents

For the first time in his own Hogwarts history, Harry was leaving the grounds for Spring Break. Of course, he wouldn't have bothered if the only place he had to go was the Dursleys', but now that he had Sirius' house, he planned to go there.

It wouldn't be empty; members of the Order were always coming and going, with his blessings. There would be company if he wanted it, but the house was certainly big enough to avoid the same if he so chose.

He Disapparated from Hogwarts' gate to the empty field near the corner of Grimmauld Place. As he watched the house appear between the two old tenement buildings, he felt oddly as though he were intruding. He almost had to force himself to enter.

He closed the front door behind him, listening to the silence. No more Mrs. Black screaming obscenities at him, no Order members coming down the hall to greet him. He thought he heard scuttling noises; probably Kreacher running away from the new master he loathed.

Harry climbed the stairs to the room he normally shared with Ron. Putting his reduced trunk onto the floor near his bed, he restored it to normal size and began unpacking. He found the books that Tanya had given him in what seemed a lifetime ago; he lovingly ran his hands down the spines and put them on his nightstand. He looked up at the ceiling, remembering the attic and the rumpled blankets in the corner.

He turned, and almost without conscious thought, headed up the stairs to the third floor. Pushing open the door, he paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. Looking toward the corner, he saw only empty space; Tanya had removed her blankets when she'd moved out. He slowly walked to the corner and sat down, taking his mind back to the nights that he sat there with Tanya. He looked down and saw something on the dusty floor; picking up a small, white button, he felt a whirlwind of time flow through his brain. His mind's eye saw the button flying off of a nightshirt he'd torn open in his haste to take what Tanya had offered.

He gripped the button in his fist, squeezing his eyes shut against the sudden pain ripping through his heart. Tanya. He'd spent a lot of energy being furious with her, then more energy being worried about her. Now his worries were of a different sort. He wondered if he'd wasted too much time condemning her instead of understanding her. Was he too late to make amends? Would Tanya rather just keep the current status quo he'd initiated by avoiding him?

He put the button in his pocket, almost running out of the attic and away from these tormenting memories.

He followed the stairs all the way down to the kitchen, looking toward the closet where Kreacher made his home. The door was ajar, and he saw something poking out, keeping the door from swinging shut.

Approaching cautiously, he pulled the door open further, his breath catching in his throat. There was a decaying, almost unrecognizable shape on the floor there, the putrid flesh assailing his senses. It was Kreacher. It used to be Kreacher. He must have died weeks ago, judging by what was left.

Harry thought back to the things Tanya had said to Kreacher, playing with his mind, as if willing him to die. He had a moment of unease, realizing that it could have happened that way; he'd seen some of her power, and he could believe without difficulty that she'd been responsible for Kreacher's death. But wouldn't it have happened much earlier then? He hated that, once again, he began to have doubts about Tanya.

He stood up, wondering how one went about hiring, or otherwise attaining the services of a new house-elf. And in the meantime, what does one do with a dead one? He

couldn't move himself to feel any real grief about Kreacher's death, but felt he owed him some sort of tribute. Was there enough of the elf left to have his bust mounted as his predecessors had been?

He moved to one of the chairs at the table, deep in thought. The question of the possibility of Tanya's involvement in Kreacher's death is a question he decided never to ask her.

He looked around him. The appeal to be here, instead of Hogwarts, had dimmed, and he waited hopefully for someone to come, yet dreading anyone's arrival; it would mean that Voldemort was moving. There would be no other reason for the Order to convene during the holiday.

Snape forced himself to concentrate on the essay he was reading, trying desperately to ignore the stinging, raw pain of the mark on his left arm. It should not have been burning now. It should never burn again, he thought. Voldemort must be aware that Snape was loyal to Dumbledore, and not the Dark Side.

And if he knew it, Snape wondered, why would he summon him in this way? Surely, he wouldn't assume Snape was idiotic enough to answer the summons. If Voldemort wanted to torture him for his duplicity, or simply to eliminate him completely, wouldn't he go about it in a less obvious way? Perhaps sending by owl post an innocent looking letter, loaded with poisonous vapor? Possessing the body of a student that Snape would not suspect, who would drive a dagger through his heart in an unaware moment?

As the pain grew worse, Snape unbuttoned the cuff of his sleeve and rolled it up to expose the Dark Mark. It seemed almost alive, the serpent seeming to breathe, an imagined mad light in the empty eye sockets of the skull. He carefully moved his finger over the pain-filled mark, feeling the heat emanating from it. It was only getting worse. To deny the summons would be to approach Voldemort with a plea to be killed.

He threw down the unread essay and headed to the headmaster's office. He had no choice. He only wished he could see Tanya once more, before he faced his death.

Tanya returned to castle, her London purchases reduced to the size of a deck of cards in her coat pocket. The weather was mild for March, and the brisk breezes whipping through her open coat were almost welcome, after the crowds of weekend shoppers that had almost suffocated her.

She entered her rooms, tossing the package on her bed to restore them to original size. As she prepared to do just that, her eye was caught by the parchment left on the table near her bed.

My dear Tanya,

I don't have the words to express the pain in my heart. To be finally allowed hope that there is someone in this world who not only puts up with me and my, shall we say for the sake of being polite, strangeness, but actually does this by choice. I feel as though one life would not be enough time to spend with you.

I have been summoned once more to that pestilent plague that calls himself the Dark Lord, and it's impossible for me to pretend that I have a chance in hell of returning this time. There can be only one reason for this summons; he knows, and he's not quite happy about it.

The enclosed medallion is the one material thing I've ever possessed that has any real meaning for me. It was given to me by my first and only childhood friend, just before that friend was taken from me by the tragic belief of his mother's that I was not a fit companion. Please wear it for me, on the off-chance that there is life after death, and the hopes that in the afterlife, it will connect me to you once again, if only as a ghost; I'll take what I can get.

Just the other night, as I lay, watching you sleep, I blissfully hoped I could spend the rest of my life in your company. My wish has come true.

It almost comes as a relief, this idea of my misbegotten life ending. I sincerely regret that it happened only after you've shown me what could have been.

I love you,

Sev

Tanya unfroze herself and picked up the medallion. She could feel his heat, his essence, his self in it; it obviously *did* have great sentimental meaning for him. She knew he'd always worn it beneath his robes, and she was glad he'd left it for her to find. It would work better than a Portkey in finding him. She only hoped she wasn't too late.

She shrugged off her coat, kicked off her shoes and sat on her bed. Breathing in the rhythmic cadences that would allow her physical body to relax, enabling her to release her astral being, she clutched the medallion to her, concentrating with all her awareness on Severus.

She found herself in a void; there was nothing here, not even matter. She looked around, searching for a ripple in this fabric of anti-matter, some fissure that would point the way to where she needed to be. She summoned up a mental picture of light, putting into that light the face of the man she sought.

At last, she could feel herself falling, weightless, yet hurtling downward, spiraling, no thoughts of ever reaching bottom. Before she could begin to despair, she began to hear faint sounds, rumblings which became voices, voices she strove to understand.

She focused her eyes on her new surroundings, and saw the night sky under which she used to sleep. The bare branches of trees broke the imagery, and looking downward, she could finally see the figures to whom the voices belonged. The Death Eaters were grouped around a single man, who was gracefully waving his hands around a bonfire in a ritualistic pattern of movements. They were chanting in a language she didn't understand, didn't want to understand. She searched mentally for Severus, willing him to reveal himself somehow, knowing he couldn't know of her presence here.

One of the figures around the man and bonfire turned his head slightly. This was as much a signal as she could have hoped for, and she drew nearer, knowing the rest would not sense her. She concentrated hard; mentally reaching out to touch this man; she could read him like the book she'd borrowed from him only last week. Severus was still alive, and she'd managed to get here before their opening ritual was complete. Lucky for her, lucky for Severus. But how to break up this meeting without revealing that Severus was the reason she was here?

She moved her mind closer to the man in the middle of the ring, sizing up her enemy. Severus had been right to warn her against underestimating him. Although mortal now, he was considerably more powerful than Malfoy. She'd not be able to bind this one, and rather doubted it would do any good to paralyze him. He'd not need a wand to curse anyone. Suspecting he used the wand for flash, she appraised his ego and determined that it would only be his downfall.

She moved her astral being closer to Severus, anxiously noting the restless shuffling of other feet. Some of the other Death Eaters were becoming aware of her presence, and their agitation was alerting the rest. She was running out of time, and still had no ideas.

She noticed Voldemort holding something up to the moonlight, babbling in some ancient tongue as if offering Hecate a sacrifice. Whatever was in the vial he held, she'd bet it was something he thought might make him immortal once again. Impulsively, without thought, she grabbed it from him, and then was amazed that she could feel it in her hands. *She'd picked up this physical thing in her astral hand.* What happened? This was something she'd never heard of before, something it never occurred to her to even try in all of her previous astral travels.

The man let loose a howl of rage, and in the confusion of the Death Eaters rushing to his side, she sent Severus a mental order to Disapparate the hell out of there. But he didn't move as quickly as he should have. She felt the searing pain (*pain? in the astral? It wasn't supposed to feel the same, it was supposed to be mental pain*) but an

Unforgivable Curse rush through her being, and both she and Severus were thrown backward. She could sense Severus trying to grab her, but she was already fading to nothingness as she rushed back into the void. This time there were shapes there, gaining on her. She summoned the last of her strength and willed herself back to her body, fleeing from these unknown entities who would try to entrap her, keeping her there, and praying to a god she'd never believed existed that Severus got out of there in time.

Snape was ready to fling the old man down if he insisted on moving Tanya to the infirmary. He tried once again to articulate to Dumbledore the need to keep her here, that she could even now be striving to return. But words were hard to come by; clearly, Dumbledore knew less than he about this ability of Tanya's, and in the time it would take to start at the beginning and explain, he would have levitated Tanya away.

"Sit down!" he commanded Dumbledore. Dumbledore sat down in an armchair as if knocked down, and Snape registered this dimly in his subconscious mind to be analyzed later. Right now, he worried that time was crucial, but as long as Tanya's physical body remained here, where she'd left it, she could come back to it. If she could come back to it.

"Do you understand," Snape said, controlling his anxiety, "that Tanya is not really here? That what you see lying on this bed is merely a package that normally contains her soul, her self . . . her very essence?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore uttered. "She's away, visiting?" There was no mockery behind his words, so Snape continued on, searching for the words to explain what he did not understand.

"Before Apparating out to Voldemort's gathering, I left her a note. She apparently found it and used her magic to follow me. Had I known this was possible for her to do, I wouldn't have left the note. Because of my ignorance . . ."

Dumbledore stood up, and gently eased Snape down to sit on Tanya's bed. "Am I right in assuming this is no time for recriminations, Severus?"

"You're quite right, of course." He took a steadying breath. "There was a time in the past that she's done this . . . this visiting . . . before. In my presence. And I could tell instantly when she'd gone, because all of a sudden . . . well, she just wasn't there anymore. Can't you *feel* it? Or rather, can't you feel the *absence*?"

"Now you mention it," Dumbledore admitted softly, "yes, I can tell. So, where is she?"

"I don't know!" he yelled in frustration. "She left the site, but she's not here, you *cantell* she's not here."

"Calm down, Severus, and tell me what happened out there tonight."

"Voldemort began his usual opening ritual of the . . . festivities," he sneered, "and I stood there with the rest, feeling kind of surreal, really. I thought he was preparing for my death. He might have been, actually. There is no doubt in my mind that he knows I'm loyal to you, and his calling of us all there tonight was so they could all witness my execution.

"I could sense her. Just like before, I knew she was there. And there was nothing I could do. I couldn't demand she leave; I couldn't chance alerting anyone there that something was amiss.

"She couldn't be seen, but some of the others began looking around; they must have sensed her. I couldn't tell what she was doing, but then Voldemort yelled and threw a curse my way. I felt a force flinging me backward, and the curse glanced off." He looked down at his arm, a wicked-looking burn across the skin near the fold at his elbow. "It was Tanya. She bore the brunt of the curse." He looked up at Dumbledore. "I have no idea how it would affect her astral self."

"Do you know how it affects the physical self?"

"No."

"Then, surely you must understand why the urgency to get her to Madam Pomfrey. She must be examined and treated, if indeed, she suffered the *Crucio*."

"If we move her, she won't be able to return," Snape insisted. "She's running out of energy, if she hasn't already, and would then never be able to return. She'll be out there for all eternity . . . not dead, not alive . . . not even existing. We have to keep her here."

"Then the least we can do is examine her here," Dumbledore conceded.

They both stood over Tanya's body, looking for visible signs of injury. She appeared to be dead; her eyes under her lids were not moving, her chest was not rising with her breathing. Snape estimated where the curse might have hit her, and decided that there was really no way of knowing. Hoping that simply moving her body *in situ* would not complicate her safe return, he carefully put his hands on her ribcage, searching for bleeding, for broken bones. There was nothing there.

He moved down her hips, her legs. Hoping she had no burns that would cause her clothing to adhere to her body, he tenderly continued his search, not finding anything. He nodded to Dumbledore, and they gently rolled her until Snape could examine her back. Realizing that she was probably facing him when she pushed him out of harm's way, he slowly pulled her shirt up from her waist until he could see her back, horrified to see the long scorch mark that had appeared there. This then, was the portal through which Voldemort had sent his *Crucio*. He closed his eyes against the knowledge of the pain she must have suffered on his behalf. Why had he left that cursed note?

"Send for Madam Pomfrey," he told Dumbledore. "She can treat her here just as easily."

Dumbledore nodded, going into Tanya's sitting room. Seeing the stove in place of the usual fireplace, he entered the kitchen, summoning a house-elf with the button there.

Coming back into the bedroom, he told Snape that a house-elf would bring Madam Pomfrey to them. Snape was still staring down at the evidence of Voldemort's violent nature. Dumbledore put his hand on Snape's shoulder and urged him to sit. Snape lowered himself to the bed and tore his eyes away from Tanya's body. He leaned mutely forward, holding his head in his hands.

They both sat quietly as Madam Pomfrey worked her miracles with the salves which Snape had always provided for her. Before their eyes, the painful-looking burn slowly vanished, starting with the outer edges and working toward the rawest of it at the center. Soon, the skin on Tanya's back was as flawless as ever it was.

Giving Poppy her leave, Dumbledore gestured to Snape, and they moved Tanya back until she was reclining once more on her back. As Snape sat down beside her hip, he reached for her hand, more to comfort himself than anything else. In surprise, he looked down at what she held in her hand. It was the vial that Voldemort had been waving about the fire. He looked at Dumbledore in amazement.

"She brought this back with her!" he exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

"Well," Dumbledore said indifferently, "she brought back her injury as well. Is this a new development of her talents?"

"I don't know," Snape admitted. "She never mentioned doing anything like this before." He caught his breath. "If this came back with her, then clearly, she's back as well, right?"

"Severus, you know much more than I about this sort of thing."

He quickly looked at her other hand, and was only slightly surprised to find his medallion loosely tangled in her fingers.

Snape put his hand to her throat, searching for the pulse. It remained slow, but steady. He counted the heartbeats while his eyes searched for other signs of life. And there was still no presence. Where *was* she?

After three days, Harry could take it no more. He'd retreated to the relative bustle of Hogwarts, where he could at least seek out Tanya's company. Hermione had mentioned that Tanya was planning to remain at Hogwarts over the break in order to be there when Hagrid's new eggs hatched. Rumor had it that it was a breed of creatures never before seen at Hogwarts, and therefore, probably illegal. Well, at least Tanya would never dream of turning Hagrid in to the Ministry for his activities. She was the perfect partner in crime for him.

He realized that he was thinking of Tanya in friendly terms. Something he hadn't been able to do for a long time. It felt good, as if they'd already made things right between them. It gave him a small dose of confidence for the awkward conversation that would be his first hurdle to repairing his relationship with her.

He had no delusions about taking up the thread of their past relationship. Too much time had gone by, and there was bound to be a lot of competition by now. Even those who had kept away because of the gypsy blood running through her veins were changing their minds about her. Or rather, their hormones were changing their minds. He'd been amused, then slightly annoyed, by the lecherous looks sent her way.

No, he reasoned with himself. The best he could hope for was that she'd forgive him for being such an ass, and then maybe he could at least count on her friendship. He missed hearing the lilt in her voice, the breathiness of her laughter when something caught her by surprise. He missed seeing the sparkle of fun in her eyes, and her sometimes dry and sardonic humor.

He unpacked his trunk in his room, then went to where he knew her rooms to be. A hint of anticipation putting a lift in his steps, he knocked smartly on her door. Just when he was lifting his hand to knock again, the door opened and he froze, his fist still upraised to knock, his smile etched into his face. What the hell was Snape doing here, in her private rooms?

He quickly found his voice. "I was hoping to talk to Tanya. She's here?"

Snape looked down, appearing, uncharacteristically for him, uncomfortable. "She is, but she's indisposed at the moment." He looked at Harry, not offering any other information.

"She'll not ill, is she?"

"She's . . . We're not . . ." Snape at a loss for words? Harry began to worry. What was going on? It must have shown up in his eyes, because Snape pulled the door open more fully and allowed Harry to enter.

She wasn't in the sitting room. He looked back at Snape, who nodded toward the door at the back of the room. Harry almost ran through it, and saw Tanya lying on her bed, looking like she hadn't seen consciousness for a while.

He turned back to Snape, who was just entering the room. Harry watched as he sat at the chair by Tanya's side, his weariness showing up in his movements.

Snape looked up at him, preparing to answer his unasked question.

"How much do you know about her . . . talents?" he asked Harry.

Harry sat down in the chair on the other side of Tanya's bed, and talked across her sleeping form to Snape. "I know that she's very powerful," he began, "and something she does for the Order really tires her out. I know that she doesn't need a wand . . . I saw what she did to Mr. Malfoy . . ." He decided to continue in Snape's silence. "I saw Dumbledore's memory of her hearing. I saw how she displayed her powers to the Wizengamot."

Snape nodded, looking down at his hands. He seemed to be gathering his strength. Harry looked at Tanya, willing her to open her eyes.

Snape cleared his throat. "Tanya has the ability to send out her astral self, her spirit, in a manner of speaking, to gather information, to search for people or things, and return to her physical self afterward. We, meaning Professor Dumbledore and I, have recently discovered that she is also capable of removing physical items from one plane of existence to another.

"These exploits exhaust her; it takes an enormous amount of energy to project herself this way. When she returns, she needs several hours of sleep to regroup. So far, it hasn't been a problem.

"But this last time," he paused, taking a deep shuddering breath, "this last time, she'd been injured. She showed the wound from a curse sent out to her while in her astral form. A *Crucio* curse. The physical injury has been healed, but we don't know what form the astral injury took, if anything. She has not returned to her physical self yet."

Harry struggled to process this information, feeling the fear build up from his very soul. What was Snape trying to tell him?

"How long has it been since she was . . . here?" he asked, realizing that any answer Snape would give him would not help him understand.

"It's been four hours now."

"Is that a long time?"

For a while, Snape was silent. Then, making Harry realize that he'd been searching for an answer, said simply, "I don't know."

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

"No. Just make sure no one moves her."

"Why not?"

Snape sighed. He felt like he'd explained this only too often. "She has to know where to return. If we move her, she may never find her way back." He looked at Tanya's sleeping form. "She has no reason to stay away. She should have been back long ago."

Harry sat back in his chair, dimly registering that he felt grateful Snape was not pushing him out the door. He looked at Tanya's unmoving form and quietly joined Snape in his wait for her return.

She fought against the dragging feeling, the awful sensation of trying to run through quicksand. Trying to run, but not having feet, to fly without having wings. She was trying to find shelter, someplace to hide from the monstrous shapes that were too amorphous to name. She was waning fast, but still could not find the egress that would take her back to safety.

She concentrated on a wavering she felt coming from her left. She faced it, hoping she was, in fact, facing it, and hoped to catch it again. There, it was almost there, it was

trying to be there; she could sense it. It was a voice, anchoring her, giving her direction, and she willed herself to approach it.

She was now hearing it, as opposed to just knowing it was there, and she mutely begged it to continue, pulling her in; she couldn't do this alone. Her energy had ebbed to a new low.

It was there; it was familiar; it was Severus. She drifted closer, opening eyes that she'd forgotten employed vision. It did no good, there was nothing here to see. She focused on the sound of his voice again, felt it pulling her, and she relaxed, knowing she had no choice; there was no energy left, and she drifted, lulled by the voice. It followed a rhythm, a cadence. She felt a fuzzy feeling of electricity gently surrounding her nebulous form; she could now hear the words the voice was speaking. She let the sound fill her, forgetting about the quicksand, forgetting about the void, acknowledging only the words this voice was speaking, the words that he was sending out to her, they were familiar, they were friends, they were . . . Shakespeare? He was reading to her.

She became aware of the cold, of the weight of a heavy quilt over her, the soft firmness of a mattress beneath her. She sighed, not having the strength to take the deep breath she craved. She opened eyelids that weighed a ton apiece, and shifted her eyes to the sound of the voice beside her. Severus was sitting next to her bed, leaning over to rest his elbows on the bed. She could now feel the weight of the book he was reading; he rested it on her hip. She tried to find her voice, but couldn't; it was too much for her. She willed him to look at her, and he did. He stared for a moment, then closed his eyes.

He opened them, looking at her intensely. "I was afraid I was imagining it," he said quietly. "I was afraid it was wishful thinking, but I knew you'd come back to me."

He gathered her in his arms and moved onto the bed so they were lying side by side. She allowed herself to sink into unconsciousness, knowing he was there watching out for her. She'd made it back, and so had he.

And So It Begins

Chapter 17 of 20

The war everyone had been dreading for seventeen years approaches . . .

Chapter Seventeen

And So It Begins

Snape found her sitting by the lake, staring out across the surface to something unseen on the other side. He quietly approached her, hoping this wasn't one of those rare times she desperately needed her solitude. He didn't wish to intrude, but he sat down on the rock next to her, content to share her silence.

She turned to him, smiling. Leaning over, she came into his arms and raised her lips for a kiss. He was still at a loss to comprehend her. Why she always seemed so glad for his company, when she could choose any of the men (and boys) who looked longingly her way. He often wondered if he could withstand the pain he'd feel when she decided she needed someone more cheerful and outgoing in her young life; someone who could walk her through her ages without being so far down the road already.

But, being human, and having recently forced himself to admit that, he was too selfish to chase her away toward someone who could make her happier. Someone like Potter.

He felt a grudging respect for the boy (hardly a boy, anymore, he reminded himself) because he'd proven to be as worried for her safety as Snape was. Potter had stayed by her side until Dumbledore literally dragged him out, muttering something about sustenance. Snape had been relieved; he had been getting closer and closer to some sort of emotional breakdown in Tanya's absence, and he would open his veins in hot water before he'd allow Potter to see this unprecedented behavior from him.

At length, Tanya stood up, pulling Severus with her, and arm in arm, they began wending their way through the forest, Severus knowing that the otherwise harmful creatures lurking thereabouts would not bother them; they loved her, sought out her attention. Even the normally shy unicorns, having no reason in this world to be within a mile of Snape, came forward to nudge them both, asking mutely for an affectionate pat on the nose.

Tanya stopped nearer to the road suddenly. Following her gaze, he saw a rat, feebly wriggling, apparently at death's door. She frowned, crouching closer, and carefully lifting its paw for a closer look. She looked up at Severus.

"It's Wormtail," she said in surprise. "What do you suppose he's doing here?" She stood up, moving her hand in the air over the rat. As they watched, the rat transfigured back into the wretched Peter Pettigrew that she'd met in her London travels.

He lay there, gasping, obviously in pain. She narrowed her eyes, waiting to see if he'd speak; if he could speak. Snape knelt down, forcing himself to put a hand against the pulse of Pettigrew's neck. It was reedy, slightly fast, but steady nonetheless. "Speak up, Pettigrew," he growled.

Pettigrew opened his eyes, clearly not comfortable. Snape stood up, one hand moving toward where his wand was concealed in his cloak. Pettigrew saw the move and whimpered. "Please, don't," he said, "I can't take any more of it."

Tanya glanced quickly at Severus, her eyes questioning. He looked down on Pettigrew again. "Do you require medical assistance?" He had no intention of examining this man personally. Poppy Pomfrey chose the life of a mediwitch; let her deal with him.

He levitated the unfortunate creature to the hospital wing, after checking to see he hadn't a wand secreted about his person. They waited until Poppy finished her examination and ministrations. They took seats on each side of his bed, and Snape conveyed silently to Tanya that she should take the lead.

Tanya acknowledged his unspoken message and turned to Pettigrew. "Do you know where you are, Pettigrew?"

"I was headed for Hogwarts," he said shakily. "I don't know how close I made it."

"You're there," she said, "in the hospital wing. Can you tell us how you've come to be injured?"

"I'm there?" he said, wonderingly. "What are you doing here, then?"

Tanya glanced at Snape, then back at Pettigrew. "I was a student here."

Pettigrew looked at her, narrowing his eyes. "You've been spying on me, then, haven't you?" She tried a few more questions, but he clammed right up. Snape gestured to her, and she followed him out of the ward.

"We have Veritaserum," he said, "but I have to clear it with Professor Dumbledore before I can administer it to him."

"Quickly, Severus," she said, "he's wearing out. I don't know for sure whether or not he has enough survival instinct in him to tough it out much longer. It was *Cruciatius*, wasn't it?"

"I fear so," he confirmed. "He must have fallen out of Voldemort's good graces."

He left to find the headmaster while Tanya returned to Pettigrew's bedside.

With Dumbledore's blessing and attendance, their continued probing into Pettigrew's secrets gave them a pretty good picture of what was going through Voldemort's mind lately.

Voldemort, according to Pettigrew's forced report, had planned to send an owl to Potter at school, delivering a package anonymously that would contain a Portkey, disguised as a Remembrall. It would have been delivered as if from the Weasleys' Burrow, so the chances of Potter's being suspicious of it would be lessened.

But Pettigrew, probably for the first time in his worthless life, felt guilty at the thought of Potter actually being killed. He knew it would happen as soon as Harry touched the Remembrall and was transported to where Voldemort would be waiting for him.

He watched for the owl, and as soon as he spotted it, he used magic to kill it, catching the package as it fell. He opened it, making sure it was the package he sought, but as he opened it, it fell against his hand, transporting Pettigrew to Voldemort instead. Voldemort at once realized what had happened, and dispatched Pettigrew with extreme *Crucio*, leaving him to die. Pettigrew had drawn upon the last of his strength to Apparate to Hogwarts, his intention to warn Potter of what had almost transpired.

By virtue of the Veritaserum, they were forced to believe him, and Dumbledore sent for Potter at once. They apprised him of the situation, knowing the time had come at last. Voldemort's attempt on Potter's life signaled the official start of the war the entire wizarding world had been fearing for the last several years. It was time to prepare to meet the enemy.

Strategy

Chapter 18 of 20

The members of the Order of the Phoenix planned their strategy. Timing was essential, and there were so many things they couldn't plan for.

Chapter Eighteen

Strategy

The Order of the Phoenix began meeting with regularity. Almost daily, in fact. The members who were still attending school, namely Harry, Ron, Hermione and Tanya, had been completely excused from their studies and other duties in order to put all their efforts into Order business.

Excuses were made to the staff and student body for the teachers and students who were no longer teaching or attending classes; most of the student body was unaware of the impending war, and Dumbledore decided it was better that way. The fewer people who knew of their plans, the less chance of Voldemort getting any information.

Because of the late Peter Pettigrew's confessions, it was imperative that Narcissa Malfoy and Macnair, the executioner, be executed at once. According to Pettigrew, these two were the ones that Voldemort was relying on the most. Without his new right and left hand wizards, the core of the Dark Lord's organizational plans would be on shaky ground.

Knowing that timing would be everything, the plans were to kill both these people simultaneously with Voldemort himself. If Voldemort realized his two best and most reliable Death Eaters had been killed, there was no telling what his back-up plan would be.

Snape was charged with dealing with Narcissa. She still trusted him, her unrequited lust for him surpassing any suspicions about his loyalties. Before dying, Pettigrew had assured Tanya and Snape, under the influence of Veritaserum, that Narcissa felt Voldemort was losing his sanity, what was left of it. She was still making her own decisions, believing the Dark Lord would thank her for it in the end.

Moody and Lupin would team up to deal with Macnair. The professional executioner was too suspicious of all wizards and witches to be easily taken in, and Moody came fully out of retirement to add his expertise to Lupin's keen sense of survival and his ability to think on his feet.

Tanya and Harry would be working together closely, deciding for themselves how to deal with Voldemort himself. They would have no way of knowing ahead of time how it could be done. They would have to assess whatever situation they found themselves in, and deal with it accordingly.

All other people in the Order, which would include help from the goblins, veela (most of them), and, if necessary, the centaurs, were to be used taking on Death Eaters. With any luck, even if they weren't successful in eliminating Voldemort, he'd have a hard time recruiting troupes in the future.

Everyone was on edge; losing sleep, skipping meals, snapping at each other when tensions ran higher than normal. Harry felt that the only time he lost that nervous tension was when he was in the depths of sleep.

He sat down to talk with Tanya for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime. He noted the dark circles under her eyes, but was impressed with the steady gaze she leveled at him.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I'm sorry about . . . everything," he said. "From not understanding, or even trying to understand, about Mr. Malfoy. I'm sorry about carrying on like a lunatic about your scar. I feel bad about the doubts I once had when I saw a display of your powers."

She looked deeply into his eyes before answering. "I hope you didn't lose any sleep over any of that," she said. "There are more important things to worry about."

He didn't know if that meant he'd been forgiven or not. He tried again. "Tanya, I wish we could clear the air between us. We're going to have to depend on each other for our very lives, and I'm worried that you don't think you'll be able to count on me."

"Harry," she said quickly, "I've heard many stories about the things you've done. From people who aren't prone to exaggeration, and I know you can keep a cool head, that you can make snap decisions. You don't see yourself as a hero, I know, but I think you just don't know what a hero is."

"I have never blamed you for how you felt about me. It couldn't have been easy to know I kept some things hidden from you, seeing as how close we were getting. I know how shocked everyone was when Malfoy came to the grounds and I . . . well, you know what I did. Dumbledore told me that he showed you his memory of my hearing. If that didn't scare you away forever, I don't know what would.

"And yet, here you are, ready to put it all behind us. I think that shows a great deal of trust in me. And I trust you. We're going to be all right."

He allowed himself to relax, chiding himself for having hoped she'd rush into his arms. He had no right to expect that, and he was here in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place with her once again, this time plotting the demise of the blackest stain on the tapestry of wizardkind.

"Harry, I wonder how much you know of Voldemort's physical make-up nowadays. The last time you came up against him was at the Ministry of Magic, when he was trying to get the Prophecy, right?"

"Yeah." He shuddered at the memory of being possessed by such an evil being, once again thankful for the intervention of Professor Dumbledore, who had stepped forward to save Harry's life.

"He's not the same wizard now," she said, breaking into his thoughts. "He's no longer immortal. He's no more invulnerable than any of his Dark Wizards."

"What makes you think so?"

She just looked at him. "Do you know nothing of my talents? *I know*."

"Tanya, I'm not doubting you. It's just that you never told me about it. Not you, nor anyone else. I'm working blind, here."

She lowered her eyes, thinking. "You're right. I didn't mean to be so touchy about it." She leaned closer to him. "I sense things. Things that I know to be true; I seem to pick up on them without actually learning about them, but more as if I'd known all along. The gaje call it clairvoyance."

"I've heard of that," he said in awe. "I didn't know you were clairvoyant. I'll bet Trelawney would have loved you," he said, smiling.

"No," she admitted, "Trelawney hated me. She knew I was legit and it drove her crazy, thinking I'd expose her. She doesn't realize that no one really buys into her theatrics."

"So that's how you got all that information about Pettigrew and Malfoy, then."

"No, that's something else. Have you heard of astral projection?"

"Yes, but I never believed in it until Spring holiday, when Snape was beside himself with worry when you didn't return right away."

"Aye, he mentioned you were there, waiting with him for a while. Thank you for your concern."

Again, he felt disconcerted. He could still glean no feeling as to whether she was still feeling slightly cool toward him and was merely being polite, or if she was warming up to him, knowing he cared. Clearly, he would learn no more about what she was thinking than she was willing to tell him. He could use some clairvoyance of his own.

"What you have to understand about Voldemort is that he is more vulnerable to you now than he's ever been before. He has a physical body that can be killed.

"On the other hand, he is probably still the most powerful wizard in existence, next to Dumbledore. And the Prophecy says you must be the one to kill him. Many of us don't believe that, but the general public will continue to live in fear unless we can assure them that it was you that ended his life. They need closure. We all do."

He looked steadily at her, knowing it was going to come down to this. Was he really prepared to kill? Even Voldemort? She'd refrained from killing Malfoy. Was it because she couldn't bring herself to do it, or because, as she'd said, she wanted him to live long enough to suffer as he had made her suffer.

She must have seen his indecision in his eyes, because she slammed her hand down to the table between them. *Damnit Harry*, this is no time to be unsure! You have to accept that this has to be done, or we'll all spend the rest of our lives running and hiding from this magical Hitler!"

He'd started when she hit the table, and cursed himself for appearing weak. He didn't feel weak; he felt fired up and ready to do battle. But he was also honest with himself. It wouldn't be easy. He'd do it; he had no doubt of that. But he knew it would cost him dearly.

"Voldemort knows he's vulnerable. According to Severus and Dumbledore, he typically struts about like a rooster while playing with people's lives. He'll probably do the same when we confront him now. Don't let him play his little cat-with-a-mouse games with you. Don't let him have a chance to finish a sentence. Don't make it dramatic. Just kill him as soon as you see him. This may be your only chance. He won't play with us for long."

He bristled at her tone. "Do you think I do the things I do for kicks? I know how dangerous he is!"

"And he knows how dangerous you are," she said smoothly. "He will try to talk you out of your concentration; he'll tell you things that are untrue, but he'll mix it with truth to confuse and attack you. If you stop to listen to him, we're both done for. And so is everyone else."

He met her gaze and held it unblinkingly. "I understand, Tanya. And I agree. You can count on it."

Her eyes finally softened. "I know I can, Harry. I'm glad I can." She stood up and left the kitchen, not looking back. Harry sighed, wishing he knew how she felt about him, really.

Snape labeled his bottles with a shaking hand. What he was planning to do with this Potion shouldn't happen to a rabid dog. But it was a sure thing, and considering Narcissa's penchant for the unattainable, he felt reasonably sure he could talk his way into spending some private time with her in her quarters, where he knew he'd not be disturbed, providing he could pull this off before Voldemort knew what any of them were up to.

With Tanya fully back on her feet after her harrowing escape from the astral plane, and with Snape having calmed down after her loving display of just how much better she felt, he could finally concentrate on making the potion that would enable them to get past Voldemort's most inner circle. It would be up to others to take down the first resistance.

Tanya had, after many protests from Snape, "visited" Narcissa long enough to find her new home. She was living alone now, having sent Draco away to relatives in Germany. She was apparently lonely, Tanya having witnessed some pretty disgusting things she did on those nights when Narcissa found herself missing the attentions of her vegetable of a husband. Snape had been amused listening to Tanya describe what she'd seen, and he was once again reminded that Tanya really hated this part of being clairvoyant and astral.

Moody and Lupin had explained to the rest of the Order how they'd charmed various Muggle weapons to adapt them for the need to take out Macnair before he even knew they were around. After practicing with a Muggle-wand, or as Harry explained to them, a handgun complete with silencer, Lupin could hit a target as well as anyone could expect. Moody, not being willing to leave a single thing to chance, cast further charms on the bullets they would use, ensuring that they would hit Macnair's heart, even should Lupin aim over his head. The bullets would dissolve in Macnair's blood within seconds after piercing his heart, leaving no ballistic evidence for the Ministry to deal with, and spreading toxins throughout his body that would disappear after a few minutes.

These charmed bullets were in the gun Lupin now carried wherever he went, although the hope was that it wouldn't be necessary until Tanya, Harry, Snape and the two of them timed their plans to the minute.

The riskiest factor was Narcissa. There was no logical way to predict how much time it would take for Snape to set her up. Or even if he'd be able to. Any other weapon would do no good, as she habitually charmed herself to the equivalent of a Muggle who wears a bullet-proof vest that encased his entire body. None of the usual charms would work either, as she made it a habit to keep herself in the public eye of Muggles. No one was willing to risk discovery from the Muggles, who would find a way to throw the proverbial monkey wrench into the works at the worst possible time. Thus, Snape was forced to come up with a solution that would enable them to be alone, with nothing more than sex on her mind.

Snape tried to gloss over details of his plan as much as possible, feeling like nothing more than a gigolo, but he suspected that those with not enough to do had plenty of time to speculate upon just what was involved in her impending assassination. And he also wondered how he was going to get through the evening, lavishing attention on a woman he detested, especially after he had become used to the attentions of a woman he loved. He'd damn well better get some decent compensation from the Ministry if he proved successful. It was way above and beyond the call of duty, in his opinion.

According to Tanya, the best night to corner Narcissa would be this coming Friday night, around 10:00. That's when she could usually be found in that vile little disco that she claimed as her favorite haunt.

Harry, Tanya, Moody, Lupin and Snape worked out together that if Snape could lure her away from the disco back to her flat by 11:00, she could be dead by 11:30.

With that in mind, it was decided that Macnair would have to be found and eliminated by 11:30 as well. Macnair was a home-body, preferring his own company to anyone else's. Tanya had already determined the wards on his private home, and frequent visits to that house while he was out further determined that he didn't frequently change these wards. Already, the knowledge that she can cause physical changes while in the astral was coming in handy.

At 11:00, Harry and Tanya would Apparate to the small cottage that currently housed Voldemort. They could take him out whenever they had the opportunity, the sooner the better. Once he was out of it, it didn't matter how long the others took. Preparations were going on all around the cottage, deep in the nearby woods and villages, to house a number of wizards who would prepare the cottage for an unimpeded entrance.

With the plans set, the Order agreed to meet with its members for the last time on Friday at 9:00. Time enough to make any necessary last minute changes, but not so much time that everyone started getting nervous.

The war would be a quick one, with most of the world none the wiser.

Was That It?

Chapter 19 of 20

A quick and almost silent war . . .

Chapter Nineteen

Was That It?

Tanya adjusted the lapels of Severus' jacket once more before pulling him forward for a long, lingering kiss. He knew she hated the idea of letting him loose on his own tonight, knowing that Narcissa's behavior was just too unpredictable. They'd have to count on her attraction to Severus, which could very well have cooled considerably these past several months. It might even be that she used to come on to him just to make Lucius jealous.

Severus put a vial in the pocket of his trousers, patting it to make sure it wouldn't fall out, and seeing that it didn't show. Now all he had to do was make sure he could keep his pants on so the poison would be within easy reach at just the right time.

As he left the castle to Apparate to the disco where they expected Narcissa to be, Tanya accompanied him, then Apparated to Number 12 Grimmauld Place for a quick word with Harry. He agreed to wait for her here, because she'd have to keep an eye on Severus and Narcissa in order to know when to make their move. Likewise, Moody would be scoping out Macnair's house, making sure he stayed put. When Tanya came back to her physical body and reported back to them, they'd all play their parts.

Snape carefully picked his way across the crowded disco until he found a place at the bar on the other side of the large room. From this vantage point, he could see all new arrivals, and a pretty good view of almost everyone already in the place, by virtue of the large mirror behind the bar. He sipped a whiskey, casually searching around for the tell-tale platinum blonde hair of Narcissa.

He detested places like this; the so-called music was too loud, the people too unreal, and the stale odor of cigarettes cloying in the low-ceilinged interior. He'd better rehearse what he would say to Narcissa. He needed to let her know he was interested, that his need was urgent, and that he didn't know she'd be here. He was afraid she'd become suspicious of his motives otherwise. He'd shunned her for so long.

He was ordering a second whiskey, promising himself to nurse this one, when a flash of blonde sat right down on the stool next to him. He turned, startled, then smiled as Narcissa smiled seductively at him.

"Severus," she drawled, "so nice to see you. And here, of all places. I wouldn't have thought it was your style."

"Hello, Narcissa," he said, leaning down to kiss her cheek. "But there are so many things you don't know about me."

She seemed surprised by his warm and teasing greeting. She lifted an eyebrow. "You seem friendlier than I remembered."

He smiled, shaking his head. "I dared not be so friendly in times past," he said. "Lucius never took his eyes off me while you were batting yours at me. I don't think he ever trusted me not to bed his wife."

She laughed. "Well, he's not here anymore. He can't keep his eyes on you anymore. Not unless you sit right next to him at St. Mungo's."

"Indeed. It's a welcome relief."

"So, that's why you've always avoided me, is it?"

"It seemed the wisest course of action, or inaction, as it were."

She studied him for a minute, then stood up and took his hand, leading him to the dance floor. Snape followed grimly, the first part of his plan working out better than he'd thought it would. He could force a few dances on himself in silent offering to the gods who he hoped were watching all of them on this night.

Harry watched Tanya as she left her body. He was nervous, feeling, for the first time, how empty the room was. He wondered if the people she was visiting would feel her presence; if they ever wondered what it was. They would probably reach out to grab hold of an Invisibility Cloak, he thought wryly. Then he reminded himself that it was a Muggle pub she'd be going to, and Muggles never noticed anything.

He looked more closely at Tanya. She had something held loosely in her hand; closer inspection showed it was a small medallion on a fine chain. Was this some sort of astral Portkey? He decided not to move it. It's not as though she'd lose it while she lay there, unresponsive to her surroundings. He heard the bedroom door open, and turned to find Lupin coming near to where he sat beside the bed.

"So, this is her magic, then, is it? You know, none of us ever knew what exactly it was she could do."

"You mean, not even Dumbledore?"

"No, I don't think so. At least not entirely. She was so secretive."

"I think that's just her nature," Harry said, understanding her a little better these days than ever before.

Tanya began to stir. She came awake, more alert than Harry had expected. She looked to Lupin and Harry, saying simply, "It's time to go."

Lupin and Moody said their solemn good-byes at the kitchen table, and Harry felt a lead ball in his middle. He allowed himself to realize that there was a chance none of them would ever see the other again. After the two men Disapparated, Harry and Tanya sat for a minute longer, steadying themselves.

"I thought you were out of energy right after . . ."

"I am. I have plenty to spare, though. I've been through worse." She looked steadily at him for a moment, then, "Are you ready?"

"I'm as ready as I will ever be. Let's do this."

They Apparated to a wooded hillside, finding the night sky clear and full of stars. Carefully making their way down to the edge of the tree line, they strained to see the small cottage below. Smoke was coming out of the chimney, and one window showed light. Flickering light. Voldemort was getting careless, lighting a fire. Or perhaps that fireplace wasn't part of the Floo Network. After all, when he wanted to summon his followers, they didn't Floo; they used their marks as Portkeys.

They could see no one about. As they crept nearer, Tanya put her arm on Harry's, signaling him to stay behind while she crept to the window. He saw her turn around and sit with her back to the house. She sat silently, then motioned him to come closer. She came away from the window and they hid near the shrubbery on the other side of the front door.

"He's sitting in front of the fire, and there's a servant, or someone that had just given him a drink. I've been concentrating, and there's no one else here."

"Then this is when we go in."

"There are wards on the house. We can't Apparate in."

"Can I blow the door off its hinges?"

"Not without giving him time to react."

"You can't remove the wards?"

"Aye, I can, but it will take a little time. You have to keep an eye on him to make sure that he doesn't sense any changes. But we're on our own, once we get inside. We have no way of knowing if Severus, Lupin and Mad-Eye will be successful, and the others nearby will be concentrating on keeping out other Dark Wizards."

Harry nodded, creeping over to the window.

Tanya silently crept up to the door, put her fingers to her temples as if warding off a headache, and he was aware of the abnormally loud sound of crickets chirping to each other.

Snape endured the grinding of Narcissa's hips against his, wondering if it was too early to drag her out of here. She couldn't make it any plainer what she wanted to spend the night doing, but would he appear too complacent to take her up on it yet? Should he offer any resistance at all? He was hopelessly inept in the fine art of seduction, and the fact that he didn't want her could only hinder the process.

Finally, deciding he couldn't take this disco anymore, he lowered his head until he could kiss her neck, pulling her closer into his body, hoping she didn't notice his lack of physical response. She sighed in his ear, and he took that as a good sign. Pulling her along with him, he left the dance floor and headed to the door.

At exactly 10:53 that night, Lupin and Moody stormed through the door of Macnair's house, and as the startled axe-man leaped to his feet, Lupin fired three rounds off into his chest. He went down easily, his body jerking in response to the poisons that had been released from the bullets that had pierced his heart. They lingered only long enough to make certain he was dead, then left the house to Apparate to the dark woods Tanya and Harry left only minutes earlier.

They peered through the darkness until they could make out two shapes at the front of the house down below. Moody focused his wonky eye until he could be sure it was Tanya and Harry, then slowly, silently, they made their way down to lend assistance wherever necessary.

Tanya signaled to Harry to join her at the door, nodding to Lupin and Mad-Eye to follow. They almost flew through the door, Lupin's *Stupefy!* removing the threat of the servant even before the unsuspecting man knew there were strangers in their midst.

But Voldemort was never caught off guard, it seemed. He'd already vanished from the room, as if the sound of the door breaking open triggered his Disapparation.

They stood silently, dreading, hoping beyond hope that their ignorance hadn't blown whatever chance they had of ending this all right here, right now.

Tanya suddenly looked toward the right. She ran through an archway, hesitating, then headed off to the left. Stunned, the rest followed, like hunters following the foxhounds, the scent of a fox leading them all on.

She headed through another doorway, and they found themselves in a kitchen. Tanya didn't hesitate; she pushed through a door and down the stairs into a dark cellar. Harry whispered, "*Lumos*," and they followed in her wake, confident that she knew where she was going, hoping they weren't cornering themselves, leaving no room for

defense.

Tanya halted abruptly, staring at what looked like a Muggle-type vault. She turned to look at the rest of them.

"He's in there. He can't get out without magic, and we can't move this thing. Not without breaking it open, anyway. We can't separate it from the wall it's built into. But as soon as we open it, we'll be victim to his attack." Everyone looked to Harry for instructions. He took a deep breath and started issuing orders.

Snape allowed Narcissa to take off his jacket, but when she started unbuttoning his shirt, he took the lead and began undressing her. At the same time, they were taking steps toward what must have been her bedroom. He turned her around the gently pushed her ahead of him through the doorway. As her back was to him, he quickly waved his wand around, placing a silencing charm on her flat. He expected a lot of screaming soon.

She stopped before her bed, turning to watch him move closer. He looked deeply into her eyes, and slowly lifted a hand to touch her hair, moving his fingers down the strands that were worn too long for a woman her age, making sure he moved painstakingly slowly.

As he expected, she took the initiative and stripped away her clothing without fanfare. As she practically threw herself down on the bed, waiting for him, he had time to wonder if Lucius knew the first thing about foreplay, or was it that it had simply been too long between lovers for Narcissa?

He pressed his body down on hers, still fully clothed, letting the rough fabric of his shirt abuse her nipples. It seemed to keep her occupied enough for him to reach into his pocket and remove the deadly vial. He created a fold in the quilt under her, between her legs, which were already spread too wide for Snape's tastes, and hid the vial there.

He eased some of his weight off of her, just enough to slide a hand up her thighs to tease at the junction between her legs. As she moaned, he struggled to keep his feelings of revulsion from her.

She was opening up to him even more, and he knew it was time. He slowly started moving down toward her bush, allowing her to think he wanted to taste her, and it helped that she closed her eyes and began playing with her own nipples. It allowed Snape to covertly open the vial and draw the virulent fluid into the eyedropper-type tube he'd designed to fit inside. When he knew the tube was full, he left it near her opening, then drew both her hands into his and lifted them over her head, holding them there with one hand.

She didn't fight this, and she didn't seem worried either when he allowed the full weight of his body to cover hers. There would be a lot of thrashing about for a few horrible minutes before her death; he didn't want to risk injury to himself, and he wished fervently that there was a way to send it down her throat instead of the other way, but it could be choked over and spit out, negating the entire purpose of this operation.

As she closed her eyes in anticipation, he reached down with one hand and inserted the tube into her, bracing himself against what her reaction would be when the pain started. Knowing time was of the essence, he squeezed down on the bulb of the tube, emptying its contents into her.

As he held her down, enduring the raw screaming in his ear, gripping her wrists in a death grip, he felt the burning pain of his Dark Mark, and envisioned the caustic searing of her vital organs, her blood carrying the toxin to all parts of her body. He sent up prayers to whomever may hear them that she would die now, before another instant of this pain that even she didn't merit.

It seemed like a lot longer than the three minutes he'd calculated for her death to be complete. He ripped back his sleeve, watching the Dark Mark take on a light of its own, demanding that he appear.

Grabbing his jacket, he stashed the empty vial into a pocket and touched the Dark Mark, which would Apparate him directly before Voldemort. If Tanya and company were already there, he'd have a chance. If not, he was going to his death. He looked back at the already decaying corpse of his final victim, knowing that however Voldemort chose to kill him, it was better than he deserved.

There were sounds of many people upstairs, and Mad-Eye nodded, signaling that they were Order members. Two of them followed the open doors to the cellar, where Harry gave them their orders. Two of them would come down to the cellar and stand with them while they faced Voldemort; the others would stay upstairs and direct whatever other incoming fighters appeared. Snape, upon his appearance, would be sent down to the cellar, in the hopes that if Voldemort had too many targets, they could use his hesitation to finish him off.

But before they could do anything else, Snape himself appeared directly in the cellar. He showed them the Dark Mark, and they understood at once. They were ready for the sudden influx of other summoned Death Eaters; after the briefest of skirmishes, four robed Dark Wizards were littering the cellar floor. Harry looked at each one; they were ready for bossman. He aimed his wand at the vault-like door, and shouted, "*Bombardia!*" The door burst open, and by the time the flying fragments hit the ground, Voldemort had come upon them in the middle of the room, wand already in use.

Mad-Eye was the first to go down. Voldemort's *Avada Kedavra* hit him, and it was apparent that the position directly to the left of the vault had been the most dangerous. Simultaneously, Harry and Lupin's wands went flying, and Harry had time to wonder how that happened before a *Crucio* hit him full force. He had been subject to this particular curse in the past, but he was unable to form a coherent thought as the pain shot through him, pain worse than anything he'd ever experienced before. Voldemort was playing for keeps.

He lay gasping, willing himself to move if he wanted to see the light of another day, as the powerful curse did its damage to his body and mind. Another body fell across his own, and he yelled in renewed pain, his muscles convulsing with protest. As his eyes rolled up in his head, he caught a quick glance as Lupin's body flew by, crashing into the wall behind him. Then blessed darkness came over him, no matter how much he tried to will it away; he couldn't die without knowing Tanya was okay, he had to hang on . . . he was failing . . . he just couldn't live up to what everyone . . . expected of . . . him . . .

Snape put a hand on the floor, forcing himself to a sitting position. His eyes struggled to see what lay around him, seeing that the dust hadn't even settled yet. He'd thought he would black out, but apparently not. He looked around, taking note of Lupin's unconscious form against the wall. Two men he was only barely acquainted with lay dead, and with a check of Moody's pulse, he added another body to the death toll.

He could see Potter lying nearby, twitching; a *Crucio*. He'd recover. He looked frantically into the darkness before remembering that he held his wand in his hand.

"*Lumos!*" He looked into Tanya's eyes. She was the only one remaining upright. She was trembling, wavering on her feet, and he looked down at her hand. She was clutching a dagger tightly, blood dripping from it onto the floor, each drop making a plopping noise as it hit. The silence was unnatural.

He forced himself to stand, fighting the lingering spasms of pain from his own *Crucio*, and approached Tanya, who heaved a sigh before pointing to the opposite corner.

Voldemort, Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord, the mortal old man lay there, blood covering his chest, his body still. Snape forced himself to go to the body, placing his fingers on the saggy throat, searching for a pulse, looking closely, searching for any sign of life. There was none.

He turned to Tanya, "What . . ." He cleared his throat and tried again. "Are you telling me that after all his reign of terror, all his years of the search for immortality, all this power, it was a Muggle knife that ended his life?"

She leaned over, resting her hands on her knees, still holding the bloody dagger. Snape crossed over to her, putting his arm around her and leading her to the cellar steps

to sit. She took a calming breath, and Snape could see her relaxing in that envious way she had. "He sent a *Cruciatus* to me," she said. "I deflected it right back to him. He was convulsing with it; I never want to see it again." She looked at Snape, and followed his eyes to her dripping dagger. She shrugged. "I stabbed him while he was twitching."

He sat next to her, holding her, knowing she hadn't had a chance to rest after her astral reconnaissance check earlier. Her trembling subsided, and Lupin began to come around.

Tanya turned to Snape. "How's Harry? He *has* to be all right; all this is for nothing if he's out of it."

"It will never be all for nothing, Tanya," said Lupin, after checking out the late, great Dark Wizard. "Voldemort is dead, and it doesn't matter how it happened here tonight."

"What about all the people who believe it had to be Harry?"

"Not many know about the Prophecy," Snape replied. "Only a select few. But it's down to the four of us. We are in the enviable position to write history. How do we handle this?"

Lupin leaned over Moody's body, holding a silent eulogy for his friend. "He went out fighting, the way he always wanted to," he said, more to comfort himself than any other reason. "He was glad to be here, I know."

Tanya got up and went to where Harry still lay, half conscious and still obviously in pain. She put her hands on him and the twitching slowed, then stopped. He opened his eyes, breathing evenly now. Tanya took his hand to help him sit up, and silently waited for him to say something to prove he was back with the living.

"He's dead?" he asked hollowly.

"He's dead," she answered.

He looked wonderingly at her. "Doesn't it seem that it should have been a lot more difficult?" He shook his head and noticed Mad-Eye lying still beside him. His eyes reflected despair as he pushed someone's body off of his and struggled to his feet with Tanya's help.

"Harry," Tanya said, looking intently at him, "I killed him. I killed him with this dagger."

Harry nodded in understanding. But she wasn't finished. "I don't want anyone to know that."

Harry was nonplussed. "Why not? You've saved our entire world, why wouldn't you want anyone to know that?"

"You know what people think already," she said, a trace of panic in her voice. "Half the wizards I've ever heard of are wondering when I'm going to take over where Voldemort left off! I can't live with that. I'm not in the habit of defending my actions, or even explaining them! I can't do this!"

Snape put his arms around her, pulling her to him to ease her fear. "There's a way, don't worry. We'll find it."

"I'd have to leave, go back to the Muggle ways!"

"It's all right," Snape continued soothingly, "we'll figure it out. Let's just calm down and think about what we'll tell everyone. We have to decide now, because once we tell anyone our story, we have to stick to it."

Harry was thinking furiously. It wasn't just her fear of notoriety at stake here, it was her entire way of life. She'd fought hard to be a part of this wizarding world, even going so far as staying in Azkaban when she could've left at any time.

"What harm would it do to give her this?" Snape asked of the others. "It would be so easy to give all the credit to Potter; it would be no more than most expect, anyway." He looked to Lupin, but Harry spoke.

"I will not take all the credit for this," he said decisively. "I was flat out on my back, not even able to handle *Crucio*, while the rest of you were fighting the wizard from hell. I can't and won't pretend to anyone that I did this. There has to be another way."

Lupin suggested that they all take part in it. "That way, everyone gets the credit; equal shares. No one would worry about Tanya's motives that way. She was part of a team, and that's as it should be. Harry, it's no weakness to suffer *Crucio*. I'm sure Severus can vouch for the veracity of that statement."

Snape smiled slightly and nodded to Harry. "Don't ever think that just anyone can go through that and stand afterward. You've done nothing to be ashamed of."

"So, it's settled then," Lupin continued. "Tanya?"

Tanya nodded, finally. "It will be much easier if we're all in this together. Especially since we are. And we'll all equally share the blame, as well?"

"Blame?" Harry wondered aloud.

"You know Fudge," she said, "If blame can be laid at anyone's feet, he'll find a way. Especially when he finds out a mere dagger killed Voldemort. He'll wonder why we didn't bring him in for the Dementors to take to Azkaban."

They all laughed, throwing off the last of the tension and fear. Tanya dropped the dagger to the floor. Then, thinking twice, she picked it up again and asked the room in general, "Do wizards use anything like fingerprinting evidence?"

Snape took the dagger from her. "Yes, they do, when necessary. But they won't find just yours on there."

Wordlessly, Lupin took the dagger from Snape, adding his fingerprints to the mix. He handed it to Harry, who touched it all over, smearing the blood to hide the fact that Tanya's prints might be under the blood instead of mixed with it. He didn't know how skilled the forensic wizards would prove to be.

They filed up the stairs, levitating the dead heroes behind them, and told the members upstairs the news. By the time they'd returned to the woods to Apparate to Hogwarts, they could already see and hear the celebratory fireworks that signaled the end of Voldemort's reign of terror.

And So the Tale is Told

Chapter Twenty

And So the Tale is Told

And so the world relaxed. The few Death Eaters that survived went into hiding or denial; those that escaped Azkaban, that is. The heroes had been happily recognized and rewarded with honors and accolades. It only took two weeks of preparation, then one more night to employ those plans. After all the years of fear and suspicion, it seemed not enough.

Snape tried to keep from falling asleep as Tanya's hands worked over his shoulders and back, easing away sore muscles. She really did have magic in her hands, and it felt like she was sending in small bursts of heat as she massaged. He felt himself harden as her hands worked their way lower and lower, and by the time she reached the back of his thighs, he was almost panting.

She urged him to his back, and began working her way up the front of him. There was no doubt in either's mind that this was now a sensual massage, as her hands slowed down to tease and tantalize, rather than relax him.

She purposely avoided his arousal, instead moving her hands like feathers at his hips, and low on his belly. His cock throbbed in protest and he grabbed the sheets in his hands to avoid directing her hands where they were most needed. He wanted to prolong these moments as long as he could, and the only way to do that was to let her call the shots.

She moved her hands over his chest, across the male nipples, and repeated the motions, this time with a lighter touch. She kept doing this for several passes, each pass having a lighter stroke than the last. He moaned and closed his eyes. She had his skin so sensitized by now that the feel of her breath alone might just send him reeling out of control.

He felt feather-light touches on his neck, then his face, and when she lightly ran her fingers through his hair, he opened his eyes and saw the passion in hers. It was the final straw; he couldn't take it anymore.

He put his hand at the back of her neck to urge her down so he could taste her lips, and then gently pulled her fully along his body, feeling the warmth of her bare skin on his, letting her feel the evidence of his arousal hot against her belly.

He urged her over on her back, and followed, pushing one leg between hers. He forced himself to go slow; he wanted her as hot as he was, ready to beg for it. He touched his lips to hers, softly licking and nibbling her lower lip. She was responding the way he expected, and he slowly pushed his tongue into her mouth. He moved so that his chest moved against her breasts, and felt her hands tighten on his. Her legs were clenched around his one leg, and he shifted so that he could put pressure on her sex.

Her legs opened slightly in answer, and he knew she wanted to feel his other leg between hers now, pinning her in place. He obliged, but then only continued rubbing against her most sensitive areas. She whimpered, and he throbbed in answer.

"Severus . . . don't make me wait . . . c'mon Sev, take me, let me have it . . ."

He almost thrust deeply inside her at that, but collected himself at least enough to lift one of her legs at the knee so he could position himself just at her opening, feeling the heat and wetness on his most sensitive part. He moaned into her mouth and pushed in just to the head. He felt her hips angle to let him in further, but he held back, wanting to prolong this moment.

She groaned in protest, shooting her hips upward, and he avoided what she wanted, kissing his way down her neck, loving the feel of her smooth skin on his lips. He breathed in the musky scent of her, and moved his lips back to hers. She was panting now, so he moved back a little and picked up a lock of her hair to tickle his own lips with it. Her hair was so soft, and he again pushed into her.

"Oh, Sev, yes, I want you, I love you."

It was more than he could bear to hear those words on her lips. She'd never said them before, and he pushed deeply into her, capturing her moan in his mouth. She shuddered as she pulled him closer to her, and moved her hips to get all of him.

He tried to keep the rhythm slow, but after only a few thrusts, his body took over and she matched him push for push. He could feel her nails on his back; he felt her tightness clamp around him, and he began gasping himself, her name on his lips, a litany he was only barely aware of. He began slamming into her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, squeezing, rocking her hips in pace with him. He could feel it building, no longer slowly; it was electrifying him, and he gave up his meager control to let his body take over. Thrusting, gasping, he wanted to wait for her; he needed to feel her come while he was in her, and he reached down with his finger and ground against her nub. She was coiling up beneath him, ready to spring, so primitive, so wild, so very like the animals that loved her. She called out his name as the world exploded around them, and he could let go, he could erupt inside her. All her muscles within were stroking him, clamping down on him, and his voice turned harsh and guttural like the animal he was, and yes, it was true, sometimes you could feel the earth move . . .

She lay with her head on his chest, listening to the beating of his heart as it began to slow down again, his breathing coming under control once more and she allowed her eyes to close in contentment. She remembered clearly that she had told him she loved him. She'd known for a long time that she did, but never thought to say the words. Judging by his instant reaction to it, she realized that he'd probably never heard the words before, not directed at him, and it saddened her to recognize that he'd been so lonely before he let her into his life. Such a tragedy for the women that missed out on his affection.

She was falling asleep, lulled by the rhythmic stroking of his hand through her hair, his arms holding her close. Their body heat was combined, and she couldn't imagine any feeling that could compare to this. She'd always been passionate; it was the gypsy way of life. There was no time to learn to repress emotions, and with the Romany language, one word could mean twenty different concepts, depending on how passionately that word was spoken. Every night, the music and dancing had commenced; it was a celebration that they'd survived another day. When it came time to make love, it was the same. There may be no tomorrow, and if you were to find yourself lying on your deathbed, what a pity it would be to have nothing but regrets and opportunities not taken.

And so she'd never learned to hold anything back. She was not promiscuous, but she was sometimes surprised that she wasn't. The sound of his voice, the panting, moaning, just hearing what she was making him feel was enough to set her off, and she knew she'd never get tired of pleasing him. And he was so quick to learn what pleased her; they both gave as good as they got, each new experience to be eagerly sought.

She knew that there was a time when he had worried about their age difference, but was now secure in his commitment to her. Wizards generally lived much longer than non-wizards, so she had every reason to believe they'd grow old together. She couldn't be happier.

After the assassination (she couldn't think of it as a war; her war had been with Malfoy, not Voldemort), Dumbledore had made some startling announcements. He'd decided to retire, and live out the rest of his days playing in the sunshine. He'd strongly recommended to Cornelius Fudge his new replacement; Professor McGonagall would be the new Headmistress of Hogwarts. She, in turn, had already started implementing new ideas. Severus was to begin teaching the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, with the knowledge that the Death Eaters that weren't imprisoned would soon be competing for the evil hole that Voldemort's death left behind. Lupin, with the promise of an easier Wolfsbane potion soon to come his way, was screening offers from St. Mungo's for future employment.

Hermione Granger had accepted an offer to begin a teaching apprenticeship with McGonagall, and would then take over the Transfiguration curriculum completely. Severus himself was the one who suggested that Minerva offer that position to Hermione.

Tanya would continue working with Severus as well, leaving him free to put more time into Defense, and she was taking over some of Hagrid's regular duties as well. Her apprenticeship went very quickly in that field . . . it didn't hurt that the animals were eager to behave according to her every wish.

Harry and Ron had been accepted as Aurors-in-Training. They were preparing to undergo a grueling three-year training course. That reminded Tanya that Harry had asked her to meet him in Hogsmeade at the Three Broomsticks for a going-away drink. He wanted to have a talk with her. Tanya wasn't sure what to expect from him; was this just closure? She fervently hoped he wouldn't insist on apologizing for things he'd already apologized for, especially since he had every right to feel the way he did.

She allowed herself finally to sleep, her breathing even with Severus'. In her sleep, she took hold of the medallion she'd replaced around Severus' neck, refusing even unconsciously to let him slip away from her.

Harry ordered his third drink, and sternly warned himself to sip it slowly. It would do no good to appear inebriated before Tanya even arrived. He would be leaving for training in two days, and he wanted to know exactly what he was leaving behind. He still carried a small button in his pocket, rubbing it discretely now and then, as a reminder of how happy she had once made him.

She entered at the door, heading for his table with a smile on her face. It appeared that she carried no grudges against him, and for that, he was grateful. He signaled to get Rosemerta's attention and asked Tanya what she was drinking.

"Cognac, I think," she said.

Rosemerta conjured one up and Tanya sipped it with relish. "It must have been two years since I tasted one of these," she said.

"You must have started drinking very young," he said without reproof.

"I grew up drinking mead and wine," she said. "But I always liked the taste of this stuff. I always know when to quit," she added. "I never wanted to lose control of any of my senses."

He smiled at her, trying to remember what words he'd rehearsed. Now that she was here, his mind had gone blank.

"So, what's up?" she asked. "You made it sound like you had something specific on your mind."

"I really wanted to know that all the unpleasantness was behind us," he answered, mentally throwing away the rehearsed speech because it was Tanya. He could always talk to her easily. "I wanted to make sure you knew I didn't feel that way anymore. Like I thought you were wrong about your scar, and what happened to Malfoy. I wanted to make sure you knew that I feel wrong about ever feeling that way. I feel Malfoy deserved what he got; and you were right about the scar. I should have known and understood about why you kept it hidden. And when we were in that cellar with Voldemort, with the dagger dripping in your hand, it hit me that you really did fear fame. The scar would have been part of that. I understand perfectly. I agree. I think someone with your private ways shouldn't be forced into the public eye against your will. It's unfair. I think it would be like putting a unicorn on display and teaching it circus tricks."

Her eyes became bright with unshed tears. "Thank you, Harry."

"For what?" He was genuinely puzzled.

"I always harbored a hope that you really would understand. Just respecting my wishes wouldn't have been good enough. It makes me happy that you know what I feel about all that. Like you accept me that way."

"Of course I accept you," he said. "I will always admire and love the way you are. I think my life would have a gaping hole in it if I never met you."

She smiled. "I'm happy we had our time together, too," she said. "I don't regret any of it."

He took the plunge. "Do you ever wish it could be that way again?" He forced himself to look into her eyes, willing her to know exactly what he meant.

"You can never go back home, Harry," she said sadly. "What happened between us was important, I think, for both of us. But even with a Time Turner, we couldn't go back. A lifetime of change has passed between us since then. I've gone to someone else, and you have your better half out there, somewhere, waiting for you to discover her. Don't let her down by thinking about me."

That told Harry what he needed to know. He knew that her 'someone else' was Professor Snape, and he found that it didn't seem strange to him. In the last several months, Snape had lost the intimidating image Harry had known since first year, and even he could see the way Snape changed when he talked to Tanya. He was sure they'd be announcing wedding plans soon. And he found that it didn't hurt him the way he thought it would. So maybe that's why he wanted to see her today. Maybe it was just dotting an 'i' or crossing a 't'. It made it possible to get on with his life.

"Well, Ron and I are in for it, I guess. I understand it's much more difficult than anything at Hogwarts."

"Severus mentioned that even with your superior skills, you'd have your work cut out for you. He also mentioned that he hoped Ron had a back-up plan, because he's a follower, whereas an Auror should either be a leader or a lone wolf."

"He'll be okay. He'll follow me a while longer, probably. But I've seen him take over when he needs to. You should have seen him first year when we had to be chessmen. Even Snape would have been impressed."

She smiled. "He's really rather proud of the lot of you," she said. "I don't suppose I'm supposed to tell you that, but there it is. He worked you hard, and you made it through. He knows how tough he was."

Harry grinned, shaking his head in wonder. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad it was Snape teaching Potions and harassing me all these years. I needed that in order to toughen up when I have to. And although there were so many times I hated him, now all I can remember clearly is the respect and admiration I feel for him. I never knew until recent years that he was spying on Voldemort while Voldemort thought he was loyal to him. He really is a genius with things like Occlumency and Potions, isn't he?"

She nodded silently.

"And," Harry continued, "I'm glad he finally gets his position as the Defense teacher. After all he's done, and after all those years of putting up with us in Potions, it's the least they could do for him. McGonagall must have felt the same way, because that's the first change she made."

"Aye," she said, "it's the happiest I've seen him about lessons in a while. As soon as McGonagall hires his replacement who can completely take over Potions, he's only got Defense and his personal research to work on. He'll have time to relax and get away from it all from time to time."

"Together with you, you mean?"

"Of course," she answered, smiling. "He doesn't know it yet, or at least I don't think he does, but I want to plan a family. I'm not going through my entire life without children of my own."

"How do you think he'll feel about that?"

"I think he'll be shocked. I don't think he'd ever imagined that he'd someday be a father. But I also think that once he tosses the idea over in his mind, he'd agree. I don't know how much time that will take, but we have our whole lives together to plan. I'm in no rush."

By mutual consent, they rose to leave. On the road outside, they walked arm in arm back to the castle, close friends who didn't need any more words. Yes, they'd stay in touch these next years. They'd get together socially whenever possible. They'd share their problems and celebrations with each other, they'd rehash old memories occasionally. Life was good.