

# A Nagini and Severus Tale

*by nagandsev*

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? This tale begins in Severus' sixth year at Hogwarts, during the surge of new young followers of the Dark Lord; Nagini Malfoy, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Nagini, Voldemort's serpent. Alternate Universe: Lucius, Lestrangle, Mulciber, Crabbe, Goyle, Rodoplus and Bellatrix are younger – in their seventh year; Narcissa and Nagini in their sixth. Disclaimer: I don't own anything - the wonderful J. K. Rowling owns everything.

## A Turn of Events

*Chapter 1 of 22*

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? This tale begins in Severus' sixth year at Hogwarts, during the surge of new young followers of the Dark Lord; Nagini Malfoy, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Nagini, Voldemort's serpent. Alternate Universe: Lucius, Lestrangle, Mulciber, Crabbe, Goyle, Rodoplus and Bellatrix are younger – in their seventh year; Narcissa and Nagini in their sixth. Disclaimer: I don't own anything - the wonderful J. K. Rowling owns everything.

□

### Chapter 1: A Turn of Events

With each movement counter-blocking her way, Nagini was finally forced to look up into the icy grey gaze waiting for her. Again a surging feeling welled up inside her. Controlling the urge to grab or hex Lucius across the room, she steadied her breathing to ask, "Yes?"

"Oh, I always like a 'yes' from a witch," purred Lucius.

Goyle and Crabbe snickered behind him; Lestrangle's interest perked up, and he shifted his sitting position to lean expectantly towards them; the two darker, younger-year Slytherins, Severus and Regulus, stilled themselves, watching Lucius' every action. He continued, "Especially a pure-blooded, Slytherin one quite, quite a delicate rarity nowadays."

"And a Malfoy to boot for the cherry on top," Lestrangle quietly added. Lucius gave him a slow, dark smirk.

Turning back to Nagini, he said, "Dear cousin, come and join your brethren Slytherins they're dying to get acquainted with you. We must amend that Ravenclaw mix-up and help heal any open wounds or distress they've caused our sister Slytherin."

"Who do we hex first?" jumped in Goyle.

"Now, now let's not be hasty let us know the details first it'll be more *...exquisite* revenging the ones who really deserve it," said Lucius, as he circled behind her.

Nagini didn't budge from her spot. "I'm sorry I have to decline," she said, maintaining a calm tone. "I'm very... tired and need to lie down. Another time..."

"You're not quite understanding. As a Slytherin Prefect, I'm insisting you join us and relay what has happened what those filthy Mudbloods and blood-traitors in those

pathetic houses did to you. They insult one Slytherin, they insult us all; they attack one Slytherin, they attack us all. Am I getting through to you, dear cousin?" asked Lucius.

He had impatiently grabbed Nagini's left arm and pulled her over to one of the plush, dark emerald-green sofas of the Slytherin Common Room. Releasing his grasp on her arm by shoving her down onto the sofa beside Lestrangle, he continued, "It's not just a matter of house pride... I am trying to be patient, very patient with you, dear cousin. You are so very new to things here, after all; however, there are some universal truths, regardless of where you're coming from that even you must recognize and acknowledge as being absolutes "

"Don't ever touch me again, don't ever grab me like that ever again," interrupted Nagini abruptly. She had risen from the sofa and was almost brushing against Lucius, but avoided actually touching him the last half-inch somehow.

"If it's decorum you wish," she said, glaring at him, "house decorum, blood-relations decorum – let me set you straight then – I can defend myself against those prats. I don't need you. They're not worth risking everyone's involvement. I insulted them first. I shouldn't have been put in Ravenclaw; it was a mistake. Now, the mistake's been corrected. Your Prefect status doesn't give you the right to force me into any revenge activity "

"Either you're being thick or you're pretending to be and that's not... good..." Lucius threatened. He made to push her back down, and at that very moment he was blasted back across the room.

\*\*\*\*\*

In a split second, Nagini was rushing away – running for her life to find shelter in her room – just to make it there and lock the door behind her. What was happening? Merlin, how could she have hexed Lucius? the overbearing prat. But a blur of uncontrolled anger had blinded her and raw instinct had taken over. She flung herself into her room, slamming the door behind her and turning around to charm it sealed, when Lucius hurled himself into the room scathing with fury. Before she could think of the next moment, he had grabbed her and shoved her up against the cold stone wall. Pressing his body into hers, pinning her up against it.

"How dare you? How dare you!" He was slightly frothing from the mouth with anger. Controlling himself, he asked her, "Have you forgotten who you are who and what you really are? Then let me remind you you are a Malfoy. A pureblood. You will not shame our name, our family – our status in the world. Which means, you will do whatever I tell you to do – to know your place, your proper place, and endure it. Whose ward are you? Who pays for this room? Have you forgotten what my father has had to do for you? What strings he has had to pull for you? And what inside insults our family will forever have to swallow because of you? Who's your guardian until it is deemed by wizarding society that you are fit to be your own person. Who?" he demanded.

She still didn't answer – if looks could kill.

"Who? Say it!" he yelled at her.

Grabbing her robes tight, he shoved her against the wall again, her head popping against it.

Through the pain, Nagini glared at him defiantly.

With a snarl, he threw her from the wall to on top of the bed.

Before she could turn around or rise up, he was on top of her, pinning her down.

"So, you want to be treated like a filthy Muggle, do you?" he said. Menacingly, he lowered his head to her left ear, whispering, "You know what Muggles are good for? The only thing... the filth are good for?"

Abruptly, he pushed himself off of her and stood up, slowly pulling out his wand and directly pointing it at her. His stone-cold eyes suddenly burned with intention.

"He's going to Crucio me," thought Nagini, gasping for breath, trying to muster up the will to dare defend herself. But, she felt that she couldn't breathe. She froze. She just stared at Lucius, taking in the halo of blond hair encircling an enraged mask of disgust. He disorientated her.

Lucius drew in deep inhaled to control himself from hexing her. His father had told him that Nagini's strong will had to be broken, and soon. But this wasn't the time or the place. He resented her – her mere existence – on so many levels, but he had to push his normal tendencies to physically, violently force someone to his will aside for the time being.

Slowly, he spelled out for her, "You will know your place in the world, the ways of the world – our world. The Malfoy world. We own you – you are ours now – truly one of us. You will adhere to our ways."

Taking in her continuing defiance of him, he sneered at her, "You were predispositioned from conception to be a dark witch, a sorceress, weren't you? Have you forgotten, already, the reasons why you're even here? My little murderess--"

Nagini screamed out, "Shut up! Will you shut it? Just leave me alone! Stop it!"

At that second, a heavily panting Regulus swept into the room.

"Lucius! What are you doing? Slughorn's asking for you – Mulciber is in trouble! You're needed immediately!" panted Regulus.

Having strolled in behind Regulus, smiling at Lucius, Lestrangle teased, "Tsk, ts, Lucius what are you up to now? Can I join in?" Then, he added, "Whatever will Narcissa think?"

Lucius glared at him. "Nothing. There's nothing to 'think', just clearing up some family business."

Since the announcement of the betrothals between himself and Narcissa Black, and Rodolphus Lestrangle and Bellatrix Black, had been made, his future brother-in-law was becoming more and more unbearable. Usually Lestrangle's lecherous sense of humour and inclination for anything perverse amused Lucius, who secretly prided himself on being 'superior' to Lestrangle in his tastes, preferences and skills.

Lestrangle scoffed at Lucius. Composing himself, Lucius walked directly over to Lestrangle. He threatened, "There's nothing unless, perhaps, you would like Bellatrix to be informed about a little juicy tidbit. If she should need to hear of an occurrence between you and a certain zoftig Hufflepuff? You were boasting about it, in detail." Then, he added with a knowing smile, "On the very same day your engagement was announced, wasn't it?"

The smirk fell from Lestrangle's face. Glaring at each other, the senior Slytherins huffed out of the room, with Regulus quickly following after them.

Left with steadying her breathing, Nagini gulped at the air, trying to control tears that were trying to be released. Then, a dizzy sensation crept over her; a Calming Potion Professor Slughorn had just given her started to kick in full force. *Or did he give me a sleeping potion?*

"Are you all right?" asked a quiet voice.

Through an enveloping narcotic haze, Nagini slowly looked over to where the voice came from.

It was from the tall, quiet housemate *It's Snape – Severus*, Nagini registered groggily. *Severus! It's all been for you... for you...*

In her drug-induced stupor, her thoughts languidly remembered when they had first met outside of Gringotts... so long ago. Nagini had been leaving with Lucius and his

father, Abraxas Malfoy, while Regulus Black and Severus were making their way to go in to the bank.

And then, that very same evening of their first meeting, they met again at Malfoy Mansion; a dreadful dinner party had been given to celebrate the announcement of the betrothal of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black; selected friends and family had been invited. And as Severus was included, being the house-guest of Regulus that weekend, he had been seated beside her, the newly arrived relative.

It had been such a miserable day for Nagini that she barely spoke a word to him throughout the entire dinner. And he had not attempted to make or force any glib small-talk with her, which she had been so grateful for.

At Hogwarts, their encounters around school had, at first, been awkward or abrupt. Until Nagini had unintentionally come across Severus and a Gryffindor student in the library, with whom he seemed to be on very friendly, if not intimate, terms. He called her 'Lily' and was speaking in a soft, low voice to her. She had laughed at something he said, and Nagini had caught Severus smiling shyly back at her in response.

The picture of them together had struck Nagini as odd. Mainly because the girl was obviously a Gryffindor, a gold and burgundy scarf flung carelessly around her, but the sight of Severus smiling was etched in Nagini's memory. It was a stark contrast to the silent, sullen young man she saw sulking around the Slytherin Common Room, or hunched over a pile of books, alone at a library table.

And that was the day that her world had changed: her *universe* had changed.

Nagini had desperately been avoiding any miscellaneous contacts with other students especially the Slytherins, attempting to distance herself from her cousin's circle as much as possible.

But, now, she had been drawn in, circumstances beyond her control – or, were they?

She lay, curled up on her left side; her back turned away from him. Snape's gentle, but firm, inquiry was not abating. He crossed over to her bedside and asked, "Do you need Madam Pomfrey?"

Nagini slowly turned over towards him, dark blotches filling her mind as she tried to focus on the dark figure standing beside her bed. "What?" she asked. His voice seemed far away.

Then, Narcissa Black entered the Slytherin dormitory room, and Severus held up his forefinger to his lips, indicating for her to stay quiet. He pressed on his enquiry gently.

"Madam Pomfrey – I could help you to the hospital ward, if you're in need of assistance."

Nagini blinked, confused, thinking that the figure speaking was someone else. *Rodolphus is offering me help? No! I don't want him to touch me!*

Her thoughts whirled, causing her to moan as she fought but slipped further and further into drowsiness. The memory of the insults and jeers of her former Ravenclaws and other peers came back to her. "They're never to be trusted selfish, manipulative, throat-slitting, power-hungry Slytherins."

And, yet, she was now a Slytherin. One of them. *Anything for Severus...*

"I'm all right," she assured the dark figure. "A little unnerved but nothing else. Lucius didn't do anything..." She stopped in mid-sentence because of the sudden discomfort of verbalising which level of aggression against her had just been committed. Lucius hated her. He had feigned tolerance of her beforehand, but, after today, she knew he could barely control his resentment towards her and would now use any opportunity to vent it. The realization of the situation overwhelmed her. Further words escaped her.

Her eyes opened wide momentarily in panic, and Nagini gazed pensively at Severus. His clear onyx eyes calmed her. Steadied her. Finally, she whispered, "Thank you." Clearing her throat, and a little stronger, she added, "Thank you for offering help... but I'm all right, now. Really." She held out her hand to him, but as he took it, she fell deeply into a narcotic sleep.

Severus placed her hand back down on her covers and watched her sleeping form. After several seconds, he sighed and crossed to leave, meeting Narcissa's concerned eyes; he turned once more to look back at Nagini and gave her one last look of doubt and then quietly left her room.

## Greed Beyond Avarice - Part One

### Chapter 2 of 22

Severus reflects on when he accompanied Regulus Black to Gringotts at the end of the winter break, meeting Abraxas, Lucius and Nagini Malfoy there.

Chapter Two: Greed Beyond Avarice part one

Stopping halfway down the hall, Severus leaned against the wall, letting out a long sigh.

"How to help Nagini?" he thought.

Risking Lucius' suspicion and wrath would be severe. A never-ending doubting of his loyalty and obedience would ensue if he were openly caught helping her, in any way, against Lucius' wishes.

Nagini had been clearly marked as forbidden fruit, another supercilious, pristine Malfoy, not to be interfered with in any way, on any level, by anyone. Only by Lucius.

And the gods only knew how he needed Lucius, as well as the other purebloods, to get what he wanted in life, his burning secret agenda. Nothing must interfere with his aspirations to maintain staying within the chosen inner-circle of followers of the Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort.

Since Severus had come of age, Voldemort had singled him out. His rare and unfathomable Potions and Dark Arts talents had been touted and rubbed in all the other Death Eaters' faces; he had been fully welcomed by the Dark Lord.

Severus had presented himself and his skills obsequiously to Voldemort, presenting his mind for Voldemort to enter, allowing the Dark Lord to see his deepest, darkest wishes.

At the time, Voldemort had only clandestinely smiled at him, and then he had 'rewarded' Severus by giving him the Death Eaters' mark. Through the blinding pain of the tattooed mark being inserted into his left arm, holding the lustful gaze of Voldemort, images of position, power, and vengeance flashed through his mind in his raw anguish. The brutal and complete support and strength of the future, ruthless, untouchable governing forces of the Wizarding world would now be his.

Finally, unabated reciprocity and true recognition of his worth and place in the world.

Taking the Dark Lord's mark had proven him worthy; moreover, he was now a true equal to the others, a wizard of the utmost pedigree, beyond the insipid, fanatical rantings of any of the pureblood followers.

He had been recognized and chosen by the great Dark Lord himself. He had been deemed meritorious and would be rewarded by Voldemort. Voldemort had solemnly promised covetous rewards for all of his top, most loyal followers in the new world order. Severus would bide his time, and when the time was right, he would ask for the most cherished prize imaginable. Lily Evans. Lily would be his.

He needed only to wait and acquiesce to all of the Dark Lord's commands. He must endure the steps of obedience demanded of him by the Dark Lord and fellow Death Eaters, whilst enduring the humiliation by those less worthy around him. But, vengeance would be his. James Potter, Sirius Black, even those in Slytherin, whose injurious slander and attacks on him he had undergone and survived, would one day soon be made to be sorry for everything they had ever done to him.

Which brought Severus dwelling on the expectations and requests recently made by the Malfoys.

Lucius and his father, Abraxas, were the forerunner supporters of Lord Voldemort, along with the Lestrangle and Black families. Lucius had already been rewarded with being honored as Voldemort's top 'lieutenant' in the newly formed ranks of his followers.

Abraxas Malfoy and Voldemort's relationship dated all the way back to their schooldays at Hogwarts. And as rumors about Abraxas' diminishing health, an incurable condition, had spread around, the appointing of Lucius in his father's stead had not surprised many.

Lucius' youth and vitality, combined with his promising future taking over the Malfoy estate, Ministerial connections, ancient family wealth and manic pureblood reputation, made him an inescapable force to be dealt with. There was no questioning the given criteria one had to meet to be included in Lucius' esoteric circle.

Severus' fate to be placed in the Slytherin House had allowed him access to a social circle that few had. His brilliant talent, keen willpower and austere demeanor had slowly brought Severus into Lucius' inner-circle. Lucius trusted Severus to be discreet. Steadfast loyalty. And he had proven to Lucius that he was trustworthy, time and time again. Severus had never thought to second-guess Lucius in matters that concerned Lucius' private interests and affairs.

Until now. Until he had met Nagini.

Leaning against the cold stones of the wall in the dark Slytherin corridor, Severus could only now recollect the images from Nagini's mind that had been haunting him since he first met her.

The thought of them caused his stomach to lurch. Remembering her dire condition and circumstances the first time he saw her, and knowing that she was continually living with the possibility of unpredictable attacks from Lucius, disturbed him profoundly.

He reflected on Nagini's first day at Hogwarts, when she had been placed, surprisingly, in Ravenclaw, a part of Severus had felt relief for her. She would have some respite from Lucius.

But now, after recent, detrimental events between Nagini and the most prestigious Ravenclaw student, Marcus Belby, had occurred, she had been re-sorted (irrespective of Dumbledore's ominous warnings) at the demands of Abraxas Malfoy and Titus Belby, the boy's Wizengamot father. Now that she was, physically, in the Slytherin house, it would be impossible for her to avoid Lucius and his intentions.

Severus knew, first-hand, that Lucius was capable of unspeakable things; he was calloused and cynical beyond his young years, with a warped sense of propriety. Having been motherless most of his life, Lucius was hardened in mind and feelings by his father from the time he could wave a wand. Both having sadistic, abusive fathers had, at first, been an unspoken empathetic basis for an intimate camaraderie and mutual understanding between Severus and Lucius. But, as both had been conditioned beforehand by completely different environments, they channeled the attainment of, or lack of, their needs in distinctly differing ways.

How, or to what ends, Lucius and his father planned to use Nagini for their own needs was presenting itself in a foreboding manner.

Severus knew Nagini had found herself in a cesspool of inescapable iniquity.

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus reflected on the ending of the winter holiday break. He had accompanied Regulus Black to Diagon Alley. Being a house-guest of Regulus' that weekend, before the second term started up again at Hogwarts, they both had been invited to the Malfoy Mansion that Friday evening for a private dinner party to celebrate the engagement of Lucius Malfoy to Narcissa Black. Regulus needed to go to his family's vault at Gringotts Wizarding Bank to procure Galleons for an appropriate engagement gift.

As they were entering Gringotts, Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius, and an unusual looking young witch, whom Severus had never seen before, were leaving. Upon seeing them, Abraxas immediately began to drone on about the upcoming evening's events, with Lucius standing resolute, exuding his trademark pomp and ostentatiousness; the young witch cowered behind them.

Severus was instantly drawn to Nagini. Not because of her mercurial hair and pale, Veela-like complexion, but rather, he was drawn to the right-side of her lowered face. It was noticeably marked with a freshly made bruise and angry cut. Her lips were swollen, and she seemed to tremble in some sort of nervous state.

A lifetime of witnessing his mother's abused body and face had instantly registered with Severus. A surge of rage welled up inside him. His facial muscles became clenched and tight.

His eye swiftly caught sight of the glinting, knotty serpentine ring on Abraxas' right hand. The glittering metal, raised in layered design, instantly told Severus what had made the gash on Nagini's cheekbone.

The witch looked up. In the instant, her and Severus' eyes met. She was startled like a doe, caught in front of bright lights, her large golden orbs startled and afraid.

Uncontrollably, Severus found himself plunging inside her mind. Flashes of grotesque and distorted images swam around in his head. He started to feel lightheaded, and yet, he could not look away from her.

"Severus!" He was snapped out of his trance-like state. Severus turned to Regulus, who had called his name.

Glancing from Severus to Nagini, Abraxas chuckled. "Of course, our young Mr Snape here has been struck by our lovely Nagini. Gentlemen, may I introduce you to my niece, Nagini Malfoy. Nagini, Regulus Black, cousin to Lucius' fiancée, Narcissa Black."

"Delighted to meet you," said Regulus. He actually swept up her hand and slightly brushed it with his lips. But, seeing her sullen reaction, he quickly let it go.

"And this is Severus Snape. Quite a distinguished young wizard. They'll be your future Slytherin housemates. Severus is in your year, in fact."

"Honored," Severus curtly replied, his dark eyes meeting hers. Nagini met, but didn't hold, his gaze, letting her eyes fall quickly away from his.

"My niece has travelled abroad throughout most of her young life. Regardless, she'll be an exceptional new addition to our honorable Slytherin House, as she will now be

residing in England permanently and continuing at Hogwarts for the rest of her formal schooling. Beyond that, I daren't speculate." Then, amused by something known only to him, Abraxas added, "However, now that we have her here, I don't think we can ever let her go. Do you, Lucius?"

"Of course not, Father," Lucius replied simply, his mask-like visage unchanging.

Both Severus and Regulus had become tongue-tied. The taciturn demeanor of Nagini, along with the blatant injury on her face, had soured any pretensions for small talk. Intuitively, they knew what, or rather, who had caused the injury, but it was an unspoken rule of etiquette never to state the obvious and, most definitely, never to accuse Abraxas Malfoy of any wrongdoing, especially in front of his face.

"I'm afraid my niece is a little unbred for proper society, as of yet far too shy for polite company." Noticing they seemed uncomfortable by his remark, Abraxas continued, "And she is remarkably clumsy for one so fair. Tripped over some sharp trinkets in our vault. Rare, but, nevertheless, quite sharp," he joked benevolently. "Nipped your cheek a bit there, Nagini. Does it smart still?"

"No... it's nothing, Uncle..." Her voiced faltered.

Abraxas let out an exasperated sigh. He said, "Young witches, these days... they are always rushing about, not minding what's in front of them. So impulsive. They shouldn't get overexcited as they do. Shows an excess of impulsiveness, or greediness. Such vulgar characteristics in people. Wouldn't you agree with me, Nagini?"

Resignedly, without looking up, she said, "Yes, Uncle."

Abraxas beamed with malicious mirth. Seeming very pleased with himself, chuckling, he boasted, "I'm hoping this evening will help break her in a bit. You young men can help with that, I'm sure. You are both excellent specimens - fine examples of young wizards of the utmost calibre. Nothing but the best, for the best, I always say. Well, we must be on our way. Many things to attend to before this evening." Concluding the conversation, Abraxas offered and gave Regulus and Severus each a warm handshake.

Holding Severus' grip firmly, he said pointedly, "Any trusted friend of Regulus Black is always welcomed at Malfoy Manor. Particularly, one who has already been notedly marked for his talents. In fact," Abraxas gave them both an odd leer, "the Dark Lord has very special plans for both of you. He is quite impressed by our young Severus Snape here and, of course, the noble Black family's loyalties go without comment." He smiled broadly and graciously at Regulus.

Regulus seemed suddenly anxious. He forced an appreciative smile at Abraxas. "We both can't wait for this evening, sir. We've still a few errands to run, as well, so I must excuse us. Until this evening, then." And with a final polite nod, Regulus and Severus turned and walked away, continuing into the main lobby of Gringotts.

Watching them walk away, and waiting to make sure Severus and Regulus were out of hearing distance, Lucius said quietly, "Father, we really should put a Charm on her face, at least, until we get home."

"Nonsense! She must be reminded of her impudence. If it takes public embarrassment to help it start sinking into that thick skin of hers, the fractious errors of her ways, then so be it!" sneered Abraxas. "See how those two didn't dare impugn my words! No one dares to question the House of Malfoy. Learn, son. Live, and learn, by my example."

He turned and glared at Nagini. "Come along, you ungrateful creature! Onward, to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions."

## Greed Beyond Avarice - Part Two

### *Chapter 3 of 22*

Abraxas, Lucius and Nagini visit the family's vault, full of unpleasant surprises; Severus and Regulus meet up with Hagrid at the Leaky Cauldron for butterbeer and dirty secrets.

### Chapter Three: Greed Beyond Avarice Part Two

As Abraxas, Lucius, and Nagini walked away from Gringotts Wizarding Bank towards *Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions*, what had happened over an hour ago in the Malfoy family vault of Gringotts kept going over and over in Nagini's mind. It had only been less than twenty-four hours that she had been placed in custodial care to her uncle, Abraxas Malfoy, by the Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Law Enforcement; she felt lost and unwanted in a whirlwind of events that were still incomprehensible to her.

Abraxas had had an anxious, irritable energy about him from the very moment Nagini came downstairs in the morning at Malfoy Mansion. His ill-temperedness continued on through to the security clearance at the long counter in the vast marble hall of Gringotts.

The goblin clerk, Griphook, had asked first for Nagini's wand for identity purposes. Abraxas winced at the goblins disconcerting request. "Why is that necessary? I have a registered letter from the Ministry, explaining her unusual circumstances."

"We've already been informed by Mr Bartemius Crouch, from the Ministry, of Miss Nagini Malfoy's peculiar status," stated the goblin slyly.

Savoring Abraxas' embarrassment, Griphook offered a half-cocked leer to Abraxas and continued, "As a means to monitoring Miss Malfoy's whereabouts and activities, Mr Crouch has sent us a memorandum, a warning, and an addendum for regulating Miss Malfoy's activities here at our establishment. A special security procedure to gain entrance necessitates extra cautionary regulations in her exceptional case."

Disgruntled, but obliging, Abraxas reached inside his cloak and pulled out an ebony, marble textured wand with three small emerald stones embedded on the top part of the handle.

Admiringly, Griphook took it, and peering at Nagini, asked, "Do you solemnly swear that you are Nagini Malfoy, daughter of Lucretia Malfoy and blood kin to Abraxas Malfoy?"

"I do," said Nagini.

"Take the wand," instructed Griphook.

Nagini reached out, and as she fully clasped her wand in her hands, a slight glow and power emanated forth from it.

Satisfied, Griphook asked, "And your key?"

Impatiently, Abraxas informed him, "She has no key, if you would read," he was thrusting a sealed parchment at Griphook, "this will explain and overrule any ..."

Cutting Abraxas off, Nagini informed Griphook, "I have the key." Pulling out a delicate, silver chained necklace with an oval pendant, she opened it up and took out a miniature golden key.

"Thank you," said Griphook, taking the key and examining it. Then, he turned to Abraxas and asked, "Mr Malfoy, your wand?"

"What?!" Abraxas growled indignantly.

"The Ministry insists..." Griphook emphasised.

Abraxas unsnapped and pulled out from the sheathed upper section of his silver, serpent-headed cane, his wand, and handed it over to Griphook. Abraxas was now infuriated beyond all measures, but managed to keep control, glaring at the goblin.

"Mr Lucius?" asked Griphook smugly.

Lucius begrudgingly deferred and pulled out his wand, handing it over to Griphook.

After verifying each one, Griphook returned the wands to the Malfoys, Abraxas pocketing both his own and Nagini's wand. And then, Griphook made a courteous, peculiar bow-like gesture to Nagini, and said, "Welcome to Gringotts, Miss Nagini Malfoy. My condolences about your mother; she was a most gracious and cooperative client of ours. We do hope to service your needs as well as we did hers."

It was poignantly odd. The goblin was speaking as if her mother had just recently died, when it had been over eight years ago. Moreover, it was not known for goblins to feel compelled to show any niceties towards wizards, other than perfunctory ones.

"Thank you. Thank you, I'm sure you shall. I hope I shan't be a very demanding customer, Mr Griphook," she replied awkwardly.

"May we proceed? We've rather urgent business to attend to elsewhere, Griphook," Abraxas stated gruffly.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy. This way, this way. Follow me." Griphook led them to one of the numerous doors outlining the large marble hall. They descended down the narrow stone passage to a sconced area and waited near the tracks for a cart. One appeared immediately, and they climbed in; the cart whisked them away, deep down into the lowest depths of Gringotts.

On arriving in front of the vault, and after Griphook had opened it, they stepped inside into a vast cavernous room filled to the brim on one side with galleons and jewels, cryptic artifacts, and objects from all corners of the world. Abraxas immediately grabbed Nagini by the arm and decisively steered her to the far right corner of the room. There, set aside, was a small, octangular chest in the midst of piles of galleons and jewels.

"Open it!" commanded Abraxas.

"My wand?" asked Nagini. "I'll need it."

Abraxas, his eyes narrowing in suspicion, slowly pulled out Nagini's wand from his inside cape pocket. As she made to take it from him, he pulled her into him with a strong jerk.

"Don't even think about using it for any other purpose other than to open the chest," warned Abraxas.

Although the thought was more than crossing Nagini's mind, her fingers itched to detrimentally hex Abraxas, she pointed it at the chest, *Alohamora*!

A coruscated flash ricocheted off the little chest, seemingly unchanged.

Nagini stepped forward and knelt down, clumsily trying to push the bulky texture of the lid upward, but it was still sealed.

Impatiently grabbing Nagini's wand out of her hand, Abraxas said, "Can't you see it's heavily warded against wand spells..." As Abraxas slipped her wand inside his cloak, he silently deliberated with himself, his eyes darting from Nagini to the chest. With a grim countenance, he pondered what to do next. A new thought then came to Abraxas, and he said, "We must try Blood Magic. Give me your arm!" Eagerly, not waiting for her to offer it, Abraxas grabbed Nagini's left arm, pulling her sleeve back, and with a quick flick of his wand, he muttered a Diffindo spell. A large gash appeared along her wrist, "Now! Now you stupid girl, the incantations!"

As Nagini whispered fiercely, repeating variants of spells, Abraxas was squeezing around the cut area, helping her blood drop profusely on the top of the metallic locked area. As each drop made contact with the metal, a slight hissing issued forth from the contact, a mist appeared, and then it vaporised completely. The lid remained sealed shut.

Exasperated, Abraxas pushed Nagini down, his heightened irritability distorting his facial features. His cane came down, hitting her across her upper back. She hit the chest front with a braced thud and painful grunt.

Then, in the heat of the moment, a flash of realisation occurred to her. She sat back on her bended knees, and holding onto the chest for support, her eyes burning with smoldering energy, Nagini whispered in a hiss that eerily echoed around the vault, *Alohamora*! But this time, it was in snake language, Parseltongue. The sealed lid broke open.

Abraxas and Lucius had frozen, startled by her Parselmouth ability.

But then, Abraxas, quickly recovering himself, jaunted over to the chest, and shoving Nagini aside, he opened the lid and plunged into it. Knocking various objects around, he suddenly let out an excitable hiss, "Yes! Here it is. At long last!" He slowly took out a small, plain rectangular case.

With bated breath, Abraxas whispered an incantation. The closed seal on the case popped open. He slowly raised the top covering. Inside was a black object with highlights of crimson gold, catching the sconced lighting. Abraxas lifted it, reverently, out of the case. Octagonal in shape and half the size of one's palm, he held it up to the light, delicately turning it around, closely examining it.

Triumphant, Abraxas said to Lucius, "This, my son, is what buys Ministerial officials; this is what buys their favors for you. It is what empires have been built on!"

"A periapt of sorts?" whispered Lucius. "The Midas amulet?"

"Yes," said Abraxas beaming. "The Midas amulet! Very ancient. Very rare. Our family's wealth has been built on it. It can transform any non-magical creature or object into Galleon gold. To be used discreetly, of course. And cautiously," he warned. "No wasting it on filthy Muggles, as if anyone would want to buy or sell their putrid carcasses, even if they were made of gold."

"Here!" Abraxas had reached back into the chest and taken out another object. He threw a small heavy book at Nagini. "Don't ever say I never gave you anything of hers!"

Nagini took the little book in her hands. It was tethered around the edges, and its cover had a faded emblem, which had long ago been engraved into the dragonskin surface. With trepidation, she put it inside her inner cloak pocket and looked back up to watch the Masters Malfoy gloating over the Midas amulet. Nagini rose, disgusted, and stared at Abraxas' gluttonous exuberance.

Abraxas, seeing the disdainful and challenging look of Nagini's, snarled, "Your mother stole this from the family's vault years ago, carrying it off with her to the continent. No doubt using it to pay for her philandering and escapades. Leaving the family behind to scrimp and scrape by as we could. To fend for itself by any means."

"Seems like you've fended for yourself pretty well," quipped Nagini.

Abraxas turned fully around and took a step towards her. Relishing what he was disclosing to her, he sneered, "She was a selfish, greedy, indulgent little tart, who got what she deserved in the end." Satisfied with the pained look on Nagini's face, he smiled exultingly and said, "But now, all is right with the world. All shall be well again." He let out a long sigh of relief.

"Greed beyond avarice," Nagini commented simply.

Abraxas and Lucius both turned to her.

"What did you say, girl?" asked Abraxas.

Mustering her courage, Nagini repeated, "Greed beyond avarice!"

"Meaning?" asked Lucius, his jaw clenching.

"Meaning... our illustrious family has obviously been controlled, all these ages, by greed beyond avarice." Nagini stared directly at Abraxas. "You said my mother was selfish and greedy... How could she not be? She was just logically following the family's natural inclinations. Just like you." Wanting to smite his ego a bit more, she persisted, "She was the same as you. You are just the same as her. No better, no worse."

Abraxas walked slowly over to Nagini, stopping in front of her. They stared at each other in silence.

Then, Abraxas broke the silence. "Logically?" he pondered, his eyes flickered over her face. "Logic has nothing to do with it, my dear girl." He smiled malevolently at her.

In a flash, his backhand slap came hard and directly down on the right side of Nagini's face, knocking her off balance; she stumbled back towards the chest and fell down beside it on top of a heap of galleons.

Abraxas' ring had caught her cheekbone and dug into her skin, making a cut downward on her face.

Nagini's cheek, the incised skin, bled profusely.

Determinedly, Abraxas strode over to Nagini. Dragging her half upwards, he backhanded her hard again in the same spot. Throwing her down, he began to pace like a panther in the claustrophobic space. Then, suddenly turning around, in a flash, Abraxas whipped out his wand from his cane staff and roared out, "*Crucio!*"

Nagini had never had this curse used upon her before; she had never experienced the retching agony of it. Writching and screaming in blinding electrical pain, Nagini felt as if her brain and internal organs were going to explode from her body, as the razor sharp juts of energy were encasing her.

"Father!" Lucius whispered fiercely, "The goblins!"

"They know their place," snarled Abraxas.

Watching Nagini's twitching slowly subside, Abraxas crossed over to her, bent down, and dragged Nagini halfway up to a kneeling position. Ferociously, Abraxas whispered, "You're going to... redeem yourself! Rather, atone for your mother..." Seeing something uncanny in Nagini's eyes, he winced and released her, watching her collapse back down again.

Glaring at Nagini, Abraxas cursed, "Damn you both!"

\*\*\*\*\*+

"We have to hurry," urged Regulus, as he and Severus made their way through Diagon Alley's winding backstreets from Gringotts. "Hagrid's to meet us at the Leaky Cauldron at noon."

"Hagrid?" asked Severus, surprised.

"Yes." Regulus' face was flushed with excitement. "Hagrid's promised me that he could get hold of some rare torquoise-coral peacock eggs. Cissy adores albino peacocks and partridges. I thought I'd surprise her with a pair of peacocks. They'll hatch around the time of the wedding this summer."

"Are Hagrid's sources reliable?" Severus asked sceptically, doubtful of the gamekeeper's abilities to procure anything of rare value.

"Well, he's assured me that some of his contacts would be able to attain them, and I'm willing to pay a pretty price. I'd asked Slughorn himself, but he was a bit standoffish about the whole thing, so I went to plan B. Hagrid. He's surprisingly resourceful, Severus. Try him some time; he can find anything."

"Obviously," Severus commented glibly.

Upon arriving, they entered the Leaky Cauldron and quickly spotted Hagrid in a corner; he was seated with four empty mugs of butterbeer in front of him and working on a fifth one. Scattered about the table and in surrounding chairs were various parcels and roughly shaped boxes, some with straw and mixed leaves sticking out of the random cracks and crooks of the bulging packages.

"Eh, Regulus! Over 'ere!" called Hagrid.

Greeting him, Regulus said, "Good day, Hagrid. You know Severus, here."

"Yup, I do. 'ow are yeh boys today, both fine?"

"Great, but in a bit of a rush. Would have been here earlier, but we had to stop by Gringotts first. We ran into the Malfoys on the way. Do you know that Abraxas' has a niece? She'll be attending Hogwarts next week."

"What? She's out already?" boomed Hagrid, shocked.

"Out? Out of where, Hagrid?" asked Severus.

"Why, the Ministry's gaol fer detainin' under-aged wizards accused of serious crimes. Ol' Barty Crouch is overseein' the whole thing, he bein' on the special Council fer Magical Law, an' all. Peculiar case. Yeh met 'er, yer did?"

"Why, yes, she was with Abraxas and Lucius, actually," informed Regulus.

Gregariously taking a swig of butterbeer, Hagrid announced, "Well, the whole lot of 'em are bad ... bad blood, always 'ave been, an' always will, I reckon."

"But what exactly is she accused of?" asked Severus, in a clipped tone.

"Accused of? Guilty, is more like it. *Murder*. Accidentally on purpose, more like, mind yeh. But, that's not fer me ter say or ter judge. Ol' Abraxas has a wily lawyer, he does. Ol' Lester Qualmsick, top o' his trade. He's known ter be quite pernicious, he is, ol' Qualmsick."

"*The Lester Qualmsick, of the Wizengamot Qualmsicks?*" Severus asked, astounded.

"That's the one. I've been runnin' parchments an' errands fer Dumbledore, to an' fro' the Ministry an' Hogwarts the past two weeks until I'm giddy about it, I am. That's 'ow I know."

Severus frowned. He was wondering whether it was the butterbeer speaking, or concrete facts that Hagrid was spewing out. Concerned, Severus said, "Murder is indeed a serious charge, Hagrid. The Ministry's proof?"

"Proof? The dead body of a Durmstrang student, hexed by 'er, he was... that's the proof; but," pausing to lick his lips, Hagrid continued, "ol' Qualmsick found a loophole in it all. It seems," he lowered his voice, "it wasn' an Unforgivable she used, but an Incendio hex o' sorts... never yeh mind, it's what led ter his death anyway."

Severus and Regulus stared at each other in disbelief for a second.

Regulus urged Hagrid on, "You can't leave us on a limb here, Hagrid; fill us in a bit more."

"Mind yer, it's ter go no further than between the three of us."

"Of course it won't," quipped Severus,

"Well, mind yeh, the Ministry's Department fer Unlawful Usage of Magic by Under-Aged Wizards had insisted as part o' the probationary agreement that Dumbledore would be the legally responsible guardian fer 'er, once she arrives at Hogwarts, that is - in fact, it was Dumbledore 'imself who insisted on it as part of the release conditions, mind yeh, before allowin' Miss Nagini Malfoy to come to Hogwarts."

The two Slytherins sat there dumbfounded, but, nevertheless, enthralled by what Hagrid was telling them, and continued to listen on.

\*\*\*\*\*

In actual fact, after an excruciatingly long trial and following a gritty meeting of the Wizarding Council for Under-Aged Wizards, Nagini had finally been released from the Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Law Enforcement on probationary terms that she would be allowed to go, at large, but conditionally, under the strict supervision of her uncle Abraxas, or in his stead, her cousin, Lucius, as he was now of age, and the next of kin, blood relative.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, had proposed himself to be appointed with custodial care of Nagini, once she would be within the grounds of Hogwarts. Even though the young witch would turn of age in February, her probationary period would last past the legal age of seventeen years until the age of nineteen due to the harshness of the accusations. For had it not been for her yet not being of age, Nagini would have been clamped and sent immediately to Azkaban.

Which is what Bartemius Crouch, chief prosecutor of the Council of Wizarding Law Council, precisely wanted to do. Crouch had insisted on holding Nagini in custody until she turned seventeen, which would be less than a month away. Crouch demanded that she would then be sent directly to Azkaban, to rot and suffer the Dementors, so outraged and disgusted was he with the case.

However, Abraxas had paid for one of the shrewdest advocates Galleons could buy (in more ways than one). His 'wily' family lawyer, Lester Qualmsick, knowing Crouch's mentality well and having been born into a long line of Wizengamot judges and counselors himself, dealt speedily and cleverly against all of Crouch's propositions.

Nagini had been accused of murder. Technically, Qualmsick argued as her defence counsel, she was not guilty. Using *Priori Incantatem* on Nagini's wand in front of the Council, he proved her wand's last hex. It had indeed been an Incendio hex that she had used against the Durmstrang student. But once set on fire, he had, naturally in the torturous pain, panicked, running and thrashing about, and had fallen backwards off an open-sided stone staircase, plummeting to his death. And this, not the hex, 'technically', Qualmsick pointed out, caused the young wizard's death.

With this point being laboriously debated, and after several days of animated riffling through ancient and appendaged laws, the verdict of the Wizengamot's panel was decided as 'not guilty' for first-degree murder, though other charges of aggravated assault and of a second-degree nature were ruled as guilty.

Bartemius Crouch, shaking with fury at the outcome and with visible difficulty, proclaimed the final verdict, "Nagini Malfoy, we have found you guilty of second-degree wizardslaughter; due process forces the Wizengamot to hereby decree that you shall for the continuance remainder of your under-aged time and thereafter, until the age of nineteen, be sentenced to home arrest under the scrutiny and probationary supervision of your uncle, Abraxas Malfoy, or in his stead, his son, Lucius Malfoy. Furthermore, your whereabouts, actions, transactions and schooling activities shall be monitored by both the Wizarding Law Enforcement officers, as well as under the auspices of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

And with further adjudged proclamations regarding appellate requests, the importance of good behaviour, and the conditions for reviewing her case in the future by the Wizengamot, the trial was adjourned.

## At Madam Malkin's: Before the Dreadful Dinner Party

*Chapter 4 of 22*

Severus finds the Malfoys, the Black sisters and Lestrange at Madam Malkin's; Lucius has a special request for Severus.

### Chapter Four: At Madam Malkin's: Before the Dreadful Dinner Party

As Severus sat in the Leaky Cauldron with Regulus, listening to Hagrid divulge further details about Nagini Malfoy and her recent Wizengamot ordeal, his thoughts raced back and forth from his own recent, squalid memories to the snatches of information about Nagini's disclosed, sordid ones.

Images of Severus' father's filthy, lifeless body flashed through his mind, and with them, a grim feeling of satisfaction. Severus' father, Tobias Snape, had been the worst kind of wretched Muggle to exist; an abusive, drunk, sadistic piece of shit was how Severus remembered him.

Recollections of their final confrontation and Tobias' consequential death from it brought nothing but bitter contentment to Severus. It was bitter because of his mother's



subsequent anguish and quick demise after the burial of Tobias' foul carcass. If slightly catatonic beforehand from the long conditioned psychological and physical abuse, Eileen Prince Snape quickly fell into a deep, despondent depression from which nothing seemed to help draw her out.

"Nagini's parents?" Severus asked abruptly. "Where are they? Who are they, exactly?"

"Well, that's the thing," said Hagrid. "Her mother was ol' Abraxas' younger sister. She must 'ave been in the third or fourth year ahead o' me. O' course, her bein' in Slytherin, I never really knew her, but yer couldn' help noticin' Lucretia Malfoy. She was a year younger than Abraxas an' Riddle, I reckon. Two peas in a pod, they were, Abraxas an' he."

"Tom Riddle, Hagrid?" Severus asked doubtfully.

"Yeh, I knew him," Hagrid said bitterly and took another swig from his mug. "I knew him before he called himself... well, before he became what he is today... Anyway, Lucretia Malfoy didn' get along with either o' them, from what I recollect, an' it's hard ter say exactly what it was that caused bad feelings between 'em. There were always more ugly sort o' happenings an' disagreements in the Slytherin House than others, yer see. All I know fer sure is that she disappeared after leavin' Hogwarts: never heard o' again."

"She's still missing?" asked Regulus.

"No, she's dead, or so they say," Hagrid mused.

"And her father?" prompted Severus.

"Dunno... no one knows... Dumbledore perhaps... but he's not sayin', if he does know."

"Perhaps he's sworn not to?" suggested Severus.

"How do you know she's deceased, Hagrid?" a troubled Regulus asked.

"The court hearings... no other livin' relatives, other than Abraxas an' Lucius..." pondered Hagrid. "There was mention of a 'mad ol' hag' who had taken care o' Nagini, up until she was put in Durmstrang. Well, that's what Abraxas called her, 'a *mad ol' hag*'; he blames her fer Nagini's behaviour an' lack o' proper control, as he says... Also, Nagini's mother's wand was given ter Abraxas. From what I 'eard, it was the only thing recovered from her remains... There was another set o' bones uncovered along with hers, but they never identified ter 'om they belonged."

Severus started to feel a sharp pressure in his temples; his head had started to ache painfully. Hearing dark details about someone else's bodily remains was not what he was in the mood for. He had barely recovered from the loss of his own mother; it had only been two months since Eileen Snape's body had been found, drowned in the river. Her death was still fresh in his psyche.

Severus' head started to pound harder; he just wanted to get through this weekend as quickly as possible. Attending Lucius' soirée was necessary on many levels, primarily because the Dark Lord would be sure to show up at some point during it. As Severus' jaws clenched with darting pain from his pounding temples, his thoughts jumped from what Hagrid was carrying on about, regarding the dubious activities of Abraxas Malfoy, to his own immediate plans for when classes resumed.

Severus was eagerly awaiting the return to Hogwarts for the new term. He had, without cease and in intense secrecy, tried all first semester to get Lily Evans to meet with him. And when Lily had heard of his mother's death, she had sent him a short but poignant condolence letter. In the postscript, she had agreed to meet him at their old library table, where Severus and Lily used to meet and discuss their lives, sharing their thoughts and emotions as only true friends could.

It had to be perfect; this time, meeting with Lily, everything had to be perfect. Severus had to win her back, her intimate trust in him, her need for him. Severus needed Lily to believe and want him again but most of all, for her to forgive him. Her forgiving him for wounding her with his name calling last spring was so very necessary. Severus still felt confused, like he had lost a part of him when thinking about Lily and the loss of her in his life. How could she not understand the humiliation and distress that had caused him to lash out against her that day? The culmination of unceasing attacks from that cursed infernal James Potter and his ruddy fiendish friend, Sirius Black!

This time, Severus would bare his soul to Lily; he would risk her rejection once more, the last remaining scraps of his pride along with the risk of being found out by his Slytherin housemates, for this chance to admit his true, deep feelings for Lily and what having her in his life had always meant. Severus envisioned her forgiving him and understanding why he had kept his amorous feelings for her secret: that his aloof facade had been for her protection all along. She would pardon him, and they would work out how to be together. Beyond Hogwarts. But, this time, for always.

How Severus was going to balance keeping his recent full allegiance to Lord Voldemort, and the required activities thereof, with keeping Lily in his life but at a safe and secret distance, an understanding, *consenting* distance, engrossed his mind at that moment.

"Abraxas! The Malfoys!" exclaimed Regulus suddenly, startling Severus back to attention and the reality of the Leaky Cauldron. "Hagrid, the peacock eggs! Were you able to get them?"

"Indeed, I did," Hagrid confirmed proudly. "I said I could, an' I did."

Hagrid sifted through the odd, clumsy shaped packages and pulled one out. Gently handing it over to Regulus, he said, "Here they are. Now, I've got 'em packaged safe an' sound. Yer just need ter put some fancy parchment around 'em, but my advice is ter hand 'em personally over to Narcissa, them bein' delicate, yer see."

"And here is your fee for them," Regulus said, handing over a small pouch filled with Galleons and briskly rising from his chair. "Thank you, Hagrid. Sorry, we need to be off; we're running behind on time. Quite a few other errands to run before this evening."

"I understand. Lots ter do. Take care o' yourselves, you two. Regulus, I know Lucius'll be yer relative o' sorts now, but watch yer back, as they say."

"Thanks for the advice, Hagrid, but no need to worry. I'm a Slytherin, remember?" Regulus jovially reminded him as he turned, leaving.

"Perhaps yer should've been in Gryffindor!" Hagrid bantered back, equally jovial.

"Enlightening as always, Hagrid," Severus said curtly and followed Regulus out.

Outside of the Leaky Cauldron, Regulus turned to Severus and said awkwardly, "I need to go to Borgin and Burkes to pick up an item for my mother, but she asked me to go alone. You know how she is..."

Severus knew well what Walburga Black was like, as well as her second cousin whom she had married, Orion Black. Both of them were the epitomes of pure-blood mania. He had only been spared Walburga's full inquisition of his family's background by being presented by Orion as Lord Voldemort's latest and most worthy servant. Orion and Walburga fully supported and encouraged Regulus' and Severus' friendship, especially after the disgrace of their eldest, blood-traitor son, Sirius; this had rendered Walburga a full nervous breakdown, from which she was only marginally recovered.

The hope that Orion and Walburga's youngest son, Regulus, would make up for Sirius' disgrace was ever present. Even though Regulus was only sixteen, he was already being coerced to join Voldemort in the name of all that the manic pure-bloods held sacred; it would be the Black family's deliverance from disgrace.

Trying to spare Regulus from any embarrassment and actually relieved, Severus informed him offhandedly, "I need to go to Madam Malkin's to pick up some recently ordered robes. Let's meet up at Malkin's, then? If I'm not finished, just wait in the front parlour for me. I'm sure she will oblige you."

Severus' current robes were too short and faded for him. He had grown taller, to a full adult height, and had filled out a bit more since the last summer, although he was still somewhat angular and gangly. Dumbledore had seen that the Young Wizard's Bereavement Fund had allocated funds to pay for new robes for Severus as well as other provisions, school related and personal, which he had needed. Severus was relieved that the privileged, wealthy Black wouldn't witness any charity being allotted to him at Madam Malkin's.

Regulus hesitated but then further asked impulsively, "Severus, these peacock eggs... could you take them for me? Just guard them for me until I return I may need both my hands free. They'll be safer with you at Malkin's. As I've got to rush, I'm afraid something might happen to them."

Not wanting to be responsible for the security of Narcissa's engagement gift but unable to refuse Regulus, Severus complied. "Very well."

Regulus cautiously handed over the odd, clumsy package to Severus and then headed off, calling back, "Thanks, mate."

The two Slytherins continued onwards, each on his own separate path.

\*\*\*\*\*

Arriving outside of Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, Abraxas stopped in his tracks abruptly. Turning around to Lucius and Nagini, Abraxas addressed Lucius first. "Take her inside; have her measured and fitted for appropriate social gowns as well as robes for Hogwarts. Tell Madam Malkin that two dresses are needed immediately for this evening and to send them on as speedily as possible. Son, I have some urgent, private business to attend to alone. You're responsible for getting her back to the Manor. Under no circumstance is Nagini to be left unattended." Abraxas gave Lucius a decisive, ominous look. "Do you understand me, Lucius?"

"Perfectly, Father," confirmed Lucius.

"And you!" Abraxas said derisively, turning and addressing Nagini. "One further incident of impropriety from you... You've been well warned, Nagini."

By now, Nagini loathed Abraxas with every ounce of her being. Her face and left arm were throbbing, aching in burning pain from the inflictions he had wrought upon her in the vault. She would never forget. Or forgive. She struggled with all her will to answer him. Abraxas noted her obstinacy with a sharp step towards her. Almost a split-second too late, Nagini answered, "Yes, Uncle."

Glancing around the public streets, Abraxas started to say something but thought better of it and abruptly turned away and headed toward Knockturn Alley.

"Follow me," ordered Lucius, indicating the entrance, and Nagini followed him into Madam Malkin's boutique.

As Lucius and Nagini entered Madam Malkin's foyer, the sound of carousing laughter was heard. As Lucius stepped towards the boisterous merrymaking evidently going on in the adjoining parlour, he heard the familiar, jeering voice of Rodolphus Lestrange, encouraged by other mocking voices doing imitations of someone. The mimicking, done by two separate female voices retorting back and forth to each other, was followed by the unmistakable, high pitched laughter of both Bellatrix and Narcissa Black. The laughter resounded throughout the high, arched rooms, immediately vexing, for a reason known only to him, Lucius. He found the trio stretched out and lolling around on plush poufs and couches; the adorned, silver side tables were covered with half-emptied champagne glasses.

As Lucius appeared in the archway, Lestrange's eyes widened, and he burst into laughter; he choked out, "Speak of the devil, and he appears!" Seeing Lucius, the witches giggled uncontrollably.

"Oh, Lucius, don't look like such a sourpuss! We've begun the celebrating a little early, that's all. Please, don't look so solemn," cooed Narcissa, slowly idling up to him. Knowing Lucius had a short fuse ... his temper was highly volatile ... and he would never tolerate being ridiculed by anyone, she tried to gloss over any suspicions he was having. "We were just speaking about you, and behold, here you are!"

"Something very amusing about me, apparently," Lucius commented, his tone clipped, not duped by Narcissa's explanation. He was definitely not amused. Perceiving he had been mocked by them, Lucius' lips thinned in a forced, tight smile, and he asked, "Anything interesting?"

"Not really, Lucius. For our sweet amusement only," teased Rodolphus. "But it seems you have something interesting. Pray tell, who have we here?" Rodolphus had spotted Nagini standing a slight distance behind Lucius.

"Oh, her..." acknowledged Lucius, turning halfway around towards Nagini. Realising it was unavoidable, he said resignedly, "Let me introduce my cousin, Nagini Malfoy."

"Oh, this is she! Finally!" exclaimed Narcissa, covering a worried expression with a gracious mask. "But, my dear, what has happened to your face?"

"She tripped in our family vault. We've just come from Gringotts, you see," answered Lucius.

"Tripped? On all of your filthy, lovely Galleons, Lucius?" purred Bellatrix, getting up from her reclined position. Lucius gave Bellatrix an appreciative smile as he stepped towards her.

"No, on all of my filthy, lovely gold trinkets, Bella..." Lucius replied caressingly. His dour demeanour had softened; Bella and Lucius were close enough to embrace each other. An unspeakable secret was being shared between them.

"Oh, behave, you two! What will your cousin think? I daresay she needs time to adjust to your 'sense of humour' among other things. Don't shock the poor girl silly with your nonsense before she gets to know us all," Narcissa scolded coyly. Then, she turned and called out, "Madam Malkin!"

Madam Malkin entered in a hurry, flushed and excited. "Mr. Malfoy! Why, to what have I this honour, today? We've just been toasting your mutual engagements. Are you so impatient to see your fiancée?"

Lucius found himself in a very foul mood after Malkin's comment. Checking his rearing short-temper, he informed her, "Impatient I am, Madam Malkin. I'm here on other business and wasn't expecting to see my bride-to-be. In short, we need to register another name to our family account: my cousin here, Nagini Malfoy."

Madam Malkin stepped back, startled, as if she had seen an unimaginable ghost. Finding her voice, she asked, "Can it be? Oh, my dear, you are the daughter of ... Lucretia?"

Uncomfortable with Malkin's shining, glassy eyes, watering up as she ogled her, Nagini answered simply, "Yes, I am."

"Well, my dear. Please come to the ladies fitting room. We will immediately measure you - she will need to be fitted for..." Malkin asked hesitantly to Lucius.

Lucius listed, "Four robes for Hogwarts, an array of social gowns, several, let's say, but we're in dire need of two dresses for this evening's soiree, Madam Malkin."

"But of course, Mr. Malfoy. We've always some in stock; shall I choose for you or would you prefer to do so?"

"Lucius, I should like to assist in selecting," offered Narcissa. "You can trust me to know your taste."

"The dresses aren't for me, my dear, but for Nagini. The only criterion is that they must be befitting of the occasion," pointed out Lucius.

"Well then, I'll do the selecting; who better to know what a Malfoy wants?" Narcissa pointed out, cloyingly sweet.

Bellatrix scoffed, "Indeed, Cissy. Then, I shall assist you as well."

Madam Malkin guided Nagini through a mirrored inner room to one of the back rooms followed by a slightly flustered Narcissa. "Please, come this way, ladies. Miss Nagini... your face, my dear... I have some wonderful healing balms for cuts, if you'd like to apply them?"

Melting under the woman's unceasing graciousness, Nagini replied, "Thank you, I would."

Bellatrix sashayed slowly behind the witches, only turning for a second to give Rodolphus and Lucius a calculating and crafty look before following the others into the ladies fitting room.

From the front parlour, Rodolphus gazed at where the witches had disappeared. Something dreamy passed over his mildly inebriated face. Taking a sip from his champagne glass, Rodolphus waved his hand to an empty one, which immediately filled halfway, and offered it to Lucius. "Champagne?"

"No, thank you, Rodolphus. I'm not in the mood."

"As I can quite plainly see. Dear, oh dear," Rodolphus sighed, "what's ruffled your feathers this morning, my dearest Lucius?"

Lucius did not answer him but remained silent, brooding.

Leaning back in the plush sofa, Rodolphus said lasciviously, "Quite a luscious piece of relations you've got there, Malfoy."

Sitting down, Lucius said slowly, "She is a quaint little thing, I suppose."

Languorously, Rodolphus asked, "She's half-Veela, isn't she?"

"Not that I am aware of," Lucius responded in a bored tone.

"Well, if she isn't, she could well be ... I mean, look at her, Lucius!" Rodolphus whispered fiercely.

Lucius looked up and followed Rodolphus' gaze. Nagini had already stepped back through to the central, mirrored room, bare-shouldered, dressed in a corseted, forest-green gown. It clung to her curvaceous form, previously hidden under her damper, travelwear suit and cloak.

As Nagini stood in front of the full-length mirrors, Bellatrix tentatively held up the accompanying sheer, blousy wrap to be worn, and Narcissa pointed her wand at Nagini's hair, whispering a charm; immediately, Nagini's hair became very neatly coiffed.

"What do you think, you two?" Bellatrix called over to Lucius and Rodolphus. "Bare-shouldered or covered?" Turning directly to Nagini, she whispered darkly, "I think they'd prefer your lovely, naked flesh on display."

"Please," Nagini asked impatiently, holding her hand out, indicating she would dress herself, "the blouse?" An intense, mutual feeling of dislike had already formed between Bellatrix and Nagini.

"Don't tell me you're the modest type?" Bellatrix said coldly. "Pity."

Lucius languidly eyed Nagini up and down.

Unable to read Lucius' thoughts precisely, Rodolphus asked softly, "Tell me, what do you see?"

It was all too obvious what Rodolphus wanted to hear: something lecherous or perverse. But as Lucius peered at Nagini, the resentment of her mere presence in front of him, invading his world, interfering with even his petty daily plans, infuriated him. Less than forty-eight hours ago, his life had been quite comfortably set, predictable; Lucius controlled the terms of engagement ... how and with whom he engaged had always been a relished power.

All of Lucius' and his father's plans had been arranged accordingly.

But now, this this illegitimate, bastard relation had been thrust upon them... But what riled Lucius even more was Nagini would eventually have legal rights, thanks to that wickedly clever Lester Qualmsick; she would have the means, through Qualmsick, to challenge Lucius, if she ever chose to in the future. Nagini could claim part of the Malfoy estate and any other aforesaid inheritance to which she could be entitled.

As Lucius continued mulling Nagini over in his mind, thinking of her potential access to the family vault, the confidences and family secrets that the prestigious Lester Qualmsick had now been made privy to because of her, his mood turned fouler and fouler.

And obviously, if Nagini was capable of murder, of what else was she capable? The verdict hadn't fooled Lucius; he knew her intent had been to kill the Durmstrang student. Cold-bloodedly. Lucius thought about how the depth of her Dark Arts abilities was still untapped and unknown.

Nagini was a Parselmouth, as well.

Lucius had never thought much of the ability beforehand. *"Why would anyone wish to converse with snakes?"* he thought glibly. But apparently, the ability afforded access to unknown magic. A very rare gift. He was getting himself worked up the more he dwelt on it. Lucius slightly flushed in envy and speculated jealously about Nagini having something he didn't have, something he could never have, something beyond his control.

Lucius gaze had hardened. "I see... a threat..." he replied simply.

Rodolphus inhaled sharply and then exploded into laughter. Catching his breath, Rodolphus said, "Wonderful! Only you could see something as delectable as that creature before us as a threat... I know that look of yours, Lucius." Rodolphus leaned into him, and whispered, "What? Do you really think she's dangerous? But you enjoy danger, dangerous creatures ... at least, dangerous witches. I know. I know you well, Lucius, my old friend. I know that look of yours."

"This time, as with many other things, you're mistaken, Rodolphus," said Lucius, almost hissing.

Rodolphus was taken aback by Lucius' acidic tone; it was enough to make him shut his trap for a few seconds and think before speaking again. For the first time, Rodolphus knew he had crossed some invisible line with Lucius. And over what? A witch? Rodolphus bristled a little, insulted; he didn't care if Nagini and Lucius were related or not why should Nagini be considered any differently from Bellatrix or Narcissa? Both Lucius and Rodolphus had always enjoyed a mutual, libertine freedom in their social as well as private interests and interactions with the esoteric selection of available pure-blood witches and the socialising thereof. They had shared courting, seducing and, generally, exploring which witches would be appropriate for which of their needs. Pressure from their families to only socialise with pure-bloods, and from this select group to arrange marriages with the most suitable ones, ones whose families leaned towards a new order of rule in the Wizarding World, and in particular those that were already stout, devoted followers of Voldemort, had narrowed Lucius and Rodolphus down to these two Black sisters, Narcissa and Bellatrix; the third, middle sister, Andromeda, was a treacherous blood-traitor, never to be spoken about again.

In the new order, the Dark Lord had selected his elite entourage: predominantly the offspring children of the Knights of Walpurgis, and surely, being the direct descendant from this elite esoteric group within the Wizarding World, this newly arrived female Malfoy would be brought into Voldemort's fold. *"The sooner the better,"* thought Rodolphus. *"What was Lucius being so bloody irritable about?"*

Rodolphus let out an audible sigh as he contemplated the new tension between him and his dearest, oldest friend. He and Lucius sat in silence. Rodolphus sipped his champagne, and Lucius continued to glare at the witches in the mirrored, inner room.

Lucius needed respite from Rodolphus. He needed... he needed - Severus Snape - he spotted Severus in the foyer. Rising, Lucius called out, "Severus, come over and join us!"

Severus crossed halfway towards him but stopped in the archway. "I don't wish to intrude," he said, giving a reserved look to both of them, lingering an extra second too long on Rodolphus Lestranger. Rodolphus gave Severus a cold smile.

Severus Snape had entered Madam Malkin's foyer quietly during Lucius and Rodolphus' chat. He couldn't help but overhear Rodolphus and Lucius and hadn't known quite what to do. Severus stood there holding the bulky, little package of peacock eggs, which were beginning to let off a slightly sulphuric odour. He knew he couldn't leave, as it was to be the rendezvous spot for him and Regulus; on a practical note, Severus needed his new robes. He'd be damned if he was going to start the new term in his old, ragged ones.

Bellatrix had left the other witches and entered the parlour, going directly over to Rodolphus. Even as she plopped herself on his lap, Rodolphus kept a steady eye on Lucius and Severus, both of whom had moved back into the entrance foyer. Bellatrix watched Severus particularly, with a curious gaze.

"Actually, I was just thinking about you, Severus. I have a special request for you," said Lucius. Suddenly, Lucius sniffed sharply and asked, "What's that putrid smell?"

Indicating the bulky, smelly package, Severus answered, "It's a gift. For Narcissa."

Lucius raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Something rancid? How thoughtful of you."

"It's not from me. From Regulus," clarified Severus. "It's his idea. Regulus is convinced Narcissa will be pleased."

"Humph, those Blacks..." grumbled Lucius, making a face, "Well, we all want to keep Narcissa pleased, don't we?" Then, giving Severus an imperious look, Lucius said, "I need to know."

Severus was puzzled. He waited for Lucius to elucidate his thoughts, bracing himself for a number of possibilities.

Lucius gave a fleeting glance back at Rodolphus and then continued, "You've now met my newly arrived cousin, Nagini. I need to know... when she arrives at Hogwarts, as she'll be with you in your class, I need to know what she does." Lucius hesitated before continuing, searching for the right words. Impatiently, he continued. "How *well* she does things. Her activities. With whom she does them. I trust you to report back to me."

Severus remained silent. He knew he didn't have a choice in the matter. It wasn't a request; it was an order from Lucius.

Continuing, Lucius emphasised, "I trust you as well to... to look after her, shall I say? I won't be around all the time to help her ... it's for her own protection, you understand. My father and I are in a rather delicate situation regarding her."

"Because of the Ministerial verdict? And Bartemius Crouch?" offered Severus.

Lucius eyes widened with surprise, and then he gave Severus a demanding, glowering look for further explanation.

Severus explained quietly, "Regulus and I ran into Rubeus Hagrid at the Leaky Cauldron. He filled us in a bit about some things when Regulus mentioned that we had met you at Gringotts."

"That half-breed oaf! Leave it to Dumbledore to entrust a mindless idiot with Ministerial protocol!" fumed Lucius as his eyes flashed dangerously. "Bartemius Crouch! That interfering, blood-traitorous leech! Once Crouch gets hold of someone, he doesn't let go. He's been waiting for something like this; Nagini's just the opening he's been waiting for to have an excuse to meddle with us. Damn him!"

Bartemius Crouch had the well-known reputation as a merciless, brutal Magical Law Enforcement officer. His perfidious, even diabolical means of rooting out the nests of iniquities of Death Eaters and potential followers of Voldemort had put a lurid fear and cautiousness in them all.

Just then, Madam Malkin appeared suddenly from the parlour. "Ah, Mr. Snape, I've been expecting you. I have your new robes all ready for you to try on. Would you like to do so now or perhaps relax with your friends a bit? Just let me know when you are ready."

Severus gave Lucius a look for approval to discontinue their conversation. Lucius concurred instinctively, saying, "We'll continue discussing this matter this evening. I need to be getting back to the mansion instead of lingering around here."

They gave each other concordant, knowing nods, and as Lucius returned to Rodolphus and Bellatrix in the parlour, Severus followed Madam Malkin.

"Please, Mr. Snape, step this way to the gentlemen's dressing room," she said, escorting him.

Severus followed Madam Malkin across the foyer to an archway that also led to the central, mirrored room. Heading towards the gentlemen's fitting room, across from the ladies fitting room, he glanced at the witches busy in front of the mirrors.

Nagini's attention was divided between Narcissa, still fussing and experimenting with Nagini's hair, and those in the front parlour, distracted by their stares.

Severus paused for a second, his attention drawn to Nagini. The picture of loveliness before him stopped him in his tracks. Indescribable. Nagini slowly turned in profile beside Narcissa. Severus was not easily beguiled or attracted to superficial appearances, as the one he saw before him: Nagini's bruised face had been covered with a charm or something similar; her attire, the curvaceously formed gown, glimmering, revealed far more of her body than could have been imagined from the last time he had met her, cloaked and betrodden. He knew it was a cheap facade. A lie.

Severus' sole preference was based entirely around Lily Evans and her unmarred, earthy beauty, inside and out. No other female could be compared to Lily or the feelings evoked.

Nevertheless, as Severus gazed at Nagini, facade and all, 'it' happened. He was struck by a revelation of beauty previously unknown to him, and a profound warmth flooded his entire body. Uncontrollably. He was suddenly aware of a feeling of ... Instantly, the discomforting feeling engrossed him along with the feeling of being ashamed, for it was purely carnal: a sensation of self-gratifying and sensuous need. The carnal heat wavered through Severus, causing a sharp intake of breath.

The carnal yearning wasn't for Lily Evans. It was for Nagini Malfoy.

The realisation sent an equally intense wave of guilt to wash over him, clashing hard with his lust. Severus forced himself to turn away and walked slowly to the gentlemen's dressing room in turmoil.

Meanwhile, Narcissa was chattering away. "There we go. Now, what do you think? Worthy of being shown off, Lucius? Rodolphus, close your mouth."

"Yes, Rodolphus, shut it!" snapped Bellatrix.

After a few seconds of silence, Lucius compliantly appraised Nagini's apparel for Narcissa. Slowly, he replied, "Yes, Narcissa, you've done quite well, naturally. Your taste is impeccable, as always, my dear." Lucius had risen and crossed over to Narcissa, giving her a dutiful kiss on her cheek.

Giddy with delight, Narcissa continued. "It's absolutely wonderful. I said to Nagini, jokingly mind you, 'it's a pity that you're not a blond', and look ... in an instant, wandlessly, her hair changed shades! Now, that's a gift! Although, it could be perhaps a bit more platinum, my dear."

As Narcissa gushed excitedly about this, Nagini glowered at all of them and transformed her hair back to mercurial shades of auburns, randomly highlighted with streaks of golden blond, reds and blackened nuances. She had turned around and started to walk back to the dressing room when Lucius' crisp voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Bit of a Metamorphmagus, are you? How interesting, Nagini." Lucius walked stealthily, resolutely towards her, stopping in front of her face. "Tell me, how many others know about your extra special little gifts?" he whispered fiercely, referring to the Parseltongue ability displayed in the family's vault. "Does Qualmsick?" A dangerous glint appeared in the grey, prying eyes.

"I'm not a Metamorphmagus. Well, not a pure one, that is," snapped Nagini.

"Not a pure what?" Rodolphus called out. The room had taken on a frozen atmosphere.

Only Bellatrix's eyes were glistening with secretive, bright thoughts as she peered at Nagini.

"I'm not a pure Metamorphmagus; I have some abilities. Limited abilities. Not worth boasting about," Nagini said directly to Lucius. Feeling suddenly tense and nervous from the changed atmosphere in the room, Nagini babbled out, "I know how to change my hair colour, some physical characteristics, wandlessly, when I'm in the mood..."

They were all staring at her like she was the strangest sort of idiot they had ever seen. Realising how silly she sounded, Nagini recklessly offered more information about herself, feeling put on the spot. "Transfigurations I'm very skilled in Transfigurations; I can at will wordlessly, wandlessly..." Then, she stopped herself. A rush of anger accompanied by a feeling of being humiliated washed over her. "*Who were these people?*" she thought to herself. Their smug, arrogant, judgmental faces were staring at her like she was the most distasteful oddity they had ever come across.

Their askant, apprehensive looks made Nagini want to hex them all ... blast them out of their posh, comfy positions. Why was she feeling that she needed to explain anything about herself to them at all? She was a witch the same as they, and though it wasn't the right time or place, she would've gladly duelled any of them on the spot, if only Abraxas hadn't taken her wand. Three armed wizards against one; Nagini knew it was a futile, whimsical thought.

Narcissa had unintentionally revealed a portion of Nagini's unknown skills ... it was true; she knew other wandless magic as well, but dared not display it before this lot.

Intensely, Nagini's thoughts flitted out of Madam Malkin's parlour and on to Monday. She desperately thought about how in two days' time, she would be in Hogwarts, away from all this direct scrutiny and not obligated to her horrid cousin and uncle, as well as their cronies. Then, Nagini remembered a warning given to her: "No matter what is said or done to you between now and arriving at Hogwarts, keep calm, discipline yourself, control your anger. Do not provoke your uncle or those around him..." The advice of the Hogwarts' Headmaster, Dumbledore, echoed around in her thoughts. Even though Dumbledore had been sublimely suspicious and brutally shrewd with her when he had met Nagini and 'interviewed' her for the first time in her holding cell at the Ministry of Magic, his advice had been a mantra for her to cling to in the past thirty-six hours.

Nagini glanced up and caught Narcissa's eyes. Narcissa was giving her a clandestine look. Was it with a twinge of compassion? Or something else? Either way, Nagini didn't care. *She's another overly conceited ninny, a perfect match for that ruddy, pompous prat Lucius; they're perfect for each other,* she thought ill-temperedly.

"I don't need to explain myself! To any of you!" Nagini exclaimed impulsively. "I'm going to change. Just leave me alone ... all of you!" She glowered at them and stormed out of the room; regardless of Nagini's outburst, Narcissa slowly went after her.

"Quite a rude, little attitude she's got there, among other things," Rodolphus commented.

Lucius crossed over to Rodolphus. Quizzically, he said, "Yes, we really should help her, I suppose." Lucius then gave Bellatrix a smile. "Help teach her some manners, that is." He turned back to Rodolphus and asked, "Are you game?"

Relieved that Lucius had pardoned any previous faux pas between them, Rodolphus smiled and said, "Lucius, you know me. I'm always game ... ready, willing and able."

"Count me in as well," purred Bellatrix, holding up her glass.

Lucius took the untouched glass of champagne previously offered him by Rodolphus. "Here's to kindred, Wizard bonding!" he toasted. "In more ways than one!" The trio gleefully chuckled, clinking their glasses together.

Having changed back into her travelling attire, Nagini entered the room with Narcissa as the trio toasted. "Have we missed something?" asked Narcissa, taking in the mirthful atmosphere.

"No, my dear." Lucius crossed over and swept Narcissa into him, planting a passionate kiss on her lips. Breaking away from him slightly in surprise, she exclaimed, "Lucius!"

"Just a little something. Until this evening." He kissed her again. "Now we must go." He turned to Nagini and proposed nonchalantly, "Shall we? Must return to the mansion before the guests arrive. Don't want to be rude by being late and unprepared, being the hosts, do we, Nagini?"

Nagini said nothing, eager to leave as soon as possible and return to the Manor, to her room, for some solitude. She followed Lucius to the door to leave without looking back at the others.

Madam Malkin bustled in, announcing, "Pardon me, I've just finished with Mr. Snape's fittings. I'll send your gowns to Malfoy Manor right away, Mr. Lucius."

"Thank you. We'll be expecting them." Then, turning to the trio, he said, "Until this evening, everyone!" As Rodolphus, Bellatrix and Narcissa smiled back in acknowledgement, the two Malfoys exited.

Leaving Madam Malkin's boutique, Lucius and Nagini walked down the main, winding street a little ways, and then they turned off onto a desolate side street. Lucius stopped, turned and said, "This will do. We can Disapparate from here." He offered Nagini his arm.

"I can Disapparate by myself. I don't need you!" she said, stepping away from him.

"You're not *licensed* to Disapparate! Remember?" hissed Lucius. He roughly grasped her around the waist and pulled her into him. Nagini could feel him smouldering with suppressed anger; a dark glow seemed to waver around him. Stoically holding her firmly against his hard body, Lucius nonetheless detected Nagini's suspicion of his abilities. Irrked by her daring to insinuate, even silently insinuate by her blatant discomfort, his inaptitude in anything, Lucius remarked sneeringly, "No need to worry about my Wizarding skills; I've been taught by the best ... you'll find I'm quite accomplished, even by your standards, whatever they may be..." Then, Lucius admitted darkly, "My dear cousin, the Malfoys are not feared by name alone... I'm already as accomplished in the Dark Arts as my father, if not more so," he added pointedly. "And I suspect your mother, my dearly departed aunt, was a perfidious sorceress of opportunistic means, treacherous and formidable, but an extremely audacious teacher of yours, no doubt." Then, Lucius nuzzled his head into her abundant thick hair, and intentionally placing his lips to graze her left ear, he whispered fiercely, "My little *murderess*!"

Frozen, Nagini's eyes widened, awed at Lucius' audacity to so intentionally disorientate her by so directly insulting her.

Pleased at having achieved the desired effect, Lucius tugged Nagini sharply into him again, and they Disapparated with a loud pop.

\*\*\*\*\*

Author's note: Deep appreciation to potionmistress23; and to Sempra, without whom this chapter for TPP could not have been realised - thank you for your guidance & tweaking, and astopperindeath/TPP administration for their patience & guidance!

# Before the Dreadful Dinner Party: Ambivalence Ascendant – Part One

## Chapter 5 of 22

Severus and Regulus confront each other preparing for the Dark Lord; Nagini and Lucius unexpectedly surprise each other in different ways.

### Chapter Five: Before the Dreadful Dinner Party: Ambivalence Ascendant Part One

Having finished his fitting, Severus once again stood in Madam Malkin's parlour foyer, but this time holding a large package containing his folded new robes in the crook of one arm and the bulky packaged peacock eggs in the other. He watched Regulus being fawned and cooed over by Narcissa and Bellatrix, with Rodolphus shoving a glass of champagne in the youngest Black's hand; Regulus was lapping up his cousins' mollycoddling of him. Each compliment stroked and expanded the Quidditch Seeker's ego, putting him in a state of euphoria.

Deciding it was the right moment, a giggling Narcissa coaxed, "You have to tell me what it is!" She was indicating a large, glittering, silver-wrapped object standing on one of the side tables. "You know I'm impatient; you know I can't stand secrets." She made as to gently tickle him on his side.

Half-heartedly dodging her fingers, Regulus feigned protest. "I can't! I can't! You know it's from my mother. She'd be very upset, Cissy." Regulus took a deep gulp of champagne; too fast, going down the wrong pipe, he started choking on the liquid as it burned the inside of his nostrils.

"Don't want to upset Auntie Walburga now, do we, Cissy?" teased Bellatrix. They all started laughing at some inside joke; only Regulus wasn't laughing, but rather trying to clear his throat and breathe normally.

"Oh Severus!" gushed Narcissa, spotting him. She crossed over to him, and calculatingly, but delicately, hooking her arm inside his and nudged him to join the group with her.

At her touch, Severus shifted his weight compliantly to accommodate her gentle guidance. He had long ago realised that Narcissa's charming and selective coquettish demeanour was not for him alone. Still, he was flattered. And grateful. Narcissa had gone out of her way, from Severus' very first day at Hogwarts, to make him feel welcome, comfortable, a part of whichever circle they found themselves in. Unlike others, who dropped their feigned interest in him beyond what he could do for them, Narcissa had remained constant fickle at times but consistently fickle; she had never once teased him about his reclusive, bookish behaviour, nor doubted his place within Lucius' esoteric circle, unlike Rodolphus and Bellatrix.

In return, Severus had grown accustomed to her demanding, pouty ways and could tolerate and even forgive her selfish whims, having experienced that they were generally short-lived and harmless, at least, harmless when regarding him he had no delusions about Narcissa. Severus enjoyed her attention, her whimsical games, knowing that at the end of the day, her place was with, and desires were long ago sealed to be for Lucius.

Steering him slowly over to the others, Narcissa insisted, "Share a toast with us, Severus."

Before he could decline, Bellatrix sniffed animatedly and made a wry face, "What is that smell? You, Severus?"

Severus eyes flickered irritably. He held his tongue, reminding himself of Bellatrix's knack for goading him into insulting banter. She never overlooked any opportunity to belittle him.

Bella took his unresponsive reserve for a private triumph. Elated, she goaded, "Oh, I see it's a big fat gift from our illustrious, affluent Mr Snape intended for you, Cissy!" The malicious intent glittered in her eyes. Bella resented Severus' friendship with her sister, even more so than his friendship with Lucius, or the Dark Lord's favour.

"Is it, Severus? Is it for me?" Narcissa asked him softly, looking at the larger of the two packages.

Severus shot a glance at Regulus, who was biting his lip, fidgeting, praying Bella's snottiness wouldn't cause Severus to lash out with the truth.

"I hope not, Cissy. It smells like rot!" jibed Bellatrix.

"Neither are gifts. These are new robes, and this it's not a gift. It's a ..." Regulus gave him a furtive glance. "This contains ingredients for a special potions project; thus, the aromatic fragrance you're finding so pleasurable, Bellatrix."

"Sulphuric and putrid? Do nasty smells please you? Doesn't take much, does it?" derided Bellatrix.

"Bella, enough!" silenced Narcissa. Disappointed, she looked up into his dark eyes and pouted, "A potions project? Potions? Oh, Severus, put that smelly thing down for a minute."

He tentatively placed both packages down beside Regulus' Borgin and Burkes parcel on the side table.

"Good boy," heckled Bellatrix.

Severus gave her an abrasive look, but went and stood again beside Narcissa.

Rodolphus sat back down, resuming his cold stare at Severus, as Narcissa gave the best sad, puppy-eyed look she could muster and said, "Oh, Severus, please, please promise me something." As she snugly wrapped her arm into his again and pressed her shoulder into his, Severus let out a slight sigh; being put on the spot by Narcissa in front of Rodolphus, Bellatrix and Regulus was the last thing he wanted.

Severus frowned and took an extra second to think; he had to be careful with Narcissa, careful what he promised her. She never asked him for anything unless she was sure to get what she wanted.

"That depends," he responded slowly.

Narcissa laughed, "Oh, Severus, it's nothing terrible hopefully it'll be pleasurable as much for you as it'll be for me." She giggled as he raised his eyebrows. "Please, please promise me that tonight you won't bring with you anything even remotely connected with Potions. Slughorn won't be coming, no need to impress anyone. Promise me that you'll try to enjoy yourself; loosen up a bit? I know you're guarded around Lucius, but you have to promise to dance with me."

"That depends," he repeated.

"On what?" asked Narcissa, starting to become truly peeved.

"Only if your fiancé approves."

"See, Bella? You were wrong about him. He's such a good little boy. Considerate. Obedient. Loyal. Lucius is a lucky man," Rodolphus coolly commented.

"Oh, Rodolphus, let him be. This is my night! I won't have you and Bella spoiling it for me with your bickering and bothering others!" demanded Narcissa. However, being considerate of Lucius' approval seemed to please Narcissa very much. Encouraged and undeterred, she smiled even more broadly and pressed harder against Severus' shoulder. "One more teeny little promise?"

"Yes?"

"You'll wear something other than black? Just a hint of colour? Just for me?"

Feeling the butt of some joke, but susceptible to Narcissa's particular blandishment, Severus said dourly, "That depends, as well. I'll see what I can do."

As Narcissa let out a warm heartfelt laugh in response, enjoying the fact Severus found her charms irresistible, a loud *crack* erupted, and Kreacher, the house-elf to Walburga and Orion Black, appeared in the middle of the parlour.

With a low bow, and his snout-like nose almost touching the floor, Kreacher croaked, "Kreacher begs Master Regulus' forgiveness!"

"Kreacher, in heaven's name, what's the matter?" demanded the youngest Black. His jovial appearance fell instantly, replaced with a fierce look of worry.

"Your mother, Master Regulus, your mother! Kreacher's Mistress is having one of her attacks; she cries and so fearfully calls her son. Master must come at once!"

Upon hearing this, a dark, foul restless mood came upon Regulus in an instant. He threw down the champagne glass and stomped over to the table, roughly grabbing the Borgin and Burkes package. His swift, disturbed movements charged the room with a tense, tumultuous energy.

"Forgive Kreacher, Master Regulus!" begged the little shrivelled-up elf.

"Enough, Kreacher! You've done nothing wrong!" shouted Regulus irritably at him. Kreacher grovelled silently. Instantly changing his tone and slowly walking over to stand beside the small creature, Regulus said quietly, as if to a small child, "It's all right, Kreacher; take me home at once."

"Don't worry, Regulus. The Dark Lord will make a man of you yet, a true wizard. Hysterical Mummy or not," coddled Bella. Rodolphus clapped the embarrassed Regulus on the shoulder and whispered, "Until tonight, Regulus."

"Yes, tonight. Tonight," Regulus repeated softly.

Kreacher had half-turned, bowing to Severus, and croaked, "Mistress Black commands that Kreacher brings home both young Masters."

"Thank you, Kreacher," acknowledged Severus, ignoring the loud snort from Bellatrix at his polite address to the house-elf, "but I can Disapparate by myself later."

"Mistress Black has commanded me. You must come with Kreacher and Master Regulus," explained Kreacher, remaining stoically resolute, his large protruding orbs staring up at Severus.

If nothing else, the highly annoyed and anxious look Regulus gave him caused Severus to give in without further argument. "Very well."

"That's right, be a good little boy, Severus; let the wee little house-elf escort you to the Noble House of Black. You should thank your lucky stars for being so privileged!" erupted Bella.

"Bella! Enough!" exclaimed Narcissa.

Retrieving the packages, Severus joined Regulus, standing on the other side of Kreacher, who reached his scrawny arms up with vice-like grips of steel around the young wizards' elbows, and as he held and tugged both of the young Masters, the three Disapparated together, the air rippling, leaving a troubled Narcissa and smug Rodolphus and Bella behind.

Apparating into the main parlour of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Regulus and Severus stood facing a hysterical Walburga Black, lying sprawled on a settee, both of her hands fisted in the centre of her breastplate as if clutching an invisible apparition on her chest. A seething Orion Black stood up grimly, giving Regulus a lacerating look.

Seeing her son, Walburga gasped out, "Regulus! Regulus! You were gone so long!" She was choking, gasping for air. Suddenly, she shrieked, "I thought, I thought something had happened to you!"

"Leave us, Severus!" commanded Orion sharply. Discreetly keeping his eyes from witnessing anything further, Severus hurriedly left and made his way up to the next floor to take refuge in the guest room.

Once inside, he quickly put down the packages and removed his cloak and outer jacket, tossing them on the bed. Rolling up his sleeves, he went to the washstand, pouring water into the bowl and splashing his face several times. Wiping his face dry, Severus stared at himself in the mirror above the stand. *"What is happening? I don't understand today... I feel so conflicted by..."*

Walburga's shrieking and wailing carried up sharply through the house and into the room, followed by the livid shouting and gut-churning screaming between Orion and Regulus, accompanied by what sounded like strong slaps. Severus pulled out his wand and flicked it. The Silencing Charm took immediate effect, but the echoes of the volatile family quarrel still resounded in his ears. Slightly trembling, Severus crossed and threw himself onto the luxurious, plush bed, shoes and all. He allowed himself to stretch out, taking deep expansive breaths. Still edgy, he looked sadly around the spacious bedroom. He could do nothing but wait for Regulus.

*God, I want this day to end. I want Monday to come. Now* He took his wand and started whispering softly. Soft green wisps of smoke seeped from its tip. In the air, he spelled out the name: LILY. It relaxed him. He took another deep breath. As the delicate wisps faded away, his thoughts randomly went over the day's events. He turned over on his side and then back again to lie on his back. *God, what an awful bloody day.* Mindlessly, his wrists slowly conducted another name: NAGINI.

Restlessly, Severus sat up, threw his wand on the bed and strode over to the bureau where the damn peacock eggs he'd been dragging around all day lay, along with his new robes, still bundled up. He looked over at his engagement gifts for Lucius and Narcissa. Made with his own hands. For Lucius, a tiny bottle of Felix Felicis; something money *could* have bought, but few could make this potion as perfectly as he. For Narcissa, a set of seven miniature bottled oils in a rectangular birchwood box filled with dried white rose petals. A different scent for each day of the week: Evergreen, Lavender, Magnolia, Vanilla, Sandalwood, Beijing Rose, Wisteria.

*Who am I fooling? Narcissa will laugh at my efforts; perhaps not to my face, but Bellatrix...*

It had taken Severus all of the first term to make them; after his mother's death, he had thrown himself into finishing the concoctions with extra fervour and effort. *Please, please promise me that you won't bring with you anything even remotely connected to Potions.* The innocent request by Narcissa echoed in his mind.

*Will I always be undervalued? Unappreciated? Just to be used for others' conveniences?*

In frustration, he hurled the box of scented oils at the wall. At the muffled sound of broken glass, Severus immediately regretted his actions. He moaned to himself and then slowly went over to assess the damage. Only one phial had actually broken: Wisteria, Narcissa's favourite. Grabbing his wand, he pointed and whispered, "*Reparo!*" He gently placed the phials back in the box and placed it beside Lucius' gift; Severus winced with the sudden pain of futility.

"*Legilimens!*" The wild cry was accompanied by a loud bang as the bedroom door slammed against the wall. The door shut fiercely behind Regulus as he sprang into the room and lunged at Severus, slashing the air with a non-verbal spell. With cat-like adeptness, Severus jumped and sprang away.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he cried, whipping Regulus' wand from him, followed immediately with an "*Accio!*", capturing Regulus' wand swiftly in his other hand.

Severus stood facing an exasperated Regulus, flushed and highly agitated. Regulus' dark, disturbed eyes flashed, and perspiration poured from his forehead. Regulus wiped at it, pushing his long unruly locks out of his face, and started to prowling back and forth along the other side of the room. "I've always told you, with reflexes like yours, you could always challenge me for the Seeker position on the team," reminded Regulus shakily. Then, he added cockily, "Or, if nothing else, a peon Chaser."

Severus took a moment to take in the situation; Regulus' wild-eyed and highly excitable nature was something he was used to, but after being with one or both of his parents, the snooty, pugnacious Black family traits were always unpleasantly accentuated in Regulus.

He watched Regulus strut, pacing around, randomly swiping at invisible objects in the air, before Severus calmly replied, "And I've told you a hundred times: Legilimency requires one to have eye contact, be calm, focused. It's not a Quidditch move, Black."

"Just wanted to catch you off guard, know what you're thinking. Thought a Quidditch move might do the trick."

"Quidditch doesn't interest me," Severus pointed out, trying to curtail any further discussion on the subject, "as much as other things."

"Yeah, I know, I know." Swaggering around, Regulus listed, "Potions, Dark Arts, Mudbloods..."

Severus stood deathly still.

Regulus licked his lips nervously, ran his hand through his hair again, standing in a poised stance with his hands on his hips. Seeing the morose look on Severus' face, he said, "Sorry... thought you'd be over her by now." Tense silence pervaded the room. "I mean, after all the pain and humiliation you've gone through... about her."

"Well, you'd know all about pain and humiliation, wouldn't you?"

Biting the inside of his cheeks, Regulus grimaced, "I said I'm sorry, mate, right?" He started restlessly pacing again. "Now, give me back my wand."

Thoroughly pissed off, Severus said coolly, "No. No, I don't think so. Not yet."

Regulus made to nonverbally jerk his wand from him, but Severus swatted Regulus' attempt away with a quick flit of his hand.

Severus' eyes flashed dangerously as he reprimanded, "You asked me here this weekend to help prepare you for the Dark Lord tonight. We've done precious little of that, in case you haven't noticed!"

"Well," Regulus gave him his best haughty look, "I've changed my mind. I don't need your help. I don't need anyone's help! I mean, the Dark Lord asked for me. He wants me. I'll be his youngest servant, younger than you even!"

"Then, if my help's no longer needed, perhaps I should leave."

"Yeah, perhaps you should."

"Fine." He threw Regulus' wand at him and stalked over to the wardrobe beside the bed. Opening it, Severus began to pack his few belongings with quick simple movements into an old leather tote bag.

Behind his back, Severus heard the question, "What will he make me do?" It was Regulus' voice, altered, subdued, with just a tinge of trepidation in its adolescent tone.

Severus stopped his packing, took a deep breath, and sighed. Keeping his back to Regulus and his eyes shut, he whispered, "Anything."

As Severus slowly turned around, he saw Regulus slide down the wall. He sat with his back up against it, knees bent, and taking his wand, he twiddled it between both hands. Momentarily depleted of any aggression. Humbled.

Regulus' looming dread filled the room. Severus said nothing but waited. There was nothing to say.

Naturally restive, Regulus quickly recovered some of his belligerence. Trying to sound light-hearted and forcing bravado into his voice, he spoke out loud, "Yea, well, I'm up for it. Tonight, you know. A bit of hobnobbing, flirting... and then... the Dark Lord. Perfect evening..." He made a puffing sound as if to force a laugh that wouldn't come out. Severus slowly went over and sat down on the floor near him, resting against the wall as well. He knew Regulus needed someone just to listen more than anything else at the moment.

"Besides, everyone'll be there. All of you?"

Severus silently nodded affirmatively.

"If you lot survived it, so will I, right? He did ask for me specifically," continued Regulus, as if to remind himself more than Severus. "Bellatrix'll be there, of course. She's been helping to groom me for the Dark Lord, as well, you know. Cissy won't be... she doubts everything... me... doubts why..." As his voice trailed off, his eyes darkened. Then, with effort, seemingly wanting to change the subject, "And of course, that new Malfoy bird won't be included. *Yet*, that is."

*God, he sounds like his smart-arse, git brother, Sirius, with his colloquial Muggle slang* Severus derisively thought; although, the images of the Muggle girls on motorbikes in Sirius' room that Regulus had shown him when they snuck in last night had been interesting... *unusual; yes, from a distance, likewise, Nagini Malfoy is definitely interesting...*

Not allowing himself to become distracted further, Severus pointed out, "I doubt anytime soon. The Malfoys have enough to deal with, without her being involved in anything else dubious in nature that the Ministry could get a whiff of. They won't risk it with her anytime soon; although, I suppose it is inevitable."

"It's so odd," stated Regulus matter-of-factly.

"What is odd?"

"Her Nagini Malfoy. She's unusual, a real oddity."

Severus huffed.

Seeing his impatience piqued, Regulus clarified, "It's just that in some pureblood families, such as the Malfoys or Weasleys a female is born only once in several



generations, and unlike the Weasleys, who breed like rabbits the Malfoys barely manage to reproduce even an heir usually only one child in any given generation. The fact that Abraxas actually ever had a sister that a second child was born, and that that child was female is remarkable in and of itself. And that Lucretia Malfoy had a female child the odds are overwhelming."

Severus controlled himself from making a surly comment about how purebloods always seem to think that their births were on the same level as an immaculate conception. He wanted to say it was just another act of nature in Lucretia's case. Nagini, she was just one more bastard in the world, and that everyone, regardless, came into the world the same way: bloody, filthy and puking. In essence, the Malfoys, as well as the other purebloods, had nothing on anybody else. But, conflicted, Severus admitted to himself that he also believed an opposite aspect of existence to be true as well, *Wizards are nature's nobility... and Muggles are stupid, repugnant creatures. It was nature's true plan that Wizards dominate and rule them, putting the primitive beasts finally in their place once and for all.* As he shifted his lanky frame in response to his growing discomfort sitting on the hard floor, his feelings about Nagini Malfoy rose up inside him and the awareness that he had a burning curiosity to find out more about her. *Perhaps tonight I can... oh, blast it! What is wrong with me?*

Stating the obvious, Regulus intimated, "Poor bird. They don't seem to be too happy about her being here, what with the murder verdict, the Ministry breathing down their necks now more than usual. Told my parents why we were late, that we'd run into the Malfoys and all; heard her mother was mental that's what my parents say."

"They said that, just now?" asked Severus incredulously.

Regulus winced, remembering his father smacking him in the head for using meeting Nagini Malfoy as an excuse for why he was late, triggering his mother to have one of her fits. "Well, not those exact words, but that's what they meant." Seeing Severus' askance look at him, he impatiently pointed out, "She can't be too different from her mother, can she? Shame. Bet when Abraxas hasn't knocked her around, mental or not, she's quite a dish." Regulus bit his lower lip and then jumped up.

Standing up as well, Severus was momentarily speechless at Regulus' blunt comment. He'd expect it from Sirius Black, but not from Regulus. But then, Severus had noticed a disturbing change in Regulus ever since they arrived at Grimmauld Place. He had first thought it was primarily due to the damper, depressing atmosphere of the house, but quickly realised that anytime Regulus was around either parent, he became unstable, changeable, hyperactively dutiful, cringingly obliging to every utterance of either parent, as if he couldn't move or speak fast enough when addressed by either of them.

"It doesn't bother you?" asked Severus.

Regulus had begun pacing around the room, levitating a dead Snitch he'd pulled out of his pocket.

"What?"

"You saw her. She'd been struck. More than once."

"What do you take me for? Yeah, it bothers me!" Regulus' face was vehement. He spat out, "But she must have done something to have made Abraxas do it!" More to himself than to Severus, he said loudly, "She'll learn. She'll adapt. Like we all do." Regulus' eyes locked onto Severus', and he said, "It makes one stronger. Right? What's a little physical pain? If she's anything like Lucius, she'll adapt in no time."

Severus made no comment, but instead pulled out his wand. "Shall we?"

Regulus stopped in his tracks, sniffed, took a deep breath and tucked his loose bangs behind his ears. He then centred himself. Still and quiet. Focused. Poised. Ready to duel.

As Severus and Regulus gazed at each other, the same realisation and thoughts ran through their minds: in the end, regardless of who else would be there tonight, 'it' Regulus' initiation as a Death Eater would be between just Regulus and Voldemort. Dark intimacy. Solely and secretly. Regulus' moment of truth alone; his private unique experience with the greatest known Dark Lord of all time. The Deliverer to Wizardkind. There was truly no way for one to prepare oneself, other than to open up and be willing to give oneself to Voldemort, completely and utterly.

Knowing this, Regulus still couldn't help ask, "What will I have to do?"

Again, Severus could only answer, "Anything."

The Seeker's troubled eyes were not appeased. Severus elaborated quietly, "Anything he wants you to... or have done to you."

Regulus blinked hard. Then, Severus said what Regulus wanted to hear, "The pain will be excruciating. Indescribable."

Centring themselves, breathing deeply and steadily, they both masked their faces with apathy. Minds were clear. Empty.

Severus asked quietly, "Ready?"

Regulus shifted his weight slightly, prepared himself in a final motion, and then nodded silently, ready for Severus' oncoming attack.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nagini and Lucius Apparated to in front of the path lined with hedgerows of the Malfoy Manor lawn with a muffled pop. Within seconds, Nagini had recovered from her previous shock and shoved herself away from Lucius. He looked surprised and wary at her and had drawn his wand, expecting her to lunge at him at any second.

She caught her breath and asked, "You don't believe them?"

"Believe who?"

"The Wizengamot the verdict! That I'm innocent?"

Lucius took a moment and composed himself. He then gave a wry forced smile. "Innocent? You?" And without saying another word, he turned towards the manor and casually flicking his wand, dispelling the protective ward. Barely looking at her, he asked sarcastically, "Shall we?" He stepped into an invisible border, indicating that Nagini should do the same. Surprisingly, she complied; at which, Lucius turned back towards the boundaries of the Malfoy Manor grounds and recast the barrier. Without further attention to Nagini, he headed towards the front door.

Nagini, however, had stopped, overcome with frustration and anger. A deep longing mixed with the most profound ache ebbed inside of her; she blurted out, "When I first heard about you, that you *even* existed when your father told me about you I thought, I thought..."

Lucius stopped in his tracks, turned around, and looked at her, sardonically amused and curious, and waited for her to continue.

Nagini had stopped; she was clearly struggling with herself whether to go on or not. She was trying to suppress her trembling, while deciding if she could control herself enough *not* to say anything more for she had sworn to herself in the vault that she would never ever cry or show any more signs of weakness in front of Abraxas and Lucius. She felt it was futile to share or reveal anything about her intimate feelings or past life. She wouldn't give them the chance or satisfaction of seeing her spirit vulnerable, susceptible to their cruelty, or that they could affect her in any emotional way. She wouldn't give them that pleasure.

But as she looked up at Lucius, she was surprised and unnerved by the change of expression on his face a look of sincere curiosity and, could it be, concern?

"I'm waiting. Go on."

His neutral tone gave her the impetus to risk saying, "My whole life I've longed for... when I heard you existed, actually existed a close blood kin, near my own age... I was so very happy at the thought of you, the possibility that we ..."

Lucius grimaced, and Nagini froze.

She looked away from him, embarrassed and abashed; unable to bear any more rejection or scorn.

The seconds ticked by in silence. Feeling defeated, Nagini disheartedly looked up at him again, ready to stoically follow Lucius and trudge on to the manor's main entrance.

But she met no derisive look from Lucius. Instead, an odd, soft contemplative expression gazed forth at her. The two young Malfoys silently stood, gazing at each other as if truly seeing each other for the first time. A moment of crystal-pure honesty.

From a lifetime of duelling, Lucius knew when an opponent's energy was exhausted, on the edge; all that was left was pure nerves, adrenaline, emotion. And as he observed Nagini, a melting sensation ebbed inside of his hard suspicious façade; the slightest crack occurred. While he had watched Nagini struggle with herself to continue confessing something something intimate, making her so vulnerable to him mixed emotions surfaced and the fleeting thought of *"Perhaps she's not such a threat, perhaps..."* He stopped. While seeing his cousin Nagini, as if for the first time, her insolent bearing, her defences down, Lucius saw something beyond. Something more. Something familial. A kindred empathy. Painful and raw. Disappointment and loss. In that split second, the realization that he didn't want her spirited nature to be diminished, to be broken; but, on the contrary, he deep down admired it, understood it. A dawning, a soft brush of warmth in his chest caused him to let out a long sigh.

Nagini impulsively responded, "I imagined... I imagined we..." but then her voice broke off; she couldn't continue.

Lucius took a small step towards her. "You shouldn't believe what you imagine; you'll always be disappointed." The grey eyes had an uncharacteristic gentleness in them, which snapped Nagini's reserve.

Her eyes pooled, and a single tear rolled softly down her cheek.

The accumulation of the day's events who was she fooling? The past week's, the past month's events culminating with today, Abraxas' treatment, Lucius' former coldness were taking their toll on her usually disciplined, stalwart, protective hard surface. Her impenetrableness. She didn't want this this uncontrollable vulnerability in front of Lucius, of all people. She couldn't trust his sudden amiability to her. It confused and disorientated her. It was true; she had just wanted him to listen to her, to not be so blindly hostile to give her a chance. A chance to prove she wasn't some parasitical, murdering, uncontrollable harpy, or whatever was going on in his mind. To stop disconcerting her and give them both a chance to understand one another. She had so many questions about the family in general, his life specifically, Hogwarts, that she wanted to ask, and she would love to feel comfortable enough to share with him the same, but was too upset and embarrassed to express it clearly.

Unprecedentedly, Lucius had the awkward instinct to reach out to her, to comfort her. As he looked at her, he also reflected on their first meeting here at Malfoy Manor when Abraxas had finally brought her home from the Ministry. She had struck him as proud, aloof, unnaturally reserved. What a Malfoy should be. Unwontedly, he had not wished to admit it, a kin. Upon seeing the dispirited witch now in front of him, her face marred by a hand that he himself had all too many times experienced, his tense body relaxed. Lucius saw raw emotion in her features, of the sort never before witnessed; experienced yes a very long time ago, and then, never again. It simply was not allowed. He had learned that lesson well. He stepped towards her and, before he knew what he was doing, he reached out and gently brushed away the solitary tear upon her cheek.

At his touch, Nagini broke down. "I thought you'd be different!" she softly sobbed out.

Taking a moment to register the almost dizzying awareness of the moment, Lucius pondered what she meant, for he had only been and cared to be this intimately direct with Narcissa, and of course, by necessity or force, the Dark Lord.

"Different from what?" he asked quietly.

The words spilled forth, whispered fiercely, "Different from your father!"

As Nagini and Lucius gazed at each other, a soft, hissing *crack* abruptly erupted. Abraxas Malfoy stood four feet away from them.

No one spoke. Nagini and Lucius both watched Abraxas and waited.

At last, Abraxas, his scathing look searing through both of them, asked, "What are you two doing out here?"

After a few seconds, Lucius found his voice. "We've returned from Madam Malkin's, Father. We've just now Apparated home just a few seconds before you, in fact."

Abraxas sneered sardonically. "Really? It looks to me as if I have interrupted something, something which most assuredly began longer than a few seconds ago." Giving them both an odd leer, he said pointedly, "What, Lucius? I've left you alone with her for barely an hour, and she already has you lying to me? How weak you are."

It might as well have been a slap to the face. Lucius was speechless; his face flushed flaming red. Nagini had turned a pale ash colour, trying to breathe normally, her heart beating fast, waiting for Abraxas to vent his displeasure further.

But, to both of their surprise, Abraxas swiftly turned his back to them and strode up to the main doors. Only turning to call out, "Well? Don't dawdle, you two. Come inside, prepare yourselves for this evening!"

As they all entered the grand entrance hall of Malfoy Manor, the bulbous-eyed house-elf Dobby timidly waited for their orders.

Abraxas, looking hard at the little creature, instructed, "Take Mistress Nagini to her chamber. I've already gone over with you beforehand what you are allowed and not allowed to do for her. See that she has all the toiletries and other needs for preparing for this evening. Any out of the ordinary requests, come to me and tell me immediately. Some gowns will be arriving for her. Take them to her when they arrive. In the meantime, check on Master Lucius' needs, and when finished with him, come to me."

"Yes, Master Malfoy," came Dobby's servile reply. Then the little elf bowed and said, "This way, Mistress Nagini." Dobby indicated towards the broad, curved black-marbled stairway.

Taking off his gloves and not bothering to look at Lucius, Abraxas informed him, "Lucius, after you've rested and finished your preparations, before the guests arrive, come to my private drawing chamber. I wish to have a little talk with you."

"Yes, Father."

Still, but trepid, Lucius watched as Abraxas walked away from him down the long, elegant hall without so much as a glance back or further attention to him. It wasn't a good sign.

\*\*\*\*\*

Author's note: Deepest thanks to my grammar beta Sempra, her guidance and 'meddling' extraordinaire, keeping me in line, on my toes, and my founding Snapette, and beta Agnus Castus - for so many things, besides the final touches, my deepest gratitude.

# Before the Dreadful Dinner Party: Ambivalence Ascendant – Part Two

Chapter 6 of 22

Besides avoiding a witch's tears, Abraxas gives Lucius some other advice; Nagini and Lucius make a truce of sorts.

## Chapter Six: Before the Dreadful Dinner Party: Ambivalence Ascendant Part Two

In her boudoir, Nagini relished the hot cinnamon-scented bath that Dobby had prepared for her. Afterwards, in her bedchamber, after tasting the petit fours and mixed fruits brought to her by the subservient creature, Dobby insisted she had a small glass of elf-made wine. Nagini wasn't used to having a house-elf at her beck and call, nor had she ever been pampered so much. At first, she felt awkward and wary of a possible false security. There was a stark contrast between her experience outside the chamber's walls and this present occurrence within them. As such, she was reluctant to completely trust the plush, comfortable surroundings and the grovelling attentions of Dobby. But she gave into it. The hot bath, food and wine caused a drowsiness to come over her that she could no longer resist.

Feeling an unaccustomed sense of relaxation lying in the middle of the luscious grand-size canopied bed, she stretched out and reflected over the day's events. With a heavy sigh, Nagini tried to recapture and reflect upon her encounters: *Gringotts was horrible. Those two young wizards the taller one, he entered my mind well, that won't happen again. Oh, those insufferable toffs at Madam Malkin's...* But the soft fragrance of succulent aromas from the feast being prepared wafted through the manor, mixing with the heavy aroma of cinnamon spice in her bath water, along with a distant tinkling sound of string instruments playing unobtrusive melodies which floated through the air. Nagini began to drift in and out of a light sleep.

In between her napping on and off, she thought about Lucius' comments on the pathway outside the manor and the unexpectedness of Abraxas' disinterest in interrogating them both further. Perhaps it was only because guests were coming and Abraxas was just postponing some further punishment, corporal or other, till a later time; or perhaps the faintest hope flitted through Nagini's thoughts the occasion for this evening had changed his mind towards being more tolerant. Perhaps he was going to give her a chance. A chance to be normal. To fit in. *I can do it*, she thought to herself drowsily, *I can be his perfect niece for an evening. The whole weekend. And then, Monday, Hogwarts. Hogwarts! It'll be so wonderful. A fresh start. Away from Malfoy Manor!*

*You shouldn't believe what you imagine; you'll always be disappointed.* Lucius' words came back to her. As she fretted, struggling to overcome her lethargy, at last she gave in to it and fell into a deep sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

*"What are you afraid of Abraxas? And you Riddle?" taunted Lucretia. "Stupid, filthy Muggles!"*

*Shrieking at the top of her lungs, Lucretia screamed, "I will fear nothing no one!"*

*Flashes of ricocheting coruscated light, bouncing, soaring in the air from curses being thrown around the dark Slytherin common room, abounded simultaneously and relentlessly.*

"Father?"

Abraxas slowly gazed up from where he had been leaning against the mantelpiece and staring into the burning embers in the fireplace. He turned his head around slightly to acknowledge Lucius, realising his eyes must have appeared glazed with a faraway look. In reality, the potion he had been taking for a flare up of Dragon Pox had caused his vision to momentarily blur. He shifted his body from leaning on the suppliant mantelpiece and turned to focus on his chair; Abraxas' body ached, the inflammation and painful chancre sores along with a bordering, flaring temperature ebbed and twinged through his body. The flashbacks of his sister and Voldemort did not help to still the bile in his throat, waiting to come out.

As Abraxas slowly tottered from the mantelpiece to his lounge chair, collapsing into it, he instructed, "The red phial there, Lucius mix it in my glass." He motioned to the nearest side table.

Unquestioningly, Lucius did as instructed. Upon finishing, out of habit, he took a linen napkin, placed it under the silver goblet, crossed over and immediately helped guide it to his father's lips. Helping to hold it steady for Abraxas, he watched apathetically while Abraxas struggled to not gag on the sanguine liquid, forcing himself to drink the contents.

Clearing his throat, Abraxas suddenly grasped Lucius by the arm firmly and said, "You're a good son. Loyal. Obedient. I am so very pleased," before heavily dropping his arm down to rest.

Replacing the glass, Lucius didn't comment, taking it for granted the narcotic effects had taken effect immediately. Abraxas' vision still seemed unfocused; he closed his eyes and murmured, *"A witch's tears... a witch's tears. Beware a witch's tear. Old Magic. Very old. Very perilous. One becomes irretrievable and lost..."*

*A witch's tears? Bloody hell! How does he know these things?* thought Lucius to himself, trying to maintain a placid face.

Abraxas' lids suddenly snapped open, looking directly at Lucius.

"Tonight is the culmination, the public celebration and sealing of our family's line with the Black line before the final consecration. Narcissa Black is a gem, but coy and cunning beyond her insipid family's imagination. Never underestimate your bride-to-be," emphasised Abraxas.

Relieved, having expected a more caustic criticism, Lucius answered, "Of course not, Father."

"The New Order is here; the opportunity and time is at hand. The New Age has heralded in a Dark Lord who will succeed in conquering all. I have known Lord Voldemort almost all my life; I've seen his involvement into the great Dark sorcerer that he truly is. He was born to rule others. Nature has endowed him with remarkable, incomparable powers. Those who follow him will be generously rewarded; those who do not will perish along with the worthless Muggles, as well they should."

Lucius relaxed a tad, assuming his father had begun one of his redundant lectures.

But Abraxas jumped again in his thoughts. "Another female you should never underestimate is your cousin, Nagini." Sharply, he asked, "Did you touch her tears?"

Even though Lucius stood still, outwardly keeping calm, his forehead became moist and clammy with perspiration, the way he always became when he knew he was caught by Abraxas. *Bugger it all! How does he know these things? It was just one bloody tear!* The absurdity of it all exasperated Lucius, for he knew it was a test. A test to see if he would lie regarding Nagini. Abraxas knew the answer already. And Lucius knew that he knew it. It was just another of Abraxas' sick games of power particularly used for his son; he enjoyed pushing Lucius' buttons and watching him squirm.

"Just... just one tear." Lucius confessed resentfully.

"You stupid little fool! How you disappoint me!"

Even though Lucius was accustomed to Abraxas' belittlement of him, he resented it so much more intensely tonight for some unusual reason. He wanted to yell back at him, *I'm my own man! I'm to be married soon; tonight is my night, the recognition of my future rite of passage! You and your stupid Old Magic beliefs! The power of a witch's tears? It's ridiculous; I have powers that you have no knowledge of; I'm the Dark Lord's favourite!* But a little voice in Lucius' head told him to keep his nerve and not display anything resembling a tantrum which, in Abraxas' eyes, would further confirm how immature and weak he still was.

Regardless, Lucius couldn't leave things like this. Compelled to show his father that he knew a thing or two, he asked, "Father, may I speak freely?"

Surprised and intrigued, Abraxas benevolently answered, "By all means, you have my utmost attention."

Feeling a wave of nervousness, but keeping his nerve, Lucius offered, "It's just that in the last year or two, I've, um, noticed that young witches can be made ~~more~~ *agreeable* if they, er, feel comfortable and non-threatened."

Abraxas' eyes flashed with anger. Eyes flickering, he glared dangerously at Lucius, but then he huffed, and his lips started slowly twitching until he exploded in full laughter, his eyes watering. "Oh, Lucius, Lucius." Seeing Lucius was unflinchingly earnest, Abraxas enjoyed giving him a satiric smile and said, "Ah, yes. To be younger, in full health," Abraxas raised his eyebrows slyly, "with a Narcissa Black waiting and panting deliriously for you."

Lucius features hardened slightly. *Yes, you old leech. It's a good thing that you don't know that I have true feelings for her.*

Displaying the expected façade in his charade with Abraxas, Lucius forced a charming smile and boasted, "Well, of course, Father. The Malfoy charm. When one gets down to the basics, Narcissa is in the end, merely a witch: the weaker sex."

Abraxas cocked his head to the side and looked curiously at Lucius. "Perhaps I have underestimated you, son."

Lucius felt choked and couldn't comment, but managed a strained smile instead for Abraxas.

Abraxas had risen and strode back across to the fireplace; he had regained his full vigorous energy. He stood now preened and taut, staring again into the burning embers, and said, "Perhaps... perhaps we should try it your way, Lucius. Let Nagini think what she wishes to believe... let her get close to you if possible; that tactic will indeed be useful, easier than other ones more unpleasant though quite effective... Wile her, beguile her, but in the end, never ever make the irreversible mistake of truly caring for her as yourself, Lucius."

He turned to Lucius and added, "Knowledge is power. Coercing information out of her, to later control her with, is an excellent way to start. Witches love to talk about themselves excessively. It doesn't take much prodding. But then, you know that well, don't you?"

"Yes, Father."

"Don't worry, son. I'm not completely heartless. I've already taken care of Nagini's long-term future; it has been predetermined. Separate from yours, of course."

Before Lucius could think *how* to ask Abraxas what he meant by 'predetermined', Dobby Apparated in the chamber. "Forgive Dobby, Master Malfoy, but you commanded Dobby inform you when the guests start to arrive. Some have appeared on the lawn of the mansion."

"Very good. We're on our way. Dobby, go make a final check on the banquet preparations, start the music, and then, immediately start serving drinks and hors d'oeuvres to the guests in the grande reception room."

"Yes, Master." The little elf popped out.

Leaving the drawing chamber, Abraxas and Lucius concordantly made their way towards the main entrance doors; soft music was heard filling the magnificent halls and rooms. As they passed by the bottom of the stairway, Abraxas stopped and instructed Lucius, "Tonight is yours and Narcissa's night. For now, let's not dwell on anything else except the evening at hand. Just go and escort your cousin down; impress on her what is expected of her this evening." And with that, Abraxas strode towards the grand main doors which opened magically on their own.

As Lucius went up the black marble stairway to go and escort Nagini down, he heard, above the murmur of animated salutations and other opening one-liners mixed with the sporadic, garish laughter of guests, Abraxas' voice in a sing-song cadence, "Don't disappointment me, Lucius!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Awakening, Nagini struggled with her grogginess and the unfamiliar sense of relaxation. As she heard Dobby's repeated calling, "Mistress Nagini, Mistress Nagini! You must wake up; you must get ready!" she realised where she was and what he was referring to.

"I'm up, Dobby, I'm up! I'm all right." she drowsily reassured him. As Nagini sat completely up and forced herself to open her eyes, she yawned and stretched, still feeling heavy with sleep; the little elf was watching her intently.

"It is time, Mistress Nagini. Your gowns have arrived and been hung up. All of the toiletries and accessories have been laid out."

Nagini rose slowly, feeling well-rested and relaxed. *There was that scent again.*

"Dobby, how did you know I liked the smell of cinnamon?"

"Mistress Lucretia did."

"You knew my mother?" Her heart skipped a beat.

"Of course Dobby knew her, Mistress Nagini."

*Yes, of course you knew her; what strange wonderful creatures elves are..* Marvelling at the little creature, she said, "That was very sweet of you, Dobby. Thank you."

With immense pleasure, Dobby bowed and then stood eagerly, watching Nagini with the most curious look.

Gazing around the room, taking in its feminine interior, her eyes lingered sleepily on the vanity table. Nagini asked, "Tell me, Dobby, was this my mother's room?"

Dobby hesitated, gulped, and then answered, "No, Mistress Nagini."

Rising and crossing over to the vanity table, she indicated, "Oh, I thought these might have been hers." There was a lovely array of marble-handled brushes, combs and hairpins carefully laid out in proper order.

"Oh no, Mistress. Master Malfoy burned all Mistress Lucretia's belongings. Hers and Mistress Lapontia's rooms are sealed. None of the accessories are from their rooms."

*Burned her belongings?* Sickened by the thought of her mother's as well as, possibly, Lucius' mother's belongings having been so vilely destroyed or desecrated in some other manner, but with curiosity getting the better of her, Nagini asked impulsively, "Where are their rooms? Can you take me to them some time?"

Instead of answering her, Dobby gave a slight scream and flung himself towards the wardrobe where he began pounding his head against it.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Nagini screamed. "Why are you doing that?"

With his swollen eyes, he solemnly said, "Master requires it. Dobby must punish himself. Dobby must know when he has made a mistake."

"But you haven't made any mistakes. You're perfect, Dobby; too perfect!"

"Then Mistress Nagini must never ask Dobby to take her to Mistress Lucretia's or Mistress Lapontia's rooms; you must never ask Dobby what was taken from them or destroyed."

"I won't, Dobby, I won't." With her heart fluttering from the violent display of self-punishment, Nagini suddenly remembered something and calmly informed him, "Dobby, I can dress myself. You may go and see if someone else needs your help. I need to use the amenities, the facilities."

The little elf didn't move but remained standing, resolutely looking up at her, not budging. He wasn't taking the hint.

"Dobby, I have to go to the loo; I need some privacy," she kindly intimidated.

Understanding this, Dobby bowed and said, "Of course, Mistress. Just call if you should need Dobby, and Dobby will immediately return."

"I will, Dobby. Thank you," she reassured him.

As soon as Dobby Disappeared, Nagini ran over to the wardrobe and pulled from the inner pocket of her cloak the old dragon-skinned book Abraxas had thrown at her in the vault. *If the mood takes him and he remembers this, especially if he knows how much it means to me, Abraxas will surely destroy it out of pure spite. It isn't much, but it was hers - my mother's.* She then knelt down in front of her school trunk, in which Dobby had already pre-packed most of her things for Hogwarts. Various articles of clothing and miscellaneous school supplies were in it; even some of Lucius' used sixth-year books had been placed inside. *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy* was on the top. Moving things around and digging down towards the bottom, she nestled the little book deep within the space, carefully rearranging and packing things over it as before. *It'll be safer here. The elves will take our things early to Hogwarts; I can explore its contents later on there* she thought, reassuring herself.

Rising, she smiled, contented. Feeling satisfied that at least one article of her mother's would be spared from the possible volatile acts of Abraxas, Nagini went to refresh herself and then hurriedly dressed herself in the simpler of the two gowns that had been sent from Madam Malkin's: an elegant, dark emerald-green, floor-length gown with simple brocade straps holding up the low-curved bodice, with brocaded edges also on the matching sheer wrap.

As she sat on the small dark green pouffe in front of the vanity mirror, a magnificent oval looking-glass with an entwining silver and green border, Nagini looked at her mercurial, slightly unruly wavy hair and thought, *A simple French twist; that should suffice for this evening.*

As she sectioned, twisted and started to curl the separated locks of hair to be styled in a high bun form, enjoying the feel and creative discipline of hairstyling, a knock was heard on the chamber door, which swung open by itself.

Lucius' voice was heard, "May I come in?"

"Yes, of course," she answered, relieved that Lucius' tone and demeanour were cordial and polite. She had feared that Abraxas had ruined the fragile grain of intimacy that had occurred between them earlier.

"I'm here to escort you down; will you be finishing soon?"

"A few minutes only; just need to finish my hair."

"Why don't you use your... wandless magic?" he asked.

Nagini took a moment to think. She wasn't sure whether she detected a twinge of harmless teasing, or if there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"There are some things I prefer doing with my own two hands," she said slowly. "You wouldn't understand."

"Why wouldn't I?" He looked insulted. His tone of voice confirmed it as he said, "Don't presume to know me so well." As he watched her twisting and pinning her long locks, he said, with a definite edge, "Looks as if you've been living around Muggles too long."

"I have never lived with Muggles!" she shot back at him, a little too vehemently.

Knowing he had touched a nerve and remembering his father's advice 'knowledge is power', Lucius pursued his objective, "Where did you live? Before Durmstrang?"

Choosing to ignore him, Nagini strategically inserted a hairpin, without answering anything.

Not one to be put off, Lucius attempted to steer her to another topic: "My father said you were taken care of by what was the phrase? Oh, yes, 'a mad old hag'?"

Nagini sharply corrected, "She was anything but a mad old hag. She was a great sorceress!"

"Who was she?"

Lucius was trying to keep a nonchalant tone to his voice, trying to approach Nagini 'nicely', at which he was a little rusty at the moment, so burning was his desire to grasp any vital information about her as soon as he could. He couldn't wait to prove to Abraxas how cunning and skilled he was, how *right* he was, able to do things his father couldn't.

But Nagini wasn't making it any easier for him, by snubbing him. She had stopped her hairstyling, and her hand was unconsciously holding, almost caressing, the dark-emerald pendant she always wore.

She was lost in her thoughts, *...flashes of grey corridors, bright blinding overhead lights, sterile silver rooms; coldness, running, screams, Dymphna dragging her, Disapparating; dark forests, suffocating, Muggle city streets; Apparating, rats, darkness, sewage smells, panic, that filthy Muggle; hiding, caves, a damp cell in a cold gaol...*

Instinctively feeling she was vulnerable to suggestions, Lucius pressed, "Your mother? How did she die? The report stated it wasn't by natural causes. What, then?"

Nagini snapped and swirled around on the dark green pouffe, coiling her back upwards, glaring at Lucius. "What is wrong with you? You're so unbelievably tactless!"

*Know when to stop*, he reminded himself. Seeing he had pushed too far, Lucius tried to gloss over things light-heartedly; he joked, "I've been called many things, but *tactless* is not one of them."

Nagini said nothing, but turned around again to the mirror, in a thoroughly sullen, melancholic mood. She focused on her manual task at hand and placed another pin to secure a twisted lock in her bun.

Trying to regain his objective, Lucius played his next card, saying the unbelievable. "Forgive me."

Nagini placed the last pin in the snug twist without responding.

Lucius carefully continued, "Do forgive me. I so very much want to know you. Understand you. I've never had an opportunity to speak with you alone. It seems as if there is so little time and so many questions unanswered."

Nagini still didn't say anything, lost in pensive thought. In the pervading silence that followed, she glanced up in the mirror to see Lucius' reflection; he was checking his immaculate manicure to see if it was indeed immaculate. His feigned ambivalence worked. Nagini sighed and then responded quietly, "I didn't know... we moved around continuously, never in the same place for long. Just before Durmstrang, when Dymphna my caretaker's name was Dymphna she was found by Aurors, arrested and taken away to Nurmengard; it was only shortly after then that it was confirmed the discovery of my mother's remains. My first day at Durmstrang, the authorities informed me." She turned and locked eyes with Lucius. "When I was a little girl, I had just thought my mother disappeared... but not forever... that she would return one day. She would find me. She would come back for me."

It was the first time she had shared this with anyone. Nagini looked wearily at her cousin; she felt so exhausted with the remembrance of the most maudlin times of her life. She took deep breaths to keep back the nauseous feeling and welling tears in her eyes.

As Lucius looked at Nagini, he remembered what Abraxas had said to him earlier,... *beware a witch's tears; they contain some of the world's deepest magic... one becomes irretrievable and lost...*

*Perhaps father was right about Old Magic*, he thought, for Lucius felt strangely compelled to again go to Nagini and physically comfort her, forgetting all else. But he blinked hard and clenched his fists, regaining his focus to pursue his objective his way. He then did something that he had rarely ever done before; Lucius uttered, "I'm sorry." From Nagini's startled eyes, filled with intense concern, he knew he was on the right path. He swallowed and slowly, decisively continued. "I never knew my mother; she died when I was very young." He gave a forced, practised, tense smile, which he always affected to cover any uncomfortable feelings.

"At least, I have some memories of mine," was the response from Nagini. Calculated or not, an intimacy was formed between them with Nagini also uttering, "I'm sorry, Lucius. So very sorry. You must miss her very much, not having known your mother at all."

"One cannot miss what one's never known. I have no feelings about her one way or another. My father told me she was a pureblood, dutiful, proper in all ways. Just too weak to endure."

Nagini couldn't suppress the slight shudder that went through her at Lucius' detached manner. "Yes, *indeed*," she thought, "*who could have ever endured Abraxas Malfoy; poor Lapontia*."

She took control to shake off the morose feeling that was starting to grow heavier in the room between them the further they delved into each other's past. It wasn't the time for it; something felt out of place to Nagini.

"Lucius, your guests are waiting. I have a deal to propose to you." His eyebrows lifted in curiosity and speculation. "I propose that we let things be no more questions about the past tonight. If tomorrow, if Abraxas..." she hesitated, not wanting to touch upon a delicate topic, "if we have some free time together tomorrow, perhaps, we can talk. Alone. You can ask me anything you like." Then, daring a smile, Nagini added, "But no one-sided deals. I get to ask you questions and get some answers, as well. Fair, enough?"

"Quite." Lucius eyes glinted with satisfaction and amusement.

A truce had been made; agreed to for different reasons.

The two Malfoy kin looked at each other; again, as earlier that afternoon, something inexpressible: a soft, discreet warm sympathy grew from this agreement to share, to dare to trust.

Nagini rose and crossed over to get her wrap.

Lucius got there first. "Allow me?" he asked demurely.

Unlike Bellatrix earlier, she allowed Lucius to hold up the wrap and help her put it on. Satisfied, not so much as with how they looked, which was pristinely elegant and flawless, except for the now less angry mark on Nagini's face, but rather with the calm, trusting intimacy which had taken place between them. The two young Malfoys eyes caught each other's in their mirrored reflections, and they both smiled decorously.

Gallantly waving his arm towards the door, Lucius asked, "Shall we?"

They glided out, and as they reached the top of the stairway, Lucius held out his arm, and again, unlike earlier this afternoon before they Disapparated, Nagini now warmly, confidently and proudly placed her hand on his proffered arm as they slowly walked down the staircase.

Reaching the bottom and as they made their way towards the grand reception room, Lucius halted, hesitating, but had to ask, "You know what etiquette is expected of you?"

Nagini couldn't help but laugh at the worried look on Lucius' face, which caused him to drop his mouth open in dismay. Immediately, Nagini assured him, "Yes, I do. I'm not the wild banshee you think I am." Unable to resist teasing him, she added, "Well, not always." As Lucius' eyes momentarily widened, with a gentle squeeze to his arm, she firmly reassured, "Don't worry; I'll make you proud. Trust me."

Lucius blinked thoughtfully and then relaxed; they walked closer to where the roar of voices from mingling guests could be heard. Putting everything else aside, they were both looking forward to this evening as one of new, affirmative experiences; but, each for different reasons and with different expectations.

\*\*\*\*\*

Author's note: Deepest thanks to my grammar beta Semptra, her guidance and 'meddling' extraordinaire, keeping me in line, on my toes, and my founding Snapette, and beta Agnus Castus - for so many things, besides the final touches, my deepest gratitude.

# The Dreadful Dinner Party – Part One

Chapter 7 of 22

Severus and Nagini start becoming aware of each other in a pleasant way, as well as others in unpleasant ones.

\*\*\*\*\*

Perhaps it was entirely the foul mood lingering on from his afternoon spent at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, or just simply the rumbling of his empty stomach that added to Severus' discomfort and irritation. Severus hungered for something. Anything. *Where's the bloody food?*

When Walburga Black had one of her 'attacks', the entire household shut down; consequently, neither he nor Regulus had eaten the entire afternoon. In a terse, hushed hurry, Orion had gathered his now slightly sedated wife, Regulus and Severus, and by the time they had arrived at Malfoy Manor, the boys were both highly irritable.

So it was with gritted teeth and unwavering determination to cover his edginess that Severus curtly nodded in agreement to Lucius' fierce whispered order, "Severus, watch Rodolphus tonight!", accompanied with a fervent glance to Nagini and Rodolphus.

A ravenous pang shot through his gut. Severus looked around the crowded room, determined to find a tray of hors d'oeuvres, either self-hovering or attached to an elf. Finding neither, he turned his attention back to the circle of droll conversation he found himself suffering through.

Only deriving sporadic pleasure from admiring the demure witch he had been commissioned to watch allowed him to civilly nod or comment on the chaff discussion around him. Having purposely placed himself beside Nagini, Severus reflected on how, with momentarily daunted breath, he had watched her enter the room this evening, passing through the gaggle of guests, seemingly unaware of the sporadic sniggers behind her back from the grotesquely animated faces. She had waded through the garish throng of affluent and powerful wizards and witches with Lucius, who strategically halting now and then to receive a greeting, an introduction or congratulations continued making a beeline towards Narcissa as best he could, escorting Nagini beside him.

Over half were supporters of the Dark Lord, and the others, who took for granted their place and influence, supported no one but themselves and the legacy they had been given as descendants of the Knights of Walpurgis. They smelled of old magic; but all smelled of an even more esoteric trait along with their wealth and power: pureblood. With derisory curiosities satisfied once introduced to Nagini, this echelon of pureblood Wizarding society turned to one another to speculate further about the niece of Abraxas Malfoy.

*Is she aware of their gandering and gossip?* wondered Severus to himself. *Perhaps she is aware of it, but merely ignoring it all?*

Noticing Nagini giving a troubled look into the oppressive crowd, Severus pondered the cause for her discomfort. What was she concerned about? Did she overhear derogatory remarks about her blood status?

Severus swallowed hard, gazing at Nagini, a fleeting thought crossing his mind: *Are you like me? A half-blood?*

Nagini was so close that Severus could detect a soft pleasing fragrance around her: *Cinammon. And something else...* undeniably, a feminine scent. *Her scent...*

Nagini looked around into the myriad of faces filling the room; not finding whom she sought, her attention returned to the immediate circle, lingering on Severus: *The one who entered my mind...* Well, *I'm ready for him now*, she assured herself.

"Yes. Yes, of course. However, it is refutable on several points," remarked the tall dark-haired wizard to Narcissa, and he proceeded to give her examples. Nagini and Severus' eyes met, followed by spontaneous knowing smiles; the discussion at hand was quite absurd, and Severus and she both knew it. Sharing a mutual moment of amusement with Nagini caused a warm surge to sweep through Severus: sensual, soothing and magnetic.

Narcissa had been in a heated disagreement with Guinevere Rookwood over the debatable usages of dragon blood, most of their conversation centring on its questionable usage in fertility rituals. Their opinions were in direct contradiction with one another.

Nagini couldn't tell whether Severus' comments were laced with sarcasm or earnestness, as his eyebrows, raised as if commenting on the ludicrous, belied his smooth voice which she found so compelling. There was something alluring about him that she couldn't quite put her finger on. The curiosity he aroused surprised her. Nagini already knew he was powerful and highly skilled. His excursion into her mind earlier that day bore witness to that, but there had been no pretension or arrogance in his demeanour. He had an ability to exert such power, yet not feel the need to draw attention to it; his modesty and austerity intrigued her.

Narcissa pouted teasingly. "Oh, Severus! You needn't disagree with everything I say!"

"I'm not disagreeing, but rather pointing out indisputable facts regarding ..."

Narcissa burst into laughter. "See? You're doing it again! Can you not *not* disagree, ever? You're one of the most exasperating men I've ever met ..."

"Good you've worked her up for me!" Lucius had come up beside Narcissa, gliding a hand around her waist. "Now, I get to calm you down," whispered Lucius into Narcissa's ear; he was in a particularly gregarious and, the more he touched Narcissa, amorous mood.

"Can't you get them to quiet down a tad?" Narcissa asked, indicating the raucous group Lucius had left to rejoin her.

Severus turned and caught Rodolphus within his peripheral vision; in sharp contrast to the rowdy group he stood among, Rodolphus was disturbingly quiet. He seemed sublimely subdued, but with a lethal edge.

Letting his gaze travel further, Severus slowly looked around at the loosely serrated circle of Hogwarts' peers mixed with several older guests. Some were dividing their attention between either Narcissa and Lucius, or Bellatrix and Rodolphus. The majority of the latter group, predominantly male, strategically positioned themselves around Bellatrix, who, laying half-reclined on a narrow settee loveseat in the midst of them, was gluttonously soaking up the volatile energy exuded from her admirers.

Peeved, Severus noticed how the vulgar, animated jostling of McNair, Nott and Goyle egging Regulus on was drawing the attention of many guests. In the midst of Bella's admirers stood Regulus, visibly shaking, adrenaline pumping through his veins as Mulciber and other young Death Eaters punched and jabbed at him, animatedly describing the various pleasures of the Imperius curse when used for sexual, fatal tortures on Undesirables and Muggles. The sixteen-year-old was wide-eyed and speechless, just nodding and giving hoarse grunts, mentally logging all the details.

Bellatrix's cackles spontaneously exploded from her when something particularly amusing struck her fancy. But the boisterous rowdiness and excitement was getting out of hand, causing some of the older guests to stop and throw distasteful, quizzical looks at the unruly group.

Narcissa had had enough.

"Lucius!" pleaded Narcissa with a forced smile covering her simmering anger, then insisting urgently, "You must control them. Now, Lucius!"

"They're just letting off some steam, excitement for tonight."

"Yes," she hissed. "But it was to be a night for us, excitement for us *nothim*."

"The Dark Lord?" enquired Lucius. Then, he pointed out, "It's his title, Narcissa use it!"

There was a second of tense hesitancy between Lucius and Narcissa.

In a neutral tone, Lucius carefully repeated, "It's his title, Cissy. You will use it when discussing or addressing the Dark Lord."

Lucius was forced to look away from the wounded look Narcissa gave him. After some contemplation, he made a decision. Manoeuvring Narcissa to the secluded spot directly behind Severus and Nagini, he took advantage of the momentary privacy and gave Narcissa a quick, soft kiss below her earlobe as he lifted her hand to his lips.

"Cissy, it *is* a night for us; our night. After the first set of dancing... the very first interlude..." He smiled surreptitiously. "Remember my plan?" he whispered. "I have something to show you. Privately?"

It seemed to mollify Narcissa momentarily, for she looked up at him with sad eyes but the slightest soft smile.

"It's *all* going to be all right, Cissy," Lucius reassured Narcissa, kissing her forehead. "Five more months you'll be Mistress of all this, and of me for always." He kissed her hand again. "You'll have other things to fill up that lovely mind of yours, other worries, obligations..." His other hand had slowly glided down to Narcissa's waist to gently rest over her womb. Gasping softly, Narcissa gracefully caught his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "There, there..." Lucius was murmuring in her ear, comforting her with sweet nothings interspersed with soft kisses to her neck.

Sharp shots of unexpected envy fired through Severus; his irascibility escalating at not only witnessing the privileged turtledoves cooing behind him, but enabling the nauseating display by providing cover for them. Severus sourly watched Regulus continuing to be goaded and revved up by the likes of Mulciber, Nott and Goyle. *Look at Regulus, like a Muggle wally... the idiot! The Dark Lord will crush him with one glance... penetrate him senselessly.*

Increasingly taxing his strained nerves, and being further distracted by Lucius and Narcissa's continual sweet nothings behind him, Severus bitterly ruminated *Lucius... handed everything on a silver platter: position, prestige, power... a bride, for always...*

Brooding darkly, Severus gave a quick side-glance to Nagini. Though she continued to stand, seemingly aloof to the different scenes playing out around her, the faint rosy flush on her cheeks gave away her emotional state. Though she maintained her poise, she couldn't masque her gentle, shallow breathing.

The thought of her reacting to the heated whisperings of the lovers drew Severus' attention to her more ardently. Previously unexpected and unwelcome but now undeniable, the blazing warmth surged through Severus once again, but this time, he was *not* ashamed by it. A sudden bolt of entitlement awoke in him. *So, she is made of flesh and blood after all*, he mused heatedly, his muscles tightening throughout his body in excitement. *Perhaps... perhaps my lovely wallflower is responsive to...*

Thinking again of the mark left on her face by Abraxas, Severus decided. *I'll kiss away your pain, make up for what you've had to endure from that arrogant, sadistic lout...*

The image of brushing his lips across her aroused, flushed cheeks, causing them to bloom with more intense shades of burgundy, flashed through Severus' mind. Allowing his thoughts to drift further, *Then, a trail of slow kisses down that lovely neck of yours... to its nape... down to your...* Severus noted with intensifying appreciation, the soft flowing material snugly caressing curves of her breasts...

"There you two are!"

Everyone in the nearby group jolted and turned to the addressor. It was Abraxas.

"None of that, now," Abraxas jokingly wagged his index finger, addressing Lucius and Narcissa. "Plenty of time for that after you're married. Propriety first. Control, young people, control!" The elders within hearing distance responded with hollow laughter as the dinner bell chimed, beckoning all to the grand dining room.

As a sweep of energy swept the scattered groups towards dinner, Lucius motioned to Severus. "Would you do the honours and escort Nagini?"

"Shall we?" offered Severus.

Taking Severus' offered arm, Nagini felt his firm, muscular bicep. *Who would have thought? He's lean but so taut...* "Thank you," she responded.

Once seated for dinner, Nagini and Severus barely spoke a word to each other. Through the courses, Severus was kept busy by Narcissa, seated to his right, who enjoyed having him, along with Lucius sat on her other side, as her audience.

This left Nagini much to herself, which she was grateful for. Even though Regulus Black was seated to her left, thankfully, he was completely engrossed in Bellatrix beside him. This gave Nagini time to think about what she should do next. For *he* was here. Lester Qualmsick, seated directly across the table from her. *It's all a mistake. Why did I think this evening could be normal?*

Nagini had thought simply doing what was expected of her this evening would be the most difficult aspect of it. *Don't speak unless spoken to. When spoken to, respond politely, but as little as possible. Be the attentive listener, not the initiator...*

*I'll return to my room after dinner when the dancing starts; I'll find Abraxas and ask if I may return to my room. No one'll care or notice my absence, and I'll be able to avoid him...*

But even as she planned this, Nagini looked up to find Lester Qualmsick's hawk-like gaze boring into her. Meeting his gaze was difficult. In a flash, the entire miserable weeks in her cell in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic came back to her; the endless interrogations, preparations, the brutal inquisitions from Bartemius Crouch, Albus Dumbledore they had not bothered her as much as Qualmsick's had because the former ones had been fierce but objective, but Qualmsick... There was that lingering undisclosed connection with Abraxas: something personal, intimate.... Lester Qualmsick knew more about her than anyone in this room.

Nagini wanted a fresh start without the past to burden her. She had been forced to disclose her past *all* of it to Qualmsick, in desperation for someone to defend her.

And now, meeting his gaze across the table in this increasingly unruly atmosphere, Nagini could only feel her growing sense of shame at seeing Qualmsick's smugness, possibly holding her very future in his hands. The possibility of his influencing it further unsettled her.

Under his dark lashes, Severus discreetly followed Nagini's gaze to where it rested on Lester Qualmsick. Qualmsick, who despite a voluptuous witch dripping with gems having attached herself to him, vivaciously attempting to hold his attention wasn't taking his eyes away from Nagini.

Qualmsick's stare continued relentlessly: Nagini tried to focus left and right, anywhere in order to avoid having to return his gaze.

As Severus watched, Qualmsick's vacant expression, in spite of the garish witch's squawking and clinging, changed to a knowing smile, and he nodded upon finally catching Nagini's attention. Nagini, unable to deny his presence any further, but hating herself, acknowledged him.

Severus had the sudden impulse to hex the esteemed barrister, regardless of Qualmsick's reputation. His gut instincts told him that Qualmsick's complacent smile and nod



to Nagini was fraught with parlous intention. It was not Rodolphus that Lucius should be worrying about, and by the reticent aura surrounding Nagini, Severus knew that she would agree.

\*\*\*\*\*

AN: Greatest thanks to beta Sempra and beta Agnus Castus; thank you both for your incredible guidance and technical help and support!

## The Dreadful Dinner Party - Part Two

Chapter 8 of 22

Severus' and Nagini's evening unfolds in unexpected ways.

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus had had one drink, and that would be it for the evening. It was going to be a long night. He already knew how prudent it was to exercise discipline and control in all things. Something the young Black would have to learn the hard way, he mused, as he looked past Nagini to see Regulus throw back the rest of his drink. It wasn't pumpkin juice he was knocking back. Severus suspected Firewhisky. This wasn't good.

The Dark Mark embedded in Severus' left arm started to ache dully. He sighed, restless. The moment of the Dark Lord's arrival was drawing near.

While marking time and continuing to pay homage to Narcissa when expected to, Severus ruminated on how to initiate further conversation with Nagini, to somehow ask about Lester Qualmsick. He wanted to help her as best he could, but as yet could only speculate on why Qualmsick's presence bothered her, and his stomach lurched at the random possibilities. Qualmsick's public reputation ranged from ruthless to pristinely untouchable. Anyone going up against him at the Wizengamot was sure to lose, and rumour had it Qualmsick's private affairs were as clandestine and extreme as his public ones were flaunted and retaliatory.

More than that, Severus wanted to more know about Nagini, anything that he could build upon once they returned to Hogwarts. If he was to now keep an eye on her for Lucius, he'd have to be less conspicuous about it, avoid literally *spying* on her. He'd also have to take care to conceal his passing attraction to her. Perhaps more than passing attraction, for the more he observed her, the more keenly drawn to her he was. Severus liked the feeling that accompanied it, as well as musing over the possibilities were she to reciprocate his feelings on any level. But Nagini was quiet and preoccupied with her own thoughts.

So, until a more opportune situation presented itself, Severus took advantage of Nagini's proximity in order to study her more carefully. He closely observed the contours of her body, and the fluid gown caressed and flowed around her every curve.

Unfortunately, Bellatrix's raunchy remarks were carrying over, disturbing his train of thought. *'Not a pure one that is,'* he heard Bellatrix saying.

Abruptly, with Bellatrix leaning heavily forward on his shoulder, the slightly pissed Regulus turned to Nagini and asked, "So you're a Metamorphmagus... How does that work? Can you change your thingy? Everything?"

Nagini frowned. She could smell the strong spirits on his breath and see the tell-tale, bleary-eyed look upon his face. *He's drunk,* she thought. Seeing Bellatrix whispering something into Regulus' ear, then cackling, thoroughly amusing herself, Nagini decided to just ignore his comment.

"And Quidditch? You any good on a broomstick? What's Durmstrang's team like?" continued Regulus in a belligerent tone.

"Quidditch?"

"Yeah, Quidditch!" Regulus boasted, "I'm Slytherin's Seeker!"

That didn't mean much to her, but it obviously did to Regulus. Nagini didn't know what to say. She really had no interest in Quidditch, but knew by the young man's sense of self-importance that being the Seeker was supposed to impress her.

Throwing a dark look at Severus, Regulus suddenly snarled, "Don't tell me, you're into Potions!"

"No. No I don't care about Potions, either."

"Either?" he sneered. Then, looking past Nagini, Regulus barked decisively, "Sorry, mate, you lose, too!"

*What did the git just say?* Severus frowned, noting Regulus' pugnacious, inebriated state more than what he'd just spouted.

Nagini turned to see Severus' taciturn expression. She hadn't meant to offend him, or Regulus for that matter. But she was too distracted by Qualmsick to be able to focus on chit-chat. Wishing to explain herself a bit, Nagini offered, "Potions requires patient consistency and the utmost attention and care. One must have a consistent, stable environment to have effective results. I've never really stayed too long in one place to cultivate a proper garden of diverse herbs or collect and store ingredients, let alone undertake long-term brewing. I am fascinated by it; I just haven't been able to develop my skills enough."

"What are you good at?" Regulus pressed her rudely.

Nagini blinked, highly irritated by his unpleasant manner, and pointedly replied, "Transfiguration, alchemy, hexes...*curses.*"

"Yeah, I bet you are..." A glint of excitement flashed in Regulus' eyes. He turned to Bellatrix, who now leaned forward eagerly, almost in his lap, and the two of them started snickering.

"Did you curse him when his back was turned? Like a coward? Or face on?" lashed out Bellatrix.

"Who?" asked Nagini, flustered.

"The Durmstrang git you offed!" Bellatrix shrieked.

Nagini blanched. She grabbed the edge of the table to brace herself, suddenly feeling dizzy.

Bellatrix and Regulus laughed crudely, enjoying Nagini's shock. In their cavorting, Regulus clumsily knocked over Nagini's wine glass, causing her to jump back in her seat.

Her napkin fell off her lap, and as she bent to retrieve it, Nagini felt her face come in contact with that of another: Severus had instinctively reached down to retrieve her napkin for her at the same time. Nagini gasped softly, tilting her head ever so slightly; she met those fathomless, onyx orbs and froze. But this time, she didn't mind his gaze; Nagini could have lost herself in his another time, another place. *He's so...* She felt his black hair brush along the nape of her neck. She slowly inhaled his soft, musky scent, and their lips almost brushed together.

"I wouldn't start anything with *him*," came a piercing taunt, "even 'accidentally on purpose'."

Nagini swiftly sat up straight, turning to Bellatrix.

"Regardless of what he's been telling you, he's not very *nice*." Bellatrix cocked her head knowingly at Severus. "You're not a very *nice* boy, are you, Sevy?"

Nagini couldn't look at Severus; she felt her cheeks burning red. She hadn't meant to set him up to be targeted by the despicable, jibing Bellatrix.

"Tell the pretty girl! Tell her what you'll be doing tonight," goaded Bellatrix.

Severus' face turned ashen. The Dark Mark started to pulsate more intensely. Burning. Even Regulus had fallen quiet. Severus couldn't look at Nagini or retort back to Bellatrix.

Nagini could only stare straight ahead, which brought her back to looking into Lester Qualmsick's eyes. The last thing she wanted.

"The music!" exclaimed Narcissa. "Finally, Lucius!"

Lucius rose in eagerness, his napkin falling to the floor, and he attentively guided Narcissa up, leading her towards the ballroom. Their actions signalled the end of dinner and caused the guests to trickle away from the table, little by little.

Severus had risen and silently held his arm out to Nagini to guide her to the grand ballroom. She let Severus escort her. Bellatrix's comments left her confused and at a loss as to what to say. *What was that all about? Should I ask him what she meant?* Her desire for the evening to end became almost overwhelming. *I need to find Abraxas... I want to go back to my room.*

As they entered the ballroom, she felt overwhelming sympathy for Severus. *Why is Bellatrix so... mean to him? Is she just drunk, or is there something more going on this evening? It's already quite late. What else can there be, other than dancing? It's only dancing, you vicious cow other than being obligatory, what is so terrible about that?*

Lucius and Narcissa had already started to waltz, Rodolphus and Bellatrix joining them shortly afterwards, followed by Regina Lestrangle and Abraxas Malfoy, Orion and Walburga Black, Cygnus and Druscilla Black, and several other older wizards and witches. As yet more couples moved out to join the flow on the dance floor, Regulus Black was shoved in front of Nagini by Mulciber and Nott.

"Blacks and Malfoys go well together. Let's do it," Regulus blurted out. Mulciber and Nott snickered and taunted, "Dance with her now; maybe she'll show how she can change her thingy for you later."

Not wanting to be the butt of more of their jokes, and wary of Regulus' intentions, she declined his offer.

"No one says 'no' to me! C'mon now..." Regulus stepped forward unsteadily, attempting to take her hand.

Moving away from his grasp, she declined him with more firmness, "I'm sorry, but I don't dance."

"You don't dance? Who cares?" blurted out Regulus. "It doesn't matter we have to do it!"

He seized her about the waist and clumsily pulled her onto the dance floor.

An invisible electrical spark shot out from Nagini's palms, making Regulus cry out in pain. He had momentarily loosened his grasp, but at this he re-doubled his efforts, clutching Nagini tightly to him and whispering fiercely in her ear, "Just do it! Please! For God's sake, please, please..."

There was a horrid desperation in his plea. Fear. Panic. Regulus was terrified. Of whom? Of Mulciber and Nott? "I'm sorry; help me, please, please, just this one dance." He gave a cowering look over towards one of the older couples dancing. It was his parents, Orion and Walburga, who, in turn, were scrutinising Regulus.

In their frozen stance, Nagini's thoughts raced while her anger pulsed at being brutally groped, but suddenly something about his erratic behaviour, one moment belligerent, the next pitiful, softened her. He was young and drunk and obviously petrified of his parents, and something about how pathetic he looked, whether from the drink or his deflated ego, caused her to say, "All right, all right; just loosen your grip; you're hurting me."

Relaxing his hold immediately, Regulus, barely coherent, whispered, "Sorry, so sorry... thank you, thank you..."

They proceeded to move around the room awkwardly, in jerking, clumsy movements, partially shuffling by the end of the number, Nagini wasn't sure whose feet had been stepped on the most; but hers definitely hurt. She just wanted to sit down and wait for the first interlude when she could ask Abraxas to be excused for the rest of the evening.

She had had enough of this miserable day.

Relief washed over her as Regulus tottered back over to Mulciber and Nott, only to turn into dismay when she saw Rodolphus Lestrangle start to walk towards her. Turning quickly, she smacked straight into someone. It was Severus. He spoke before she could say anything, but instead of talking to her, he directed his comment over her shoulder.

"I believe the next dance is mine."

"Shall we?" asked Severus, neutrally peering into Nagini's eyes. She gulped, speechless, nodding in agreement.

Placing one hand firmly on her waist and assertively cupping her palm with his other, he ignored Nagini's embarrassed mumblings, attentively initiating and taking control of their movement as the second number began.

Nagini was making excuses. "I'm not a dancer... Don't know how to dance properly... formally... since I was a small child..."

Barely registering her comments, Severus gave a final decisive look back over to Rodolphus, now with a gushing Guinevere Rockwood in his arms; Rodolphus' cool exterior flinched at catching Severus' pointed glance. *That's right, Lestrangle, stay away*, thought Severus, glowering at Rodolphus.

Severus then turned his full attention to Nagini; she was moving in an unsure manner. "The key is to let me lead; you need only focus your energy in an anti-clockwise, triangular movement. Give over to me. I'll guide you. Small movements. Slowly. Trust me."

At the last instruction, Severus' throat constricted slightly, Nagini having given him such an odd, vulnerable look/ *feel...* "That's it. It's all in the fluidity, elongation and one flowing force you control the air; we control it, together..."

As she followed his whispered, but distinct, instructions, Nagini couldn't help but look Severus directly in the eyes. Again. Those dark, unfathomable eyes. She felt his energy surround her and had to give herself over to his guidance. Trust him. Let him touch her. Nagini gasped softly at the realisation that she was enjoying a pleasure previously unknown to her: his touch, the swaying movement, Severus' enveloping energy. *It feels so...* Again, she was lost, but peacefully so; in the movement, she forgot everything around her, only the syncopated rhythm and movement, twirling and swirling, not knowing where her body ended and Severus' began; they were one; in sync, in breathing, in body and mind, in movement... peacefully lost on a plateau of soft murmurings.

Ceasing his susurrations, Severus felt her heat... her searing gaze; she was completely absorbed in him; the realisation and the intensity of it caused a faint thrill to go through him.

Nagini felt a tremble go through Severus and into her; she felt light-headed. Nearly swooning, she grasped tightly onto his chest and gasped softly as his muscular hands contracted tightly around her body in response, supporting her steadfastly.

*This is insanity. Delirious, wonderful insanity...* They both gazed at one another, enraptured, lost in the thought. *What are you Who are you... What is happening...?*

*If nothing else, she's a Malfoy...* Severus reminded himself. *She's... but she feels... incredible.* In that very moment, he wanted more. He could feel her body responding to him, yielding. The scent of cinnamon delicately fragranced her, along with her own soft, feminine scent, arousing him. With each movement in his arms, his senses were further ensnared by her. With guarded, measured pleasure, Severus kept his gaze on Nagini's golden eyes, reassuring and guiding her, beckoning her attention, feeling her enraptured absorption in him.

"You two, hello!" a voice called to them. "It's the last set before the interlude; must change partners," sang out Narcissa.

"Finally." Lucius couldn't restrain himself from nuzzling Narcissa's sculptured neck, whispering, "After this, I'll have you all to myself for a few minutes."

Narcissa beamed enticingly at Lucius. "Yes, I've been longing for..." she coquettishly smiled, "you to show me some of your family's... treasures." They were both almost giddy; grinning broadly; their hormones seemed to be getting the better of them.

The last number started; impatiently, Lucius sulked, "Oh gods, one more bloody dance. Nagini, shall we? Want to avoid Walburga as much as possible."

"You can run, Lucius, but you won't be able to hide from Auntie. She's got her eye on you," teased Narcissa.

Lucius groaned. "Don't you dare set me up with Auntie Walburga," he whispered, and then he let his kiss just below her ear linger an effective extra second. "I'll never forgive you, you torturous minx."

"Then you'll have to..." she whispered something in Lucius' ear that caused him to let out a soft groan. The evening's festivities and atmosphere had put both Lucius and Narcissa in thoroughly randy states of being.

As Lucius and Narcissa paired off with Nagini and Severus, respectively, Narcissa gushed teasingly, "Oh, Severus! I just love the green what do you think, Nagini? Isn't our Severus more captivating with a hint of colour? Sorry to make you jealous, but it's intended just for me!"

Severus had charmed his inner waistcoat a deep forest green, unassumingly tinted, but effective enough to obviously fulfil Narcissa's request for him to wear a touch of colour. And just a hint of colour was exactly what he'd done; enough of a gesture, but not to overdo it.

Severus was pleased that Narcissa was pleased by it. And Lucius took note of this.

"It's not Nagini's jealousy you should worry about, Cissy," Lucius started to point out, miffed, but Narcissa and Severus were now already three couples away in their waltzing.

Feeling uncertain of Lucius' tone, Nagini tried to point out the obvious. "It's so nice," she commented shyly.

"Mmmn?" Lucius mumbled distractedly, not really paying attention to what she said, but rather trying to trail Narcissa and Severus on the dance floor.

"Narcissa. I can tell you're sincerely fond of one another. That you love her."

Lucius' head snapped back to give Nagini his full attention. "What did you say?"

Nagini faltered momentarily in responding. "You love her... You love one another... It's just very ... nice."

Lucius looked back, catching sight of Narcissa, and watched her undulating, graceful form in Severus' arms. They were quite the couple, both so elegant in their smooth glides. Severus remained expertly accommodating, guiding Narcissa skilfully through the now up-tempo waltz.

"She's mine!" Lucius whispered fiercely. Looking back to Nagini, he stated, "Mine and mine alone. It's a fact, not a sentiment."

"Oh, Lucius..." Nagini couldn't help herself, her cousin had a thoroughly parsimonious streak in him, but she wanted to ease, at least, his jealousy a bit by helping him see the truth of the matter. "It's all right to admit your feelings about her. I mean, you're marrying each other. It's normal that you have, um, affection for her."

"I have an entitlement, a pureblood obligation to her," informed Lucius, but catching Nagini's dismayed frown, he admitted, "and yes, it is nicer that we *appreciate* each other as we do."

Lucius looked unfocusedly over the crowd, vaguely searching for someone. As if quoting from a distant memory, Lucius remarked, "But it has nothing to do with that filthy Muggle weakness."

"You mean 'love'?"

He laughed, sardonically amused at her naiveté. "I knew it," he muttered to himself. "Pray, enlighten me, Nagini. Define it. Tell me what it is."

"Love? I don't know, Lucius," she replied exasperated, knowing he was trying to turn the table on her.

"You don't know?" Lucius was highly amused. "And you dare preach to me about it?"

"You... you care for her; you... admire her..."

"Care for her? Admire her? How could one not look at her! The perfect image of all that we hold pure. Narcissa Black Malfoy will be the mother of my heir. Perfection." He inhaled deeply, thoroughly satisfied. He adamantly revered Narcissa. "You wouldn't understand," he smirked.

*I understand more than you'll ever know,* Lucius thought Nagini, but replied, "You're right. I wouldn't." Wanting to support a lighter mood, she teased, "I'm not male."

He snorted in amusement, "No. No, you're not. That's very clear. Speaking of which..." Lucius gave a knowing glance around. "Yes... What to do about you?" Smirking good-naturedly, he remarked, "Look at all those randy buggers..."

"Lucius!" exclaimed Nagini, shocked, but she couldn't help giggling.

Lucius had seemed to regain his naughty sense of humour. "Hmnm... He's engaged as well, but it doesn't stop him from rutting around when he can... Rodolphus..."

"Lucius, don't please I'm not interested. Besides, he's vile."

Lucius smiled coolly at her clear disgust of Lestrage. Then, he let her in on a little secret, "Good," he whispered. "Glad we are of the same mind; you'll be safer that way, not being a gullible ninny to his, um, *charms*... Well, then, let us see... Ah! He's slightly younger than you, highly irritating, but very promising Blacks and Malfoys do seem to go together well the youngest Black, Regulus."

"The Quidditch player?"

Lucius guffawed. "Yes, the Quidditch player; although his true skills will soon be put to better use..."

Over their partner's shoulders, Nagini and Severus' eyes caught each others across the dance floor. An awkward sensation came over Nagini whilst holding Severus' gaze; she recalled his touch, the precise pressure of his fingertips on her lower back, effortlessly guiding her.

As well as the sweet, lingering languor associated with dancing with him, she was still warm with the memory of Severus and his attentive touch.

Lucius, noticing her attention caught by someone else, swivelled her around in one elegant movement to see the object of her attention. "Ah, Snape." A slight frown appeared on Lucius' features. Feeling a disapproving guardedness from Lucius regarding the tall, dark wizard and wanting to divert attention from him, Nagini insisted, "Lucius, Lucius, I'm not interested in *anyone* I'm not like that."

Lucius stilled them to a slow pace and took in her earnest look. "No. No you're not 'like that', are you? You are ~~amdd~~ one... Why am I not surprised?" he sighed quizzically. "Well, there's no rush. You're a Malfoy; we'll make them all grovel at your feet before allowing one of them to kiss your big toe. The randy buggers..." he mumbled in his distraction, giving a furtive glance to Narcissa, his thoughts wandering. "Although, it's not your toe Rodolphus wants to kiss..."

The music stopped. The first set had ended, to be followed by an indefinite interlude. With all the guests well-fed, the loosening up and true festive mingling of the evening commenced. Trays of cordials and all other imaginable spirits appeared, the guests swarming around trays and then spreading out throughout the room on cushioned settees or around banqueted tables. The background music played on, unobtrusively underscoring the festive roar of delighted socialising.

Lucius escorted Nagini a few steps towards a settee in a corner. "Just wait here; don't go anywhere I'll return soon."

In the tousling, mingling of guests, Lucius quickly turned to catch and swoop Narcissa away from Severus; simultaneously, Regulus appeared and urgently grabbed Severus. He ushered him to a nearby group of males, who were arguing urgently in harsh, fierce tones.

Nagini backed away to the empty settee, relieved to distance herself from them as well as give her feet a rest. She sat and scanned the room *Where has Abraxas disappeared to? He was just on the dance floor... Oh well, I'll rest and wait for him to reappear...* Through the chaotic intermingling, she saw Lucius and Narcissa sneak out of the room. She smiled, liking their covert determination to be together privately; somehow, the idea of Lucius and Narcissa doing anything without their parents' knowledge lifted her spirits in the oppressive room.

*I don't think they'll be back any time soon...* As she sat musing, Dobby appeared beside her with a tray of elf-wine. "Would Mistress care for more?"

She was thirsty, but not for the elf-wine. "I'll have to decline, Dobby. I can't afford to fall asleep quite yet."

"Oh no, Mistress Nagini. This wine won't relax anyone, but it will keep them awake." Dobby winked knowingly.

Nagini smiled incredulously at him. *Oh gods, were the house-elves spiking all the drinks with stimulants?*

"Dobby, don't tell me you put something in it?"

"Master wishes that all have a good time." The elf grinned broadly.

"It's a very sad day indeed when a witch such as yourself has only a filthy house-elf for company." It was Rodolphus Lestrage. "Scuttle along, you! Back to your work!" Rodolphus commanded the elf nastily, making a kicking motion at the little creature as he passed.

Rodolphus boldly sat himself down beside Nagini.

For some reason, Nagini unconsciously spotted Severus. Even though he was in profile, he saw her situation; Severus tried to keep them within his peripheral view, in between paying attention to others in the rowdy circle. He winced at seeing Rodolphus' audacity in sitting so determinedly beside Nagini and started towards them; but, at that very moment, Macnair grabbed him and pulled him away towards some other commotion further into the crowd.

She could feel Rodolphus' oppressive presence besides her but refused to acknowledge him, to chat with him Nagini couldn't do it; she had an unexplainable aversion to him.

Rodolphus knew he was forcing his company upon her, and that she didn't like it. Or him. It amused him.

"Look around you; what do you see? All Purebloods," the smooth silky voice of Rodolphus pointed out. "Except for the occasional charity case. It takes a narcissistic bore to tolerate a parasitical one," observed Rodolphus caustically. "Snape the one you're staring at is a parasitical bore. Snape is Narcissa's charity case. A Half-blood." His jaws clenched. "You see? We all make exceptions; beyond our control, like all scintillating obsessions. Compulsive pleasures. One comes to understand these things, you see. I've come to understand this about myself."

Nagini felt the slightest trace of fingertips on her lower back.

She swivelled and snapped at Rodolphus. "Don't touch me!"

Rodolphus eyes widened for a second. But then, slowly, they narrowed, boring into her. With a cool, cruel smile dawning on his chiselled features, he remarked, "You shouldn't be so cruel to me, Nagini Malfoy; you'll find you'll soon regret it. We'll be Slytherin housemates. Very soon."

Remembering Dumbledore's warning: "*No matter what is said or done to you between now and arriving at Hogwarts, keep calm, discipline yourself, control your anger. Do not provoke your uncle or those around him...*"

She looked away, searching for someone she could go speak to, but she saw no one she knew. Severus had been absorbed into the crowd somewhere. Lucius was who knows where with Narcissa... She'd be so glad if she could finally find Abraxas somewhere.

"Yes... who can you run to? Who here has open, welcoming arms for you? Your uncle?" Rodolphus snorted. "Lucius and Narcissa? The sooner you're out of their lives, the better for them. Don't be fooled by Narcissa's niceties. She loves charity cases, but Snape's taken that spot already. Ah, dear mercenary Narcissa. Seems you're out of luck."

Nagini could feel Rodolphus stretching out his long muscular arm behind her on the back of the settee, half-encircling her; she was keenly aware of his body heat and the malign, virile radiance he gave forth. She was on the edge, ready to spring up, but knew he was ready to pounce as well. She had promised Abraxas she would not make a scene and promised Dumbledore that she would control herself, regardless of what someone said or did but did it entail putting up with this?

"But I, on the other hand, am here, have gone out of my way to be by your side. You see, I know that I can help you. *persuade* others to include you... We know you're at least a half-blood, but that's not enough: someone must vouch for you; a pureblood must claim you..."

Nagini could feel his hot breath on her neck.

He whispered, "...*mark* you as their own, an equal, so to speak." He smirked. "Lucky for you, I'm more than willing and more than capable."

She could feel his fingers again on her lower back, but this time stroking her more resolutely, confidently claiming their privilege.

*Don't let him unnerve you; you have to stay calm...* Willing herself to play his game long enough to find an escape route, she forced a nonchalant smile and played for time, "Your fiancée wouldn't have a problem with your *marking* and *claiming* me?"

Hungrily taking her bait, Rodolphus professed, "Ah, Bella... So glad you remember her she is one of a kind, isn't she? We have the most agreeable understanding of one another: each other's needs, passions, indulgences, darknesses..."

He had inched closer; Nagini, feeling his stifling heat, turned away.

"For you... I'd make an exception. Other than Bella, it'll be our little secret, for now." He spoke in a low throaty voice. "I don't mind, Nagini. I don't mind that you're a fil...a half-blood. You're half-Malfoy, that's enough for me." He firmly pressed his hand on the fullness of her hip.

"Don't!" She shifted away from him. "Stop touching me."

Rodolphus's eyelashes flickered for a few seconds before he smiled to himself and settled back into the settee, languidly stretching his long limbs into repose. He coolly remarked, "I thought so."

Irritated beyond measure, Nagini snapped, "Thought what?" He didn't answer her. Just as she had the impulse to dash up, she felt his firm grip on her arm. She whipped around to slap him, but at the last second grabbed his left wrist, releasing a non-verbal, wandless stinging hex upon contact.

Rodolphus barely flinched.

Nagini was shocked; he should have jolted away, releasing her, but Rodolphus only gasped deeply, but maintained his grip, as if the hex had simply been absorbed by his left arm, powerlessly evaporating. A sinister leer spread across Rodolphus' face.

"You want to hex me, Malfoy? Hurt me?" He chuckled softly. "Well, you are full of surprises, aren't you? Lucky for you, I like my witches that way a little dangerous; keeps me on my toes." His smile disappeared, replaced by a menacing snarl.

Nagini had underestimated Rodolphus' strength and powers. She'd have to use a more powerful spell if she wanted to force him to release her. For that she'd need her wand, and she'd surely cause an unforgiveable scene. She glanced around more frantically than before.

"Where do you hope to escape to? Look around you, Nagini. Who of those assembled would truly welcome you into their society? They'll tolerate you, because of Abraxas and Lucius. But do you know what they're thinking? What they're saying, whispering about you behind the Messrs. Malfoys' backs?" he sneered. "Behind your *dear* Uncle Abraxas' back?"

Of course she had noticed the furtive glances and excited whispering that had followed her all evening. Even now, as she slowly scanned the room, she could see guests dotted around the ballroom, openly staring at Nagini and Rodolphus askance before turning to their companions to speculate: squawked exclamations interspersed with callous laughter and pointed glances at Nagini when needing visual confirmation of the subject matter.

"Are they mocking you, one wonders?"

"I don't care," lied Nagini, her throat constricting.

"You should."

"Why?" she challenged him, attempting to forestall the tears beginning to well.

"Rodolphus, Nagini!" It was Abraxas, but he was not alone. Beside him, ostentatious and austere, was Lester Qualmsick.

Nagini's heart sank, and everything around her seemed to fade to black, except for the three wizards surrounding her.

"I need to steal my niece from you, Rodolphus; and your fiancée is eagerly searching for you."

"Well then," said Rodolphus, rising, "I must seek her out at once; Bellatrix has a very impatient disposition doesn't like to be kept waiting." Whether Bella was truly searching for him, or not, didn't matter; it was understood immediately that Abraxas wished him to leave, so Rodolphus, well versed in the rules of the game, promptly complied.

"*Impatience* in a witch can be quite a satisfying experience if used to one's advantage," confided Abraxas to Rodolphus.

The three wizards chuckled lewdly amongst themselves.

"Yes, sir." Rodolphus lowered his voice to a heated whisper. "I've been fortunate to have discovered that already. All the more reason to go to her as speedily as possible." With a quick nod, he left them, blending quickly into the other guests.

The two older wizards looked down at Nagini.

Abraxas broke the silence. "I'll leave the two of you to *reacquaint* yourselves with one another. You haven't changed your mind, then this is your wish, Lester?"

"Yes, Abraxas, old friend. I'm quite set on my decision. You know me, when my mind's made up it's made up. A deal is a deal; a bond is a bond," his voice dropped notably, "and a vow is a vow."

Nagini sat as if Petrified. She felt Qualmsick take up the seat Rodolphus vacated moments before.

Abraxas turned his back on them and walked a few feet away, joining the nearest cluster of guests.

Without knowing the reason, Nagini found herself deliberately left with Lester Qualmsick; she felt as caged as she had felt in the Ministry of Magic's cell.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: Greatest appreciation to betas Semptra and Agnus Castus!

# The Aftermath of the Evening

Chapter 9 of 22

Severus and Nagini both find themselves in unexpected, irrevocable situations with dire consequences.

Lester Qualmsick looked intently at Nagini.

"What a difference a day *does* make. I hardly recognised you when I first set eyes on you this evening... This attire is much more worthy of your beauty. Except for that mark on your face." Lester took two drinks from a self-hovering tray slowly floating nearby. Handing one to Nagini, he enquired, "What did you do to incite Abraxas' anger? It doesn't take much, granted. I did warn you about that from the very beginning if my memory serves me correctly..." He sipped at his elf-made wine. "And it always does. I warned you at our very first private consultation. I thought you were intelligent enough to heed such a vital warning."

Nagini looked directly at him. "Well, I'm not."

"I suspect you're upset by something. What did that young cur Lestranger do? He seemed quite self-satisfied, whereas you were clearly distressed by his demeanour."

Nagini said nothing and turned away.

"And you're quite unsettled by my presence as well. Now, that distresses me. And I won't allow it to continue." Lester leaned forward to enquire softly, "Why are you so upset to see me, Nagini? After all we've been through together? All you've shared with me?"

"I didn't share." Her voice was trembling as much as her lips were. "I was forced to tell you."

Suddenly Qualmsick hissed, "I never forced you to do anything; it was all of your own volition."

"What choice did I have?" she replied, unable to control the bitterness searing through her. "What *real* choice have I had since I first met you?"

"Ah, so Abraxas has told you; he led me to believe that he had not."

"Told me what?"

Lester Qualmsick's smooth reserve faltered for a second. His long, silver eyelashes fluttered. "Why, my dear girl, of our agreement, of course."

She turned and looked at him.

"Your apprenticeship with me, as my *bonded familiar*."

"Your *bonded what?*" Her voice rose in shock.

"Please calm yourself, Miss Malfroy; don't become overly excited. We're not alone as we were in our lovely room at the Ministry, your lovely cell. I had thought all would have been explained and solidified by now, but I see Abraxas has been negligent in the matter, preoccupied with his son's affairs, as well as yours, no doubt."

Qualmsick sighed. "It's a forgivable oversight, though a matter of concern in light of your evident consternation at your future profession."

"My future profession? As what?"

Lester Qualmsick didn't answer straight away, first letting his eyes slowly roam over her appreciatively before answering, his gaze belying his words. "As I just said, as my apprentice, which will, naturally, lead to you becoming a practising barrister in your own right, or I daresay, a future Wizengamot judge; although, as you'll soon find out, it's much more satisfying to control the Wizengamot than be controlled by it."

In the uncomfortable silence, Nagini forgot herself and took a sip of the spiked elf-made wine.

"The power is beyond anything you've ever experienced," promised Lester. "Surely that in itself appeals to your unique sensibilities."

Feeling a slight tingling course through her, suddenly strengthening her confidence, Nagini asked, "To what do I owe being chosen for such a privilege?"

"You're a lucky girl; that's what it boils down to," he pointed out sharply. "You see, the prosecution had approached me and asked me to oversee their council, to assist in prosecuting you." He sneered. "Bartemius Crouch or Abraxas Malfroy? Decisions, decisions..." Qualmsick let out a long sigh. "My poor dilemma. What was I to do? But Abraxas and I go way back, so Abraxas' claim on my professional services and loyalty tilted me in *your* favour." The timbre of his voice dropped low and husky. "I definitely knew Fate had brought you to me."

Feeling an unrestrained freedom, Nagini belligerently challenged the esteemed barrister. "How do you know anything for 'definite'? Your whole life is speculation. Mere parasitic speculation. Otherwise, you'd truly know that nothing is definite!"

"You are so very wrong, my impudent girl. One thing is positively definite. If I had chosen to assist old Barty in prosecuting you, at this very moment, you, my dear girl, would be a mindless lump of quivering flesh under a Dementors' Kiss, instead of sitting here, drinking the finest elf-made wines and looking so demurely tempting, dressed as captivately as you are, mingling with the upper echelons of Wizarding society!"

Nagini's mouth went dry, and she shuddered. *A mindless lump of quivering flesh under a Dementors' Kiss...*

Whether it was the spiked wine or her own uncontrollable will, she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Then why?"

"Why?"

"Why did you defend me if you believe I'm guilty?"

Qualmsick smiled lewdly for a second then masked his features with a facile expression.

"Here's your first lesson about the law: when taking on a case, one doesn't look at whether or not someone is guilty; I've never cared about the accused, one way or

another. One looks at which side will serve one's personal interest the best. It's true. I couldn't have cared less if you'd confessed to using *Incendio* or *Avada Kedavra* on Mr Von Sturmberg at Durmstrang; your innocence or guilt were irrelevant to me. What I considered was what's in this for me, Lester Qualmsick?"

He sighed, as if bored. "You must understand: I'm a very simple man, Nagini. With very simple needs. Very practical." Lester sniffed slightly and snidely admitted, "I had to admit to myself, 'Not much. Not much at all.'"

He smiled sardonically at Nagini.

Nagini's face burned red, flushed with a muddled humiliation which ebbed, replaced by a creeping dread with each passing second. She could do nothing but sit and listen to him.

Enjoying her embarrassment, Qualmsick continued on with his self-amusing analogy, "But then a little voice spoke out: Old debts! Let old debts be paid once and for all. 'Old magic ways for debts to be repaid'," he quoted in a sing-song voice. Then, sombrely he stated, "Yes, let restitution be made."

"Restitution?" Now, Nagini was thoroughly confused. She lashed out in frustration, "What has this to do with me? Abraxas told me he paid you for your services paid you very well!"

Nastily, Lester snarled, "Restitution *and* retribution, Miss Malfoy!"

"I had never met you before the day you entered my cell at the Ministry. You hadn't even known I existed what have I to do with you?" she demanded, unable to keep her voice from rising.

"Restitution for what should have been mine! Retribution for a deed unfulfilled, a vow betrayed. But now it shall be repaid." Qualmsick's features hardened. "When I first met you, I wasn't sure whether you'd be of any real use or further *interest* let alone value to me, but it became quite clear after our very first session that, besides your corporeal charms, you were uncannily intelligent. Such a clever, lovely cunning girl, and so talented." He gave her a look which revolted her. "How could I refuse such just recompense? Then, with each revelation of your magical prowess, your gifts which other wizards have spent their lifetimes attempting to acquire, it sealed my decision. Only to rein in your peculiar inability to be tamed which, as your illustrious past has revealed, needs controlling."

Lester leant in, as if in confidence. "Just as that young whelp, Lestrangle, admitted, so do I love a challenge."

Amused by her taciturn unresponsiveness, he whispered, "You are wild, mercurial, my little Metamorphmagus, like the law, constantly changing, adapting to what's at hand." Lester inhaled and exhaled deeply. "A wild energy to be tamed... But you will be my private, intimate *wildness*: you will be my bonded familiar; I will cultivate you to be a true force to be reckoned with within our Wizengamot circles."

"No... never..." rasped Nagini.

"No?" Lester remarked matter-of-factly, "You will never utter that word to me ever again. I will break you, my girl. I will break you then mould you in my own image, set you in our society, where you are, by nature, meant to be. You will not slip through my fingers... as Lucretia did..."

"My mother?"

"Yes," he softly hissed. "An unfulfilled betrothal..."

"I'm not her," whispered Nagini.

"No, you're not; you're so much more; she was so much less. I'm quite the fortunate wizard." For a moment, Lester seemed lost in a daydream, reminiscing of a time gone by. Then his face seemed to excite at a realised notion. "With your Metamorphmagus gift, imagine the possibilities! When you're sitting pretty, atop the Wizengamot, or even as my dearest consultant, you'll thank me beyond all measure."

Nagini turned to look at him, speechless at his outrageous imaginings.

"In the end, all has worked out well for all involved: old debts repaid and new endeavours to *bènjoyed*; Abraxas' gratitude, as well as his son's, will be mine for the rest of their lives. In the end, I win."

Abraxas had looked over at Qualmsick and Nagini; his niece seemed calm, very attentively listening to Lester. He relaxed with relief *She's taking this better than I thought she would. Good, there's nothing like solving two problems in a single step.* Abraxas would get rid of the girl once and for all, separate from his and Lucius' lives, and amends would finally be made for the betrothal bond promised to Lester but dishonoured so long ago. Hereafter, the girl would be Qualmsick's problem. Abraxas could wipe his hands clean of Nagini, as well as his sister's memory, at long last.

However, Abraxas had misconstrued Nagini's attentiveness. She sat frozen, listening, but was light-headed and horrified.

"I realise it may be difficult, at first, for you to take it all in at once," Lester said with a smile, "difficult for you to accept taking honourable responsibility for your part in this, but once you think on the matter thoroughly, you'll comprehend the equity of it all; you are an intelligent girl, aren't you, Nagini? I have the utmost faith in your seeing sense."

She felt his firm fingers touch her chin to tilt her face to his.

"There'll be plenty of time for things to fall into place, little by little. Your apprenticeship begins immediately this summer, after Hogwarts. Abraxas and I have already arranged the legalities and other technicalities regarding your wardship; he'll turn over your guardianship to me."

"Please, don't."

Nagini cast her eyes down, unable to further bear being an audience to his wishes, to further pretend she was accepting or agreeing with anything he was saying. Or doing.

"Modesty doesn't become you, nor will it be useful in your future profession, so I wish you to cease trying to use it on me, at once. Don't ever dare ~~to~~ *pretend* with me, Nagini. It is quite distasteful."

"I'm not pretending. I don't want to..."

"Don't lie to me or, more importantly, to yourself!"

"I'm *not* lying..."

"Everyone lies, Nagini. I lie all the time. I lied about you... *lied for* you."

"You lied for me?"

"I *emphasised* selective pieces of hard evidence about the chain of events. Mere technicalities they make the strongest impressions on the simple-minded but of the

utmost importance. Technically, you were charged with using an Unforgiveable. And, technically, you had not used one. In law, there is circumstantial evidence and cold, hard facts; which of these can you manipulate to influence the minds of the Wizengamot? Which strategy will affect their shrewd, caustic little brains the most? I made a choice. Just as you made a choice," he pointed out.

Nagini could barely breathe as she whispered, "Which choice are you talking about?"

Lester sat forward, closer to her, his oppressive presence seemingly encircling her; he lifted a fallen, curl up away from her cheek and gently around her ear, his fingertips lingering on her soft earlobe. She then felt his fingertips slowly caress downward along the softness of her neck.

He gently reminded her, "Your choice to let me kiss you."

Nagini heard a rushing in her ears and felt like she was plunging heavily into deep water, dizzy and out of control.

Savouring her swooning reaction, Lester emphasised, "Your choice to let me be the *first* to *truly* kiss you."

\*\*\*\*\*

It happened so quickly. Nagini was only aware of Abraxas' fingernails clawing into her flesh, gripping and tugging her to him, her wine glass shattering to the floor, and then Disapparating.

Nagini had swirled around in a flash and, before she knew it, had slapped Lester Qualmsick in the face so hard his drink had fallen out of his hand, splattering everywhere.

Abraxas and Nagini Apparated to her boudoir. His nails pressed into her arms, and they stood frozen, staring at one another, Nagini panting shallowly from the pain and intense fear.

It had all happened so fast.

"You slapped him..." Abraxas' enraged voice was an unstable thin pitch. "You dared to slap him... like a filthy Muggle... in front of everyone..."

Nagini looked up at Abraxas' stretched face, deathly pale and quivering in repressed emotion. Slowly, he hoarsely whispered, "I'll show you what a real Muggle punishment is..."

Not having a wand, but with her deepest wish combined with her Metamorphmagus powers, Nagini transfigured herself into her Animagus form.

Abraxas jumped back in surprise, his niece having dissolved and morphed; he now faced a rearing, hissing serpent of substantial size. But Abraxas was only unnerved for a second before he retaliated against his niece. Wrathfully, Abraxas sent a spell at the Animagus, hitting the creature full force. What followed was a painful, grotesque transfiguration of a half-morphing: Nagini's reptilian form slowly distorted and throbbed before coagulating back into some semblance of her human form, but it stalled mid-transformation.

"You abomination!" roared Abraxas. "You dare to try to intimidate me? *Infinite Animagus!*" he commanded, and an ear-piercing scream erupted from amidst the remaining serpentine hissing, the force of the spell wrenching the involuntary full transfiguration. Once Nagini was solidly in human form, Abraxas whispered another spell, and the now convulsing Nagini clawed at her neck as if an invisible force was strangling her. She felt the warm sensation of her own blood run down her neck as her fingernails desperately attempted to arrest the invisible force, but to no avail; the smothering, crushing sensation against her windpipe propelled her into darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

Abraxas' purged wrath and punitive action was quick, merciless, effective.

Nagini's body lay motionless and bleeding.

Abraxas' punishment lasted a mere seven minutes, his anger quickly dissipating; he'd used physical punishment as a way of working through his anger it being more satisfying than magic at that moment, exhausting his inner demons. Quickly cleansing any traces of blood and straightening his robes, Abraxas left Nagini's chamber and returned to the dinner party.

What he left behind was an unconscious Nagini: flogged senseless by a Muggle cat o' nine tails. Her naked torso shone with multiple lacerations, her back reduced to bloody strips of flesh intermingled with torn cloth from the inflicted punishment.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Severus," called Lucius cheerfully. "Excuse us for a moment, will you?" the blond wizard asked, politely smiling and escorting Severus away. "My father just needs to ask you something; we'll be right back. He's over here," Lucius informed, steering Severus from the group towards the side of the room. Lucius manoeuvred him slowly out into the main hall, and his voice grew in intensity. "We can't Apparate there the room is now heavily warded. Follow me." They both quickly ascended the stairs, and Severus found himself entering a poorly-lit chamber; it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the low, sconced lighting.

He first caught sight of the terrified house-elf Dobby staring with trepidation at them, but Severus' attention quickly zeroed-in on a collapsed figure. He inhaled sharply as he recognised Nagini's body: a sprawled lump faced downwards on the canopied bed. His eyes slowly scrutinised the congealed blood on the lacerated flesh and strips of darkened cloth.

Severus inhaled sharply with a hiss as he noted the frazzled pattern of tattered cloth intertwined with torn flesh and coagulated blood that ran from her shoulders down to her buttocks.

"Severus, whatever you need, Dobby will provide you with immediately. Just command him," whispered Lucius, refusing to even look in Nagini's direction.

Lucius then hurriedly made his way back to the door. "I have to return now. The dinner guests are leaving... followers remaining... and the Dark Lord will be arriving... I can't... I'll speak to the Blacks you'll be our guests tonight, Regulus as well, no doubt... It's going to be a long night..."

Severus turned to him in earnestness. "Lucius, I can't I'm not a Healer! I can't... She needs St Mungo's..."

"Damn it, Snape! There's no time; just stop the bleeding, clean her up, whatever you can; you know how to do *something*. My father..." Lucius grasped Severus' arm so fiercely he winced. "We're counting on you I'm counting on you!"

Lucius' voice was unusually strained as he instructed him. "Stay here... until someone comes for you... care for her... just care for her, Severus!" Lucius dashed out of the room.

The room was then silent, except for Severus' breathing and the house-elf's sniffles, which he was attempting to stifle.

Severus felt sick; he couldn't move. Forcing himself, he timorously approached the bed. *Think! Control your emotions; think on what must be done!*

"Dobby!"

"Yes, Master Snape?"



Severus started listing the first things to come to mind. "Bring me a cauldron... filled with hot water... dittany, moonstone; bring any cleaning potion for wounds in store, a second kettle, towels, cotton gauze, aloe vera... is there Sleeping Draught in the manor? Calming Draught? You're familiar with Wizarding substances bring any other similar substances that you can find in the household... immediately!"

Removing his outer jacket and waistcoat as he approached Nagini's body, he drew out his wand and pointed it at the side table "*Engorgio!*" It enlarged, allowing Dobby to place all the items upon it when he returned.

Assessing what ingredients he had available, Severus rolled up his sleeves and swiftly set to work together with the little creature; Dobby seemed to instinctively know what Severus needed, and soon, noxious-smelling, but medicinal, brewing fumes filled the air; pulped moonstone and powdered dittany blended with the array of other ingredients that littered the table.

"Oh!" cried out Dobby, cringing. "Master is calling!"

"Go to him, Dobby, you're finished here."

The house-elf popped out instantly, and Severus walked over to the bed with the dittany and moonstone mixture, a wet sponge and gauze. He hesitated before climbing up onto the bed, but he had to in order to reach Nagini's shoulders comfortably.

Tentatively, Severus knelt beside Nagini's body, alternating between straddling her prone form and kneeling beside it, careful of the angle and pressure he placed upon her, as he covered all the wounds. Gently applying the soaked gauze, beginning at her shoulders, Severus slowly and methodically wiped away the blood and peeled away the remains of Nagini's dress, which were partially adhered to her skin with her dried blood.

Nagini moaned in pain, and Severus Summoned the Sleeping Draught, sponging it onto her mouth and nostrils by hand. Within seconds the anaesthetic properties of the draught took effect, and she became immune to the excruciating pain caused by his actions. He gently lifted the locks of her hair that had fallen onto her shoulders following his movements around the bed.

Inch by inch, Severus soaked, peeled and cleansed. While his hands calmly and skilfully continued, his face turned a vivid red, blood pumping furiously, outraged at the way her body had been defiled by such abuse. Severus had to muster all his willpower to dispassionately perform the task at hand Nagini needed help. His help. Now. Not his barely controlled impulses to find Abraxas and slit his throat like a filthy Muggle...

Grimly ruminating on a variety of excruciatingly slow deaths for Abraxas, it continued to be a struggle, almost impossible, to proceed calmly. Suppressing his emotions was making Severus' eyes smart; he felt like he was going mad with the rage welling up inside as he forced himself to soak, sponge, peel and then, something else suddenly distracted him. He tasted something: salty and wet. Tears. His.

Mixed with the smell of blood.

The putrid odour filling the room, so stifling that it masked the fumes emitted by the bitter minerals that had been brewed and combined, hit him, and Severus couldn't control his pharyngeal response he lunged off the bed, barely making it to the feminine boudoir, retching, before relieving his stomach of his dinner.

Unsteady yet determined, Severus slowly crossed back to Nagini. His hands had begun to shake and tears continued to silently pour down his face.

"I will not be weak!" he growled aloud. He felt his control over his anger slipping. *Damn you, fucking Malfoys!*

He cursed further under his breath and huffed heavily as the taste of salty tears mixed with the sour aftertaste of his stomach juices. Gritting his teeth, Severus once again climbed onto the bed to finish what needed to be done. *I will not be controlled by my emotions! By my body's weaknesses!*

A surge of anger filled him, defying an open wound of raw pain unleashed within. Severus hadn't allowed himself to cry since childhood, or express his emotions in any way, not even at his mother's death. He was the last to see his mother's body; it had lain cold and bloated, distorted from its time in the water. Severus had identified Eileen, a mere formality, but he had controlled himself admirably.

Stoic and strong, he prided himself on his inner strength and self-control. He refused to express any weakness now, never mind the sickening situation he found himself in.

Staring at Nagini, he told himself, *This is just a body... She means nothing to me... nothing... How could she?* The detachment process was winning. Cool objectivity flowed through Severus, empowering him, allowing him to adopt a detached stance towards Nagini. *This is just a body, wounds in need of disinfection... an object, no emotion to be attached...*

Severus muttered instructions to himself, *soak, swab, peel*, chanting and burning the process into his brain. He worked in a methodical, hypnotised fashion, unaware of the time passing. Finally, the deed was done.

Nagini's body lay naked and sterilised.

In the half-light of the approaching dawn, Severus took his wand and began chanting healing spells on the larger gashes spells his mother had taught him and which they had each used on the other after Tobias' brutal attacks. Utterly absorbed in healing Nagini's wounds, he was caught off guard when the door was flung open.

Before Severus knew it, the Dark Lord swept into the room followed by Abraxas.

Severus quickly stifled a gasp, scrambled off the bed and, with one swift movement, knelt and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe.

Voldemort's red eyes flashed with a taut leer as his waxen, stretched features slowly assessed the lacerated body on the bed along with his kneeling servant.

Voldemort idly remarked, "So... this is the offspring of the fecund womb of Lucretia?"

Abraxas grunted in the affirmative.

Voldemort stepped closer. Flicking his wand, he gracefully raised his other hand, and with a sustained motion, he spelled Nagini's body to slowly levitate upwards and then turned over. As he lowered Nagini, a cry of pain issued from her stuporous body when her open wounds pressed down on the mattress. He repeated his actions, and she slowly rolled over to once again lie face down. Voldemort's slits narrowed, and his taut features distorted to form a cryptic smile.

"She has the gift, you say?" asked Voldemort softly.

"Yes," hissed Abraxas. "But is as belligerent, unpredictable, wild... as Lucretia..."

Voldemort leered malignantly.

"Witches have never interested me... however," Voldemort's eye was drawn curiously to Severus' kneeling figure, "wizards' weaknesses have always highly amused me..."

A sinister silence ensued. Barely breathing, Severus dared not move a muscle.

"You will remain to take care of her, young Severus."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Severus?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"Look at me!" Severus instantaneously looked up, and the Dark Lord locked eyes with him.

Voldemort raised his wand and with one quick jabbing motion, he penetrated Severus' mind.

Severus felt a razorblade slicing into his mind, an appalling blankness, except for the sharp shots of enforced pain as his mind was plundered by Voldemort. He lost control of all his senses except for a dull, cascading sensation as the recesses were thrust open, and finally, the Dark Lord found what he was searching for.

In a precise jerk, Voldemort pulled out of Severus, languidly holding his wand, but his bloodshot eyes were still boring into his young, vulnerable follower.

Severus felt something warm and wet flowing down from his nostrils onto his lips, seeping in between them.

His own blood. Severus tried to steady the sporadic trembles that shot through his body.

Voldemort meditated on the sequestered revelations drawn from Severus.

Voldemort had felt Severus' yearning desire, his former arousal and unbridled, lustful images, fantasies he hadn't remembered having Lily and him.

As Voldemort had ravaged Severus' darkest desires further, forcefully tearing through his undying resistance, Voldemort had revealed other buried images and suppressed feelings, liberated and responding to the basest instincts: sensory recollections of the gratifying feel of Narcissa's delicate but stimulating touch, segueing into a pleasurable arousal in response to Nagini...

These fleeting flashes of imagery and emotion satisfied Voldemort.

The pain stopped. Severus' eyelids were frozen open, forced to stare mesmerised into the waxy, distorted features of his Dark Lord.

Voldemort remarked softly, "You see, young Severus? I told you before that there are other witches of pureblood, more worthy of you than your filthy little Mudblood. There will be no denying it."

"No, my lord I mean, yes, yes, my lord..."

"These things must be dealt with, Severus; you must purge yourself of these *distractions*; the Dark Lord wishes to reward you with... position, power, prestige... even the unworthiest witches of your desires if you still wish them; you shall be fulfilled beyond your imagination ... All good things will come to you..."

"Yes, my lord," Severus mumbled. "Thank you, my lord." Trembling uncontrollably, he kissed Voldemort's hem again.

"Ah, the young, Abraxas," observed Voldemort sentimentally.

Abraxas' facial muscles flinched in fierce disdain.

"No need for modesty, Severus!" Voldemort's tone was laced with disgust. "It is not a trait I'll endure to witness or tolerate."

Severus quaked, barely managing to keep his balanced kneeling position.

Mercifully, Voldemort neutrally ordered, "For now, you will remain and take care of Nagini." He slowly turned his head to gaze at her once more.

Abruptly, Voldemort announced, "A young wizard burning with impatience and ambition awaits us..." and he gloated, "Another Black to be welcomed to our cause."

Voldemort turned and glided out of the room with Abraxas following in sync.

Severus, still kneeling forward, shivering, wiped at the blood running from his nose.

He collapsed back onto the floor to lean against the bed frame, gulping in air, he breathed deeply to steady himself. Soon, the nosebleed trickled to a halt, but his shaking continued.

Distraught in frustration and blinded by tears, he lay prostrated in weakness. He hated himself more than anyone or anything in the world at that very moment.

In his incapacity, he lost track of time. The time ticked by until he noticed that the room was now lit with a soft, golden light from the dawning sun. Severus blinked; the realisation that a new day had finally arrived, ending the nightmarish evening, slowly invigorated him into action. Severus grabbed the bedpost to steady himself and clumsily rose to standing. He was determined to finish what he had started.

Shakily, Severus knelt beside Nagini's body once more, applying the healing balm here and there, where he could, interspersed with moments of using his wand, chanting in the low lilt of a lullaby. He continued, at the same time determinedly reminding himself that he would remain void of feelings regarding Nagini; he'd treat this and any future interaction with her clinically, as needed. Whatever pubescent impulses he had felt before would cease immediately.

Resolved to this decision, it was easier for Severus to admit to himself that he burned with another desire to be the best he could be in all things; and he was the best, better than all of them no one could take that away from him. He was above the Malfoys and their sordid affairs; he would heal Nagini perfectly, but detach his interests from wandering further. Voldemort's brutal plundering had once more unearthed his yearning for someone pure and solely his own, someone unmarred by the darker side of life, but who would one day be the most cherished, person in his life, truly his for always Lily Evans. The thought and prayer of her calmed his stressed mind and renewed his strength and austerity to get through whatever awaited him this day.

Tomorrow, he'd be back at Hogwarts, back in familiar surroundings, and Lily would be there, and she had promised to meet with him. Mordantly reminding himself of the task, Severus methodically resumed applying his healing balms to Nagini's flesh whilst excogitating his next meeting with Lily. He had to make everything perfect; all good things *would* come to him he resolved it would be so.

But then the Dark Mark erupted, searing through his arm. In a gurgling gasp, Severus was reminded that he would not be alone in his declared resolution. Ever.

\*\*\*\*\*

AN: My indescribable appreciation to betas: Sempra, blue artemis, star\_girl and Agnus Castus, each contributing their own special expertise and support - thank you!

# Hogwarts, Lovegood & Hope

## Chapter 10 of 22

Three gifts are given to three particular witches with dubious intent; Severus' and Nagini's arrival at Hogwarts leads each one on both familiar and novel paths.

It was 10:55. The Hogwarts Express was fully-steamed and ready to depart. Students were boarding, eager and excited to return for the second term.

As Lucius climbed on board, Nagini made a small movement to follow him, but stopped. Tightly squeezing the book she carried in her hands, she hesitated, wishing to speak. At last, she had to turn back and look up at her uncle, who was ostentatiously waiting on the platform to watch them leave, and she hoarsely whispered, "My wand..."

Abraxas arched an eyebrow. "Yes, what of it?"

Nagini swallowed hard. "I'll need it. All the other students have theirs; I have to be like all the other students..."

"But you're not like the other students, are you, Nagini?" pressed Abraxas sharply.

Lucius stood in the carriage's entranceway, saying nothing.

"Hmn?" pushed Abraxas, enjoying her frustration.

Attempting not to lose her control in front of Abraxas, Nagini bit her lower lip. But then, she couldn't help herself. The vexation was too much. She lost control. She could only give in.

Abraxas had broken her.

Choking up with stifled tears, not wanting to, but feeling forced to by the situation, Nagini pleaded, "I'm a witch!" Seeing the unmoved, sardonic cold greyness only blink silently back at her, she softly begged, "Please. Please, Uncle. I'm a witch... I need my wand."

The cool, steely eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly. "No need for a scene. Your wand is waiting for you already at Hogwarts." Pleased with the confused, distrustful look his niece gave him, Abraxas added, "I met with the Headmaster yesterday and left it in his care. It'll be given to you in due course after your arrival." Abraxas then sniffed. "Interesting little meeting with Dumbledore. He's under the delusion that you'll finish the year, satisfactorily without incident. I, on the other hand... well, let's just say I've ordered the house-elf to keep the fireplace burning in your lovely boudoir... yes? Nice and cosy for you? What say you, Nagini, less than a fortnight? Less than a week?"

Nagini was unable to respond. Torn between her hatred and fear of Abraxas, she remained silent, staring at a dirt-filled crack on the train's platform. Her face burned in humiliation, and her back still twinged in darting pain from Abraxas' flogging on the evening of the dinner party. Even though she wished to lash out, *I'll willingly burn in hell before ever returning to Malfoy Manor!* She held her tongue.

"Learning to control yourself, I see. Good. My little exertion to correct your wild ways was not in vain. Wouldn't you agree, Nagini?"

*I hate you.*

"Don't you agree?" insisted Abraxas, threateningly.

"Yes, Uncle," she lied.

"Look at me!"

Nagini trembled, willing herself to meet his gaze.

With satisfaction, Abraxas saw in her golden eyes more profound fear than her usual vexing pertinacity.

The clock struck eleven.

"Now, get on board."

As Nagini climbed onto the carriage, the sharp tug of Abraxas' walking stick pulled her arm, causing her eyes to flash angrily around at Abraxas.

He was smiling at her. "Don't get expelled, at least until tomorrow evening. I'm treating myself and Qualmsick to an evening of leisure and pleasure." He gave her an odd leer. "Unless you wish to join us sooner than later, make sure you behave yourself."

The mention of Qualmsick's name caused Nagini to wish to spit in Abraxas' face, but instead, on second thought, a flash of apprehension swept across her features, enough to appease Abraxas. He chuckled and released her arm as the train gently reared and then chugged forward and out of the station.

Nagini had turned sharply away only to step on Lucius' boot heel. He huffed, frowning, and ordered, "Follow me." They made their way through the train's corridor, carriage after carriage, until finally arriving near the rear end. From a separate, private compartment, the recognizable voices of Narcissa and Bellatrix were heard, and as they entered, Nagini saw three others: Severus Snape, Rodolphus Lestrange and Guinevere Rockwood.

On the left side, Severus sat quietly by the window with a tatty, untitled book opened in his lap, Narcissa beside him. Rodolphus stood relaxed against a wall, and Bellatrix was excitedly pacing in the tight space, showing off a three-stoned emerald ring on her right hand. Guinevere perkily sat on the right side, her Prefect robes crisply starched and glittering, batting her eyelashes and seeming completely enthralled listening to the Black sisters, except for stealing glances at Rodolphus whenever she could.

Everyone stopped in mid-motion and stared at the two Malfoys as they entered.

Immediately spotting an empty place on the right, Nagini made a beeline for it, only glancing momentarily at Severus seated directly across from her. She tried to sit smoothly without twitching from the smarting jabs of pain caused by the stretching scabs on her back. Unsuccessfully. As her back made contact with the seat's back, she inhaled sharply. She looked up, and Severus caught her eye for a second. Remembering the last time she saw him, she jerked her head down, confused and ashamed.

It seemed years ago since that dream of a dance had happened. Another time. Another person. She now felt lost and stymied by a myriad of obstacles. The dark young wizard's presence befuddled her. She hadn't wanted to accept that he was the same as the others in the compartment. *But, he is...* Bowing her head, she quietly opened Lucius' used copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, wishing to inconspicuously read it and be left alone.

"Thought you weren't going to make it," teased Bellatrix to Lucius. She gave a malicious glance at Nagini. "Either of you."

"Bloody hell," mumbled Lucius, exasperated, and flung himself down to sit beside his fiancée.

Narcissa turned to Guinevere. "Dearest, do you know when Slughorn wishes to meet with all the Prefects? Would you mind asking? Wouldn't want anyone to not be on time."

"Oh, not at all, Cissy," beamed the female, seventh-year Prefect. She daintily rose and gave a smug smile to Rodolphus before mincingly exiting to find her Head of House.

Bellatrix snorted. "Now that that twit is gone, tell us what's wrong, Lucius."

"Nothing is wrong!" He glanced at Nagini whose head was stuck in her book. "Father just had a full agenda this morning."

Rodolphus scoffed incredulously. "He's giving too much attention to Qualmsick." His eyes narrowed. "Too much loyalty."

"My father and Qualmsick go way back. You know that, Rodolphus." Lucius' tone had a defensive edge. "Just as the Dark Lord and my father do. Are you questioning his allegiance?"

"Merely stating an observation," replied Lestrage coolly.

The two Slytherins stared at each other, an unspoken tension pulsing between them. The compartment was deadly still; even Nagini couldn't ignore the strained energy and shot Lucius a side-glance. Going back to her book, she couldn't help but glimpse the apprehensiveness on Narcissa's and Severus' faces. Suddenly, Severus' eyes pierced Nagini's, and she momentarily felt stunned by his intensity. She couldn't look away, but then the moment was interrupted by Guinevere sliding the door open, breathlessly calling to the Malfoy heir. "Lucius! Professor Slughorn would like to see our Head Boy!" Her eyelashes fluttered at the blond wizard indulgently.

Lucius grunted in compliance and stood up, only pausing to smooth his long blond hair into place, preening himself. "Very well." Forcing a smile on his face, he tersely offered, "Shall we?"

With their presence gone, Bellatrix and Rodolphus took a moment and then proceeded to resume a former discussion.

"You *can't* refuse, Cissy," prodded Bella. "You know you can't." Then, she lashed out, "It's a bloody gift from *him*, after all! You should be honoured!"

Narcissa haughtily stared at her sister. She considered several things carefully. After a few seconds, she simply stated, "I don't want to wear the same thing as you."

On the verge of a hissy fit, Bellatrix shrieked, "They're not the same! Look, look at it, you stupid, silly..."

"Bella!" Rodolphus cut her off sharply, giving her a knowing look. "Why don't you have a seat beside your dear sister, and allow me to talk to..." He paused and regarded Nagini intently. A complacent smile formed on his thin lips as he sat down beside her. "...the ladies."

Severus watched Rodolphus pull out a small, plush-covered rectangular box from his inner cloak's pocket. Opening it, he drew out a matching, plush ring case, and handed it to Bellatrix to give to Narcissa. Then, he took out a second identical ring case, placing the rectangular one beside him. He turned to Nagini. "Miss Malfoy?"

Nagini couldn't ignore him. Feeling all eyes boring into her, she looked up at the smug, handsome wizard, but shuddered as his cruel, chiselled features only reminded her of the dreadful dinner party two days before and his behaviour towards her.

*But nothing can happen now. Here. Narcissa is here, and...* She gave a fleeting glance at the tall, black-haired wizard who had held her in his arms, dancing; it had been a moment of rare bliss. *And Severus...*

Nagini unconsciously touched her thin, white neckerchief she wore under her high collar, and tucked it higher. Reminded that she still bore the marks of her own fingernails on her throat from struggling against Abraxas' Strangling Hex, she wished to cover up all lingering traces, physical and emotional, but Rodolphus' presence and insistent attention was summoning her back to what she wished to forget and feel: what she wished to keep hidden.

There was a peculiar energy about Rodolphus that made Nagini's heart thump in dull dread and her fingers itch to have her wand. She bravely replied, "Yes?"

"You've been chosen," replied Rodolphus wryly, opening the ring case to show her its content. "The Dark Lord has honoured you with a gift." Seeing her eyes widen in aversion, he coaxingly pointed out, "As well as Narcissa. And Bella. Three rings for three exceptional witches." He turned to Narcissa and cocked his head. "Look closely, dearest Narcissa. The Dark Lord has impeccable taste. Each is unique unto itself. Each one was chosen specifically to complement the particular witch."

Rodolphus tried to control his patronising tone to his future sister-in-law and arched an eyebrow. He crooned, "He knows you favour emeralds, Cissy."

Narcissa opened the case and gasped. Two large oval-shaped, gleaming emeralds were elegantly set in a delicate S-shaped, silver design. Amused and satisfied, Rodolphus chuckled, "See how thoughtful the Dark Lord is? And you wished to refuse his generous gift... tsk, tsk, Cissy."

With a smirk, Rodolphus turned back to Nagini. "Shall I?" He smiled artfully and took the next ring out of its case. At first glance, it looked like a mere simple, metallic serpentine design. But on closer inspection, the tiniest gleams glinted from the mercurial metal as if alive and moving.

"Mercurial, like a Metamorphmagus, like you," he commented softly. As Rodolphus reached to take her left hand in order to place the ring on her finger, Nagini clutched her book tightly and whispered, "No!"

Severus had been listening and watching this scene unfold, gritting his teeth. He had gradually closed and put his mother's *Dark Spells and Their Properties* book aside, and his fingers had found and wrapped themselves around his wand.

Nagini raised her chin a bit and breathed deeply to steady her nerves. Resolutely, she informed, "He's *not* my Dark Lord. I have nothing to do with him. Nor do I wish to."

Rodolphus' face flushed livid, and Bellatrix shrieked, jumping up. "Listen to her! Listen to the arrogant, little cow! I told you! But you and Lucius didn't want to believe me," accused the outraged witch. Then, she jeered, "And I know why!" She gave a knowing shriek at Severus. "Bet you know why too!"

Irrked, Severus glared at Bella, which only caused the heavily-lidded witch to cackle wildly and tease, "Bet you thought I haven't been watching you, Sevy!" Her eyes wide with inspiration, Bellatrix began pacing again in the cramped space, her chest heaving and wand hand jerking spastically.

Rodolphus had leaned back and was rubbing his lips with his finger, contemplating what to do next, trying to control his dark temper. Straining to keep civil, he explained, "The Dark Lord has given us the unwavering impression that you *do* have something to do with him. You are a Malfoy, aren't you, Nagini? That in itself is enough. Surely, your family's allegiance to him is known to you by now. Stop acting naïve."

"Leave me alone."

Rodolphus inhaled deeply, trying to keep from losing his temper. He pursed his lips shrewdly and attempted to placate her suspicion. "The Dark Lord merely wishes to welcome you to the fold, a pureblood witch with pedigree of such distinction. He has honoured Bella, as well as Narcissa."

Severus saw Nagini eye the ring warily.

Unyielding, she repeated, "No."

Rodolphus snarled in frustration, snapping up to an offensive stance. He whipped out his wand. In reflex, Severus gripped his wand tighter, a hex on the tip of his tongue.

Narcissa suddenly jumped in. Wishing to diffuse the situation, she pointed out, "Nagini, look!" She fluidly placed her emerald-stoned ring on her middle-right finger. Nothing happened. Narcissa smiled broadly in relief. "It's just a ring. Nothing more." Trying to lighten the charged atmosphere, she forced an amused laugh. "Please, Nagini. It's just a piece of jewellery; a lovely piece at that. Quite antiquated."

Narcissa gracefully rose and calmly took the other ring case from Rodolphus, crossing and sitting down beside Nagini. "You're making more of this than need be. See?" She took the ring meant for Nagini and put it on her own finger in demonstration. "Nothing." She wiggled her fingers for emphasis. "Just lovely, and I must admit *thoughtful*, jewellery." Narcissa, with pleading eyes covered by her forced, broad smile, once more appealed, "Humour us, Nagini. Just try it on for a second." Amiably smiling over at Rodolphus and Bellatrix, Narcissa turned back to Nagini and playfully fussed, "They've gone to all this trouble to bring us both these lovely gifts from a very powerful, very revered wizard. A new leader. A true Dark Lord to guide and protect Wizardkind against the growing tide of Muggles encroaching on our world and our ways." With a light laughter, beseechingly laced, again she entreated, "Please. For me?"

Nagini sensed there was more to Narcissa's words than needed, but felt unbearably uncomfortable having become the reason for a problem among Lucius' inner-circle. Flustered and wishing for them to leave her alone, Nagini knew she had to appease them first.

"Very well. For you." Narcissa took the ring off and gave it to Nagini, who quickly took and placed it on.

A resounding scream issued forth from Nagini.

Narcissa and Bellatrix both had jolted slightly in place, inhaling sharply, as a simultaneous pulse of magic occurred from their rings, but no further reaction followed.

Severus had jumped up, casting an *Infinitum* spell at the object on Nagini's hand.

It didn't stop the pain that was pulsing through Nagini. As Severus' spell hit her, a forlorn wail came from her lips: the ring had tightened and bitten deeply into her skin. Severus froze, dismayed, unable to think how to help. On the verge of attempting another spell, his impetus was stopped by the softest hissing sound. It came from Nagini; she was whispering incoherently, unintelligibly to herself, as if hissing an incantation. Severus couldn't make out anything concrete and stared at her fixedly. However, her whisperings seemed to help as Severus saw Nagini convulse once sharply, and then the pain slowly ebbed away, leaving her trembling sporadically, and then become still in a fetal position.

Looking around him, he saw that Bellatrix had slid down to the floor cackling with glee; Rodolphus had rushed to help lift her up onto the seat beside Narcissa, who had languidly drifted back to her place, staring dumbstruck at Nagini. Severus peered intensely into Narcissa's eyes, which were wide-open in surprised fear, but she otherwise appeared unharmed. They both shared the same rummy thought: *Nagini's a Parselmouth?*

As the rings seemed to have affected Nagini the worst, Severus tried to assess how he might remedy the problem. He gazed at her with pity, something he had sworn not to do. *I will detach myself from any weaknesses, any feelings for her...* But seeing Nagini laid curled up in her corner spot, her eyes scrunched painfully closed, his heart smouldered to relieve her pain somehow. Wholly.

Severus pointed his wand at Rodolphus. "Release her. Now."

Rodolphus eyes glinted, amused, and with a cool leer, he challenged, "Are you deaf? The ring is from the Dark Lord, not I."

"You've added your own special *touch*, Lestranger."

Not denying it, Rodolphus sneered, "This doesn't concern you, Snape."

"Why would he Charm her ring in that way and not the others?"

"Why indeed?"

As their wand tips simultaneously pointed at each other and sparked in anticipation, the door slid abruptly open. "What the bloody hell is going on?" With wand ready, an irate Lucius took only a second to assess Severus and Rodolphus, and snarled, "Enough, you two! Put your wands away!" Once they both begrudgingly complied, Lucius rushed to Narcissa. "What is it?"

Narcissa's eyes fluttered as she held onto Lucius, encircled in his protective arms, unable to speak.

Warily watching Rodolphus turn to Bellatrix, who'd begun giggling wildly, Severus was left standing near Nagini. Not wishing to touch her unless he had to, he waited for Nagini to compose herself if possible, and was relieved to see her body slowly relaxing and stretching out, released from the intense pain. As she managed to stiffly sit up again, he tentatively sat down beside her. Severus had sworn to himself not to get further involved. Not to feel anything for her. And yet, he couldn't help himself. Through her closed lids and rigid form, he could feel her vitriolic anger and pain; he knew all too well those emotions and the remorseless energy it consumed one with.

In fact, at that very moment, he empathized with her. The fact that Rodolphus was up to something, something dark and secretive with the Dark Lord involving Nagini, infuriated him beyond reason. Knowing that Narcissa and even Rodolphus' own betrothed was also involved didn't soften the myriad of merciless thoughts and hexes running through his mind. *They're pureblood witches! Why would Rodolphus curse his own kind? Why would the Dark Lord?*

His mind stirred with the creeping realisation that no one was safe and anyone could become a target, regardless of their blood status or allegiance. He inwardly groaned, glaring morbidly at Rodolphus. Severus knew Lestranger too well. One male to another. He knew Rodolphus, in particular, had a perverse, insatiable appetite for all things salacious, all things female. *Something unsavoury, unspeakable, is always a given...*

Leaning on Lucius' chest, Narcissa whispered, "The rings!"

"Rings? What rings?" demanded Lucius fiercely. Narcissa held her hand up. Upon seeing the foreign object on his fiancée's finger, he snarled, "Take the damn thing off!"

Attempting to pull it off, Narcissa realised, "I can't!"

"None of us can!" shrilled Bellatrix giddily, licking her lips, wiggling her own fingers to show off hers. As she leaned her arched head against Rodolphus' hard mid-torso. Rodolphus stood in a triumphant stance, running his fingers through Bella's wild mantle of hair. Bellatrix further revealed, "Not until each of us has fulfilled a wish of the Dark Lord's!"

Lucius and Narcissa slowly turned to look at Bella. Nagini opened her eyes and stared out the window but was listening to every word being uttered. Severus stared at the gloating Bella with horror.

Impassively, Lucius croaked out, "Bella... you will tell us *now* what all of this is about!"

Leaping up, Bellatrix cackled wildly and lunged, attaching herself fiercely to Rodolphus' side. She mewed and began petting his broad chest precociously. Turning sharply to face Lucius, she pouted, "Well, it's really only what Cissy and Nagini must do." With a wicked grin, she lashed out, "I've already had the privilege of fulfilling the Dark Lord's wishes!" Looking greedily into Rodolphus' eyes, she whispered vehemently, "As well as my betrothed's!" Bellatrix and Rodolphus' lips met in a ferocious kiss.

The others turned their focus away, waiting for the volatile couple to finish. All except Lucius, who adamantly demanded, "Rodolphus!"

After a few seconds, in a low thick voice, Rodolphus commented, "The Dark Lord's rings his gifts for our girls." Lucius' forehead furrowed in concern. Rodolphus smirked and informed, "Cissy's will come off the night after her marriage vows, I daresay, in honour of her pristine loyalty to you, dear Lucius. And Nagini's... Well, that's still to be revealed... It is between the Dark Lord and me. Tokens of obedience, let's just say."

"What?" hissed Lucius. The blond wizard blinked hard. Flustered and outraged by his oldest friend's deception, he pressed his fiancée harder to him and glared at Rodolphus. "You gave it to Cissy without even telling me beforehand?"

"Why should I have told you?"

"You tell me everything!" spat Lucius.

"Do I?" replied Rodolphus coolly.

The door slid open and a wild-eyed, sixth-year Slytherin stood in the doorway, his flashing dark-brown eyes quickly darting around. His restive glance flitted between Rodolphus and Bellatrix before finally resting on the heavy-lidded witch fixedly. He said, "Pardon me, but Regulus is asking for you; he says he doesn't feel up to coming here." The nervy youth gave Bellatrix an excited, goofy smile.

"Ah, still feeling peaky, is he, Barty?" Bella sashayed up to the grinning, smitten sixth-year and patted him on a cheek. "And you, young Mr Crouch? Are you still feeling a little peelie-wally?" She whispered in his ear, "Poor little waif, I'll have to come claim him, won't I?"

"He is a bit green about the gills still," agreed the youth, his tongue darting out, licking his lips. "And asks for you repeatedly. He insists it's urgent, before we get to Hogwarts."

Abruptly, Bellatrix's high-pitched laughter rang out, and as she swept in front of and past Barty leaving, Lucius called out, "Take Rodolphus with you!"

Insulted, Rodolphus started, surprised. "What?"

Lucius gripped Narcissa instinctively tighter and gave a fleeting glance at Nagini. Thoroughly peeved, the blond wizard nonetheless mastered his edge and turned to Rodolphus, giving him a neutral stare. "Later this evening...we'll discuss everything that has occurred here. In private. Just you and me." He then gave Rodolphus a tart smile and said brusquely, "Guinevere should be lolling about in the corridor, waiting for you, I suspect... If you're bored and in need of further entertainment."

Rodolphus gave a hard, contemptible look around to them all. "Very well. This evening, Lucius."

After Rodolphus gruffly stalked out, the air lightened and there were glimmerings of faint sunlight breaking through the darkening, wintry sky. The Hogwarts Express rounded a long curve and started slowly descending on its final leg of the journey.

No one spoke. Lucius continued to hold Narcissa in his arms. Stone-faced, staring over her blonde head snuggled on his shoulder, he stared sternly out the windows.

Rising, Severus reached down and picked up Nagini's *Advanced Potion-Making* book which had fallen and handed it to her. She took it, but didn't look at him. Instead, she turned listlessly and also stared, as her cousin was doing, through the frosted glass.

Severus sat back down, feeling discomfited and defeated. He discreetly noted Lucius and Narcissa and frowned, moving further to the left, giving Nagini plenty of space. He brooded, ruminating again on how he now knew deep in his heart that if it amused the Dark Lord to play around with his favourite chosen pureblood followers, no one was safe from Voldemort's whims.

It provoked him to no end that Rodolphus held a special claim to the Dark Lord's favours. Lestrangle would use it to his utmost surly, sordid advantage. And Voldemort would indulge Lestrangle. That much was clear.

But Voldemort had also promised to indulge Severus. *Gratify my every wish... Lily...*

Only the sounds of the train chugging along continued to penetrate the compartment's walls, and Severus mulled over and over in his darkening thoughts on how nothing was sacred. Nothing was safe. No one. A nervous tremble ran through him as he meditated on the Dark Lord knowing his weaknesses. Voldemort knew his deepest, darkest wishes he knew his deepest yearning was for Lily. But the Dark Lord had cared not; his uncovering of Severus' most intimate wish appeared distasteful, but other than a curt comment about there being other witches more worthy, Voldemort had never alluded to Lily being of any particular further interest. So much that none of Severus' peers had been given access to this information. *Voldemort must have his reasons. Or not. A 'Mudblood' must truly be unworthy of him, even his distaste. Unworthy of his cruelty...*

Perhaps, this was truly so. Lily was beyond Voldemort's whims. *A mere 'Mudblood' of no worth. Perhaps, I need only to worry about those around me* Severus twitched at the thought of Bellatrix and Rodolphus finding out. Looking around at the despondent pureblood witches targeted for who-only-knew-what dubious purpose, he bitterly reflected, *Lily would never be safe with me!*

Severus and the other passengers were jolted out of their contemplative states by the train coming to a halt. The Hogwarts Express had arrived at its destination.

"We're here!" affirmed Lucius, relieved. He eagerly rose and helped Narcissa to get up and leave. Lucius gave a look to Severus, motioning subtly over at Nagini.

Gathering belongings, Severus austere waited and allowed Nagini to go ahead of him; he couldn't help but see that Nagini tried to walk smoothly through what were most likely smarting jabs of stretching scabs on her back, as well as the discomfort from the cursed ring she was wearing. Understanding all too well the reason for her stiffened gait, Severus noted to himself, *I'll send some soothing balm to her room once she's settled in Slytherin House.*

As the four of them slowly exited from the train onto the tiny platform, Lucius and Narcissa were swiftly engulfed by familiar faces, and Severus silently guided Nagini to follow him. They walked idly in the back of Lucius' group, Nagini lagging behind, staring upwards. The sky was darkening, but even so, a golden beam arched in the vortex of the open atmosphere, causing a lingering, glowing light around the wisps of deep-purple clouds brushed across it.

Severus watched Nagini, curious. The light was capturing her features and colouring them with a soft, amber glow. Her wonder-filled orbs, looking intently around and above her, caught his attention. She seemed to crackle with golden energy as she peered around, absorbing the mountainous, rugged beauty of the Scottish highlands. He'd forgotten. *She is so lovely... in such an unusual way...*

Nagini blinked hard as her eyes adjusted, focusing on the gleaming, fading sunlight and shadows. She breathed in deeply the crisp wintry air and hurried to catch up with Lucius' circle. She saw Severus standing still, his attention caught, staring at another small group of several students, who were rushing by almost at a running pace towards some coaches further on in the woods. He seemed fixated on a witch with flowing red hair and a warm, open smile. The witch didn't notice Severus; she was holding hands with a bespectacled wizard, who was teasingly pulling her along with him.

There was a general hurry and flurry all around from students briskly making their way to the carriages awaiting them. The Slytherin groups casually headed in the same direction, and Nagini followed, not knowing what was in store for her, and at that very moment not caring, suddenly feeling invigorated by the sight and smell of the majestic highland nature around her.

Out of the blue, a loud voice boomed, "Nagini Malfoy!"

She turned and found herself greeted by a giant of a man.

"I'm Hagrid, gamekeeper o' the Hogwarts' grounds. Yeh'll be comin' along with me, separately. Headmaster's orders."

Apprehensive, she asked, "Where to?"

"Oh, ter Hogwarts o' course. But the Headmaster feels yeh should come the way any first-timer should: on a boat! Yeh can follow me."

"She's not going anywhere with you." The haughty comment came from Lucius, nettled. He strode over to beside Nagini and glared at the hairy giant. "She's coming with us!"

"No need ter get yeh dander up, Mr Malfoy. Yeh best be gettin' yerself back ter the castle all the Prefects need ter gettin' there ahead o' the rest."

"You needn't tell me what I must do, you impertinent..."

"Dumbledore's orders, Mr Malfoy!" The gruff half-giant looked down sternly at the well-groomed, sneering blond wizard and reminded, "Dumbledore is in charge o' Miss Malfoy now she's at Hogwarts. Officially speakin', I'm acting on his orders." Then, Hagrid gave Lucius a 'You-Know-Who' *isn't* in charge look and informed, "She's ter enter and be Sorted like any firs' year."

"Does she look like she's eleven-years-old, you thick oaf?" snarled Lestrange.

"Yeh watch yer tongue there, Mr Lestrange. Not goin' ter repeat myself again. The Headmaster's given me instructions, and I'm goin' ter do them. You lot, be on yer way ter the castle!"

And with no further ado, Hagrid turned and instructed, "Come along now, Miss Malfoy. This way. Mind yer step there; the bank is a bit slippery."

Perhaps it was the looks on Lucius and Rodolphus faces, or perhaps the sudden encompassing of the rich Highlands overwhelming her, ensnaring her with its beauty and earthy power, but an enlightening energy coursed through Nagini's veins. And giving a brief, relieved glance back, she caught Severus' eye; she smiled at him, then turned and eagerly followed the giant.

Hagrid led her down a steep, narrow path along the embankment to a huge, dark lake. As Nagini's boots sunk into the crunchy earth, she looked around at the mountains, and inhaled deeply, distinguishing the various scents of winter, water, forest and earth. She felt a heaviness lift from her chest. She'd even forgotten about the bewitched ring she was wearing.

"Hope yer not one fer gettin' sick in boats." Hagrid turned to see that the witch had stopped. Her eyes were closed, and she had a gentle smile, breathing deeply.

"Yeh al'right there, Miss Malfoy?"

"Yes, oh yes. There's evergreen in the air and sweet, sweet water..." She saw the odd look on the half-giant's face. "It's been a long time... since I've been in nature. I'm sorry."

"No, that's all right. Just yeh'll have plenty o' time to be outdoors soon enough. Fer now, I must get yeh to the castle on time." He gestured across the great, Black Lake. There, gleaming in the winter sunset on top of a mountain stood Hogwarts.

"Oh... it's beautiful! So different from Durmstrang!"

Hagrid offered her his hand, helping her into the boat. As she sat on the opposite end, she looked around, taking in the wild Highland landscape: the expansive mountains and sky, lake and forests. "It's all breathtakingly beautiful."

By now, Hagrid's wariness of escorting the Malfoy girl had faded away. She had ingratiated the gamekeeper, and he gave her a beaming smile. "Yes, it is, Miss Nagini. It is indeed!"

Hearing her name spoken in such a kind warm manner filled Nagini with a feeling of lightness and warmth she'd not known for a very long time. *No, that's not true. Severus...* She remembered his touch, dancing...

White and pink gleams of birds flew over them as Hagrid oared them closer and closer to the castle.

She was transfixed on the Forbidden Forest and asked shyly, "I bet there are unicorns and Centaurs dwelling there."

"There is indeed, Miss Malfoy, and a whole heap o' other things!"

They had arrived in the boat house. Nagini felt torpid and dazed, her sensations reeling from the unfettered sense of freedom Hogwarts and its surroundings evoked. She hadn't realized how much she had missed nature, needed it in her life. *It's been so long...*

Flashing images of hiding, Durmstrang, the cell in the Ministry, Malfoy Manor they all melted away.

Docking the small boat, Hagrid helped Nagini out and led her up the castle stairs towards the Main Hall. She felt something well up inside her. Hope. A calm peacefulness accompanied it. And with this peace, suddenly, someone's image flashed through her mind: Severus Snape. *Perhaps, I can get to know him differently here... In this great castle's walls, anything seems possible...*

They continued walking up the stone stairs until they arrived at the Great Hall. A tall stern-faced witch came out and upon seeing them, nodded to Hagrid and informed, "I'll take her from here."

Startled-eyed, Nagini stared at the authoritative witch, not knowing what was happening.

The elder witch matter-of-factly listed out, "Welcome to Hogwarts. I'm Professor McGonagall. I'll be your Transfiguration teacher. You'll be Sorted into your House soon, after the Headmaster's welcome-back greeting. I assume you've been informed of the exact procedure by now, Miss Malfoy?"

"No. No, I haven't. What procedure?"

Minerva sniffed slightly, sizing up this unusual Malfoy in front of her. *Oh, my! Perhaps, she's truly a daft one...* Seeing the girl seemed to be earnestly befuddled, McGonagall gave an impatient sigh. "Oh, very well then. Briefly, you'll follow me and wait on the side. I'll show you where; the Headmaster will motion when you're to come up, and we'll place the Sorting Hat on you. You'll be placed in your House for the remainder of your schooling here. It's tradition. All students must be subjected to it."

"My House?"

Seeing the blank look on the young witch's face, Minerva explained tersely, "Where you'll be sleeping, studying, spending your free time." Exasperated, McGonagall huffed. "Just follow my cue." She motioned to Nagini to follow her, and they entered through the great double doors. There were hundreds of students and a high-arching ceiling filled with uncountable lit candles. Nagini was overwhelmed by the space and stopped in her tracks. McGonagall saw her awe and apprehension, and mercifully led the girl along the farthest left-side aisle. Even so, through the myriad of faces, Nagini made out Narcissa and Lucius. Somewhere in a wave of haze, she spotted Severus.

As they reached the front, McGonagall motioned for her to stand to the side. Nagini stared at the row of Professors sitting at the High Table. There was a hush in the hall as Dumbledore rose and briefly welcomed the students back to their second term. It seemed only seconds before she heard him announce that he was pleased that Hogwarts was welcoming a new student who needed to be Sorted. Professor McGonagall called out her name and motioned to Nagini to come to the centre and sit on a small stool.

Nagini felt ridiculous, embarrassed. She was in mortal fear to look at anyone and felt she would black out when McGonagall placed a tattered old hat on her head. Minerva whispered, "Wait until it Sorts you, and I'll point you to your House table."

Nagini closed her eyes. She gasped as she heard a soothing voice in her ear speak *Hmm... loyalty runs strong and true. That's interesting. Reckless courage. Very useful. So very determined, clever and very resourceful, I see. Oh, my goodness, such a thirst for knowledge to fill the grey... So, where to put you? Knowledge is power. And your power could be great. No? Well, then, let it be "Ravenclaw!"*

Nagini opened her eyes and saw McGonagall's surprised look, motioning her towards the table second from the left. The hall seemed silent as she stiffly walked over to the table, coloured with blue and bronze scarves. No one cheered. In particular, an older boy with a Ravenclaw Prefect badge on his pristine robes was giving her a nasty stare. As she slowly walked down the long table's row, she softly gasped with thankful relief when she heard the Headmaster's voice continuing on and further announcing the students to commence the start of the second term feast.

Now that she felt a huge hurdle had been leapt, she became conscious again of the pangs in her back and marks on her throat twinging, causing her to walk carefully, awkwardly. From another table dotted with burgundy and gold, a young man whom Nagini thought at first was Regulus Black was snickering and whispering something to his bespectacled mate beside him. There was the same girl with flowing red hair that Severus had been mesmerised by earlier at the train platform. She was smiling kindly at Nagini, even as a shaggy, sandy-haired young wizard whispered something into her ear.

Ignoring them, Nagini focused on the floor in front of her, and she felt her face burning as she realised no one at the Ravenclaw table was making space for her to sit *!! have to walk to the very end of the hall and hope there'll be a space there. Oh gods... how humiliating...*

But just as she passed the middle section, suddenly Nagini's eye caught two very blond wizards. In a flash she thought of Narcissa and Lucius, but knew this pair was very different. The witch had large protuberant eyes and a dreamy expression with a sphinx-like smile. She wore eccentric earrings and necklaces which at second glance, Nagini realised were made from vegetables and fruits and other material she couldn't recognize at that very moment. She had a golden, coarse-spun dress showing through her Ravenclaw robe and wore cream and yellow-plaid stockings with golden boots topped with sunflowers.

The tall, slender wizard beside her seemed to glow even more; he was wearing a fluorescent yellow tunic and matching, loose pyjama-like pants, shining out underneath his robe. The golden, candyfloss-haired wizard stood up to his full height, his long flowing hair unruly falling around his pointed, carved face, giving the impression of wind blowing through it. But his wide, sparkling eyes were kind and his voice warm as he held out his hand and introduced himself. "Xenophilius Lovegood. Seventh-year scribbler and quibbler extraordinaire!" Nagini heard a few random sniggers around the table, but focused on reciprocating the welcoming gesture, shaking his hand.

"And I'm Hibiscus. Hibiscus Hope," said the effervescent witch. "Sixth-year scribbler and spells-experimenter extraordinaire!" Hibiscus gave Xenophilius a knowing smile and they both laughed: lovingly, soulfully.

Their laughter was music to Nagini's ears.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: Greatest appreciation to betas extraordinaire: blue artemis, star\_girl and agnus castus!

## Ravenclaws Ascending, Slytherins Descending

### Chapter 11 of 22

There are many kinds of Ravenclaws, as Nagini quickly discovers, some of good will and others not; Severus' ideas of his and Lily's future is challenged, not only by Potter's presence, but by Lucius' attempted deterrence.

\*\*\*\*\*

From the delectable meal and warm camaraderie of her newly found Ravenclaw housemates, Nagini had slowly relaxed. Xenophilius and Hibiscus' continued chatter of all things related to their House, as well as their engaging banter, had lulled her into a calm repose. Until now, she had struggled to sit up straight against an overwhelming tiredness creeping through her sore body and limbs. The accumulation of the day's events hit her hard, and she was curious to what refuge Ravenclaw Tower would hold for her, eager to settle down in her room. *In a nice, warm bed! Finally, safe and away from them!*

Nagini glanced down at the ring on her left hand. The Dark Lord's gift via Rodolphus rested benignly on her finger; she turned and looked over her shoulder, giving a fleeting glance towards the Slytherin table. Nagini caught sight of Severus Snape, but his attention was focused on the red-headed witch he had so intently watched earlier upon arriving at the Hogsmeade station.

The green-eyed witch, who Severus stoically gazed at, was seated at the table between them: Gryffindor.

Nagini turned back around, wondering why she even cared at all that the tall, raven-haired Slytherin was fixated on the Gryffindor witch *It's odd, but I've only seen him in Slytherin company, as I have only been... but who is the red-headed witch to him?* Snape being interested in anyone outside of the Slytherin circle struck her as odd, as well as risky, given that it was so dangerously esoteric. *There's so much more to him than the little I know... why does it even matter to me? My future is here with the Ravenclaw house; I needn't concern myself with anyone in Slytherin again... just focus on the here and now...*

Her thoughts wandered back to when she and Severus had danced together; the mere memory of it lit her senses. Nagini could feel him holding her, guiding her, touching her... Just then, her back muscles darted with pain, reminding her of how much had changed in so short a time. Her aching exhaustion flared, and she couldn't suppress a long, heavy sigh.

"Have some more pumpkin juice," offered Hibiscus dreamily, refilling Nagini's cup. "It's nourishing as well as good for the nerves, especially before sleeping."

"Gurdyroot would *invigorate* her more," chimed in Xenophilius, waggling his eyebrows. "The benefits of it are endless." Xenophilius was pleasantly sucking on something,



smiling rascally at Hibiscus and Nagini.

The mercurial Malfoy couldn't help but smile in response to the candyfloss-haired Lovegood; his quirky good nature had a light-hearted sweetness which was irresistible.

"Which benefits?" replied Nagini, taking a sip, grinning.

Hibiscus giggled softly. "Xeno, she's just met us; Miss Malfoy must have..."

"The mark..." The droned comment came from a witch with frizzy brown hair and large rimmed glasses directly seated across from Nagini; the infelicitous Ravenclaw had been peering solemnly at Nagini throughout the meal, but she had not once spoken until now.

Nagini looked at her, curious.

Xenophilus raised an eyebrow, and Hibiscus' lips formed a knowing smile.

"Ah, a divination, Sybill?" asked Xeno, impressed.

"An aura. Her aura. I divine a dark..." Sybill gazed above Nagini's head, "augury."

Before Nagini could question what exactly the portentous girl was implying, she heard a cry, "Malfoy!"

Nagini looked up. It was the Ravenclaw Prefect who had stared at her so nastily as she had walked to the House table after her Sorting.

"I'm Marcus Belby, Ravenclaw's Head Boy. You are to go to your quarters immediately, unpack and wait to be briefed by me on all our rules and regulations within Ravenclaw. You'll find our House is quite different to others." The dark-haired Prefect gave Hibiscus a lofty look. "Hope, as you're one of her roommates, escort her at once!"

"A bit bumptious tonight, more than usual, aren't we?" butted in Xeno. "Vis absoluta, Belby," he tilted his head back slightly to give his fellow seventh-year Ravenclaw a judgemental look, "absolute corruptit!"

"Lovegood, *not* now!" pointed out Marcus, defensive.

"Nagini!" All turned to see Lucius Malfoy standing near, coldly staring at his cousin. "We must talk. Come with me."

Upon seeing Lucius, an irrational refusal sparked through her. Before Nagini could decline, Belby took a step towards Lucius and exerted his power, Head Boy to Head Boy. "She's not going anywhere with *you*. She's going directly to Ravenclaw Tower!"

Lucius' facial muscles flinched in tension. "No. You're mistaken, Belby. I'm going to talk to her privately. Right. Now."

Marcus turned back to Nagini and spoke sharply. "Unless you wish to be sent to the Headmaster immediately, go to your room!" Then, Belby gave a challenging, but amused look, slowly, to both Nagini and Lucius. "Is this really what you want? Would you like me to make a scene, to demand that Professor Flitwick that Dumbledore be immediately involved? Does the Malfoy name really need more scandal? You know I'll do it, Lucius, just for the mere whim of it!" Belby took a step closer to Lucius, almost brushing against him. "If you want trouble, you'll get it tenfold!"

Irrked, Lucius' eyelashes fluttered in thought, but before he could reply, Nagini rose and informed them, "I'll go directly."

Turning to Hibiscus, she asked, "Could you please take me there?" Besides appeasing Belby, she wished to show that she didn't associate herself with her blond cousin and respected the Ravenclaw Head Boy's authority. Nagini couldn't tell if Belby's threat to call upon the Headmaster for something so seemingly trivial was real or not, but something about his nasty countenance and unflinching arrogance, equalling Lucius', told her he would. *I want to avoid Lucius on any level, especially privately!*

The realization that she was free of Lucius and his cronies, Lestrage in particular, inspired her to cooperate to the fullest. However, she saw Belby's already prejudged dislike of her by the nasty sneer plastered on his face, which only deepened whenever he made any direct eye-contact with her. She stared at the floor, disheartened. His look implied that, regardless of her cooperation, he would be prejudiced to anything she did. *It's not going to be easy. He despises Lucius, and me as well!*

"Absolutely, it'll be my pleasure," replied the effervescent Hibiscus. "Just follow me, Nagini. Xeno?"

"Of course, my dear. With all of the Wrackspurts floating around, siphoning people's thoughts and causing all of these muzzy notions abounding this evening, I wouldn't think of letting you ladies venture about unescorted." The tall, golden wizard stood up to his full height, his long unruly hair flowing down. Debonairly, Xenophilus proffered both arms for each witch to respectively take. Suave and carefree, Lovegood guided them to the doors of the Great Hall.

Watching them, Marcus and Lucius heard faintly, "The haunted bed..." They turned and stared at the frizzy-haired, wide-eyed girl.

Sybill raised her hand slowly pointing at Nagini. "Tormented dreams, troubled sleep, the haunted bed awaits her curses await her!"

"For your information, the Malfoys are already cursed, Trelawney, so no need for embellishments..." remarked Belby snidely.

"That will do, Belby!" cut off Lucius, coolly incensed.

"Touched a raw nerve have I, Malfoy?"

"You've touched nothing, as always."

Marcus smirked, relishing Lucius' cold fury. "At first, I was simply outraged by her being Sorted into Ravenclaw." Then, the Head Boy sneered. "But, on second thought, I shall enjoy having a Malfoy to keep under my thumb." Belby leaned in and softly whispered, "Even if she is a bastard; a half-blood will do just as well, won't one, *cousin*? Even if she is half a filthy Mudblood, yes?"

Smug and assured of winning a point in some hostile, private game between the two, Marcus turned and started to confidently jaunt away.

"You forget who my father is!" lashed out Lucius.

Whipping back around, Marcus snarled, "And you forget who my father is the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot! You Malfoys think yourselves above the law, so just a reminder: my father oversees every single court procedure. Guess whose case was quite recent?"

The Ravenclaw Head Boy gave a dark look to the end of the Great Hall where Nagini was just exiting with Hibiscus and Xenophilus. Smugly, Marcus pointed out, "You also forget that I have privy access to everything... I know all of the dark and dirty secrets regarding Miss Malfoy."

Relishing his triumph, Belby rubbed it in. "Mmm... cat got your tongue, has it? Good!" Satisfied, Marcus intentionally butted Lucius' shoulder hard as he brushed away, leaving the Slytherin Head Boy stewing in his own juices.

Amid the hubbub of excited, chatting noises of the Great Hall, Lucius heard, "Oi, Malfoy! Your cousin," it was Sirius Black, grinning ear to ear, jeering him, "nice looking bird! Where've you and your father been hiding her in your dungeons?"

Boring into the back of Marcus Belby, Lucius only gazed piercingly at the blood traitor, Black, for a second before deciding to ignore Sirius, and headed back to the Slytherin table.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I'll deliver them immediately!" eeked out the young Ravenclaw, Terry Boot, staring at the small package he held in his hands.

Severus watched as the frightened second-year scurried away, having sworn to the intimidating Slytherin to deliver three small tins of healing balms to the newest Ravenclaw house member, Nagini Malfoy. Severus waited until the younger student disappeared up the stairs of the Ravenclaw Tower; satisfied, he turned and headed back down the corridor to return to the Slytherin dungeon, only to halt and quickly spring into the dark shadows upon hearing a familiar voice.

"James Potter, no!"

Severus' heart stopped. It was Lily, making her nightly Prefect patrol, but not alone.

"Come on, Evans... One kiss! Just one..."

"And then one more, and then another..."

Her playful protests were stopped by James decisively nuzzling her up against the wall and silencing her with his mouth. Only the soft moans and impatient grunts of the two embracing and exploring each other were heard echoing sporadically.

Severus watched in horror, frozen, a wave of nausea coming over him. Several seconds passed before he could muster his wits enough to think. *That vile swine snogging you? Lily, no! You said you would meet with me! This Thursday... at our table in the library... Lily, no!*

Severus' hope had soared as he read the Owl post he had received from Lily only an hour ago during the welcome-back feast. His heartbeat had continued racing rapidly, even as the note disintegrated in front of his eyes once read.

Scenarios of their secret meeting, leading to further *amorous* meetings for this time Severus would take no chances; he would give Lily no time to doubt his true feelings for her. He'd rehearsed in his mind over and over again what he would say from the second he'd have her intimate attention: he'd bare his soul. He would prove to her that there was so much more to him than she assumed she knew, more than the childhood friend, the poor boy from Spinner's End, more than her schoolmate confidante. Bitterly, he reflected, *We were best friends, more than best friends...*

That was until last spring when, through one heated moment in dire humiliation, he had lashed out calling her the fateful word 'Mudblood'. Thinking of his last pitiful attempt to make amends for offending her, how he had risked waiting outside of Gryffindor, pleading with Mary Macdonald to go and send Lily to him, only to say the wrong things when she appeared, Severus winced.

The memory of Lily's fiery temper and resolute decision to distance herself from him, once and for all, Severus pushed aside. He would risk again her rejection in an attempt to gain her back. *I won't make the mistake and keep hidden exactly what she means to me... what Lily has always meant to me. This time, she'll hear me out. This time, she'll understand. This time, she'll reciprocate my feeling!*

Severus had faith in Lily; she would understand him fully... *Forgive me, accept me! Accept us!*

Believing himself to be clever and cunning enough to procure a way for them to be together, he needed only for Lily to reciprocate; the slightest sign was all that he wished. But first, they must meet. *This Thursday in the library. The first step for me to truly make amends!*

However, at that very moment, with the sight and sound of James Potter touching and kissing *his* Lily blatantly in front of him, he was blinded with vitriolic hatred. Uncontrollably incensed, his wand hand rose to hex his nemesis, James Potter, when several things happened at once.

A furious Marcus Belby appeared from the Ravenclaw stairway.

"Hey, you two!" shouted the furious Ravenclaw Head Boy. "Stop that! Stop that now!" The priggish Belby strode nearer to the disconcerted couple. "Evans? What is this? A Prefect behaving in such a way! Oh, it's you, Potter... McGonagall will know of this at once! Gryffindor will be missing its prize Seeker for the upcoming match!"

Before Lily could defend James, Severus heard another all too familiar voice.

"What does one expect? A Mudblood given the rights of a Prefect of course they're going to be defiled in such a way... only Gryffindors stoop so low..."

"Malfoy, shut it! Or I'll..."

"You'll what, Potter?"

"I'll make you shut it!"

"Is that a promise?" Lucius leered at the outraged James.

Wand in hand, Belby broke in. "Enough! Evans and Potter you will return immediately to Gryffindor I'll report your conduct to Professor McGonagall promptly. Go straight there; I'm right behind you!"

"You just wait, Malfoy! You'll get yours soon!" called out Potter, unable to restrain himself.

"James, don't make things worse. Come along!" Abashed, Lily tugged the hotheaded James to leave with her, and quickly, with heated whispers, they were soon out of sight.

Thoroughly disgusted, Lucius' hawk-like gaze had followed them, glaring at Lily in particular. *What is it about Mudbloods that could entice a Pureblood away from his own?*

The Ravenclaw Head Boy interrupted the blond wizard's malicious thoughts.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Lucius gazed coolly at Marcus. "Nagini. I need to speak with her."

Delighted he could deny Lucius what he wanted, yet again, Marcus sneered. "She is not available."

"Belby, don't play games with me. I want to see her. *Now.*"

"Are you deaf? No!"

Having avidly locked eyes with Marcus, in a flash, Lucius raised his wand. *'Imperio!'*

Against an invisible counter-shield, there was a split second of a brief light ricocheting, striking Lucius down on the hard stone floor, stunned.

Belby burst out with laughter and glee. "The Belbys learn from their mistakes, unlike you Malfoys, unlike that wretched father of yours!" Suddenly, Marcus' demeanour became eerily sombre. "Unlike my dear Aunt Lapontia... It was too late for her...Where would the rest of our family be, not learning to defend ourselves from your father's filthy, underhanded tactics? Hmm?" Belby kicked Lucius hard in his ribcage. "You dare to try to Imperio me, dear cousin? You are rather thick, aren't you? Everyone knows it's your father's calling card, and you're *just* like him, aren't you? You stupid, shallow toff!"

Marcus paced, working himself up into a tizzy. The chance to vent long seeded frustrations between their families, between the two of them personally, overtook him. "Try to use an Unforgiveable on me, will you? Well, let me reciprocate with a little surprise for you!" Belby raised his wand and in the split second intent to use the Cruciatus on Lucius, he suddenly fell over, hitting the floor hard from a *Petrificus Totalus*, having been hexed from behind.

Wand raised, Severus walked slowly out of the shadows and stood between the two sprawled seventh years. After a second's thought, he quickly counter-cursed Lucius and helped him to his feet.

Malfoy grasped to balance himself against Snape and catch his breath from the residue of the stunning spell of Belby's. Just as Severus initiated to guide him away, Lucius threw out his booted foot, kicking Belby full in the face. Riled beyond measure, he would've had at him again, but Severus whispered, "Leave him for others to find; it won't help if you're seen here; otherwise, it'll be his word against yours. We need to return to Slytherin, at once, before anyone can place you here with him."

"Always the voice of reason, aren't you?" concurred Lucius, bitterly, for he would've loved to have beaten Marcus' face in Muggle-style. "Very well."

It wasn't until they were both crossing through the Slytherin common room that Lucius inquired, "Besides my gratitude, Snape, you have my curiosity. What were you doing in that part of the castle in the first place?"

"Nothing." Severus was still morosely playing the mental film of Potter kissing Lily in his mind, torturing himself.

Lucius raised an eyebrow, skeptical, knowing Severus' different silent moods well from over the years. "Snape, have a seat." Beckoning the brooding young wizard over to two corner chairs, Lucius flicked his wand, placing a Muffliato spell around them as they both sat near the fireplace. The blond wizard was determined to get to the bottom of what Severus was reluctant to reveal. "You just happened to be near Ravenclaw at curfew time?"

Severus flicked at a spot on his sleeve. "Healing balms... for Nagini; I'd promised myself to bring her some." He looked up at Lucius, poker-faced. "For the lash wounds on her back... in case she needs them. I noticed her gait was quite stiff, which indicates the wounds are still... painful." Severus knew full well what this felt like from his own father's thrashings.

Lucius sniffed and stared into the burning embers. He refused to comment on his father's punishment on his cousin. Instead, he pursued his own curiosity regarding another matter. "Why then were you hiding? From that shite of a nob, Belby?"

Severus remained silent.

"You saw the Mudblood and that filthy blood traitor, Potter, going at it, didn't you?" Smugly, Lucius purred, "Didn't I tell you about Mudbloods, Severus? Muggles and Mudbloods they are only good for a few things... torture, other forms of entertainment, but for serving our intimate needs? Besides being distasteful, it is, nonetheless, unacceptable. Need I point that out again?" Malfoy gave an exasperated sigh. "I thought you had rid yourself of this *obsession*. Especially in light of Evans having ensnared Potter in her web; they are obviously rutting around"

"Enough!" snapped Severus, standing up abruptly; he then turned and strode two steps away, only to halt. Unable to go further, his shoulders sagged in defeat. The pain of Lily having chosen James Potter overwhelmed him. He felt Lucius guide him back to his seat and flopped down in it, weakened in body and spirit.

"What is it about Evans that lures you and Potter to her?" Lucius winced at some sordid thought. "Severus, can you tell me one significant thing to help me understand this mad infatuation? Just one small glimpse into that peculiar mind of yours and why you are so ensnared by her, um, charms?"

"I was her first..."

Lucius' eyes narrowed in disbelief. "Her first?"

"No, no, not that..." sputtered Severus, feeling a wave of nausea roll over him. He swallowed back down the rising bile in his throat; his will to hold everything in clashed with an unforeseen need to unburden the insane jealousy of Potter and possessive feeling about Lily. *Is Lucius capable of understanding the merest ounce of what I feel?*

"I was her first; the first to know her for what she was..."

"And what, pray tell, was that?" asked Lucius, deadpanned and clueless.

"A witch!" revealed Severus in agony. He repeated, "I was the first to know her for what she was, even before she fully understood it herself..." For the briefest moment, Severus smiled at the wonderful miracle of what had been shared between Lily and him. *The purity of what only one person can share once and once only with another.*

He looked at Lucius for affirmation of this providential event in his life, but only saw the blond wizard peering at him with a distasteful and quizzical expression.

"Well, whether Mudbloods are innately born with magical powers, or whether the power has been stolen from pure Magic-kind is, indeed, the question. I advise you not to put much weight into this insipid childhood memory." It was difficult for the privileged, Pureblood wizard to be tactful in dealing with Snape; however, the Dark Lord had shown more than once a certain softness for Snape, which Lucius interpreted as a sign for others to do so as well. It had briefly perplexed Lucius, but he hadn't dared to question Voldemort's reason for this. Eventually, with time, it became a mute and disinterested point, and the young Malfoy focused rather on how to use Voldemort's favouring of the underprivileged, exceptional Snape to his advantage.

Mentoring Severus had been just the first step of further endearing Voldemort's perception of him. *I'm more than just my father's son...* reminded Lucius slyly to himself. *The Dark Lord shall see that I'm a natural leader for others as well, entrust me even more when he takes full power, but I must put myself forward...*

The underprivileged, unusual lad had responded eagerly to Lucius' guidance; it had been easier than the blond imagined, for Severus was truly, exceptionally gifted; Voldemort himself had pointed this out in front of all the other followers, and when Snape took the Dark Lord's Mark, it had sealed the deal. Lucius now needed only to give continued guidance and advice to his Slytherin brother and fellow Death Eater. On Lucius' part, there would be no breaking asunder their bonds, no questioning of loyalty to the Dark Lord or to each other. *But he needs my help to rid him of this... Mudblood filth...*

Lucius carefully continued, "Severus, I would advise you never to even imply that Mudbloods are our equals; furthermore, I wish to instill in you to trust me, as an older brother, Severus, an *experienced* brother." Lucius changed tactics. "I wish you to know that I understand your attraction for the weaker sex. However, your choice is what is in question, in need of correcting."

Seeing the incongruous look on Snape's face, Lucius paused.

Severus was now numb from his momentary folly of having entertained that Malfoy could for one second understand what Lily meant to him. Impatient to return to his room for some mental privacy, he couldn't suppress a slight sigh.

Seeing the remorseful young wizard suffering, Lucius scoffed. "Really, Snape, put the pathetic dribble aside, and let's discuss this man to man." Lucius rose and crossed to

the fireplace. Turning back to the angst-ridden housemate, Lucius firmly instructed, "You must rip any sentimental dribble from your heart for this Mud...Evans! What you need... and again, I'm speaking to you man to man is a *distraction*..."

Spurred on by a sudden inspiration, Lucius touched the shoulder of the hunched over figure in pain. "Bellatrix..."

Severus jerked his shoulder away from Lucius' hold.

"Snape...Severus, listen to me! You know Bella fancies you... Why else is she so hostile towards you? A woman scorned... and you have more than once declined her advances..."

Severus huffed, sickened by the mention of the vulgar, voracious Black sister, and swiped again at a fleck on his jacket sleeve.

"You needn't be so *cruel* to her, Severus. One kind word, one small gesture of affection, and she will do," his voice lowered into a throaty whisper, "anything you want... your utmost fantasy..."

Severus had frozen, breathing slowly.

Lucius had sat again and leaned closer. "Your darkest wishes, Severus. She's incredible. Indescribable."

Severus felt ill. He needed to be alone with his thoughts and feelings, but knew the only way to escape Lucius' savvy attempts to lure him into encouraging and accepting Bellatrix's favours was to appear to be in accord.

Slowly rising, Severus offered, "Very well. I shall think on it."

"Don't think, act! She's yours for the taking," insisted Lucius smugly. "I promise you, Bella will wipe away any schmaltzy childhood fluff and replace it with a very fulfilling, tangible reality." Lucius chuckled softly. "If you're going to be ensnared, Severus, you might as well be ensnared by the best. Trust me on this; she *is* the best... and the fact that she, a Black, desires you you are honoured. Truly." Lucius was now in a sporting mood, feeling generous by his libidinous reflections of his own experiences with his future sister-in-law. "You won't regret it!"

Attempting to mask his disgust, Severus placidly repeated, "I shall think on it."

Suddenly, Lucius caught sight of another figure who had entered the Slytherin common room. Reminded of his own interests by this challenging presence, the blond wizard urged, "Think on it, and when you're ready to act, let me know. I'll aid you in whichever way you need."

Then, Lucius flicked his wand, dispelling the Muffliato spell, and called out, "Rodolphus! I've been waiting for you time we discussed the gifts from the Dark Lord, the lovely rings for all of our girls?"

Disgruntled, LeStrange gave a cool glare at Severus as they crossed paths with each other and proceeded to fill the chair which Severus had just vacated.

Severus glanced back at Lucius and Rodolphus, who had immediately encircled themselves with Silencing charms, vivaciously in discussion.

He quickly focused on Lily's radiant face, the image of her hair and emerald eyes; immediately, a feeling of calm and solace came over him.

Severus continued onward to his room to lose himself in visions of Lily's and his future.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: The greatest gratitude to emdramaqueen for her beta work and support!

## The Haunted Bed and Other Dilemmas: Part One

*Chapter 12 of 22*

Settling down for the evening in her House, Nagini is confronted with a variety of dilemmas.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nagini lay in her canopy bed, breathing in the sweet fragrance of the cinnamon-scented healing balm which she had rubbed on her neck before lying down. She reflected on how earlier, after unpacking, she had rushed to change into her nightgown, and in doing so, she had forgotten about the welts on her back from Abraxas' flogging.

Having been perched on one corner of Nagini's bed, Hibiscus saw the swollen lash marks and then gazed at Nagini with her protuberant eyes, saddened at the sight of the mercurial Malfoy's marred skin; but then, the effervescent blonde witch simply commented, "Some of those wales still look angry." Lithely crossing over, Hibiscus picked up one of the small tins of balms, which Professor Flitwick had given to Nagini earlier in his consultation study, and she offered, "Let me help you."

Nagini had been too ashamed to say anything, but merely turned away from Hibiscus. After a few seconds of silence, the uneasy Malfoy lowered her gown to her waist and waited. Neither girl spoke as the sylphlike blonde witch carefully rubbed the balms of Dittany and Murtlap on Nagini's back.

When Hibiscus had finished applying them, she returned the salves to her roommate's vanity table and smiled serenely. "You've nothing to be ashamed of... The person who did this to you should be ashamed."

Nagini did not reply; softly, Hibiscus wished her good night and slipped through the shimmering curtain which curved around, sectioning off and enclosing each separate sleeping area of the dormitory room, used in the late evenings for privacy. The pensive Malfoy waited a second and, assured that all had retired for the evening, carried one healing balm with her to her bed. She untied the midnight-blue curtains from each bedpost and drew them closed.

Lying down, she then raised her nightgown to her waist, and took some balm, slowly rubbing it on an older, burned scar on the inside of her upper left thigh *it probably won't help it to disappear, but it can't hurt, just to soothe the dryness*... Slowly, she massaged the salve on the taut, thin skin. It no longer hurt her physically, only a tingeing tightness now and then. As for any emotional scar regarding how she had received it, she had grown used to that; accepted it as a part of her life: an irreparable part. On some level, it actually had strengthened and shielded her, for she allowed no one to touch her, only very selectively; therefore, she felt she could control and not allow

anyone to hurt her. Physically, as well as emotionally, that is.

As the soothing fragrance of cinnamon, mixed with the Essence of Murtlap, filled the air of her now enclosed canopy bed, she recalled the event in which she had received the mark.

"Gunther! Rolf! That's it, hold her down, tight!" The young blond wizard, Karl Von Sturmberg of Durmstrang, commanding them, swirled his wand upwards, using all his concentration, and whispered, "*Flagrate!*" A burning, fiery line appeared in the air, and Karl began to draw with his wand a specific shape: a straight vertical line, adding a circle on top of the line, and then, he enclosed both line and circle in a triangle.

With the symbol of Gellert Grindelwald complete, he guided it towards the tightly held figure of Nagini, fastened to the floor by his two bullyboy mates. "Spread her legs," hissed the vicious Von Sturmberg. "Wider!"

Pulling her skirt up to her waist, Von Sturmberg guided the burning symbol to her inner thigh and branded her flesh. Over her screams from the searing pain, Karl crouched down more comfortably between his yobbos. Satisfied Grindelwald's symbol had burnt into her permanently, he lifted the fiery line in the air above them and grabbed her hair, jerking her head upwards. He spat out, "Now, you and all will know you for what you are...an abomination created by that heretic hag who you called your mother: Lucretia de Malfoy!"

The seconds that followed were all one blurry wave of hatred and blinded violence.

Before the Durmstrang bullyboys could further continue and carry out their hate crime, all three assailants were thrown away by the explosive force of a nonverbal hex from the avenging witch. Gunther's head had cracked against the dark stone wall, and he lay unconscious; Rolf's wand arm's elbow had snapped, broken, on his body's contact against the stone. The leader's body had been knocked back and slid across the floor. Karl lay near the brink of a dangerous precipice, one of the open-sided staircases of Durmstrang.

Through tears of uncontrollable rage, in the blink of an eye, Nagini had Summoned her wand from Rolf's pocket. In fury, she pointed it at Von Sturmberg's fading Flagrate spell, the lines weakly hovering still in the air. In wrathful Parseltongue, she hissed an Incendio spell. As the dark fire took the shape of a serpent in its swelling flames, it swallowed the dwindling Flagrated symbol, and with a decisive swish of her wand, Nagini directed the cursed flames to pursue its intended human target: Karl Von Sturmberg.

Once set on fire, he had, naturally in the torturous pain, panicked, running and thrashing about, and had fallen backwards off the open-sided stone staircase, plummeting to his death.

Blinking back the painful memory, Nagini wiped the tears off her cheeks and tucked the healing balm under her pillow.

Pushing the horrid event aside, Nagini continued to ruminate and willed herself to think over the immediate day's events; she refused to dwell on Abraxas, Qualmsick or anything else related to Malfoy Manor or further back in her past. She turned on her side and reflected, rather, on her newest surroundings and the other witches she was now sharing this serene, elegant room with.

She remembered how Hibiscus had helped her finish unpacking her belongings from her trunk after the evening meal when two other witches entered the Ravenclaw dormitory room.

"Hello! I'm Charity Burbage, and this is Mildred Bagnold. We're two more of your roommates."

Nagini shook their hands.

"Mildred's sister, Millicent, is rumoured to be the next Minister of Magic; so, you're rubbing shoulders with the elite here!" teased Charity good-naturedly.

"Don't listen to Charity; I'm not a pompous prat like Belby, spouting off my family's positions," assured Mildred.

Nagini's fifth roommate entered wide-eyed and gave a knowing look to Nagini. "The haunted bed!" croaked out Trelawney.

As all of the canopy beds with midnight-blue curtains in their room seemed identical, Nagini only looked at the portentous witch, not knowing how to respond.

The levelheaded Bagnold asked, "You've already met Sybill, yes?"

Shaking Trelawney's limply offered hand, Nagini quickly turned back to organize the remaining items that she had tossed on her bed. As she placed the array of marble-handled brushes, combs and hairpins in proper order inside the centre drawer of her ornate vanity table, Nagini sentimentally thought of the little elf. *Dobby! He remembered how I liked these so much and packed them!*

But then, the sweet memory of Dobby faded, replaced by unpleasant ones of Malfoy Manor. Nagini gazed fleetingly at herself in the blue and bronze trimmed, oval looking glass above the table and saw the dark circles under her eyes. Her back muscles twinged. Distracting herself by stretching her neck and rolling her shoulders gently, she looked around the room in more detail as the other girls chatted randomly.

The Ravenclaw dormitory was a light-filled, rounded chambre with bewitched constellations on its high, domed ceiling, mirroring those found in the common room. As Nagini gazed upwards, the stars, almost imperceptibly, moved, continually forming different formations. She blinked and took a deep breath, admiring the pleasing décor of the sleeping chambre. On its graceful arched windows, there hung blue and bronze silk draperies. The rich midnight-blue carpet gave softly under her feet, and beside each bed, an antiquated bookcase protruded out, beckoning to be filled with tomes of wisdom. *Peaceful... Lovely, just lovely!*

Hibiscus had picked up the old dragon-skinned book Nagini had unpacked, placed on her bed covering beside Lucius' used sixth-year books and his *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*.

"Ooooh," cooed Hibiscus, opening the slightly tattered, fragile binding. "Runes! Ancient Runes and glyphs You're quite a Runologist!"

Seeing the other inquisitive Ravenclaws immediately flock around Hibiscus to get a gander at the antiquated curiosa, Nagini quickly dispelled the notion. "No, I'm not at all...can't even read one symbol! It was my mother's book."

Hibiscus' protuberant eyes, filled with wonder, gazed upwards, and she asked, "Oh, Nagini, may I borrow it for a few days? To show to Xenophilus? He'll be quite delighted...runic scripture is one of his specialties! Some runic texts scribed in pamphlet-like parchments are occasionally circulated within the student body. They were penned by Xeno; he is quite passionate about Runology."

"Yes!" squealed Charity in excitement, pointing steadfastly on one page. "Muggle runes!"

Gazing at Nagini in awe, thoroughly delighted, Burbage sputtered, "Your mother was a scholar in Muggle Studies? Fluent in the ways of the Elder Futwark? It's unprecedented! Fascinating!"

"Burbage is a Muggles freak," joked Mildred. Seeing the worried look on Nagini's face, she clarified, "Madly keen on all things Muggle...ancient and new!" Then Mildred remembered, "Oh, speaking of eccentrics, Professor Flitwick wishes to see you in the consultation study. It's the little snuggery straight across the common room from the base of the dormitory steps. It's like his second office...but just for Ravenclaws, of course." The unrestrained Bagnold snapped her fingers searching for a phrase. "What's the word Muggles use, Charity? Oh, yes pronto!" She smiled, pleased with herself. "Just love it...sounds like a spell!"

As Nagini crossed to leave, she saw that all four roommates had perched around on her bed, utterly immersed in the strange old book *So much for my bed being haunted! Even Sybill's joined in!* They were all captivated and chirping excitedly. Nagini didn't bother to interrupt their 'Oohs' and 'Ahs' as they shared esoteric observations from each new discovery the book held.

Silently slipping out, Nagini made her way down to the wide, circular common room, passing in front of the white-marble statue of Rowena Ravenclaw. Giving an admiring look to the founder of the Ravenclaw House, she saw Professor Flitwick's door open.

The tiny wizard appeared and called out, "Ah, Miss Malfoy! Please, do come in!" She crossed through the spacious room filled with bookcases, tables and chairs, and soon found herself warmly greeted and snugly seated in the cosy little study.

The half-goblin wizard smiled and noted, "Quite a day for you, Miss Malfoy!"

Suddenly nervous under the wise gaze of her Head of House, she could only reply, "Yes, sir."

Cordially, Professor Filius Flitwick got out a circular tin from his desk drawer. He opened and placed it in front of her on the desktop. A Baroque tune tinkled out. Nagini peered closer and saw little colourful cupcakes inside it. Filius waved gracefully over the tin with his wand, and the icing covered pastries began to twirl and swirl, forming stately minuet movements, only to then jerk and jive in a rhythmic pattern as the tune exuding from the box changed to upbeat Jazz.

Nagini smiled at the sweetness of such a display of Light magic. "It's lovely..."

"Have one! They're as delectable as they are delightful!" Filius assured her, helping himself to one. Nagini took one as well. As she bit into the tasty cake, Professor Flitwick then referred to a list he had been analyzing on his desk and gently explained, "The Headmaster has proposed the following for your present timetable; the staff will immediately begin to assess your skills during classes. In a fortnight, we will re-evaluate you. If need be, we'll adjust your curriculum, and at that time, add on a few electives to help fill out anything missing from your," Flitwick hesitated, "past training, private or otherwise."

Finishing her little cupcake, Nagini took the parchment Filius proffered. On it was written: Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology.

"As your housemates may have told you already Lovegood and Hope can be quite thorough. Ravenclaw House prizes learning, wisdom, wit and creativity in its members. I look forward to the diversity and individuality you shall bring to our House. You are the first Malfoy ever to be Sorted into Ravenclaw..." Flitwick broke off, as another thought occurred to him, and reached for a small loosely wrapped, half-opened packet. He gave it to Nagini.

"This was, um, delivered earlier, intended for you."

She unfolded the wrapping. Nestled inside were three small tins. The scent of cinnamon protruded heavily from one. A tiny note was underneath them. Written in spidery, cursive handwriting, it read: '*Cinnamon... oil-based chamomile, Dittany, and Essence of Murtlap*'. Nagini gave a confused look to Professor Flitwick.

"I checked them," he admitted, slightly embarrassed. "They seem to be healing balms..." Gently, Filius enquired, "Have you an injury?"

Nagini blinked and stared at the tiny, tarnished tins. Thinking quickly, she said, "No. No, I just usually have some with me as a precaution. I'm very clumsy. Prone to accidents..."

Suddenly, a flashback of waking up in her boudoir at Malfoy Manor, and gazing through a haze of excruciating pain, she saw Dobby being kicked by Lucius. Her blond cousin, who was holding a similar, larger tin as those in her lap, was hissing at the wretched little creature, "Don't you dare touch her! Use some of your filthy powers to apply it to her back!"

*Lucius! Lucius must have brought these to me!* Momentarily feeling guilty for snubbing him earlier, she explained further to her Head of House, "I must have forgotten to pack them. My cousin delivered these?"

Clearing his throat, Flitwick delicately informed her, "This packet, the contents therein, was *confiscated* by Prefect Belby from a second-year, Terry Boot. Mr Boot can't remember exactly who gave it to him, although he does remember that it was a Slytherin." Flitwick cleared his throat again. "There has been an incident: Marcus is in the Hospital Ward, nothing too serious; however..." It was difficult for Filius to say it directly. "Miss Malfoy, although we strive and pride ourselves here in Ravenclaw to resolve conflicts of interest, beliefs, and such, intellectually, diplomatically, wit over brute force, as it were...there are always unforeseen exceptions to the rule. Marcus and Lucius are these. Our Mr Belby is the exemplar, model student: our Head Boy," Nagini bit the inside of her lip to not huff derisively, "however, any time he and Mr Malfoy are left to their own devices, there have always been *incidents*." He gave a knowing look to Nagini.

"Professor Flitwick, please, what has happened?"

"Marcus was found a short time ago, face down, in his own blood from a broken nose. Someone had used a Petrificus Totalus on him and kicked him in the face. Inappropriate behaviour has occurred before between the two." Flitwick pushed his glasses up a bit, momentarily stalling; but then, he asked, "Were you expecting Mr Malfoy to deliver these? Would you be willing to attest to this before myself, Professor Slughorn of Slytherin, and the Headmaster?"

Nagini's eyes widened in panic. *To squeal on Lucius? But what if it wasn't him? Of course, it was...who else? Only he knows why I would need these...*

Hesitating, Nagini asked, "Professor Flitwick, surely Marcus knows whether it was, indeed, Lucius or not? Surely, he can identify him?"

"That is the crux of the matter; Marcus' pride won't let him name a name, and without anyone else to do so, my hands are tied."

"I'm sorry, Professor," Nagini felt her face burning in cowardly shame, but couldn't bring herself to agree to do it *Lucius!* Moreover, there was the faintest nagging doubt in her mind connected, incomprehensibly, with the scent of cinnamon filling her senses. It wasn't Lucius' face, but someone else's, an unidentifiable presence in her subconscious, teasing and intangible. "...I can't say it, for certain..."

Disappointed, Flitwick's attention was distracted as he noticed Nagini's hair changing. Dark red streaks flowed through her brunette locks.

"Ah, yes, wonderful! The Headmaster informed me that you are a Metamorphmagus."

Self-conscious, Nagini touched her hair. "Not a pure " she stopped, having become flustered. "My Metamorphmagus powers fluctuate from voluntary to involuntary responses, reacting to various emotional stimuli." Nagini stopped and waited. At that moment, she was feeling guilty, ashamed, but also angry for having to be put on the spot. She dwelt on what would happen if she stepped up and accused Lucius on behalf of Marcus. *What will it gain me, except for more trouble?* She fingered the bewitched ring on her finger. *For whatever reasons, Belby doesn't want to accuse Lucius himself, or he would have... It's unfair for Professor Flitwick to ask me to! If Marcus won't... And yet, if I truly want to disassociate myself from Lucius and show my loyalty and respect to Flitwick, the Ravenclaw House, I should do the right thing!*

Through her fog of doubt, the faint, unidentifiable imaged face triggered by the cinnamon scent became clearer to her: Severus Snape. Her brow knitted; she was utterly confused.

"Professor Flitwick, I'm sorry, but perhaps I could sleep on it? If that is all for now, may I please be excused?"

Knowing it was best for the young woman to get some rest, Professor Flitwick complied, "But of course, Miss Malfoy. If you haven't any questions for me at this time, do return to your dormitory. You can ask or discuss with me anything which comes to mind in the morning. You'll start your day off with two hours of Charms, back to back. How do you find your room?"

"Lovely, sir, truly lovely." Thanking him, she rose to leave, only to turn and ask, "Sir, my wand? I was told..." Abraxas' devious smugness flashed through her mind, "that I would receive it upon my arrival."

"Ah, yes, the Headmaster shall give it to you right before Charms class. After breakfast, you may go directly to his office and, afterwards, come to room 2e, the Charms classroom, located on the third floor."

Taking the little tins and thanking the Ravenclaw Head again, she left, eager to return to her room. She sighed heavily, dreading having to meet with Dumbledore alone. The last time she had spoken with him was in the bowels of the Ministry, the day of her hearing in front of the Wizengamot. Moreover, she could never forget her very first meeting with the omnipotent wizard before that in her gaol cell; his deceptive, grandfatherly blue eyes had seared through her with wrathful judgment, smiting her shields of denial and avoidance instantaneously.

She quaked in her boots at the memory of the angered Dumbledore. Her only comfort was that she would be reunited with her wand. With this hope, and that the Headmaster would be mercifully brief, she returned to the dormitory room.

\*\*\*\*\*

## The Haunted Bed and Other Dilemmas: Part Two

Chapter 13 of 22

Unable to sleep, Severus seeks refuge in the Slytherin Common room, only to be confronted with one immediate dilemma which he has no choice but to deal with ... Elsewhere in Ravenclaw Tower, Nagini, also, is having trouble falling to sleep...

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus tossed over on his side. He couldn't sleep. The grating snores of his roommates caused his pulsing temples to pound achingly. The lingering residue from having witnessed Lily being touched and kissed by Potter crushed his chest. *I can't breathe!* Feeling suffocated in mind and body, he jumped up and grabbed his robe, quickly putting it on as he strode silently out of the dormitory room. Making his way to the Slytherin common room, he crossed to a corner and flung himself down onto a grande sofa. He wished to brood in peace in the shadows of the eternally lit fireplace and dim greenish light the dungeon perpetually emitted.

*Why? Why would she let him do that to her?* The truth gnawed at him, a persistent, painful comprehension which he fought against accepting. *She's accepted him as her... lover. She has chosen Potter...* It was the hard truth, on a base level, along with other nauseous truths. Incensed, his frustration and insecurity increased tenfold. The merciless mulling over what James Potter had that he didn't, tortured him. *And now, the great Quidditch hero, Saint Potter, wants to get inside her knickers?* Severus face burned. *And she'll let him?*

It was too much for him to hold in. "No!" he cried out. He scrunched his eyes tight and took deep breaths. Suddenly, he froze.

Someone else had entered the common room.

He wouldn't usually have cared; it wasn't the first time he had sought refuge in the common room when unable to sleep, nor the first time his solitude had been interrupted. *But it has to be around three o'clock in the bloody morning!* Tonight was a night he particularly wished to be alone with his thoughts. With his pain.

The figure stopped, paused, and then slowly walked towards him. As it neared, he recognized the feminine form. As she drew even closer, he recognized the witch. *Bellatrix!*

"Well, well, what have we here?" she whispered softly.

Severus' onyx eyes glittered, the gleams from the dancing flames of the burning embers of the fireplace reflected in them; but then, Bella halted, her curvaceous figure silhouetted, casting a shadow upon Snape.

*Fuck! I forgot my wand!* Before he could nonverbally *Accio* for it, in a flash, Bellatrix had fluidly flicked her wand, placing an Invisibility Shield and Silencing charm around them.

Neither spoke as she languidly crossed over and lowered herself beside him in a sinuously yet...Severus could not negate...alluring manner. He had always prided himself on deflecting Bellatrix's licentious behaviour, but he could not deny that he was well aware of what indulgent pleasure it promised. It was her voracious and precocious sexual behaviour which always threw him off, challenging him, and the only way he could counter her volatile energy was to withdraw from and shun her. She was everything Lily was not.

And yet, he was keenly aware that the eldest Black sister's voracious sexual energy was tied in with her powerful, Dark magical powers. Or so, Bella proclaimed every chance she could. *Is there just magic, and only the wizard or witch determines its darkness? Rather, its darker usage?* Asked the curious young wizard to himself as she drew nearer. So many times the exultations of a wizard's sexual energy being equal to his abilities were droned into Severus by his mates. *Is that what Potter has?* The mad thought flitted through his mind. *Is that what Lily is drawn to?*

He could not quite fathom, nor accept this, but perhaps... His first full sexual experience had been with Guinevere Rookwood just this last Halloween's festivities. An impromptu party had been given at Hogwarts for the sixth and seventh years. The liberating event had left mixed marks on his psyche. He had lain and the eager witch had ridden him, completely in control. He didn't complain, nor regret it; the experience was eye-opening and whetted his appetite, feeling physically empowered. Sexually empowered. And, consequently, he felt more self-assured around the more perverse of his Slytherin mates, understanding their weaknesses from his own experience.

Nevertheless, a large void still remained within him; the gap of loneliness in his life became even more pronounced. The emptiness of the physical act of copulation had not eased his longing for a fuller union with another: completeness. Something more than just the functions and needs of the body. It had only keenly emphasized the large hole of longing for something which remained forever, frustratingly, elusive. *But, with the right person it could be filled and fulfilled: with Lily...* He believed he would be made whole by her. Now that he had gained some basic, practical experience, he had pledged to save himself for her and her alone.

But, like a sinister dream of dark yearning, Bellatrix stood before him. His pubescent hormones pumped furiously in his veins, clashing with his defence of disdain that he usually shielded himself with against her. In the surreal ambience, her salacious energy exuded forth, catching his dubious and curious attention. *She's incredible.*

*Indescribable...* Lucius' words echoed in his thoughts. But Severus' reason bolted forward, reminding him of another private oath he'd sworn to himself. *Nothing is worth Bellatrix' favours...*

Feeling his resolution wavering for the slightest second, torn between tasting that which he had chosen to deny himself, that which he prided himself on abstaining from, Severus started to rise.

"Always so afraid."

He stopped.

"Always so *cowardly* around me... Why is that, Sevy?"

Severus turned to her, his fathomless eyes boring into hers.

"The Dark Lord knows this about you. He knows it's a *weakness* of yours... your peculiar sensibilities regarding the *fairer* sex."

Severus huffed. It wasn't the first time Bellatrix had boasted and endowed herself to speak on behalf of the Dark Lord. But it was the first time she had spoken so unaffectedly. There was none of the mad mockery or goading which usually accompanied her addresses. Unaccustomed to her unusual normalcy, he sat back and waited. *What is it that she wants of me?* Even as this thought occurred, he saw her lick her lips and cock her head, curious.

"Why are you *afraid* of me, Snape?"

Severus blinked, thoughtfully. He was treading in dangerous waters and needed to wade very carefully. His eyes flickered over her deceiving, attractive features: her wavy raven hair flowing down, her opened robe revealing an enticing *décote*. Her full red lips. But her otherwise classic beauty was mocked by her vulgar, unstable aura. So opposite to what he usually found attractive. For even though Lily was perfection incarnate, a category all unto herself, which no witch could or would ever compare, Severus had an appreciative eye of the female form. He did not deny that. Rather, he prided himself on his control, prided himself on being *above* the others and their follies, not indulging in the weaknesses of other wizards.

Even now, gazing at the unpredictable, sultry Bellatrix, he momentarily mused on how it had always astounded him how different the elder Black was to her fairer sister, Narcissa. For a fleeting moment, his thoughts wandered further, and it struck him curiously odd how even the Malfoy witch, Nagini, in her demeanour was more kindred to Narcissa than Black's own flesh and blood: Bella.

*Narcissa and Nagini are attractive, but not in the obvious way...* His eyes lingered a moment too long on Bella's breast as she loosened the outer robe of her nightgown. *That Bella is explicit in her needs... deliciously indecent, that is...*

Seeing her challenging stance, he gritted his teeth. *I will not back down from you, witch!*

Holding firmly Bellatrix's gaze, he answered smoothly, "It is *not* fear; it is out of *respect*."

Marvelling, Bella's eyes shined, and she challenged him, "Respect for what?"

"Respect for you, Bellatrix. Respect for your fiancé; you'll be taking your wedding vows soon."

Bella let out a high-pitched laugh. "Oh, that is utterly amusing!" Then, her demeanour changed, and the familiar, dangerous scowl that Severus was used to slowly crept on her face. "What's the *real* reason?" Bella leaned closer. Childlike, she pouted, "Why do you reject me?" Severus felt her hand on his thigh. He made to grab her wrist just as her hand grazed and pressed firmly over his member. In silence, they held each other's gaze while she firmly rubbed him up and down. "So afraid," she whispered again, "Your mind is resistant, but your body..." she tightly grasped his tented, hardened cock, "your body is *not*."

As the seconds blurred by, it became harder and harder for him to concentrate. His keen libido awoke with a vengeance, and holding Bella's gaze, he acknowledged that this time he would not deflect her daring candidness and bold actions. His muscles clenched, involuntary tightening up throughout his body, the pressure in his veins building up, intensely needing release as Bella's expertise administrations captured him within their pleasurable powers.

"Do you feel pain?" she whispered in his ear, her hot breath tingled. His closed, tightened eyelids contracted as she pinched his cock's tip through the cloth. "I heard your cry, Severus. I can help you with your pain... It'll be our little secret. Let me *ease* your pain," she murmured hypnotically. Her apt hand had found its way inside his underpants, stroking his burning flesh. "Let me help you unleash your deep, buried powers." Severus had shut his eyes in conflict; the pleasure centre of his brain was taken over by sensuous, psychoactive release. It was true; her stimulus was so much more powerful than anything he had known. He felt her lips on his cock's tip and forgot all else. As she took him deeper in her mouth, he knew not what his name was, but only felt her incredible oral skills pleasuring him.

Her own arousal from sucking him off grew wild and, before he knew it, Bellatrix had released his cock from her mouth and climbed over his lap, straddling him. She raised herself up, positioning her entrance and, boldly grasping and holding, guided his manhood to her opening. She thrust herself down upon him, crying out in pleasure. As she rocked forward, undulating tautly, she dared him to meet her lips.

Severus turned his head away from her, refusing the contact, even while their bodies simultaneously rammed together in growing syncopated fucking.

*No, I will not be intimate with you that way... but I will fuck you to my fullest ability, Miss Black* With that decision, he continued to thrust hard upwards, grabbing and locking her curvaceous hips clenched against him, feeling her gasp and mewl, both grinding pelvic bone to pelvic bone.

Bellatrix eyes clenched tight; her face distorted in euphoric ecstasy as she came. Ecstatically whimpering, she slowly began to rock and sway again, more intensely. The sight of her abandoned wanton lust took his breath away. Her rocking increased. The friction of her velvety wetness, mixed with the slippery cum, caused Bella's movements to slide and jerk sporadically until she cried out loud again; her head thrown back and fingers sunk into his skin as she clutched him as if for dear life.

Her vaginal muscles flexed tightly around his cock in spasm. Severus groaned out, clenching his teeth as he came; she was squeezing every drop out of him. Suddenly, Bella collapsed on his chest, gasping hard, her head momentarily resting on his shoulder. She still held his spent member tight within her. Time ticked by with only the sounds of their arrhythmic breathing. Abruptly, her vaginal muscles pushed his cock out, and she slowly rolled off him, gathering her robe around her. Shivering, she stood up and flicked her wand, walking away without looking back or further ado.

Pulling his pajamas up, tying his robe closed, Severus watched her disappear into the direction of the girls' dormitory.

He sighed, not knowing what the next day would bring, what further dilemma he had brought upon himself giving into Bellatrix, but he shrewdly thought, *Come what may, I'll turn anything Bella throws at me to my advantage. She's only weakened herself by pursuing me this way in this little game she is playing.*

For Severus' caustic astuteness, from years and years of Slytherin 'use or be used' diatribe, could not help but plan ahead various strategies to counter against any backlash of what had just occurred. *Bella never does anything without a reason, to gain an advantage for herself. If she'd wanted just a quick shag, her dear fiancé could've serviced her... Just to wait and see how she plans to use me, this little indiscretion, and then, I'll show her; I'm not her fool...* He smirked confidently. *At the least, my headache has disappeared.*

And with that, he returned to the snoring of his roommates, where he took his wand, cast a Silencing Charm and, unable to shake the residue fully of having had some



sexual release, proceeded to envision how he would one day make love to Lily. Properly. *I'll be the perfect lover... she'll desire only me...*

Before drifting to sleep, his thoughts had changed to dwell on the upcoming private meeting with her on Thursday. Realising it had to be perfect, from his first utterance of a greeting to his declaration of amatory love for her, he began to practise and subvocalise variants of responses and replies. And with this monotonous script of wooing Lily, playing on his mind, Severus fell into a deep sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Vulnera Sanentur... Vulnera Sanentur... sana haec vulnera... sana hoc corpus...*

Nagini woke up in a sweat. The chant of Healing spells and soft murmurings echoed in her drowsy dullness, along with the compelling voice, beckoning her, lingering, unshakeable. She struggled, through her heavy sluggishness, to surface from the muddling notions in her mind. The strange dreams, wispy images, combined with powerful, emotional reactions, caused her to stare upwards, not fully realizing where she was, lost in a haze.

She blinked, confused. As she gazed up through the gauze-like fabric draped directly over her bed between the four bed posts, she could see clearly, through the transparent cloth, the constellations of the heavens adorning the room's ceiling.

Capricornus twinkled above her.

The scent of cinnamon oil surrounded her, luring her into a dreamy softness, but she was not alone. A dark angel encompassed her, and she could feel his wings folding around her, enwrapping their bodies, molding them together. She felt his lips slowly brushing across her neck, covering her scars with his marks of passion, the heat of his kisses tingling throughout her body. His administrations began to lower and his fingertips brushed over the curves of her undulating form.

Rolling over on her side, she felt the lethargic fullness that accompanies the middle of the night weighing down upon her. Everything was so still; uncontrollably, her quiescence was disturbed, the impact of fitful slumber diverted her attempts for quiet restfulness: for *his* image kept reappearing.

Unable to resist the raven-haired presence, wishing to fully give herself to this dream-like sensation, she could not ignore the actual, dull burning which had coursed through her, a heaviness now settling between her legs. The residue of *him* pressing her into the mattress, their bodies molding as one, and his touch arousing her as she had never experienced before, occurred. Unknown sensations had erupted forth. "O," she softly moaned out as her fingers explored searchingly between her legs, as if they were his, stroking and rubbing her sex. Thankful that the medieval canopy bed had curtains, completely enclosing it, ensuring warmth and privacy, and hid her actions. An unknown abandonment washed over her, and she continued to explore and stimulate her folds and centre, discovering her clitoris, until her toes curled, and she whispered, in orgasmic relief, "Severus!"

Awaken in arousal, she breathed deeply and gazed once again at the changing constellations above her, pondering the now vivid memories of her dreams. But the more she lay, trying to make sense of them, the more perplexed she became. The fragrance of the cinnamon scented salve, the chanting of healing spells, the sense memory of being touched, hearing his low, caressing voice, and *his* face, the young wizard she barely knew, Severus Snape, she kept experiencing again and again.

She sighed in frustration.

*The haunted bed? More like a bed of torment...Severus' image stayed with her, refusing to disappear, so her hands found their way to her sex... again. A bed of tormented desire... But as her fingers touched her sensitive nub, ready for further release, the feeling was too pleasurable for Nagini to feel ashamed of, to retract from, and she started, slower this time, savouring the sensation, to stimulate herself once more. He'll never know; we're not in the same House. I'll hardly have to even see him ever... no one'll ever know. She increased her friction, allowing the delicious intense pleasure to flow through her in mounting waves. It'll be my secret and mine alone that I fancy him...*

As she came again, she saw with flushed delight that the constellations had changed again. Horologium now shone above. Slowly, her eyelids grew heavier and heavier. As she fell into sweet slumber, the stars changed to Ophiucus, the serpent holder, but Nagini was already in deep sleep, unaware of this dubious auger of the heavens.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: Greatest appreciation to the very wonderful, and very busy emdramaqueen for beta reading and supporting my lemons ... a lady of many talents! Translation *αsana haec vulnera... sana hoc corpus...: heal these wounds... heal this body...*

## Capricornus Ascendant – Part One

*Chapter 14 of 22*

In the midst of the unexpected, circumstances bring a spurned Severus and a smitten Nagini together...

□

\*\*\*\*\*

Dumbledore placed the three-emerald studded, ebony wand down on the desk.

"Your wand, Miss Malfoy." The Headmaster watched carefully as a strange expression came across Nagini's face; something about it reminded him of a certain young wizard, with the same expression of mixed relief and delight exuded, but it was a memory of so very long ago...

"Thank you, sir." As she grasped it, a refreshing energy flowed into her from the wand, and Nagini felt as if a part of her body had been rejoined.

"Do you remember our very first conversation in the holding gaol cell of the Ministry?" asked Dumbledore pointedly.

The mercurial witch looked up at the stern wizard. *How could I not?* She gulped hard, a cold tingle sporadically ebbed through her upon remembering the omnipotent wizard that day and his relentless questions; she knew not then how the interrogation would end, but it had felt as if the usage of an Unforgiveable was the inevitable outcome from his fierce line of questioning. She shivered and answered, "Yes, sir."

"My vital question now is the same as the first time I spoke with you: do you know the difference between good and evil? Between the Light and the Dark?"

Shaken by his keen bluntness, she nodded affirmatively.

His deceptive, grandfatherly blue eyes peered neutrally at her for several seconds before he instructed, "Go, then. Return to your Charms class."

As she turned to leave, Dumbledore reminded her, "Madam Pince shall be waiting for you at six o'clock sharp this evening; assisting her will help to balance and expedite your theoretical knowledge against your exceptional practical experience." The contemplative wizard raised his eyebrows in further observation. "A bit of much needed history of Wizarding Britain is needed on your part, Miss Malfoy, and your professors are eager to assess and have you placed appropriately as soon as possible for your future preparations."

"My preparations, sir?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Malfoy. Your NEWT level ones, in particular. I have a hunch that you already possess the needed skills to meet the criteria qualifying as an intern with the Hit Wizard squad in the Ministry. Bartemius Crouch has already implied such; it's just a matter of Head Auror Moody meeting and accepting you in the Ministry intern programme. If my calculations are right, you will be able to begin at the end of this term, if not before. Exceptions are always inevitable, and up to now, your presence has been nothing but the exception to the status quo."

Nagini blanched and took two steps towards the headmaster.

"With all due respect, sir. I... I would rather not..." Nagini was cut off by Dumbledore's sharp look, piercing her to the core.

Dead silence prevailed.

Dumbledore broke the ominous quiet. "Raised and bred on the darkest of arts by she who had been ostracized by her own kind: Lucretia Malfoy."

Lips quivering, Nagini managed to whisper, "I was not raised by her..."

"Your *caretaker*, Dymphna 'Bagshot', deemed a heretic by..."

"She is alive, still?"

"I am informed she is dead. Quite dead. An *incident* inside of Nurmengard. It seemed she could not bear the incarcerating circumstances... The officials are rather mute on any further details," lied Dumbledore.

The headmaster watched carefully as Nagini took in the news. Observant of her seeming despondency, Dumbledore simply stated, "Your internship in the Auror department is not a choice, Miss Malfoy; it is one of the probationary terms of agreement by Bartemius Crouch for your rather unorthodox sentencing and the allowance of it by the Ministry. Surely, you have not forgotten that you were finally released from the Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Law Enforcement on probationary terms? Conditional terms?"

*...your whereabouts, actions, transactions and schooling activities shall be monitored by both the Wizarding Law Enforcement officers, as well as under the auspices of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...*

Yes, Nagini had forgotten; so surreal was Hogwarts, so utterly different than any place else she could've imagined or had ever remotely experienced in her lifetime that she had conveniently...eagerly...forgotten her life before, once arriving in the great castle's walls.

However, it was obvious that the headmaster had not.

It was painfully clear to Nagini that Dumbledore had no intention of letting her fool herself into believing that he deemed her the same as other students or give her a chance to be so. She was not and could never be. She was a potential tool for him, for Crouch, for the Ministry to decide how to use and who would profit the most.

As if reading her thoughts, the headmaster simply enquired, "The conditions are surely more agreeable than your other alternatives...say, any notions your uncle, Abraxas, may have in mind for your future?"

The startled look on her face gave Dumbledore his answer.

Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses. "Is there anything further you wish to ask or tell me, Miss Malfoy? Anything else you wish to confide?"

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Nagini resigned herself to Dumbledore's will. As much as she loathed the idea of her powers being forcibly trained, controlled and exploited by such a formal, formidable institution as she perceived the Ministry to be, she had no choice. The alternative was to serve the other side of the spectrum's will under the thumb of Abraxas, as Qualmsick's 'apprentice' and anything dubious that that would entail but that choice was abhorrent to her. Her deep smouldering hatred for Abraxas, unfathomable and uncontrollable, burned inside her and won.

Her choice was made with a clear conscience.

"No, sir, I understand." Trying not to squirm under his steadfast, cold gaze, Nagini whispered, "At this time, no further questions, Professor Dumbledore."

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus waited for Lily with bated breath. Sitting at 'their' old table in the most unpopular, remote area of the library, the Legal Section, he fastidiously aligned a pile of books played around on the table's top, impatiently nudging them into a straight line.

Athirst, Severus sighed heavily and reflected on how this was the second Thursday he sat waiting for Lily, for she had not shown up last week on the agreed upon date.

Crushed, Severus had suffered yet another sleepless night, but mercifully, another letter was delivered to him by owl the next morning stating that she would come this evening to the library, and so he waited in anticipation to reveal his heart, ask for her forgiveness...again...and claim what he felt was his to claim: her true affection. In burning resolution, Severus mulled over that it was now or never; he must help Lily admit that which they both had been guilty of suppressing due to each one's reasoned embarrassment, peer pressure, and fear.

\*\*\*\*\*

Frazzled and aching, Nagini tapped three times on the gargoyle which disappeared in the blink of an eye, along with the doorway entrance of the Invisible Section of the library, leaving the façade of a blank wall. She sighed heavily, gazing upwards and around at the dusty Legal Section; it was her next chore to do. Forcing herself, with feather duster in hand...for Madam Pince would only allow manual cleaning: strictly no magic allowed on the precious tomes under her overly protective librarian's care...Nagini trudged over to the trolley ladder of the nearest row of bookshelves extending to the ceiling. *Might as well start here...* Slowly climbing the steps, holding on to the metal railings, she made her way clumsily up to the top. With the first swish of the duster, she let out a powerful sneeze, dully absorbed by the ceiling-high walls of tomes.

Exhausted, but insatiably curious, Nagini paused and took one of the magical law books from a series of obscure titles and perched on one of the wide mid-steps of the library ladder. She opened up the heavy old tome on Hippogriff-baiting. *How bizarre... how is this related to magical law?*

Starting to immerse herself into it, Nagini suddenly heard from around the other side of the row, "Lily!" Nagini recognized the voice. It was Severus Snape. The Slytherin

continued to speak, but in a soft, low voice.

A gentle feminine laughter responded to Severus' address, and Nagini impulsively pulled out her wand and non-verbally cast a spell allowing her to catch a glimpse through the bookshelf of Severus smiling shyly back at Lily in response. *She's that Gryffindor he's always...* Nagini released the spell and sat back on the ladder step contemplating the oddness of the situation, but what struck her profoundly was the sight of Severus smiling. It was a stark contrast to the silent, sullen young man she saw sulking around, or hunched over a pile of books, alone at a library table.

As Nagini sat mulling over what she had just seen, the sounds of heavy chairs pulled out from a table, scraping against the wooden floor, and then the Gryffindor witch's words, suddenly serious and sad, reached Nagini, causing her to perk up and listen attentively.

"Severus, I'm only here because of your mother..." Determined that he understood her intentions clearly, Lily repeated, "Again, I'm sorry for your loss, the loss of your mother; I just wished to tell you that in person."

Severus gave a terse nod in acceptance; the excruciating pain of his mother's death he had locked away long ago, the day of the burial, in fact. He turned his will from going anywhere near it and decisively pushed himself to the emotional precipice in front of him. "Lily... Lily, I'm so glad that we may be together...talk... like old times..."

"I only came here because of those *old* times, Severus."

"Yes... Exactly... Lily..." He loved the sound of her name, the feeling of it as he pronounced it. "Lily, I've been meaning to tell you, to have a chance to tell you, besides my apologies...again...for everything that has transpired since last year..."

"It doesn't matter. Last year doesn't matter anymore." A flash of hope struck Severus' face in awe, only to quickly ebb away as she clarified, "It's best that one knows and embraces their true friends, their true loyalties; last year only helped me see what I had been blinded to before: my true Gryffindor friendships... Now, I understand things much more than before," her voice took on a slightly haughty note, "much *clearer* than before, and I've discovered a happiness I never knew!" She blushed in her determined confession. "Well, it's always been there; I had just been distracted from it."

"It?" Severus couldn't keep the painful jealousy from surfacing and snarled, "*Or him?*"

Undeterred, Lily simply replied, "There's so much more to James than you could ever see, than you could ever understand... Yes, he can be an arrogant toe-rag at times, but I've experienced another side of..." Her focus drifted as she gazed upward at the top shelf. "He's attentive, affectionate and caring, sensitive and... I'm his everything!" She beamed, then her forehead furrowed in thought. "Oh, Severus, you wouldn't understand; you're not capable of...you're not the type..."

"Not the type of *what*, Lily?" croaked out the broken young wizard.

"It's nothing." She confessed, "I've moved on, Sev. James and I are a couple. I hadn't realized it until he..."

*He kissed you? Wanted to get into your knickers? The filthy swine...* thought Severus fiercely, unable to verbalise further a single thought by now, rendered speechless by Lily's brutal declarations; his self-protection shields had kicked in, and he could only filter bits and pieces of information he was hearing through a haze of hatred for the wizard who had stolen the one thing, the one person, he held sacred.

"He's everything I've ever dreamed about." Severus listened in horror as Lily, oblivious to his pain, further confided, "He's warm, affectionate; we have the same interests, the same *loyalties*... James is just everything opposite of what," she paused, but knew he needed to hear the truth, "you are: what you and your friends have chosen."

"Lily!" Desperation coating his plea, his calm shattering, Severus blurted out, "With time, I can give you everything, much more than Potter can even dream of giving you; there's a new world order coming...I will protect you. I *know* you, Lily. I was the first to know you for what..." Panic set in and Severus' prepared speeches abandoned him. He blurted out, "I just need time..."

"For what?" Evans' temper flared. "How can you give that which you don't have? That you don't understand? That you're not capable of understanding? James loves me, and it's more than a childhood, *friendship* love; it's a full love, bonding us... Severus, don't look like that... maybe one day, you can experience it; maybe one day, you'll be capable of it..."

Frozen, dumbstruck in agony, he watched Lily rise and turn, walking away; she only paused to look back at him. "Again, my condolences, Severus." With a hardened edge, Lily finalized her double-meaning. "Good-bye." She turned and walked away.

Severus sat numb, uncomprehending fully, or in vital denial of, what had, truly, just occurred. He could barely register Lily's fading footsteps, only comprehending that with each step, she was slipping further and further away, utterly out of his grasp.

Suddenly, a loud thumping crash of a heavy body hitting the floor startled him out of his denial. He rose mechanically and stiffly strode to where the sound had come from behind the nearest row of bookshelves.

Upon seeing who had fallen, Severus huffed and thought, *You clumsy, eavesdropping Malfoy! How much did she overhear?*

But his keen self-control kicked in, and he forced his wounded pride and numbing pain, caused by Lily and Potter, aside for the moment and focused on the situation at hand. Seeing the startled and embarrassed look on Nagini's face, his fierce demeanour lessened. She sat cradling her left arm with her right one, and Severus realized that she was vulnerable and hurt; he softened, knowing all too well how she felt.

In a flash, Severus remembered the first time he had ever seen her, miserable and dejected, outside Gringotts with Lucius and his swine of a father, Abraxas. And then, the engagement dinner: how lovely she was in his arms as they danced, so warm and shy... Recollecting, his anger melted out of him, fully dissipating as the reminder of that horrid evening's ending with his vigil over Nagini's body, thrashed and bloody, came to mind; his vivid, feeble attempts to heal what he could with the little he had to work with...

The Dark Lord's visitation had topped the evening off, leaving Severus feeling as helpless and destitute as he had just now felt, rejected by Lily. But just as with the Dark Lord, Severus pulled himself up and out of any emotional quandary, brushing off any lingering residue of pain; he put his feelings for Lily back in a special box, the lid only to be opened when and how he would decide.

Giving the Malfoy witch a curious gaze, he reasoned, *Nagini has nothing to do with Lily... and that bloody Potter* He swore to himself, *Potter, you'll get what's due you, if it's the last thing I do!*

"Are you all right?" Severus asked curtly, kneeling down beside her.

Giving Severus an odd, warm look, Nagini answered, "Yes." She seemed embarrassed by having fallen, but was blushing at him as if there was something she found attractive but was ashamed of feeling that way...not ashamed of the object of interest, but as if...

*As if... she fancies me?* Severus blinked hard, feeling thunderstruck. There was something about the look Nagini gave that reminded him of Guinevere Rockwood's when she was pursuing him before the party; the determined Slytherin Head Girl had succeeded in getting Snape to finally give in to her intentions and salaciously respond to her...to both sides' satisfaction that evening. At the memory of their coupling, something warm lit inside Sev. Cynically, he admitted that the incident had been for purely self-indulgent needs on both sides' part...no affection required, just fucking.

But as he gazed back at Nagini, he was keenly reminded that there had always been *something* more about her he'd been drawn to from the very first time he saw her. He could not deny that since Madam Malkin's he'd been quite taken and aroused by her, discreetly, of course; his protective possessiveness had instinctively kicked in at Malfoy Manor: she'd been so unsure and vulnerable in his arms... He had enjoyed guiding her and feeling needed... trusted... It was true, at the time, he had mused on various possibilities that could develop with her, especially once Nagini was in Slytherin; he would've bided his time and allowed her to respond to him...when she was ready and in the way she wanted. Severus prided himself on not being like most of the other Slytherin males: he wasn't Rodolphus Lestrange or Lucius, Imperioing witches when they tired of toying with them, becoming too impatient from waiting to get what they wanted to satisfy their physical needs. One thing Severus could say for himself, he was patient. Very. Most of the time...

But any musings about the Malfoy witch had vanished with that horrid evening's ending. It was a brutal reality check of the world they lived in, void of any sweet comforts intimately shared or possible secret liaisons to be explored and mutually enjoyed simply for what they were. Moreover, a grain of truth which discomfited Severus ever so slightly was...he had to admit...that the attraction he'd felt for Nagini from afar wasn't purely physical. There was something more that lingered. Inexplicable. Or, so he thought... *I understand her*... He understood her reticent quietness and solitude, something dark and painful covered by an austerity...he knew it was a kind of protection she used to stay safe, a shield against the various threats of their volatile wizarding world. It was for this he had felt grateful when she was placed in Ravenclaw, guaranteeing some respite from her dubious Slytherin cousin, Lucius, and others of kindred profile.

Severus knew well what it was like living on the edge, living in fear and unpredictability... dire straits and abuse.

And so, her kind, gentle protestations as he helped her stand up touched his hardened heart and drew him nearer like a moth to a flame. Noting her shy, but obvious physical attraction and reaction to him was beyond her control, Severus couldn't help but smirk at her behaviour.

As she stood upright, Nagini took a few mousesteps away from Severus, detaching herself from his supportive touch, but couldn't help look the beckoning Slytherin directly in the eyes. Again. *Those dark, unfathomable eyes*. She felt his attentive energy surround her and started to sway, only for him to gently reach out and steady her.

*My dark angel*... At the thought, Nagini felt a hot wave of excited embarrassment wash over her face. *I must be beet red... good grief*...

"Don't move too quickly," he instructed calmly. *Good lord, what's wrong with the witch? She looks like she's about to faint*...

For Nagini's face flushed redder and deep rich burgundy streaks began to gush forth throughout her brunette mane. *She truly does fancy me*... He could feel his body responding to the pleasurable thought. With guarded, measured enjoyment, Severus kept his gaze on Nagini's golden eyes.

"Are you all right?"

He heard her softly mumble, "I... I've dreamt of you...I saw...felt..."

Severus raised an eyebrow. *You've dreamt of me?*

His momentarily amused puzzlement was abruptly interrupted by the familiar voice of Madam Pince shrieking, "What is going on here?" Oblivious to Nagini having fallen from the ladder, the vulture-looking librarian's attention was drawn rather to the large old tome on the floor. Quivering, she shrieked, "My book! What have you done to that book?"

"It fell," mumbled Nagini, attempting to point upwards. "I was dusting and it fell..."

"By itself? I think not!" reprimanded Pince sharply. "Or did you dare to use magic on my precious tomes? I strictly forbade it! No wands, no spells, verbal or non-verbal, no eating, no drinking; I forbid..."

As Madam Pince continued her ranting tirade, Severus heard Nagini deny all charges.

"No, no," assured Nagini, "I was..." Cut off by a sharp pain in her left elbow where she had landed on it, she winced. Nagini had fallen due to realizing she was shamefully eavesdropping on an unpleasant intimate conversation and had tried to quietly turn around and climb down the ladder to return to the Invisibility Section until Snape and the Gryffindor witch, Evans, had finished what they had to say to each other. But she lost her grasp of the heavy Hippogriff-baiting book, and the lopsidedness, as she twisted to turn around on the ladder steps, caused her to lose her footing and balance, toppling down.

"Madam Pince, Miss Malfoy appears to have been injured. Perhaps, it would be prudent to see to her injury?" Severus carefully pointed out.

The vulture-like Madam Pince gasped and her pencil-thin lips formed an astonished 'O' at the Slytherin's impudence. "She can stand, can't she?" pointed out the irritated Pince in a snit. "And *your* excuse, Mr Snape?"

"For what, Madam Pince?"

Raising a triumphant eyebrow, she scolded, "The library closes at eight o'clock sharp! What are you even doing here?"

Severus gritted his teeth, not answering. The merest thought of his futile meeting with Lily caused a wave of vitriolic pain to sear through him.

Jumping to the wrong conclusion, Pince cawed, "Oh, I see! Waiting for Miss Malfoy, I presume? Didn't realize she'd already snagged a paramour...who would have thought a *Malfoy* to be interested in a *Snape*?"

Severus felt his face burn by her tactless remark.

Before either he or Nagini could sputter out a protest at the mistaken, rude Pince, the nitpicking librarian shrieked out, "What are you waiting for? Get out! Take her to the Hospital Wing...but first, hand me that poor book off the floor!"

In a huff, Severus swirled in a flash, swiftly snatching up the book and handed it to Madam Pince, who crooned and soothed the inanimate object like a baby, only to pause and shoo them out of the library.

Once in the third-floor corridor, they walked in silence, side by side, for a minute or two, before Nagini shyly offered, "You needn't see me to the Hospital Wing, just point the way...I'm not sure..."

Frustrated, seething from Madam Pince's remarks, along with Lily's latest rejection, hovering in and out of his thoughts. *What did she say...I'm not capable of understanding...of feeling...of experiencing love...and Potter is? That bloody swine! It's not over yet, Potter, I'll get my revenge; I'll get Lily back, one way or another...I'll protect her as you'll never be able to...I'll...* Severus erupted, "I'm escorting you to Madam Pomfrey whether you wish me to or not!" Seeing Nagini flinch, he attempted to control his anger and enquired, "It's on my way down to the dungeons... to Slytherin... Your arm is injured. Is anything else?"

Meekly, Nagini shook her head 'no'. She made the mistake of locking eyes with him again and felt her face blush red, uncontrollably, again. Feeling overheated, she quickly looked away and thought twice of attempting any small talk. Between the pain in her elbow and her shameful feelings from the erotic dreams and self-pleasuring which the tall raven-haired Slytherin had caused and inspired in her, she felt completely self-conscious.

*My haunted bed of desires*... Night after night, she gazed up through the translucent gauzed fabric draped on the four-poster canopy bed at the star formations of the heavens adorning the room's ceiling; night after night, she was left continually yearning: the more she studied the changeable constellations, the more she searched for

something unknown and intangible, something infinite... Feeling light-headed, she could not bear to look into Severus' glittering onyx orbs, like the endless constellations, longer than necessary and turned her focus away from him as the ever-moving stairways leading to the different floors came into view.

But the tall, dark Slytherin didn't seem to notice her discomfort; now that he was in closer proximity to her, he was complimenting himself on the fragrance of cinnamon oil softly detected on Nagini. *Hmm... my balms, perhaps?* His keen olfactory sense noted the mixture of his work mixed with her own unique scent, breathing in gently the delightful combination. He also noted her hair. Severus was mesmerized by Nagini's lush mane, mercurially gushing forth burgundy streaks again.

Self-conscious, Nagini took a lock and saw the colour. *Oh, no! He knows...he knows something...he knows I'm reacting to him...!* She could barely breathe and thought she would faint in embarrassment. *Just try to keep cool, try to think of something to say to distract him from staring at your hair!*

As they reached the ever-moving stairways and navigated it, heading downstairs, she chatted, "I'm a...a Metamorphmagus; well, not a...my hair changes colour...probably from the fall...probably from..."

Sardonically amused, Severus raised an eyebrow incredulous to her randomly going on about Metamorphmagus nonsense.

His amusement was cut short as he heard her abruptly apologise.

"And I'm... I'm sorry." Nagini's thoughts and words blurred together in panic. "I'm sorry I overheard you and your...your friend; no one should have heard it; you must be in such pain; I'm sorry..."

Severus set her straight immediately.

"Nothing. You overheard nothing," he snapped coolly, cutting her off. One of the many things Severus could do well, better than anyone else, was to cover up his feelings, shut them down in a second's notice, place them in their appropriate box, categorise them, and seal them closed forever... when needed. For he had learned *that* in order to survive in his world; it was a survivor's skill brutally needed. Thus, Severus had done so. Time and time again. His father's beatings, witnessing his mother being abused, himself being ridiculed and bullied and abandoned... By the time he came to Hogwarts, in his young life, he had witnessed, endured and survived enough opprobrious treatment to be well conditioned enough not to show any hurt feelings: no pain, ever; yes, he was already quite an accomplished master at that.

And so, turning taciturn, Severus repeated again, "You overheard nothing." *What was it that Lucius had called it?* "Merely pathetic, sentimental dribble of times gone by..."

They had reached the second floor and navigated on downwards in awkward silence.

He would deal with his feelings for Lily at another time, another place, in the privacy of his own mind; for he would not accept what had transpired. *Besides*, he told himself, *that was not 'my' Lily, that was Potter's influence... Potter speaking through her... and once Potter is no longer in the picture...*

Severus believed only what he chose to believe regarding Lily. No one could or would ever take that away from him.

Nagini was skeptical of what the tall dark Slytherin said, but she knew by his curt response it had been *faux pas* to bring up the sticky incident and that the matter was closed. She had partially wanted to distract his attention away from her and partially wished to sincerely apologise. *I'm basically a stranger to him... who am I to him to stick my nose into his business or to convince him that I... I care...am truly sorry that he may be hurting, feeling humiliated... that I understand the feeling and wish he wasn't in pain?*

As they reached the first floor, Nagini said, "The Hospital Wing is on this floor, yes? I can manage it by myself. Just point me..."

Severus raised an eyebrow, doubtful. "I think not." He almost smiled as he informed her, "Besides being as mule headed as you, Miss Malfoy, I wouldn't want you to run into Lucius. Alone." He paused. "Or Belby."

Nagini tried to keep her bravado up upon hearing either Head Boy's name; it was true, meeting either would be undesirable, and she had skilfully managed to avoid both these past weeks; she had mainly succeeded due to luck and the seventh-years' timetables, keeping her and them on opposite schedules. Outside of meal times, there was hardly a reason or chance to be in the same space at the same time with either one of them.

Wishing to be nonchalant, above any worries, she reassured, "It's not necessary. Truly."

"It's quite necessary. The Prefects will begin making their rounds at any minute now."

"And what about you?"

"No need to worry about me." Very self-importantly, Severus pointed out, "I can handle both Belby and Lucius, each in my own way."

Nagini smiled softly. She knew he could.

As they made their way towards the Hospital Wing, their gaits had slowly lulled to a halt, and they were now standing close to one another. The candlelit sconces lit the stoned corridor, and the warm softness of the golden glow given off matched Nagini's eyes.

*She is lovely...* thought Severus. Standing so close, looking down into her golden orbs, he noted her dilated pupils and flushed cheeks with penetrating acuity. A bittersweet smirk crept upon his lips as he shrewdly contemplated, *Why shouldn't we take some sweet solace with each other in this bloody unfair world... some small consolation from our miserable lives? She fancies me... she's discreet... no one shall know...*

Severus made his decision. As he took a small step into her, she could not help but look up to meet his eyes, his curtain of long black hair framing his intense gaze, his energy encompassing her.

*My dark angel...* She gasped softly as she felt his strands tickling lightly on her cheeks and felt his lips ever-so-softly press hers.

Severus raised his head up just enough to see her golden orbs waiting in anticipation, waiting for him to continue. *She wants me, wants more... wants me to continue... And why not?*

He slowly manoeuvred them into the shadows of the nearest alcove.

Once nestled into a nook, Severus pressed her lips more ardently, parting her lips, seeking to taste as much of her as he could, even as his fingers lightly discovered and grazed over the fullness of her curved body. It was with an undeniable and welcomed pleasure that he felt his muscles tightening throughout his body from the soft, sweet moaning his ministrations elicited from Nagini.

Suddenly, his head snapped up at a dull but raucous noise that quickly began growing louder and distinguishable, coming closer and closer; Nagini's attention followed where Severus was peering.

The distinct boisterousness of four cumbersome males grew nearer and nearer.

Severus had frozen, only his black eyes were glittering dangerously.

Nagini felt her blood run cold at seeing such a scowl on Severus' face, one of such disgust and contempt at whomever they were drawing closer.

With trepidation, Nagini heard Severus utter in a low growl, "The bloody Marauders, the swine!"

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: My deepest gratitude to the very patient and wonderful WriterMerrin for her generous, precious free time to do an initial beta check and give some feedback on this! Also, my eternal appreciation to the one and only hexgirl for supportively nudging me to have Severus finally decide to have some 'sweet solace'... Thank you!

## Capricornus Ascendant – Part Two

*Chapter 15 of 22*

Dallying about in Hogwarts corridors after hours leads to both dangerous and pleasurable events, illuminating the state of things between Severus and Nagini.

oOoOoOo

Severus snapped out his wand, ready for attack.

Nagini instinctively drew hers out as well, her adrenaline coursing through her veins, numbing the pain in her hurt arm. She raised her other arm up higher, gripping her wand tightly, ready for the unexpected.

There was something about her decisive action, prepared to back him up instinctively, no questions asked, which spurred a burning excitement throughout Severus' body. *I'll deal with these swine, and then, dear Nagini, we'll continue our endeavours...*

His dark eyes glittering, he pressed his body close to hers and lifted one forefinger slowly and pressed it gently on her lips. "Shhh," he whispered, while flicking his wand, casting non-verbally Invisibility and Muffliato spells around them.

Severus and Nagini stood, meshed together, pressed against the cool stone walls, waiting as the noise neared. He noted her dilated pupils and flushed cheeks and how she couldn't hold his gaze, as if utterly embarrassed. Her eyes fluttered as his chin grazed against her soft cheeks, and his wisps of long, lank hair tickled her soft flesh.

Nagini shifted her weight and gasped softly as she felt his hardness now pressing against her lower abdomen. Immediately, Severus stepped an inch back, but their eyes met, and he whispered, "Yessss... That's what you do to me, Miss Malfoy."

The boisterous foursome interrupted their moment of revelation, as the distinct voices of each one of Severus' nemesis became distinct.

Snape froze. He was in a dilemma whether to instigate a surprise attack or let the unsuspecting four pass unprovoked. *I could just wait here and let the bloody pillocks pass, and then continue with Miss Malfoy here...* But the grating sound of Sirius Black's voice halted any further thoughts along this line, and Snape's black eyes glistened with malice at the approaching Gryffindors.

"Moony, you furry berk, what were you waiting for?" jibed Sirius as the cumbersome foursome jostled hurriedly down the castle's corridor. "I think I see your tail already."

Selene was shining bold and bright, drawing the Maurauders to harbour one of their own quickly to the Shrieking Shack; a race with time against her ill effects on Lupin as he leaned on James, who was laboriously half-supporting Remus. Sirius and Peter harboured around them, trying to make light of the situation whilst still nudging everyone along. But Remus had to stop, as if for breath, and leaned with one hand on the wall just a few feet past Nagini and Severus; he seemed unable to walk normally but rather like a sluggish drunk man. James retook and placed Remus' other arm around his shoulder again to urge him to continue on, but Lupin refused, stopped dead in his tracks.

"What is it, Remus?" asked James, growing truly anxious; the odd expression on Lupin's face instilled immediate concern for all. *Is he going to transform right here?* thought his mates unanimously, giving each other apprehensive glances.

Remus turned slowly, facing and staring at directly where Severus and Nagini stood, shielded behind the Invisibility Charm.

"Blimey, what is it, Moony? You're giving us the spooks," half-joked Sirius.

Remus sniffed deeply, and then he blinked, confused, staring at the seemingly blank stoned wall and alcove stairway before him. *That's odd...* thought Lupin as he took a few small steps closer to the hidden two.

Severus had clenched one of Nagini's arms so tightly she almost cried out, and he silently cursed. *Damn Lupin's lycanthropic senses!*

"Can't you smell it? Cinnamon, and..." Remus huffed. "Of course, you can't, but..." He raised his wand and, with a quick flick, commanded, *Revelio!*

In the seconds that followed, the blur of hexes ricocheting and overlapping each other ended with a whimpering, wandless Pettigrew thrown against and sagging down to the floor, cradling his right shoulder, as if it was snapped, and a disarmed Potter scrambling up between Lupin and Black as they faced Severus and Nagini. All came to a standstill, pausing for breath, but with wands raised for further attack.

The only sound in the air for several seconds was the huffs and pants of exertion as the Gryffindors eyed the odd couple, waiting to see who would make the next move.

"What have we here? Looks like Snivellus has a bird," taunted Black, biting his lower lip, trying to contain his excitement.

Remus suddenly blanched and appeared more visibly ill. "Later, Padfoot, let's leave them. We've got to be going," he urged, his thoughts racing to getting to the Shrieking Shack.

"And let this golden opportunity pass us by?" jeered Black. "We're not leaving until Snivellus has wet his pants in front of Miss Malfoy!"

Remus was in anguish. "I can't hold out much longer. I feel it..." His facial muscles clenched, straining against a hidden pain.

Severus snarled viciously, "You bloody pillocks, get the beast to the Shack..."

"Shut it!" roared Sirius, sending a Stinging hex at Severus who swatted it away like a fly.

A surge of pain sparked through Remus again, and his fingers trembled so that his wand fell from his hand.

James assessed the situation quicker than catching a Snitch and growled, "Padfoot, Moony needs us now! We'll deal with Snivellus later!" He grabbed Lupin around the waist to support him and growled at his Slytherin opponent, "Give me back my wand, Snape!"

"No. I don't think so, Potter." Severus sneered. "Maybe if you kneel down and," he leered mockingly, "kiss my toes."

"We'll leave the kneeling down and kissing your lower parts for the Malfoy slag there," flouted Sirius, giving Nagini a dirty look, but his derisive expression quickly turned to one of excruciating pain as Severus swiped his wand sharply across Black's body.

The air chilled several degrees as all watched Sirius collapse in slow motion and a stripe of blood seeped forth through his clothing.

All hell broke loose again with Potter grabbing Sirius' fallen wand, and Snape and him dueling like bats out of hell.

Remus had feigned collapsing only to make an animalistic, spastic lunge, tackling Nagini down to the floor; her scream rang out as her injured elbow popped again against the stone floor.

In the midst of the chaotic scene, a sudden bolt of light burst forth, stunning all of them in place as they heard clearly Professor McGonagall's fierce command, "Enough!" The Head of Gryffindor was quick to exclaim, "Remus, get off of Malfoy immediately!"

Lupin released and scrambled off her, only to press his back against the wall in strained tension; his hands starting to tremble again as McGonagall, accompanied by Professor Sprout, bustled over to the middle of the sprawled group to take stock of what damage was done to whom.

Potter and Snape had been hexing each other simultaneously when the impact of McGonagall's spell, hitting and dispersing theirs, knocked them both backwards by the force. But whereas Severus had toppled back, his head hitting against stone, Potter remained unscathed and was able to quickly point out, "Sirius, Professor McGonagall! Snape's used Dark Magic on him; he's..."

"Mr Black seems perfectly fine," reported the quiet voice of Professor Sprout, who stood beside a dazed but fully conscious and sitting-up Sirius, who was anxiously feeling his chest and legs. All signs of a slashing curse had disappeared internally as well as externally.

"I...I don't understand. Snape slashed and cut Sirius up; we all saw it with our own eyes!" insisted Potter adamantly.

McGonagall gave a wary look at Snape and then Black. "Sirius, are you hurt?"

Perplexed, Sirius stood up shakily, touching over his chest again, trying to find a wound. "No... no..." He quietly muttered, "I'm fine... I don't understand."

Severus had crossed over to help Nagini stand up, giving Lupin a glowering glare. Then, the Slytherin sneered and commented, "Perhaps just a change of knickers is needed, Black? You seemed to have wet yourself." Indeed, there appeared to be a large wet spot spread across Sirius' crotch area.

Before either Professor could reprimand Severus, Pettigrew squeaked out, "Professor McGonagall, look it's Remus, he's..."

All turned to Lupin who was clutching the wall, as internal pains were causing him to spasm. "Good heavens!" Minerva whispered fiercely, "Pomona, go get Poppy! Tell her to meet me you-know-where." McGonagall gave Nagini a curious look, not wanting to disclose more than necessary in front of her. "James, Sirius, Peter, help me with Remus!"

Not waiting a moment more, James and Sirius scooped Remus under the shoulders, guiding him away as Pettigrew grabbed Lupin's wand and scurried after them.

McGonagall arched an eyebrow at Severus and proffered her hand out, saying, "Potter's wand, Mr Snape."

He frowned, but handed over his spoils 'won' from Potter, steadily looking Minerva in the eye.

The elder witch sighed wearily. "Oh, Severus, when will you boys ever learn...?"

Turning to follow where her Gryffindors had gone, Minerva only paused to inform, "Don't think this is over yet, Mr Snape and Miss Malfoy...and don't think there won't be detention for all of you! But first thing's first!" And with that, she hurried out of sight to run to the Shrieking Shack.

"Yes, you hurry on to your own Houses! I must get Poppy," instructed Pomona, shooing them away, and headed off to the Hospital Ward. They heard the bustling Hufflepuff Head called back, "Don't dally about; get along now!"

Nagini's eyes followed Professor Sprout, not knowing whether to press on to the Hospital Ward or not.

As if reading her thoughts, Severus caustically commented, "You might have to wait a while for Madam Pomfrey to be available. She'll be busy with *furry* problems..."

Nagini gave Severus a perplexed look. *Furry problems? What is he talking about?* "Where does Pomfrey have to go?" she asked, unconsciously cradling her arm again.

"Nowhere of real importance, just assisting in a hopeless case, in vain." His fiercely glittering eyes turned their attention to Nagini. "Are you all right? Did that beast...did Lupin harm you further? Your arm?"

"I'm fine," she lied, delicately lowering her left arm, trying to ignore the twinging smarts pulsing through it. "I...I just want to go back to Ravenclaw."

Severus raised an eyebrow, going neutral, studying her for a second or two, and then commented, "Very well." He became taciturn and motioned that they proceed onwards, and once again they began to stroll as before...before they were interrupted by the Marauders.

Nagini didn't know which question to ask first. So much had happened, and her head was in a whirlwind of thoughts about why those four Gryffindors and Severus were at each other's throats, Severus' slashing curse which disappeared after minutes of being used, and what kind of detention would they receive? Durmstrang's punishments had been mostly corporeal in nature, and Nagini flinched at the reminder of them.

Moreover, she felt overwhelmed, remembering Severus and hers' first kiss...it was lingering in the forefront of her consciousness more profoundly than the incident with the four berks that they had just had to deal with. Kissing him had opened a part of herself she'd never allowed. Her world had changed; she felt different. Nagini gave a fleeting glance up towards Severus, hoping to see any ardent signs on his impressive disposition, but the tall dark Slytherin seemed to have already forgotten, already returned to his usual reserved self. Nagini sighed, embarrassed at her whimsical notions, and went back to pondering Severus' Dark Arts skills, the Marauders, and worrying about detention.

And so, they walked silently, both deep in thoughts. Arriving at the base of the Ravenclaw house stairway, they stood and looked at each other. Severus' onyx orbs glittered keenly as he secretly enjoyed the mercurial witch's hair producing vibrant burgundy streaks. *Because of me! She fancies me!* He relished her uncontrollable Metamorphmagus' response to him, silently.

Before Severus knew it, he felt the brush of her lips on his cheek and heard Nagini whisper softly, "Thank you... Thank you for everything..." She had held onto him, balancing herself on her toes to whisper in his ears, and in the seconds it took to register her words and touch, he instinctively responded to the intimate moment and asked

again, "Your arm?"

"It's...It's fine... I...I just need to rest it." The tall dark wizard's thin lips quirked in amusement, and Nagini felt her cheeks flush *He knows I'm lying!*

"Do you trust me?" he asked unexpectedly, instead of calling her on her little white lie.

"Trust you?"

He gently took her injured arm in one hand, and just as gently, Severus guided her into the alcove underneath the Ravenclaw stairway, the perfect nook for some privacy, half-hidden and sunken in. Sitting her down on a carved-out ledge in the stone, he sat beside her and raised his wand, slowly chanting soft Healing spells; his baritone voice murmured them like lullabies over her delicate limb.

Nagini gasped as she felt spurts of burning, followed by dull tingling, sporadically here and there, and then nothing. The pain had ceased and she looked up at him, beaming, and asked, "You're a Healer?"

"No." There was sadness in his eyes which quickly changed to neutral as he added, "Just know a few spells well."

"Well, I'm also not one either, but you hit your head pretty hard, let me..." She impulsively stood up, placing one knee on the ledge to balance and lean forward.

Severus felt soft fingers gently touching the back of his head through his sleek, oily hair.

"There's a little bump. Does it hurt much?"

The unexpected contact on her part, her touch, their close proximity, utterly distracted him. Her breasts were at his eye-level and his nostrils flared as her scents fragrant forth. *That damn, dangerous cinnamon fragrance she wears... blended with* he inhaled slowly, *her...* He had a mad impulse to bury his head in her breasts or pull her down to straddle him so he could taste her lips once again; he inhaled sharply, aware that his hard-on had reared up as well and become painfully acute.

Suddenly, Nagini felt Severus' hands gently touch her waist; instinctively, her focus went from the bump on his head to gazing into his fathomless black eyes.

Severus held her gaze and something unspoken was communicated. Ever so slowly, he pressed his head between her breasts, spreading her globes of flesh through the cloth as he nuzzled in. Tilting his head back to check her response, he was pleased that her mouth had opened to a lovely surprised 'O' and that her gentle golden-honey eyes were invitingly curious. Slowly, he placed kisses across one breast until he reached her nipple, and once there he increased his suction pressure, eliciting a soft gasp, which encouraged him to continue. Giving attention to her other breast, he lingered longer on that nipple while tugging and raising her blouse up and out of her skirt. His fingertips felt the silky softness of her flesh underneath, and he hesitated for only a second before he began to peel her blouse upwards, curling the cloth back until he reached her undergarment. Nagini stood as if Petrified with only her shallow breathing and her fingers clenching his shoulders in and out to let Severus know that she wasn't.

Severus swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, and hoarsely whispered, "I want to kiss you, taste you all over, Nagini."

He twirled his tongue on one, now fully exposed, nipple. Hearing her moan, his hands firmly felt up the curve of her back to her shoulder blades and then slowly stroked down her center to firmly hold her on her hips. "Straddle me," he whispered. She wasn't a Bellatrix, but he yearned to feel her weight on him and wanted to see her every expression as he explored her body.

She lowered herself to sit, opened-legged, on his lap, her skirt hoisted up by the action to just below her knickers, unsure of what the next moments would bring.

Severus whipped his wand out, casting another Cloaking Charm and Invisibility spell around them and their secret little nook. Placing his wand down, he firmly pressed against Nagini's bottom to nudge her forward until his erection was felt underneath her. Severus ran his hands up her back keeping eye contact with her all the time, but then he let one hand explore her lush mane and pull her down to meet his lips.

Once met, he knew she was as desirous for him as he her, and Severus lunged to taste and explore her deeply.

Nagini moaned as Severus slipped his sharp tongue between her lips and enveloped her tighter in his embrace. She pressed her body into his, allowing him to explore her warm, soft curvatures. He groaned as she, unwittingly or not, arched her pelvis against him, meeting his rhythmic slow thrusts. As they undulated lazily together, his hands instinctively went down and under her skirt, touching the contours of her spread thighs and roundness of her arse.

He kissed her in demanding circular movements, and Nagini felt him lift and shift both of their body angles enough so she was able to lean forward on him more. Severus broke away from her lips to nip and kiss her neck; he felt her shivers and trembling, and it roused a feral heat inside him as he placed his fingers on her Venus mound, savouring her heat and wetness. Ever so slowly, he slid one finger and then another under her thin knickers to gently probe her folds. Nagini froze again, but in an intense sensation as she felt his fingers explore her. Severus sucked her bottom lip while he inserted the first and then the second finger inside her heat. As she groaned, he captured her mouth again making his tongue repeat what his fingers were doing to her other orifice. He had to hold her tight around the waist, clasped in one spot as she had begun to writhe and rock so, and as his thumb was strategically placed and pressed on her swollen nub, he relished her moaning out his name as she clenched her eyes tight and her frame shook in orgasm.

As she came, Severus knew the imprint of her exquisite expression would be forever burned inside his memory; he slowly gathered her in his arms so that she lay her head on his shoulder. Nagini was breathing hard, still trembling. He knew not how long they stayed that way and savoured having a lapful of witch in his arms. But when he felt Nagini's finger strum over his waist to his painful erection, he couldn't help hiss, inhaling sharply.

She didn't raise her head but kept her attention on the crotch of his pants; she twisted around a bit, half sitting by his side, allowing her access to slowly stroke the outline of his now tented erection. Neither spoke as she slowly unbuttoned his trousers. But as she found and released his cock from his underpants, she slowly began stroking his staff up and down and asked in a quiet voice, "How does that feel?"

Severus could only nod and answer with a guttural, "Brilliant..."

She smiled and continued to explore stroking him, luxuriating in his length and texture. After several seconds, Severus raised an eyebrow and huskily suggested, "You can, um, squeeze it a bit harder or add more pressure... It won't break."

Nagini gave him an incredulous look and then shyly smiled; Severus found the moment irresistible and swooped forward kissing her deeply again as he placed one hand over hers, gripping his cock, and guided her on how to stroke him harder, tighter. Together they stroked, pumping him in a growing frenzy until he came, his seed jutting out from their joint efforts. Breathing heavily, Nagini leaned back on his chest again still stroking his sticky member, outlining its curious form. Severus luxuriated in the feel of her touching him and the incongruous situation. *If Lucius only knew...*

He smirked and felt afire, burning to have Nagini, but 'properly', in a bed where he could take his time and teach her slowly how to enjoy *everything* his pubescent heart and mind could think of...

Severus swallowed hard and kissed her forehead gently, his black eyes glittering as he proposed, "There's a place in Hogsmeade, the Hog's Head Inn... It's quite seedy-looking on one hand, but..." He swallowed again but was determined to get to the point. "It has rooms... rooms with beds... for rent. I...you...would you come with me there?"

Nagini's eyes were wide with elation, and her heart felt as if it would burst...for now, only Severus existed. "Yes..."



Exalted, Severus gave a triumphant smile and set about leaving a trail of passion marks on her neck and breasts so that she would remember him until they touched again.

oOoOoOo

A while later, having been thoroughly snogged and marked with lovebites by Severus Snape, Nagini returned to her dormitory room half-dazed and was met by her worried roommates as they exclaimed, "Nagini! What happened...we were just about to go..."

"I'm fine," she quickly explained, beelining to her bed and playing down any sense of just having had the most incredible experience of her life. "I fell from the library ladder...but I'm all right. Just got delayed going to the Hospital Ward, and then Madam Pomfrey wasn't available, some furry problem," her roommates listened agog while she babbled on, "but that was after, no, before...oh, it doesn't matter...these berks, four Gryffindors, came and then, Professor McGonagall...well, everything's all right, really!"

She bustled about, preparing things for bed, and turned away from them, carefully changing clothing.

Getting back into bed, Mildred Bagnold yawned and sleepily commented over to Charity, "I told you she was fine; she's a Malfoy."

Burbage nodded, pulling her covers over her, and replied, "Yup, they always land on their feet."

And with that, the girls were soon back to sleep. Only Trelawney and Hope slowly sauntered over to Nagini's side of the room and waited as the mercurial witch finished her toiletries.

Hibiscus leaned against the curved wall and dreamily gazed upward at the Ravenclaw ceiling of changing constellations. "Horologium has crossed paths with Capricornus," said the dreamy-eyed blonde witch.

Nagini followed her gaze and smiled. Horologium shone above, taking centre as Capricornus moved to the side, twinkling above her. Feeling titillated, full of life and passion, she remembered Severus' hot mouth all over her and glibly observed, "I guess time has caught up with the old sea-goat!"

"A Capricorn," came the solemn voice of Trelawney. "A Capricorn has entered your life, changing all that shall follow."

Nagini smiled and thought fondly, *I wonder when Severus was born?*

"Who do you know born under the sky of Capricornus?" enquired Sybill, peering curiously at her.

"No one that I know of," replied Nagini, not really caring. She shrugged. "I...I don't know off hand; it's not really something I ask people."

"Your world will be changed," warned the frizzy-haired witch, worried.

Nagini huffed slightly on the verge of laughing, craving only to be under her covers and recount every kiss and touch of Severus'. "I'll ask around," she offered, getting under her blankets and hoping that that comment would satisfy her roommates.

Hope and Trelawney slowly sauntered back to their own beds.

"Her world already has changed, Sybill," commented Hibiscus with her all-seeing, all-knowing eyes, smiling serenely into the constellations once again. "Nagini's *universe* has already been changed."

And with that, the room became quiet and dark, each young witch lost in her own dreams or thoughts.

And so it was that none saw, again, Ophiucus, the serpent holder, force his way between Horologium and Capricornus, holding center stage in the constellated heavens.

oOoOoOo

## Horologium Ascending - Part One

*Chapter 16 of 22*

Desperate to find a way to be with Severus, Nagini asks Lucius for help. Severus becomes acutely aware that others' malicious intent towards Nagini is alive and well.

oOoOoOo

Selective eyes watched Nagini as she crossed over to the Slytherin table through the hub of the Great Hall during the evening meal the following day.

Bellatrix glared, Rodolphus purred, Regulus and Narcissa smiled but each for different reasons, and Severus followed her movements like a cat tempted by a shiny object as she approached Lucius and asked her cousin if he would speak with her privately.

Staring at her coldly, Lucius considered her request for several moments in silence, causing Nagini to bite the inside of her cheek in anticipation. She had avoided and snubbed him and his cronies as much as possible during her entire time thus far at Hogwarts, but now she needed his help. She felt desperate, and Lucius could smell her desperation. So after making her squirm a bit, he slowly rose and told her, "Follow me."

As Lucius and Nagini walked away together, the Slytherin Head Boy was being watched very closely by his inner circle as well as by the very discontented and suspicious Ravenclaw Head Boy, Marcus Belby, sitting at the Ravenclaw table. Belby was thoroughly put out that the Malfoy chit had already got herself into trouble with the Heads of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff catching her red-handed. *She's already bringing shame to Ravenclaw and no doubt House points will be deducted by McGonagall!*

Marcus glared as he saw Lucius' close mates rise from the table and start to follow where the Malfoys had gone, but his eyes narrowed shrewdly as he fixated on Severus. *It's that Snape's fault! Cavorting with him, doing Merlin knows what!* Belby fretted in insidious contemplation as he watched them leave the Great Hall, stewing in his own juice with pernicious suspicions of what the Slytherins were up to with the errant Ravenclaw.

Lucius led Nagini outside of the Great Hall and down the corridor; they walked in silence towards the Slytherin part of the castle, but before descending, Lucius motioned her to a hollowed side vestibule and guided them inside it.

Raising an eyebrow in cool disdain, Lucius said, "Very well, I'm all yours."

He waited, curious as to what was so important that she had finally sought him out in front of everyone, desperate enough to break some unspoken pledge she had declared to disassociate herself from him since arriving and being placed in Ravenclaw. To say Lucius was miffed was putting it mildly...he was fuming at Nagini's perceived insolence towards him but had had other pressing things to worry about. Between his upcoming marriage immediately after finishing his NEWTs and impatience to be his own man in all things, especially impatient to finally unconditionally bond with and bed Narcissa Black, there was the increasingly delicate balance of fulfilling and pleasing his father and the Dark Lord in the wily ways of their esoteric world, separate from the mainstream Wizarding one.

His aggravation was only exacerbated by still being stuck at Hogwarts and the daily trivial annoyances of his remaining days and duties as Head Boy as well as being under the platitudinal auspices of Albus Dumbledore daily. *The meddlesome, bromidic old coot...* The Malfoy heir was about to explode from all of the pressure he was feeling.

Having Nagini so close to him physically reminded him of yet another irritating obligation that would have to be fulfilled at the bequest and arrangement of his father: the settled agreement between Abraxas and Lester Qualmsick, the family's barrister; Nagini was to be Qualmsick's apprentice, his *bonded familiar*.

It wasn't the old magic bonding which annoyed the young Malfoy as much as it was Lester Qualmsick. Lucius had always despised him and his seeming control and influence over his father in certain matters. *When I come to power, Lester will be one of the first to... disappear...* brooded Lucius darkly.

Oblivious to everything but her own need, Nagini gulped and then explained, "Everyone is going to Hogsmeade this weekend, but I was informed by Professor Flitwick that I'm not allowed. Abraxas...Uncle didn't give his permission."

Utterly irked, Lucius blinked at her. "So?"

"I thought if you could...we could...together ask the Headmaster, then Dumbledore would give his permission, as you and he are legally responsible for me as well... if your father is not around..."

"Ah, I see," commented Lucius caustically. "You've been purposefully shunning me, but now that you want my help, you think you can just ask for it, and I'll give it to you?"

"I've been trying to fit in...my time schedule, work in the library; we're on completely different time tables..."

"Why?" asked Lucius, not listening nor believing one word she blathered out.

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to go to Hogsmeade?"

She shrugged. "Just to be with...with my friends..."

"Friends?" Lucius abruptly grabbed her arm and roughly pulled her into the shadowed alcove corner.

"You have no friends, do you hear me? What is friendship...tell me that, Nagini? Hmm? Those freaks you hang out with...Lovegood and Hope, Burbage, Trelawney?" He gave a derisive huff. "What do they know of the true meaning of bonding...pride, wealth, honour...loyalty? Does any of this have any meaning to you?"

Nagini watched as Lucius spouted out his diatribe, and her heart started racing. *I only want to go to be with... with Severus...* she thought frantically as her gut feeling warned her not to disclose a hair's-breadth of this to her increasingly livid and irate cousin.

"You're not even listening to me!" snarled Lucius, snapping Nagini back to the moment. "You shouldn't be asking about wanting to go to bloody Hogsmeade but rather about what you should be doing for your family..."

"My family?"

"Yes," he spat out, "For my father, for me! How to enhance your place in *our* world...fulfill your obligations, and it's not by socializing with your Ravenclaw oddities!"

She raised her chin a bit and answered, "I am a Ravenclaw."

Lucius stilled and then asked in a very quiet voice. "Are you, Nagini? I've been meaning to ask you, but you've denied me your charming company thus far...", his eyes narrowed, "Remember? You promised me that we would have a little talk, just you and I... You really should learn not to break your promises to anyone...especially me, dear cousin." He pressed her arm tightly. "Did that wretched Sorting Hat offer you a choice?"

Nagini blinked, trying to remember under Lucius' vitriolic stare. "I...I can't remember."

"Don't lie to me!" He gave her a shake.

"Let go of me, you brute!"

But he gripped her even harder. "You asked that filthy rag to put you into Ravenclaw...but you were meant for Slytherin, weren't you? Why?" he yelled, having worked himself up in a tizzy.

"Really, Lucius, don't you know that that's not the way to get what you want from her?" The smooth voice was followed by its owner's smoother and sleeker form: Rodolphus Lestrange glided near to them. "Either play very, very nice and be very, very patient with the pretty little witch," Rodolphus smiled an eerie smile at her, "or just take what you want. Force her."

"Not now," huffed Lucius, glaring at Lestrange. The blond wizard turned back to Nagini and informed her with a nasty smirk, "You can't go to Hogsmeade either way...Have you forgotten? You have your first detention this weekend. Any would-be privileges are foregone."

Nagini was speechless; she had forgotten. *But how does Lucius...*

As if reading her thoughts, Lucius sneered. "I'm Slytherin Head Boy. I know everything..."

He gave Nagini an odd look and added, "You've been very naughty, getting one of my top Slytherins ensnared with you and your little escapades."

"What are you talking about?" asked Nagini, playing dumb, as she caught a strange glint in Lucius' eyes and heard Rodolphus harrumph loudly and announce, "Here's Bella!"

"My filthy little blood traitor of a cousin has a big, juicy mouth," jeered Bellatrix, entering from the corridor, drawing close to the trio with Regulus Black close behind her.

Nagini stared at Regulus, shocked and confused.

"No, not me," snarled the youngest Black, "my mudwallower brother... He and his other Gryffindor berks have been crowing about how they caught you and..."

"There you all are," called out Narcissa. "We were wondering where you had taken Nagini, Lucius." She smiled graciously up at Severus, who accompanied her, as everyone stood, silent and waiting for someone to break the ice. Narcissa obliged and asked, "What were you talking about?"

"Just that Sevy here and Miss hoity-toity Malfoy have detention together with those filthy Gryffindor vermin," pouted Bellatrix. "Poor, Severus... no Hogsmeade for you either." Bellatrix sashayed over to him. Cocking her head in a curious way, she asked him in a mocking baby voice, "Or is it the good ol' Hog's Head you were really aiming for? A bouncy bed and whatnot?" She gave a malicious glance over to Nagini and then threw her head back, cackling like a madwoman.

Her heart thumping wildly and face burning in humiliation and shame, Nagini broke away from Lucius and lunged past them all, daring to flee as fast as she could back to Ravenclaw Tower without another word being said or even a look back at Severus.

Severus made a move as if to follow Nagini, but at that moment, Narcissa swiftly turned into him, forcing him to engage in direct eye contact with her. Severus heard Narcissa warn, *Don't! Don't do it! Danger!* although her lips did not move.

Noting their little silent interaction, Lucius stared stoically at Snape as he crossed over to Narcissa in order to take her by the arm and walk with his fiancée back towards Slytherin.

Giggling insanely, Bellatrix with a wild-eyed, snickering Regulus Black bounded before the rest of them as the Slytherin group made their way slowly towards their common room. Before descending downward, Bellatrix twirled around and with her forefinger pointing back and forth between Rodolphus and Severus, she sang out, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch the half-blood by her toe. If she screams don't let her go, Eeny, meeny, miny, moe. My mother told me to pick the very best one, and you are now it!"

Bellatrix jabbed her fiancé's chest hard with her finger, and Rodolphus began to laugh a dark, deep laugh which she joined in, cackling loudly at some inside joke known only to them. Severus watched in tense silence as Bella abruptly stopped and slowly sauntered over to him. With a challenging look in her wild eyes, she poked him rhythmically in the chest as she taunted, "O-U-T spells 'out' so out you must go, because the Warlock and Sorceress say so!"

Severus was appalled as Bella whispered fiercely, "Hurry, Sevy, hurry! Before something wicked takes her for his very own!" He looked around at all of his mates, and each one seemed to be waiting for 'it' to click.

Vexed, he felt his face burn, and giving Narcissa a fleeting glance, catching her thinly disguised pained expression, Snape turned around slowly, before bolting away towards Ravenclaw Tower in hot pursuit to find Nagini. The sounds of Bellatrix and Rodolphus' cruel, jeering laughter spurred Severus on.

oOoOoOoOo

## Horologium Ascending - Part Two

*Chapter 17 of 22*

In a stew between Marcus and Lucius, Severus and Nagini are caught in the middle of petty and not so petty tiffs, spurring events on.

oOoOoOoOo

Severus panted heavily from the exertion, his side aching, but it was not in vain. As he neared the stairway to Ravenclaw Tower, the unmistakable form of Nagini was there, hunched and leaning against a wall.

The mercurial Malfoy turned and looked up sharply, and they stared at each other, frozen in time.

Only when Severus slowly raised his forefinger to his lips, warning her not to speak, did she silently step closer to him. He swirled around, and she watched him pointing his wand here and there, rotating around until he had non-verbally cast *Homenum Revelio* throughout the entire circumference of the space around them, waiting for some reaction from an unknown source. Nothing happened.

*No one! That damn Bellatrix and Rodolphus, unnerving me!* cursed Severus to himself. *They want to play games? So be it!*

With a sigh of relief, Severus turned his full attention onto Nagini.

They spoke not a word as they came together; Nagini wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning her head on his shoulder. *She's been crying*, noted Severus, pocketing his wand, and he reached out and slowly caressed her cheek, gently wiping away a fresh tear that fell.

Feeling his touch, she gazed up into his eyes.

Adrenaline coursing through his veins, Severus cupped her face and pressed his lips to hers, releasing his anxiety about her well-being by crushing her with a kiss. He didn't pause until he heard her whimper from the intensity of it, and then he broke off their contact and heard her whisper, "They know! Lucius, Bellatrix...How do they know?"

His eyes glittered dangerously as the answer came to him. *Sirius Black! Potter. That spineless Pettigrew.* He could just hear Black's version of their little run-in being spouted out in exaggerated details for anyone and all to hear, especially to Black's cousin, Bellatrix, who Sirius seemed to love to goad and provoke as much as, if not more than, he did Snape. *That bloody berk! He'll get what's coming to him... privately!*

But Severus pushed aside his thoughts about the odious Black, and his eyes bored into Nagini's golden ones with purpose and intent as he reassured her. "It doesn't matter what they know. Or what they *think* they know about us." He wanted Nagini to *need* him, regardless. To trust him. To trust that he could make everything work out, make everything be all right. "All that matters is *us*. What we want for each other. From one another."

Nagini seemed to understand what Severus meant, for she whispered, "Yes, yes... I want you too..."

Severus tilted his head to kiss her again, but the sound of the Ravenclaw Head Boy, Marcus Belby, tsking and saying "That will do" stopped him cold. His blood froze even more as he looked around and saw that Belby was accompanied not by fellow Ravenclaws but by three Gryffindors: Sirius Black, James Potter and Peter Pettigrew. They had silently semi-surrounded Nagini and him, wands raised for attack.

"I saw you Slytherins... and *her*," Marcus snidely informed Severus, giving a distasteful look to Nagini, "wandering off, and I thought to engage the aid of others who know you only all too well, Snape." Belby smirked and then addressed Sirius. "Invaluable advice, Black, to hold back, keep back a safe distance and not pounce at once but wait until he was *distracted*. I owe you."

"Anytime, Belby, anytime." Black swaggered over to Nagini, letting his wand dangle loosely about and announced, "But I do believe that I deserve a little reward for saving such a damsel in distress... Blimey! She's been crying!" Sirius leered at Nagini, amused, and then he sighed dramatically, orating, "Georgie porgie puddin' pie, kissed the girls and made them cry..." He smirked at the witch. "Is that what happened, Malfoy? Snivellus kissed you and made you cry?"

Nagini couldn't answer him, appalled at his and the others' audacity, and looked around at all of the wands being pointed at Snape and her, but from the corner of her eye, she saw Severus reach for his wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" cried James, disarming Snape in a flash.

His attention momentarily drawn to Severus, Black jibed, "I thought it was only...what's your favourite word that you and your lot like to spout off about?...ah, yes, 'Mudbloods'. That's it! Only Mudbloods, you made cry, Snivellus."

With his black eyes flickering lethally at Black, Severus froze, seething and enraged at being caught in a trap, having to endure the humiliating memory of his verbal abuse to Lily that horrid day and being impotently incapable of defending Nagini and himself with four wands ready and pointed to hex them.

Knowing he'd hit a deep, raw wound, Sirius rubbed salt in it further. "Mudbloods, such as," his cruel smile broadened as he jeered, "your favourite one, let's say, Evans?"

Severus felt the intense pain of a Stinging Hex from Potter's wand hit him full force, knocking him backwards onto the floor.

"Stop it! Stop it! What's wrong with you all? He doesn't deserve to be attacked..." cried out Nagini.

Bursting out in laughter like a hyena, Sirius exclaimed, "Snivellus, not deserve it?" He noted Nagini's wide-eyed amazement and shock. "Well, what do you know? The hoity-toity Malfoy truly fancies our greasy-haired git here!"

Nagini made to cross to Severus, but Black grabbed her by the arm. Before Nagini could help herself, she felt a deep surge of anger and anxiety well up inside of her, a déjà vu of being bullied and attacked at Durmstrang burst forth, and she hissed at Sirius in parseltongue, "Let go of me!"

Only a second of shock crossed over Sirius' face, hearing her serpentine sound at him, before he burst out in wild, excited laughter again and called out, "Looks like we got a live one here, Prongs! Where's Moony when you need him?"

As Sirius held her, she tried to keep control of herself, for she felt a rush and need to do something violent, non-verbally and uncontrollable, if the bullyboys didn't leave them alone. She appealed to Belby, "You're a Prefect! A Head Boy! How can you allow this?"

At Marcus' unresponsiveness, she demanded, "What do you want from us?"

"From you? Nothing at the moment." Belby's thoughts were reeling, and he couldn't wait to inform Flitwick, let alone the Headmaster, that she was a parselmouth, but first, he had some unfinished business with the Slytherin on the floor.

"From him," Marcus paused and crossed over to Severus lying prone on the floor. In a sudden movement, he kicked Snape hard in the ribs, saying, "I heard you that day, you oiker! I know it was you who hexed me from behind. You dirty coward!"

Severus let out a slew of swearwords as Belby kicked him again.

"You're going to give Malfoy a message from me, but only after I break your nose like he did mine..."

Suddenly, all heard Pettigrew squeal like a pig and turned around.

Ambushing the ambushers, Bellatrix had grabbed Peter by the neck from behind, her wand digging into one of his plump facial cheeks; Rodolphus was disarming Potter as Regulus motioned with his wand for Sirius to let Nagini go and back away from her, saying, "That's it, nice and easy, scumsucker. You know I'll do it."

Through them all strode Lucius, who smoothly bent down and helped Snape back up on his feet.

Turning to Marcus, the blond wizard coolly commented, "I'm right here in front of you, Belby. Perhaps you'd like to give me your message now?"

The chilling reality that he and the Gryffindors were now at the mercy of Lucius and his inner circle of Slytherins caused Marcus' mouth to go dry, and he couldn't utter a sound.

"Hmm? Cat's got your tongue, Belby? But you were so eloquently making your point, kicking my good man while he was down." Lucius looked around, carefully taking everyone into account. "Four against two? Or rather, four against one since you were gallant enough not to attack Nagini. Yet."

Lucius sniffed, his anger began to seep out from under his cool façade. "I must compliment you. Very nice tactics. Who would've thought you'd be capable of it?" He smirked, giving Sirius and Potter a knowing look. "But then, blood traitors always do surprise one. Capable of anything."

Marcus found his tongue at last. "Shut it, you bloody hypocrite! After what you did to me..."

"What, Belby, what?" spat out Lucius through gritted teeth, "I'm sure we all want to hear you whine...and your *intimate*, graphic details, please!"

Seeing Marcus hesitate, something not allowing the Ravenclaw to speak further, Lucius smiled cruelly. "No juicy tidbits to share and enjoy? Well then, I'll be the gentleman and propose how to get us all out of this little mess you've made, Belby, shall I? For now, that is..." Lucius leered at him. "It's only because I'm counting the days till I get out of this confinement...without further *incident*, Belby. I know you can't wait to have your own life, either. Away from Hogwarts. Away from your family. Independent and living the *gay*, carefree lifestyle, befitting to your true nature."

Marcus' brow furrowed, and he gave Lucius a worried look as he heard his cousin say, "Let's just play nice; you go on up to Ravenclaw, like a good boy, leave Nagini alone, not a word to anyone about anything, ever, nor being nasty to her...let the *honourable* Gryffindors return to their dump..."

"Except for this one, Lucius," cut in Bellatrix, giggling; she had replaced her wand with her forefinger, pushing it into Pettigrew's soft cheek in small circles, causing his eyes to water. She whispered in the trembling Gryffindor's ear, "I like 'em round and soft. Just like you, Petey."

Pettigrew nervously whimpered, and Sirius spewed out at Bellatrix, "Let him go! You bloody, fucking..."

Black was cut off by a Silencing Charm whipped at him by Rodolphus, who warned him quietly, "Watch your mouth, little Sirius, or I'll wash it out for you. Topsy turvy Muggle style."

"Now, now, everyone just calm down." Lucius raised a speculative eyebrow. "Potter...take your little friends and go...we won't harm a hair on Belby's head." Malfoy smiled a secretive smile. "Regulus will make sure of that. In fact, I'll count to three, and you all leave at the same time. Bella, you can play with Pettigrew at some other time. One, two, three."

No one moved and Lucius sighed dramatically.

"It will only end very *ugly*, otherwise, and I believe none of us wish for our parents to be involved, do they?" Lucius commented sentimentally, "So little time left to be together until the end, NEWTs and all?" He lost his patience and turned sharply to the Ravenclaw Head Boy. "How much do you want disclosed, Belby, if your father and mine were called together? I might have to reveal certain things about you that your father, the austere conservative, albeit temporary Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, might find quite *shocking* about his son. Unacceptable. Orion and Walburga Black would be summoned as well. Certain matters concerning underage wizards would require it. But then, you're a Head Boy. You know the rules regarding reporting underage *relations*."

*Regulus!* Marcus visibly paled in front of all. After several seconds, he rasped to the Gryffindors, "Go!"

"Fair enough, Belby, yes? Until another time then," purred Lucius, relishing Marcus in a true dilemma.

What little rationale was left in Belby's flustered state kicked in, and he nodded, jerking his head in agreement. Lucius leaned closer into him and said in a quiet voice, "All's fair in love and war, is it not, Marcus? See how happy you've made Regulus, being a good boy, cooperating with us? Protecting him? And yourself, as well. It's almost *romantic*."

Belby blushed red as the youngest Black shot Marcus a puppy-eyed look of relief, if not longing, for the briefest second. But it was enough for Belby to know that their clandestine sexual experiences with each other had been fully revealed to Lucius and by now the others...the heated moments, desperately stolen and shared, were not forgotten but would now be over, as of that very second, he decided. Marcus could not risk his father finding out and disowning him.

Defeated, Marcus gave one last dark but longing look at Regulus and, without another word, turned and walked slowly up the stairs to Ravenclaw.

Disgruntled, but under the threatening wands of the Slytherins outnumbering them, James picked up his wand that Rodolphus had thrown on the floor and pulled Sirius along; Padfoot still cussed animatedly under the Silencing Charm LeStrange had placed on him while Bella gleefully released Pettigrew to scamper hurriedly after his mates, not looking back.

As Rodolphus' eyes darted back and forth hungrily between watching the Gryffindors fade out of sight and Nagini standing beside Snape, touching his ribs tentatively, Regulus and Bellatrix lolled over to Severus, and she jeered, "Betcha didn't think we were looking out for you, did ya, Sevy?"

Regardless of yet another triumph over Belby and the other blood traitors, Lucius' expression had hardened, and he ordered Severus in a no-nonsense tone, "Walk Nagini to the Ravenclaw door and say goodnight. I'll be waiting for you in the common room, or better yet, come to my room. Be quick about it, Snape."

oOoOoOoO

## A Restitution of Sorts, a Runespoor, and the Horklump

*Chapter 18 of 22*

After receiving a warning from Lucius, Severus is given detention with Nagini and Pettigrew in the Forbidden Forest; after being separated, a Runespoor and an unusual Horklump catapult events forward.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter characters are the property of J.K. Rowling and Bloomsbury/Scholastic. No profit is being made, and no copyright infringement is intended.

\*\*\*\*\*

Of all the trees that grow so fair,

Old England to adorn,

Greater are none beneath the Sun

Than Oak and Ash and Thorn.

(Puck of Pook's Hill, by Rudyard Kipling, 1906)

oOoOoOo

"When I said you needed a distraction...when I asked you to keep an eye on Nagini, I didn't mean for you to...," Lucius searched for the right phrase, his cool grey eyes peering into Severus' black ones, deliberating his choice of words, "get involved with her intimately."

Snape didn't blink or move but sat stiffly in his Head Boy's plush armchair that graced Lucius' Prefects' quarters. As if he'd been Petrified, he stared back solemnly at Malfoy, masking well his inner thoughts.

Lucius sighed heavily, and his lips pursed tightly as he made his decision. "Severus, I've been more than generous with favours to you all these years," he put his hand up in defense as he pressed his point, "of my own accord, and I've had no regrets... until now."

The blond wizard slowly walked over to his ample bed and began to undress in front of the taciturn housemate. When bare from the waist up, Lucius flicked back his long hair, turning around to Snape, and pointed out matter-of-factly, "She's been marked by and for others. So stop before you continue anything further." He crossed over to in front of Severus and sat on the edge of his massive writing table, bracing himself so that his muscular arms flexed in his pose, and whispered fiercely, "Immediately!"

Severus had learned well to parry and ignore Lucius in all of his dubious, duplicitous ways and intentions.

Lucius ran a hand through his hair and gave Severus a challenging look. "Well? Say something, Snape!" He impatiently sniffed. "I'll take your silence as a complete agreement."

Still, Snape sat without moving or speaking. Seconds went by in silence. Lucius began to glare at him and his jaw clenched in growing tension. "Rodolphus... and the Dark Lord have claimed her..."

Severus croaked out, "She chose me! Nagini chose me!" His voice was weak, but his eyes flashed in anger at Malfoy.

Lucius jolted up and paced around, clenching and unclenching his fist. "What I'm about to say, I mean with all sincerity for your well-being, Snape." Lucius noted that Severus' eyes now gleamed with attention. "Don't. Be. Stupid."

To emphasise his point, he grabbed Severus by the arm. "Nothing and no one is worth risking the displeasure of the Dark Lord."

Severus snarled, "Even Narcissa?"

Lucius' eyes narrowed. "Cissy is not your concern." His expression hardened. "Just as Nagini is not your concern."

Feeling an innate, cruel urge to push his point, Malfoy reminded Severus, "She wears their cursed ring...bewitched until Lestrage has had her." His grip tightened so much that Severus winced, and Lucius continued, "It was either Nagini or... Narcissa, in repayment of my... access to Bella. A reciprocity of sorts." He gave Severus a defiant look. "You will not interfere with their intentions regarding Nagini. Your path and hers are never to cross other than as schoolmates in Hogwarts...do you understand me? Her path has been decided upon by others, and it has nothing to do with you."

A soft knock on the door caused Lucius to loosen his grip on Snape's arm, as well as soften his voice, as the blond wizard repeated, "Do you understand, Severus?"

The knock became louder, more insistent.

"There's always Guinevere, willing and able to amuse you... or....," a caustic sneer appeared on Lucius' face, "or your little Mudblood...one swish of your wand and Evans is yours." Impulsively, Malfoy offered, "I'll do it for you..."

"Lucius..." The voice was heard from the door, which opened slowly, and Severus turned to see who was entering, his pulse racing in expectation of coming face to face with Lestrage and feeling a wild surge to strangle him. But it wasn't Rodolphus who slipped in and stopped in the doorway...it was Regulus Black.

Dressed in a sleeping robe, Regulus stared at Severus in surprise.

Malfoy huffed, miffed and restless. Shooting Snape an indignant look, he motioned to Regulus, saying, "Come on in. Snape was just leaving."

As Black casually sauntered over and lazily stretched out on the bed, Lucius reminded Snape as he left, "You've been warned."

A lump in his throat, Severus gave his two Slytherin housemates a fleeting glance before he left without further ado, leaving Lucius and Regulus to their own devices and privacy.

\*\*\*\*\*

It wasn't the Forbidden Forest's undergrowth that raked Nagini's nerves, nor even the incessant, nervous chirping of Peter Pettigrew pecking away at her patience as they brushed and poked under thick shrub growth in the moonlight, searching for mutant Horklumps.

The main part of her irritation was the cursed ring on her finger annoying her; it had been tightening on and off all evening, and she had an almost uncontrollable need to scratch around it. In order not to rub her skin raw, whenever she felt the urge to dig her nails into the skin around the metal, she would fiddle with her mother's necklace, which she wore to distract from the horrid ring.

But on top of this, more intensely bothering her and putting her nerves on edge, was Severus' *changed* behaviour these past few days. Something was wrong, very wrong, and she couldn't put her finger on it, but his apparent avoidance of her confused her. Whenever she saw him, his eyes looked at her just as intensely as when he had kissed her, but ever since the evening of the ambush by Belby and the Gryffindors, ever since he had said goodnight afterwards and kissed her goodbye in front of the Ravenclaw door, his demeanour was stiff, formal...cold.

Trying to catch him privately to talk, she had lingered down beside Ravenclaw Tower's steps in the evenings this past week as long as allowed, hoping that he would make a secret appearance. That not happening, Nagini had loitered after classes in the corridor leading to the Slytherins' dungeons and dawdled in the Great Hall after each meal, watching and hoping that they could both accidentally-on-purpose meet each other. But nothing had occurred. They had only exchanged a few brief greetings in the hallways between classes, and 'I'll contact you when I can' was all Severus had further offered her in a quick hushed whisper two days ago.

So when Professor Flitwick announced that her detention would be that Saturday evening with the other guilty students, she couldn't wait *At least I'll be able to talk to Severus and find out what's wrong, what's troubling him!*

Their detention to look for and gather magical fungi this night under Hagrid's charge was monotonous, but having been paired up with Pettigrew while Hagrid kept Severus with him was more and more tediously taxing. "Best not to put yer and Severus together, yer see, nor Severus and yer," Hagrid had informed her as well as the nervous Gryffindor, who was glancing back and forth from Severus to Nagini.

"Now, yeh lot'll be collectin' these mutated sorts o' Horklumps, well, all kinds...whatever yeh find...Madam Pomfrey needs their juice fer her healin' potions. The thing is, they grow in dark clumps; yeh'll be manually diggin' and pullin' 'em out o' the ground under shrubs and whatnot. It's dirty, hard work, but someone's got ter do it." He gave them a knowing look. "And that someone is yeh three. Plus me and Fang. We'll divide up."

Hagrid gave Pettigrew a supportive look and then turned to Nagini. "Sirius told me that yer good around snakes. If yeh run into any errant Streelers or Runespoors, yeh'll know what ter do," he pointed out, giving Nagini a nod.

"Why would Black say that?" she asked defensively.

"You're a Parseltongue!" squeaked Pettigrew. "I heard you. We all did..."

"And where exactly are the other Gryffindors?" asked Severus through gritted teeth, cutting him off.

"Oh, they'll be doin' a separate detention, once Lupin is up and about. There were six o' yeh, so the professors decided to split yeh up in two groups o' three. And I decided to split us up in two groups o' two." He gave Fang a fond look. "Well, two and a half and two."

Severus made a derisive sound, which Hagrid ignored as he announced, "So it'll be yeh and me, Severus, with Fang. Peter, yeh with Nagini. Extra points if yeh come across a Velebetian Horklump," he handed out huge canvas-clothed sacks to each of them, "and after yeh've unearthed them one by one, toss 'em into yer bag. We'll meet back here at dawn."

"At dawn?" squeaked Pettigrew. "But that m-means we'll be here all night." He peered around into the murky forest apprehensively.

"Well, yeh should o' thought o' the consequences o' yer actions before goin' around throwin' hexes at each other. As if yeh haven't better things ter do." Then Hagrid, with Fang beside him, turned around and headed off in one direction, only to stop and call out, "Come along, Severus!"

Nagini's heart leapt and then fell as Severus only gave her a quick glance, but not a word, before following Hagrid, leaving her feeling worse and full of more doubts than ever before.

\*\*\*\*\*

And so it was that hours later, after Nagini and Peter had slowly sauntered deeper into the Forbidden Forest's woods, they managed to find a thick growth of Horklumps and proceeded to root them out of the dark earth under the bright moon's light. Well, Nagini was doing it; after two or three samples, Pettigrew sat lazily on a half-rotten log lying in front of what appeared to be a circular thicket of yew trees behind him.

Nagini pulled the muddy fungus she had her fingers wrapped around, carefully feeling and gripping around its tentacles with her other hand, and gave Peter an annoyed look. She huffed and gave another tug, unearthing it. "You're supposed to be helping me, Pettigrew! *Our* detention remember?"

"But you're doing such a fine job without me," commented the smug Gryffindor.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" she quipped, throwing the Horklump in her half-full bag.

Peter said in a small voice, "Well, I am. I'm more clever than you know."

Nagini frowned. "Alright, so you're clever. Now, will you help me? The sooner we collect enough, the sooner we can finish this and go back and wait for them. Your bag is practically empty, in case you were too clever to notice."

Peter opened his mouth to retort but stopped, frozen, as a soft hissing was heard, followed quickly by two other hisses.

*Runespoors!* thought Nagini, recognising their distinct sounds immediately.

"Pettigrew, don't move! Just be still." She took a step closer to him and saw the magical creature behind the boy's back. She concentrated and softly hissed, asking the Runespoor to move away and leave him alone, telling it that they meant no harm.

The three-headed serpent agreed and then unexpectedly gave Nagini advice. "Yonder where the yew trees fork, a rare Horklump lays... In the heart of the blackthorn tree, one Horklump like none other! Take it, and you'll need no other... It's medicinal juice is the rarest of the rare... but you must be quick! It's magical power is so great that it can will itself to move through space! Hurry!"

"How did you know we were looking for Horklumps?"

"We've been watching you," said the centre head of the Runespoor, "You humans are a loud, noisy lot... but *you* are not all human, are you, my dear?" And with that, the three-headed creature slithered off, leaving Nagini unnerved by its last comment.

Looking alarmed, then relieved, Peter gasped, "You saved me! What...what did you say?"

Nagini blinked in thought, still stunned by what the Runespoor had just said, and then slowly she answered, "I just told it to leave you alone and go about its business."

"And it did it? It listened to you? Just like that?" Pettigrew stood and looked Nagini up and down, as if seeing her for the first time. "You're that powerful? I owe you..."

Nagini felt a sick feeling in her chest, seeing him gawp at her in awe. "I'm *not* powerful!" she snapped. "I'm just a regular parseltongue...I'm *normal*. It's not a big deal." She hurried to point out, "You don't owe me anything...just help me, follow me...stay by my side before something else almost happens to you." Nagini gave her half-filled sack a tug and hitched it over her shoulder. "This way."

Gods, how she wanted this night to end! She wanted to find and get this special Horklump, return to the meeting point, and hoped that if what the Runespoor said was true, the rare medicinal fungus would appease Madam Pomfrey and help refill her stock enough to not have to ever repeat this detention. She would think more about her interaction with the Runespoor later, for most of all she just wanted to hurry back and have some private time with Severus before returning to the castle. She felt like she would never be alone with him again.

She stepped through the yew tree thicket with Pettigrew near her, and they found themselves upon a bare, open patch of grass, circularly surrounded by the evergreen grove...except for one very different tree.

"Look!" exclaimed Pettigrew, seeing the object of interest before she did. Across from them, a gleam of gold shone brightly in the moonlight. The Gryffindor bounded towards a gnarled old blackthorn tree incongruously standing twisted and sinister within the yew circle. In the centre of the ancient tree was a large golden mushroom-like object.

"Wait, Pettigrew! Don't touch it!"

"You want it all for yourself?"

"Don't be stupid...it might be poisonous! I've never seen one of these in Professor Sprout's class, have you?"

Pettigrew stopped in his tracks, conceding, and waited until Nagini caught up with him; they both cautiously approached the tree until they stood before the golden entity.

"Is it...?" The runt of a young wizard raised himself on his tiptoes to see better. "A Velebetian Horklump? I don't know what one looks like."

"Neither do I," whispered Nagini and squinted as she observed it closer. The Horklump had what appeared at first to be the typical black bristles which usually covered and identified it. "It's not poisonous because it has the dark bristles..." She poked it with her finger for good measure. Then she touched it more gently. Its texture was soft and its skin shiny. Nothing happened.

But as she stood face to face with the fleshy fungus, studying it, she saw that the black patterns weren't just inlaid bristles but were tiny lines of *Runic symbols*? She whispered, "It seems to be..." Nagini stopped and tried to remember what she had learned thus far from studying Runes and world Runology. *No... it's a... a saying or a spell of sorts... But some of these runic patterns... It's not a Nordic one, but it's a... Witches in England would place them on objects in olden times for... protection?* She sighed, frustrated. *Where are Xenophilus and Hibiscus when I need them?*

Suddenly, staring at the Runic symbols, Nagini remembered a childhood rhyme:

*Evil return to the one who sent thee*

*For me and mine are now set free*

*No, not a rhyme... a spell?* Her forehead furrowed in thought. She scrunched her eyes as images unexpectedly flashed in her mind: her mother's face, green light from a spell being cast, and then, she saw Dymphna...her old caretaker's face and voice were sensed so strongly, as if she was standing near, whispering the words into Nagini's ear. She closed her eyes, simultaneously touching and holding the necklace Dymphna had given her from her mother so long ago, and whispered aloud:

*Evil return to the one who sent thee*

*For me and mine are now set free*

*No hurt nor harm can enter here*

*For my life and way are now made clear.\**

"Here now, what are you up to?" asked Peter nervously.

Nagini's eyes flew open, and she reached up and touched the protruding symbol. She pulled at the fungus; its texture seemed to toughen under her touch. But also it appeared to move a wee bit. She felt compelled to tug at it, loosen it more. But it still wouldn't come out. "Pettigrew, help me. Just tug on that side, and I'll tug on this one...we have to pull as many of its tentacles out as possible to detach it!"

They worked their fingers around and under the exotic magical fungus, huffing and puffing until, simultaneously, they pulled it out. Holding it together, admiring the mesmerising golden Horklump, they barely realised what they had done when a flash of light burst forth from it, and they were Portkeyed away to a spelled destination.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: \*A Celtic Protective Spell from The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, as contributed by Jacqueline Paterson, date unknown.

## Caught and Found

*Chapter 19 of 22*

The golden Horklump serves its purpose; Dumbledore chooses Severus as the source to question.

oOoOoOo

*Evil return to the one who sent thee,*

*For me and mine are now set free.*

*No hurt nor harm can enter here,*

*For my life and way are now made clear.\**

oOoOoOo

With a sharp cracking sound, Nagini found herself and Pettigrew Portkeyed and standing in a dark cavernous space, still holding the Horklump between them. But only for a second.

Instantly, hexes hit them, and her body was thrown back against a wall. She had only seconds to cognitively take in several shady forms before one singular shadow became clearly visible.

Clad in dark robes up to his jawline, the waxy, deathly pale features of a wizard became distinct. The feeble light from sconces accentuated his red burning eyes as he drew slowly closer to her, and Nagini blindly scrambled backwards along the cold stone wall, her fingers clawing in irrational fear for any gap in panic, battling with her brain racing and screaming, *Why? Who are you?*

She heard menacing laughter echo in the vast chamber and saw another hex hit Pettigrew's collapsed form, laying in the distance, as her back hit the corner wall.

Somehow, from somewhere deep inside her, she found her breath and nerves and screamed, "Why?"

Her adrenaline raced from fear, already causing a deep need to defend herself, and prickled throughout her. Being wandless due to the detention rules, her instincts snapped her defense mechanisms within her like a chameleon changing colour...her transfiguration to her Animagus was imminent.

But the formidable, skeletal wizard beat her to it as he leered and raised his wand, his hex hitting her hard.

With a loud, painful crack, she was fast-forwarded to her Animagus self, a rearing, hissing serpent of substantial size. Her reptilian form snapped and lashed at the wizard who only jeered euphorically before slashing his wand at her, sending her serpentine form through the air and slamming her against another wall, deflating any impetus or ability to strike momentarily.

A bare foot was felt on her reptilian neck; her golden snake eyes glared up at the wizard as she silently tried to place her tail behind him, to coil and throttle the breath out of the baleful bastard.

"No. No, I don't think so, Nagini Malfoy," spoke the omnipotent sorcerer quietly.

And even as her tail slithered upward and found and wrapped itself around his neck to squeeze and snap it, he slashed another wand stroke across her, and she slowly distorted and throbbed, coagulating back into her human form.

She felt a strange numbness throughout her body, unable to move.

The wizard's slits narrowed, and his taut features twisted to form a cryptic smile.

"I am Lord Voldemort."

His foot was again on her windpipe, threatening to crush it. "Lucretia never spoke of me? Only *Grindelwald* to you?"

Nagini whimpered in fear, petrified, her bulging eyes begging to answer him.

The Dark Lord locked eyes with her, raised his wand, and with one quick jabbing motion, he penetrated her mind. His razor blade slice cut through any feeble attempt of defense, and she was left utterly malleable underneath him.

The shards of sharp pain coursed through her as Voldemort probed and plundered, searching for something, causing a burning, cascading sensation as the recesses of her mind were thrust open, again and again.



Reeling in her mind flew images from her past:*Durmstrang; Dymphna; a dirty, drunken Muggle cursed dead in a gutter; black forests; a crisp, pious Muggle offering food; a bright, clean cottage; a dark, cramped hovel; a sterile chamber; her mother; her mother's companion Adolphus Rohn...*

Voldemort paused momentarily and then with another jab of his wand he probed, and suddenly, all that Nagini could see in her mind's eye was the image of *Severus!*

Time stood still, her mind turned blank, and the only tether of consciousness she then knew was at some point in the agonizing void the Dark Lord probing further until his desires were finally satiated, and with a precise jerk, he pulled out of her.

Another hex hit her, and as she blacked out, she heard Voldemort state softly, "I'll continue with you later... Rodolphus, she's all yours, my worthy follower."

oOoOoOoOo

Several weeks. Several weeks had passed since Severus found the bodies of Nagini and Pettigrew unconscious at the bottom of a gully in the Forbidden Forest.

After an exhausting night of rooting up Horklumps with Hagrid and then waiting for Nagini at the meeting point, it became obvious to Severus that something was wrong. *She should be here...*

The dawn's weak rays were slowly filtering through the Forbidden Forest's dense shadows and growth when Severus, Hagrid and Fang started the search.

So in the early morning light, they followed the signs of the trail Nagini and Peter had freshly left behind.

With a marksman's eye, Severus spotted and followed the succession of trodden grass that led to a subtle path made recently by different footsteps. Arriving at a rotted log, he found an almost empty sack of Horklumps. Turning, he spotted what appeared to be an opening through thick Yew trees. As he pushed his way through the evergreens, finding himself encircled, he rushed and picked up a second sack nearly full of the fleshy pink mushrooms.

Severus felt sweat run down his face as his keen eye was drawn to a visible gap behind a large gnarled Blackthorn tree. As he made to go through the opening, he grabbed a branch for balance keeping him from plummeting down a sharp gully directly behind.

Catching his breath from a close accident, he spotted two human forms at the bottom of the treacherous incline. Calling for Hagrid to be careful, he carefully sat on his arse and slowly zigzagged his way down, sliding and pausing at intervals. Reaching the thicketed ditch's bottom, his chest burned as he knelt down beside one form. *Nagini!*

She was faced down, unconscious. He swallowed hard and then ever so gently turned her face upward *She's alive!*

Severus called out to Hagrid, "Here! I've found them!"

"Don't!" whispered Severus fiercely as Hagrid lumbered over to the other body and made as if to pick it up. He knelt down beside Nagini's unconscious form. "We need special help. Madam Pomfrey or..." Severus stopped short seeing Nagini's deathly paleness; her once lustrous, mercurial hair was lank and lifeless, a faded, dull brown, as if all the vitality had been sucked out of it. She was in a deep stupor, and her face was bruised and cut, seemingly from falling down the steep bush-clad incline.

He gave a look over at Pettigrew's twisted body and managed to utter. "We might do more harm than good. There might be... internal bleeding."

Just then, high in the sky, a sound was heard, and Severus saw the crimson form of Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix companion, circling above them. In a series of flashes, the phoenix swooped down and, in a blink of an eye, disappeared then reappeared above; only now Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey stood, Apparated, near him and the fallen bodies.

Dumbledore slowly walked over and looked down, his searing glance swept over Nagini's body, and then his piercing blue eyes held Severus' for several moments.

"I'll take over from here, Severus."

Madam Pomfrey gave a quick wave of her wand over Nagini's and Peter's forms. Giving Dumbledore a concerned look, she informed, "I'll take the boy. See to the girl, Albus; she needs your special close attention." Pomfrey placed Pettigrew's head and torso firmly in her arms against her chest, and then with a soft pop, they were gone.

Dumbledore stared intensely at Severus, even though he addressed the half-giant. "Hagrid, you go back to the castle." He pulled from his robe Severus' wand and handed it to him. "From Professor Slughorn. Your detention is over. Take this and use it if need be...go back exactly the way you came."

Dumbledore slowly waved his wand over Nagini's body; a light golden glow encompassed it momentarily and then faded. He then levitated Nagini into his arms and whispered something into her ears before the two figures Disapparated.

Severus blinked, feeling empty and lost. Out of the corner of his eye, something glinted in the leaves under where Nagini's body had lain. He bent down down *It's the ring, the Dark Lord's ring given to Nagini by Rodolphus that day on the train...* He carefully picked it up and immediately felt a painful lump in his throat, spreading like fire down through his chest. *The Dark charm has been broken... It's able to come off her finger!*

Severus knew then and there that Rodolphus had *had* her.

A wave of nausea rolled over him, and he felt dizzy as the realization sunk in, then the denial, only to be followed by a flame of anger flaring up inside him, clarifying a violent need to get back to the castle... *And bash Rodolphus' skull in with my bare hands!*

As Severus began to climb frantically back up the cliff with Fang and Hagrid following behind him, Fawkes continued to soar and circle above them.

Severus made for the back side of the ancient gnarled Blackthorn tree and grasped at its trunk and lower branches to pull and steady himself on up and back into the clearing of grass.

As they all reentered and crossed through the circle of Yew trees, there was a flash and Dumbledore stood in the middle. The old wizard's eyes blazed, and he gave a sharp look around and walked directly towards the Blackthorn tree.

His heart pounding, Severus watched as the Headmaster touched the tree as if summoning something from within it and then stood still in a meditative state.

Several seconds passed in silence before Dumbledore suddenly turned around and snapped at him, "Severus, you'll Side-Along-Apparate with me!" And with that, the Headmaster roughly grabbed him, and within seconds, he was beside Nagini's bed in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts.

"Look at her, Severus," ordered Dumbledore severely. "Look at her!"

Severus jerked his arm away and scowled in his frustration and suppressed fury as his fingers squeezed the broken, cursed ring. Through his long, lank bangs, he saw Nagini's limp unconscious body. It had already been cleaned of the blood and dirt, but now the bruises and red swelling were clearly seen. He swallowed hard and felt the blood pulsing in his veins. He just wanted to get to the Slytherin dungeons, find Rodolphus, and...

"What have you to say to this?" Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses, his face grim.

Startled, he snarled, "Sir?"

"Who did this to her, Severus? It wasn't from a fall. She's been violently hexed several times, suffered an attack. Several attacks. Violent and brutal."

Seething, Severus became glum and taciturn. His breathing slowed down, even though his heart was racing, thumping hard, painfully hard... He could feel his hands trembling in anticipation of what the Headmaster would say next.

Dumbledore paused, watching Severus' reactions keenly, before he continued, saying, "Nagini has been assaulted.*Violated*, to be more specific."

As Dumbledore's meaning sunk in, confirming what he already knew but irrationally was trying to deny, Severus felt a wave of nausea roll over him. He felt an involuntary spasm ignite. He lunged over and vomited up acidic fluid, the only content he'd had inside from not eating since the day before.

"Poppy!" called Albus, and the matron appeared as if already expecting this. She waved Severus clean and then the floor before Accio'ing a potion-filled phial.

Severus gave the purple potion a wary look.

"Drink this. Drink this like a good lad."

"No! No," protested Severus, wanting all of his wits, wanting to feel the painful nausea as to remember every bloody detail*Keep my mind alert!* He wouldn't be sedated. Not now.

"We insist." The Headmaster's eyebrows rose, and his gaze became sombre as he emphasised, "*I* insist."

Seeing a stern, cold look on Dumbledore's face, Severus forced himself to knock back whatever the hell Pomfrey was offering. He gagged slightly as the distinct taste of caterpillars was recognized. *And something else has been mixed in...*

"You were seen," continued the older wizard.

Severus sputtered, "Wh-what?"

"I have witnesses that saw you together."

"Who?" he asked in a fierce, desperate whisper. "*When?*"

"James Potter, Sirius Black, and a Ravenclaw Prefect said you and Nagini were on," the Headmaster paused to find the right word, *ihitimate* terms, after curfew hours in the castle's corridors... When you all were reported late and missing this morning, they offered, as well as your own Slytherin Head Boy, that perhaps you'd taken this opportunity to be late to..."

"No!" he roared violently, backing away from Dumbledore, shaking. "No... No, no, no..." His voice weakened even as his body did, sliding down against the wall his back hit. "Those bastards! Those filthy, conniving, lying bastards!"

"Who?"

Visions of faces flashed through his mind: *Potter, Black, Belby, Lucius, Rodolphus!*

"All of them!" His muscles were now quickly becoming relaxed, and he could feel a heavy sensation of sleep creeping up on him. He shook his head as if to forestall the feeling of lethargy.

"I'm not saying it was you, Severus." Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses. "However, I do believe you know who it was."

"Who it was *what?*"

Dumbledore slowly walked over to Severus. "Get up. Here, let me help you, Severus. Sit."

He indicated the hospital bed nearest to them, and as Severus groggily, shakily sat down, the Headmaster did as well beside him. Severus was trembling uncontrollably.

"Show me what's in your hand, son."

Severus gripped the broken ring tighter. "Nothing."

"Severus. Please." Dumbledore patiently held his hand out.

Miserable, Severus broke, unable to control himself, hating himself for not being able to, and sobbed in bitter, broken riffs as he handed the cursed object to the Headmaster in a spastic movement through his growing sluggishness.

"It is clear that there was some *mischief* at hand," the old wizard sighed heavily, "some mischief has indeed been done, Dark and violent, but to what extent it has been done, exactly why and by whom, the consequences of all involved and affected, is what needs to be known."

Dumbledore gave Severus an all-knowing look and asked him, the older wizard's voice sounding sing-song like to his ears, "Is there anything you wish to tell me about this?" He held the broken ring up. "Voluntarily, Severus?"

Severus strained to keep focused but the Calming Draught with a dash of Sleeping Potion kicked in full force, and he blacked out.

oOoOoOo

A/N: \*A Celtic Protective Spell from The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, as contributed by Jacqueline Paterson, date unknown.

## Something Lost, Something Found

*Chapter 20 of 22*

Severus discovers Nagini's memory has been affected, fueling his duplicity, his dilemma of where his loyalties lie, and

his own desires.

□

A/N: This chapter brings the story full circle to the beginning of the tale, as started in chapter one, and from here on out, the plot will more speedily proceed forward to the end. Also, when I began this story so long ago, I gave Luna Lovegood's mother the first name of 'Hibiscus', surname 'Hope', but J. K. Rowling has since then revealed that Mrs Lovegood's first name is Pandora (maiden name still unknown), so her canon first name will now be used in any relevant, remaining chapters. Thank you for your understanding and patience (with everything) through the years.

\* S \*

Severus had been warned.

"Nagini's memories... Well, her identity may not be as before... She'll need time," Dumbledore had confided to Severus one day while he visited her as she lay unconscious in the hospital ward, sitting by her bed.

Severus had had time to *think*. To reflect about everything. However, no amount of reflection on all the events that had recently happened seemed to offer any relief. He seemed to only be digging himself deeper and deeper into uncharted territory.

And yet, he embraced plunging further into the unknown, believing he had the strength and skill to face anything fate might throw his way; more concretely, anything his Slytherin housemates, Dumbledore, or the Dark Lord might challenge him with.

\* S \*

And so it was that several weeks had passed since Severus found the bodies of Nagini and Pettigrew unconscious at the bottom of a gully in the Forbidden Forest. Several weeks of private Occlumency lessons with Dumbledore, albeit under the guise of detention; several tedious weeks of Rodolphus attempting to provoke some further response from him; several anxious weeks of isolating himself outside of classes, watching and waiting by Nagini's bedside, when allowed, waiting for her to awake.

When she did, Nagini was at the beginning non-responsive, seemingly unable or too weak to speak. He took to reading to her his notes for exam revisions, hoping that something would spark her interest, hoping that there would be something she noticeably fancied, something to distract and motivate her, or something that would reach and touch her from within that she could grasp onto, a lifeline to help lead her to and hasten her recovery.

True, Severus' first impulse after he had awoken in the hospital wing from Dumbledore's Calming Draught and realized he had his full senses back was to storm down to Slytherin Dungeon, find Rodolphus, and beat his brains in, Muggle-style. He had had to be patient and calm, controlling and holding all his feelings in on returning to the Slytherin dormitory, waiting and watching for Lestrage.

He did not have to wait long, for Lucius called him to his room for a private talk, but the Head Boy was not alone in his room.

Severus had launched himself at the other person, Rodolphus, upon setting eyes on the cut-throat swine, pummeling Lestrage's face. It had taken more than one hex from Lucius to subdue him and another one to disentangle him from the lout.

But it wasn't until he lashed out again with his wand at Lestrage, grazing Rodolphus' upper arm with a severing spell that Lucius had fully interceded. Restraining Severus' wand arm, Lucius warned, "Calm the fuck down, Severus! Or even that mark of loyalty you bear won't stop retaliation being done on you! You were told more than once *she* had been marked by and for others."

"It's only a nick," sneered Lestrage, putting pressure on his wound with his free hand. "But yes, know your place, Snape!" Rodolphus' bloodied lips curled shrewdly.

"Besides, what have you to complain about? Doesn't reciprocity mean anything to you? You *had* Bella...yes, of course I know all about it. Cheer up, Sevy, Bella says you fuck like a Dark god, not a compliment she gives to everyone..."

Severus made another lunge at Lestrage, only to have Lucius restrain him again, as Rodolphus spat, "It was my turn to have who I had claimed ~~before~~ before you started desiring her!"

"You treated her like a bloody animal..."

"She provoked the Dark Lord, you fucking twit!" snarled Rodolphus. "Tried to strangle him in her fucking Animagus form!"

"She's nothing to you, any of you...she claimed me!"

"And what was Bella to you?" Lestrage callously chided, "Don't be thick, as if Nagini has any right to claim anything, an illegitimate, half-blood..."

"Enough, Rodolphus!" snarled Lucius.

"Lucius, you know I didn't truly mean that *inthat way*..."

"I know what you meant. Perfectly, Rodolphus. Leave and get yourself healed and cleaned up. Narcissa can do it. I'll deal with Severus."

"You're wasting your breath with this one, dear friend; he'll never change, too duplicitous, too *soft*," whispered Rodolphus darkly and slowly made as if to leave. But right before exiting, he turned to Severus, saying, "Remember this, Snape. I never forgive, and I never forget."

"Nor I, Lestrage."

Rodolphus smiled a malignant smile at him and left.

Lucius leaned back, sitting on the edge of his desk, pinching the top of his nose, then rubbed the ridge of his forehead as if to relieve stress, quietly saying, "We seventh years will be leaving Hogwarts very soon. Next week in fact. N.E.W.Ts are ending. Moreover, I have extremely important matters to attend to than these petty rows between you and Rodolphus. It ends here, Severus. Your *concern* about Nagini. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Why do I not believe you, Severus? We've had a similar conversation before, not too long ago in fact." Lucius sniffed, impatient. "Say what is on your mind."

"No need. There's nothing further to talk about." Severus turned away, making to leave.

"Don't turn your back on me; we're not finished!" barked Lucius, glaring resentfully at him.

"But we are." He stared back at Malfoy, coolly and masking well his inner thoughts.

And with that, he withdrew. Not merely from Lucius' room, but Severus withdrew from fraternizing with the inner circle, becoming even more reclusive, scheming. He didn't know exactly how or exactly when, but he would avenge what had been done to Nagini. *Stealthily, patiently, and no one will ever know. Lestrage will get his*

comeuppance!

\* S \*

As he sat yet again beside Nagini's infirmary bed, reflecting on all that had transpired in the last weeks, Severus realized he was breathing hard and deep again, recalling the violent tiff with Rodolphus. He slowly let his fingertips gently touch hers. A small thrill went through him as he noted they were warm.

*It's been weeks since she came out of her comatose state... But I'm so restless, wanting her to finally leave here. Today is finally the day!*

Since coming to in the second week of her recuperation, Severus watched as Nagini began to communicate in stops and starts, and how her strength had increased, particularly over the last few weeks. *Madam Pomfrey assured me that this is a very good sign. The worst is over!*

And so Severus waited very patiently beside Nagini's bed, hoping to catch her when she awoke before he had to leave and go to Dumbledore. For the school year was ending, and outside the tranquil serenity of the hospital ward, the chaotic and frenetic energy of final exams for sixth years, along with O.W.Ls and N.E.W.Ts for the fifth and seventh years, purveyed the entire student body.

And inside Slytherin house, a certain esoteric circle of Slytherins were doubly frenzied, but it had nothing to do with inner-school matters, but rather what a certain Dark Lord was promising to all who followed him. *What will the future bring?* thought Severus to himself as he watched Nagini's gentle breathing.

Sitting there, Severus was suddenly snapped out of his reflection by the soft, dulcet voice of Pandora Hope. "Oh, she's sleeping."

He looked up to see both Pandora and Xenophilus hovering around, Lovegood saying in a quiet voice, "When we were visiting yesterday, she asked for her mother's diary." He held out an old, frail-looking book. "I must hurry off; today I have my N.E.W.Ts in Charms."

"Will you give it to her from us when she awakes?" asked Pandora, her large protuberant eyes imploring Severus. "I know she trusts you dearly." She gave him a knowing smile. "And that you're a special, true friend. Let her know we're sorry for keeping it so long."

Ignoring Pandora's personal comments, Severus skimmed over a random page, but then quickly snapped it closed, commenting in a bored tone, "A book about ancient runes?"

"It isn't a book *strictly* about ancient runes," corrected Lovegood mulishly. "It's a journal. An intimate diary of sorts with coded, personal commentary along with spells and notes."

"It seems her mother, among many things, was a brilliant calligrapher and transcriber of ancient hieroglyphics as well as all ancient runes, Muggle and wizard alike," chimed in Pandora supportively. "Although some parts, particularly at the beginning, are of a personal nature...she seems to have been much younger when she first started the diary, our age perhaps... and very unhappy. Family and private issues." She looked away dreamily distracted for a second before adding, "But that all changed apparently. For the rest of the diary is significantly academic in nature. And she writes enthusiastically about accomplishing a goal; although only generally, she didn't write exactly what it was she had actually achieved. Perhaps it was the process that excited her."

Severus raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued.

"Having Abraxas Malfoy as your brother along with the circle he kept, one shouldn't be surprised about her feelings of discomfit. Regardless of the domestic ruminations of a young witch, which should be kept private and separate from her accomplishments, objectively speaking, Lucretia Malfoy's expertise and depth of knowledge is quite profound and revelatory," Xenophilus cooed with enthusiasm. "Nagini's mother was quite fluent in the ways of the Elder Futhark; the content is quite unprecedented and shall be featured in the very first publication of *The Quibbler*!"

"The what?" asked Severus, becoming irritated.

"Didn't you hear? Xeno will publish a monthly magazine as an alternative to the Ministry-controlled *Daily Prophet*," informed Pandora proudly.

"In order to let the public know the truth!" announced Xenophilus pedantically. "Not what the Ministry is manipulatively feeding us."

Severus inwardly groaned, quickly speculating at the kinds of articles the eccentric Ravenclaw would publish, and intentionally turned his attention to the diary, opening it again. "There seems to be pages missing...no, there are gaps in sections? Is this how you received it?"

"Yes," confirmed Pandora serenely. "We also found it curious that pages were left blank between different parts..."

"Naturally, room to add on further research and observations, my dear," quipped Xeno.

"But Nagini's mother never did." Pandora sighed wistfully. "Such a shame. She has such unusual theories and observations. I can't wait to try some of her spells..."

"Now, dearest, one must be careful. Approach everything in a cautious and reverent way..."

The couple speculated a bit more before excusing themselves and leaving.

Relieved the talkative Ravenclaws had finally gone, Severus gave a concerned look to Nagini and then slowly opened the book again to note its contents more carefully. *Yes, it's an unusual diary of sorts... Such a hodgepodge of writing...* His eyes darted quickly over and through several pages. *Runic spells, itemised lists of ingredients... Travel notes... Personal notes...*

He noticed blank pages throughout and returned to one page near the beginning after a list of runes, reading, *I ran into the great-aunt of Gellert Grindewald, Batilda Bagshot, today at Madam Malkin's. Batilda is such a tedious old bird, but meeting her great-niece, Dymphna, was an unexpected pleasure... It's fascinating how much we have in common and what a small world it is... I think she's the one... the missing link to help me reach my goals! Greatness will be mine! I will achieve what has never been done before. I will push magic beyond its limits...even that presumptuous Riddle will acknowledge my superiority! If only he wasn't so charming... But anything to make Abraxas suffer... I'll show both of them!*

Severus turned the page. *Fuck! It's blank!*

Just then, he heard Nagini's movements and saw she was slowly waking up.

"Hello," he said softly and on impulse closed and slipped the diary into his robe's pocket.

At first startled, her features focused on him and then relaxed. "I know your voice. I know you."

Severus felt a thrill vibrate through him. *She's more of her old self today!* Exhilarated, he launched in on updating her on school goings-on, timetables for sixth years' final exams, offering, "The professors will surely schedule yours separately when you're ready to sit for them...I'll help you with revising..."

Nagini said nothing but listened attentively to him. When he had spoken about the routinely mundane matters, he remembered what he was most eager to share with her.

"As you know, you've been moved to Slytherin house, sharing a room with Narcissa Black. One of her roommates has left school already. Yesterday, in fact." Severus

struggled to chat lightly, trying to think of what she might like to hear. "Like Narcissa, she will marry soon, and the other transferred to Durmstrang, although that was a few weeks ago... Your uncle Abraxas was here again... and met with the Headmaster, Slughorn, and Flitwick. Lucius said that Dumbledore even brought and placed the Sorting Hat on your head again..." He hesitated momentarily before assuring her, "The seventh years are leaving next week, so you'll only have to tolerate them briefly. And I and Narcissa shall..."

"I don't remember."

Severus halted, unsure exactly what she was referring to and equally unsure how to talk around what had happened to her *Don't discuss anything that could excite her in her condition, keep the discussions neutral*, Pomfrey had warned him.

"I don't remember," she repeated, closing her eyes.

He took and rubbed her hand gently, saying, "It doesn't matter. You simply need rest and time. You're on the mend now. Madam Pomfrey said..."

"Severus? Are we... close friends?"

Severus froze.

She apparently saw his shock, explaining, "I'm sorry, but I...I don't remember how well I know you. You seem to know a lot about me, and you've been so kind to visit me every day and read to me, keeping me informed."

He slowly let go of her hand and sat up straight, perplexed.

Nagini slowly confessed, "But I have this feeling when seeing you, something very strong and pulsating in one moment, but then it seems to be washed away." She seemed embarrassed about this.

"Yes. Yes, we're friends," he managed to answer, his voice low and hoarse. "On some levels, one could say *close* friends." He attempted a smile but failed. "Depends on how you define *close*."

"That's nice..." She gave him a curious look. "I'm so very glad that you're my friend. Thank you." She reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Severus could feel his blood pulsing in his veins. *She doesn't remember... us? What has she been thinking all this time? What does she remember?*

"Mr Snape, you'll need to go now, visiting time is over." It was the Matron. "I must help get Nagini all ready to return in top form. Tomorrow she returns to classes."

He hurriedly stood up, saying, "I understand, Madam Pomfrey."

"But it's been the best medicine, having a good friend nearby everyday." Pomfrey seemed to note his glumness. "Don't worry, young man. You'll be seeing her soon enough."

Severus could only nod his head curtly, suddenly eager to get away, to find an isolated spot and be alone *And think! Read this bloody diary... Nagini doesn't remember us? What else did the swines do to her, Obliviate her memory? Ah, bloody hell, I have detention with Dumbledore! Maybe we can start early...*

He rushed down the Gargoyle Corridor towards the Headmaster's office.

"Kumquat salad," he hissed at the gargoyle, who moved aside allowing Severus to race up the circular stairwell. Dumbledore's office was opened.

"You're early, Severus. Help yourself to some lemon drops, courtesy of Professor McGonagall."

"No, thank you, sir."

"You seem unusually excitable. Have you something you wish to say before we begin our Legilimency and Occlumency drills?"

Severus clenched his teeth. Dumbledore knew all. Everything that had transpired between him and Nagini before that fateful night looking for Horklumps. It had all come out little by little, but Severus had felt an uncomfortable relief on some level, knowing that the Headmaster knew for certain that it could not have possibly been him who had raped and mistreated Nagini so; that any interaction he had had with the Malfoy witch was mutual and consensual. *Out of a true caring for her, out of ...* He stopped, unable to finish his thought.

Severus swept his thin, long lanks out of his face and behind his ears, pulling his wand out, desiring to get this session, or rather this detention, over with as soon as possible. For his subsequent violent attack on Rodolphus had not gone unreported, due to a spiteful Guinevere Rookwood who, as a witch scorned by him, dutifully reported the incident.

His supposed detentions with none other than the Headmaster had worked out well. On one hand, the sessions appeared as deserved punishments to any and all concerned about him attacking a fellow student, but on the other hand, the 'detentions' were the perfect cover for private lessons and mentoring from the great, elderly wizard.

"Severus?"

"I've just come from the hospital wing, sir. Nagini told me, after all these weeks for the first time, that... she doesn't remember *me*."

Dumbledore seemed to consider this information carefully before commenting, "A side effect of her trauma... or certain memories of you have been deliberately tampered with. Perhaps a blessing in disguise."

"Sir?"

"If she does not remember you two together in any intimate way, one can conclude that she doesn't remember anything about other times with anyone else, being... violated. This reinforces what we have suspected." Dumbledore peered at Severus over his half-moon spectacles intently. "For she has told Madam Pomfrey that she can remember classes and being in Ravenclaw, general school activities, but on the day in question, in particular, she can only remember falling down the hill and everything going black."

"And Pettigrew?"

"Likewise."

Severus felt like a knot in his gut was tightening and had already had enough of Dumbledore, even though he fleetingly supposed the Headmaster was trying to be as tactful and honest as possible. But still, Severus wished to leave. "Shall we begin, sir?"

"Impatient this evening, Severus?" The older wizard gave him an odd look. "Yes, let us begin. However, I must first say, you are quite an accomplished master of Occlumency." Dumbledore paused, contemplating something momentarily. "Yes, an extremely accomplished Occlumens, Severus. In fact, we shall be ending our lessons together today...your detention, as it were."

"Sir?"

"Out of curiosity, has Lucius asked nothing about your detention with me?"

"No, sir. For the most part, we're not on speaking terms unless it is needed. He, being a seventh year, seems quite occupied with other concerns." Severus hoped Dumbledore would accept this answer and prod no further.

"Ah, yes, he and Narcissa Black will be wedded immediately after term ends. It's a pity."

"Sir?"

"A waste of a highly talented witch. Miss Black will not finish her Hogwarts education, rather she will be fully embracing her role as Lucius Malfoy's wife. It's a pity that there could not be a longer engagement period until she completed her N.E.W.Ts. Other young couples seem to understand the benefits of it and are prepared to wait."

Severus stood still in duelling position as Dumbledore elaborated, "Xenophilius and Pandora, Potter and Evans, for instance, have announced they are betrothed, but they have the insight to wait until they've finished their formal schooling."

It all happened so fast.

Severus felt as if all the air had been sucked out of his lungs; the images of Potter and Lily kissing up against the wall flashed vividly through his mind, the thoughts of *No! Not James Potter, that arrogant piece of shite, Lily!*, and then Dumbledore's Legilimency spell hitting him so hard he felt himself thrown back against the wall, snapping and slinking to the floor.

His mind was searched briefly, and before he could resist and close it off further to the invader, he was let go from the Headmaster's spell.

"Guard up, Severus! Never let your guard down. A wizard such as Tom Riddle will undo you when you are most vulnerable. As my good friend Moody would say, 'Constant Vigilance!'"

Severus made a spastic movement as if to get up when the diary fell out of his pocket. In a flash, he grabbed and stuffed it securely back.

His action did not go unnoticed by the Dumbledore; however, the Headmaster didn't comment on it, but rather pointed out, "You consort in very dangerous circles, Severus. Is that truly what you want?"

Glaring, Severus made an involuntary vicious grunt in frustration at Dumbledore's clever trickery. *He knew just how to distract me!*

Severus slowly stood up, leaning against the stone wall, panting as if a great weight were being pressed against his chest. He could not *would not* make eye contact with Dumbledore.

"You've known Lily and been close to her since you were children, before coming here?"

Severus gave a curt nod.

"Such feelings of love and bonding will never go away, Severus. They will be a part of you, always. It is important that you understand these things."

Severus twitched slightly, looking at the Headmaster through his long lanky hair. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir."

"Like I am mistaken about your *concern* for Nagini Malfoy?"

Severus straightened up; he could feel his entire body tensing and burning. He felt afire with frustration and rage.

"There are many forms of love in this world, Severus. You need not be ashamed of a particular one...nor afraid."

He snarled, "I am neither!"

"Aren't you?"

Severus felt a slight tremble thrum through him. "May I be excused, sir?"

"Forgive me, Severus. I had to show you where and how your true enemies will attack you, the missing chink in your armour that lays open, leaving you vulnerable. You can deny your feelings all you wish, but..."

"You are mistaken, Headmaster. I am master of my feelings and will not be so easily swayed again."

Dumbledore sighed a long, heavy sigh. After several seconds, he finally said, "I feel you are at a crossroads, Severus; which path you will fully embrace has not yet been carved in stone. You still have a chance to make different choices."

Severus avoided Dumbledore's piercing look, staring at a small crack on the stone floor while the elder wizard continued, "Along with all the things you hear and believe about Tom Riddle, never forget that Tom is devoid of normal human responses to other people's suffering nor never underestimate his skills nor his fickle *pettiness*..."

Severus' jaw muscles clenched tightly, and through gritted teeth, he uttered, "Lesson learned, sir. May I be excused?"

Dumbledore appeared to be ruminating over something, as he did not answer immediately. Finally, he gave his permission. "Very well, Severus. But may I ask, will you not consider accepting the Potions internship position this summer? Professor Slughorn cannot stop complimenting and recommending you."

"I'll let you know, sir. Just not today. May I leave?"

"Of course, Severus. Look forward to knowing your decision soon. It is the choices that we make that define us, yes?"

Severus gave him a terse nod and fled from Dumbledore's office like a blind bat seeking refuge somewhere away from it all *Lily! Potter, you bastard! Rodolphus! Nagini! Lucius! Dumbledore!*

He felt as if he were being suffocated, leading him to seek a place where he could get some air and peace. He found himself at the Astronomy Tower.

\* S \*

Severus stood by the Astronomy Tower's railing staring out into the starless sky. He reflected on many things before retreating into a shadowed alcove and slinking down, sitting on the cold surface. With a flick of his wand, he nonverbally warmed the area and then cast a Lumos. He pulled out Nagini's mother's diary and started at the beginning.

Remembering that Xenophilius had commented that the blank pages would logically be left for additional notes to be taken on, he twisted his lips in shrewd thought, his eyes narrowing as he mused, *What if there are already notes on them?*

Placing the tip of his wand on a blank page, he whispered fiercely, *"Aparecium!"*

Very faintly, lines and forms took shape, appearing on the previously blank page.

Severus felt a thrill go through him, hungrily scanning through the content. He froze, not believing what he was reading, and went back slowly deciphering and re-reading again the mixture of runic and latinate notations, lest he was misinterpreting events and descriptions. For his blood ran cold as the very clear names of Tom Riddle, Dymphna Bagshot, Gellert Grindewald, and Rolph Lestrange appeared, mixed in with places: *Nurmengard, Germany; Basel, Switzerland; Jealott's Hill, London; Imperial Chemical Innovators, Syngenscorp...*

Something clicked in the recesses of Severus' mind. *Imperial Chemical...something Muggle...? A Malfoy in the Muggle world? Incredulous!*

He suddenly had a flashback of one of his father's drunken rants about how the mining industry of Cokeworth had been taken over, closed down in order to make those lousy Imperial bastards richer while we poor suffer, strangling the whole bloody Midlands, they are!"

Severus tapped another blank page with his Revealing Charm.

Cursive writing appeared, and he rapidly read, keenly driven by a deep need to understand further the mad world that Lucretia Malfoy dwelt in:

*Just returned from Gringott's... I've been to the family vault. The Midas amulet is now in my possession. Abraxas will be so furious! But this is just the beginning... Before long, I will make him kneel before me and beg forgiveness...*

*Staying at the Leaky Cauldron. I must meet Dymphna down at the docks; we're to set sail for the continent. Must succeed in Nurmengard. Dymphna has a plan. We're to then meet up with Rolph in Basel; he has written that at long last, we can push magic beyond its known limits by including Muggle techniques. As a Squib, Rolph has lived among these advanced Muggles for many years and gathered all we need to know... I will create life!*

*Unlike Riddle and Abraxas, I do not fear Muggles. I will use them for my own gain.*

*Riddle wishes to conquer by death, but I will conquer by life!*

Severus lowered the diary slowly to his lap, both astonished and mesmerised by what he was reading, but mostly overwhelmed. *Nagini's mother, Abraxas, Riddle...the Dark Lord? Dymphna Bagshot, kin to Gellert Grindewald? And Nagini doesn't even know? Or how much does she know of her mother's past? How much of her memory was Obliviated?*

Then, it struck Severus. *Perhaps it wasn't solely Rodolphus who Obliviated Nagini's memories, but... the Dark Lord himself... Did Voldemort also erase select former knowledge about Lucretia Malfoy from her daughter's memories? What exactly transpired between him and Lucretia? Does the Dark Lord know she recorded happenings about them...about this diary?*

Severus opened the diary to the next blank page and placed again his wand's tip on it, whispering, *"Aparecium!"*

He would not stop until the whole bloody diary revealed all of its secrets to him.

\* N \*

*They're never to be trusted...selfish, manipulative, throat-slitting, power hungry Slytherins!* Nagini's ears were still ringing from the warnings of her former roommates in Ravenclaw as she packed and had her trunk moved to Slytherin. Only Pandora had not commented but quietly and kindly helped her with a few remaining items, walking her to the Dungeon Corridor and giving her a kiss on the cheek as they departed beside the stairwell leading down to the Slytherin door.

\* N \*

Nagini's first day back in classes, mostly revising for and scheduling her final exams, had her head throbbing in pain. She felt uncomfortable; even though the subject matter and professors were the same, the classmates were not. *The atmosphere is so different somehow, being in the Slytherin and Gryffindor classes* she thought, vaguely recalling a more conducive environment when she was in Ravenclaw.

Perhaps it was partially the newness of being back in classes in general, after recovering in the hospital ward for a long stint, or perhaps it was being in the new grouping of primarily Slytherins and Gryffindors in particular, but anxious thoughts and strange, distorted images distracted her from fully concentrating in the here and now as she walked down the Dungeon Corridor towards the staircase leading down to the blank stone wall which was the entrance to the Slytherin dungeon.

Compared to Ravenclaw Tower, the Slytherin environment was all very new to her, causing a slight feeling of discomfit, but she was eager to return to her new room and rest, feeling a bit taxed from her first full day. *Narcissa has been so welcoming to me.* Nagini smiled as she remembered Narcissa saying, *We're family, Nagini. And besides, I'm leaving school early in a few days. In a few weeks, Malfoy Manor will be my permanent home. I like knowing that you'll be here... and that we'll see each other soon...*

But Nagini's smile faded slowly as she recalled a ring on Narcissa's finger, a ring with two large oval-shaped, gleaming emeralds set in a delicate S-shaped, silver design. Perplexed by the object, she felt her own fingers, feeling for the briefest second a phantom feeling of also wearing a ring...a simpler, metallic serpentine design flashed through her mind, but not finding one in actuality, her fingers fluttered up to her neck, also feeling that something was missing. *A necklace!*

"Hey, Malfoy! Do you remember this?"

Snapping her out of her thoughts, Nagini felt a rough shove of someone's shoulder into her and a force tugging and knocking her books and parchments out of her arms, scattering them all over the floor.

As she instinctively crouched down, frantically picking up what she could, she glanced up at the callous pranksters, remembering their names slowly. *The Ravenclaw Belby and Gryffindor Black...*

Black had grabbed her Dark Arts book, holding it out of her reach, toying with her.

"Give me my book back," she demanded, flustered.

"Nah, not until you tell me how ol' uncle Abraxas had you transferred to Slytherin," he flashed her a wolfish grin, "Or you give me a kiss. Let's say, um, behind Herbology Greenhouse six tonight. After dinner, sneak away. And I'll give you your book back if you're extra *nice*."

Nagini gave the roguish Gryffindor an odd look. It had only been her first day in classes with the different grouping of students, but Black had already stood out, striking her as unruly and tiresome. *Completely unpredictable!*

"Tell us how your uncle did it, Malfoy," demanded Marcus Belby. "My father wants to know!"

"I don't know. And I don't care. Give me back my book and leave me alone or..."

"What? You'll hex us?" Sirius mocked, "What's that, no wand? Lost it in the Forbidden Forest? What about your wandless magic, Malfoy? Rumour has it, you can get really wild with it... if provoked enough."

Something was niggling at the back of her mind as he taunted her, something unpleasant, as she tried to stay calm and replied, "I'm getting my wand back tonight from Professor Slughorn. Professor Flitwick had kept it since my detention in the forest..."

Talking over her, as if he didn't care what she was saying, he suggested, "Or you could just give me a quick peck now in promise of some real snogging tonight. Don't worry, my reputation can handle it."

Nagini had put on a brave front all day, trying to present herself full of energy, recovered, but now she was feeling weak, so weak. It was exhausting; this confrontation was so exhausting, and she couldn't understand why they were harassing her... She couldn't remember what the antagonism was about to provoke this, but she could feel a wild energy from Black and a deep resentment from Belby.

Her hands were holding a few of the books she had picked up as she shuffled back while the wild-eyed Black slowly approached her. "I've been asking around, finding out even more about you, Malfoy. For instance, I heard that if I get you in the right mood, I can make your hair turn pink. I wonder what deep purple would mean I'm doing to you?"

She looked into his eyes as he came face to face, and her head started throbbing as his features reminded her of someone else. "Don't," she whispered, scrunching her eyes shut as a powerful ache thrummed through her.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" whispered Black in her ear. "You only put out for Death Eaters?"

Nagini could feel the books leaving her grip, falling to the floor, and saw purple and grey spots as she clenched her eyes tight, trying to suppress a wave of volatile magical force washing over her. She could hear laughter from the bullyboys, and a burning sensation was welling up inside her. She felt her magic would explode out of her, uncontrollably, if she unleashed it. *Murderously!*

"That'll do, Sirius."

She turned her head towards the voice and could make out a blonde witch in Slytherin robes *Narcissa!*

In a haze, Nagini saw someone else come forward and stand beside her *Severus Snape!*

"Cissy, you are always such a killjoy," commented Black to his cousin before turning to Severus, jibing, "Snivellus, you're always just a grovelling arse. Cissy's house-elf now, are you? What's your servant name, 'Greasy'?"

Nagini could see that Severus' eyes had a dangerous glint to them as he restrained himself and retorted, "You would know all about grovelling, wouldn't you? When you were disowned, I'm sure the Potters thoroughly enjoyed having you kiss their arses in order to bed with their son?"

"Fuck you, Snape."

Severus actually smiled. "Any time, any place, Black. Speaking of which, *Head Boy* Belby, haven't you an ardent note for a certain Slytherin? No? Regulus will be very disappointed. Again. Perhaps your petty father would like to know about your recent lack of love notes to your *amour*, even more than the triviality of why a student changed Houses, a Governor of Hogwarts' niece to say the least?" Severus sneered, asking, "Daddy's little peon, are you?"

"Shut it, Snape."

"If you'll behave, Belby. Be a good boy, and back the fuck off."

With an air of resignation for the time being, Marcus gave Sirius a jerk of the head as if to leave, but Black took a few steps towards Narcissa, causing Severus to ready his wand.

"I've always liked you, Cissy," confessed Sirius quietly and then he huffed, shrugging cockily. "Well, Andromeda is my favourite cousin, naturally. But you... I had so much hope for you, for you to be happy one day, do something that would surprise us all, not be uncle Cygnus' little poppet anymore. You know, break away and be your own woman. But now, Lucius Malfoy? He's a vile, evil, greedy swine, just like his father. I can't congratulate you."

Narcissa gave him a cool stare. "I didn't ask you to, Sirius."

"Yeah, well, we all have to live with our choices, don't we? When the final clash comes, don't expect me to help you, cousin."

"Likewise," Narcissa hissed softly, and as if covering a pain by forcing herself, she whispered, "Blood traitor..."

Severus saw Narcissa's eyes moisten, and he gripped his wand tightly, ready to defend against what would surely be an attack, but unexpectedly, Sirius abruptly turned away and headed off without another word with Marcus scampering to keep up with him.

Narcissa seemed to compose herself, asking Nagini, "Are you all right?"

Nagini nodded her head, asking, "Are you?"

Narcissa gave her a tight smile, saying, "Absolutely. I'm perfectly accustomed to Sirius' uncouth ways."

This unexpected run-in had Nagini's heart racing as never before and caused her to feel the urgent need to get her wand *I need my wand to help control and channel my magical energy or I think I'll explode!* "Can you take me to Professor Slughorn's quarters? I need to speak with him."

"Perhaps, Madam Pomfrey?" suggested Severus, giving her a concerned look. "If you're not feeling..."

"No, it's not that. Is his quarters also on the dormitory level?" *I need my wand back as soon as possible!* Nagini felt her adrenaline flowing, and an excitable nervousness continued to pulsate through her wildly.

Upon finding Slughorn, Narcissa and Severus informed the Head of Sytherin about what happened when they came across Nagini.

"Ah, yes, Marcus Belby... of the Wizengamot Belbys... and excellent Potions masters in their family, you know. And Sirius Black, well, um, we all know about him, yes?" hedged Slughorn, turning to Nagini. "Well, now, formalities... Let's see, I suppose you wish me to make an official report to McGonagall and Flitwick?"

"No, sir. I just want my wand back."

"Nagini, you must," coerced Narcissa. "It's a matter of principle. Belby is leaving, but regardless, Sirius must be reprimanded to discourage his impetuous ways. I know my cousin all too well."



"Thank you both, but may I speak to Professor Slughorn alone?"

Giving her an odd look, Severus stared at her, not answering. She had the impression that he was heavy in thought about something else, and she started to ask them again, but he abruptly said, "If that is what you wish."

Narcissa seemed taken aback, about to refuse, but then she changed her mind and concurred, turning to Severus, "Shall we? See you later then in the Common room or in ours."

After they left, Nagini confided hurriedly, "Professor Slughorn, may I just have my wand back? I feel like a part of me is missing, and I'll need it for Dark Arts tomorrow. Also, I've scheduled my Charms final, and I'll need it for..."

"Of course, my dear girl. It's, um, been a bit of a whirlwind today and all. Just one moment." Smiling cordially, he seemed relieved that she didn't wish to officially file a complaint and motioned his fingers theatrically. Her wand flew to his hand from where it had been stored in a drawer in a wall cabinet.

He gave it to her, and she could feel the magic course down and around her body and through her arm to the wand's tip.

She trembled in relief.

"My dear, if you don't mind my saying so, you seem a bit nervy from today's happenings, and we can't have that, can we? I really shouldn't offer you Firewhisky, but I can offer you something better, a special concoction." He gave Nagini a sly but good-natured wink. "Take this Calming potion."

He waved his hand airily and a potion bottle flew to him. "It's a bit of a night toddy actually and will help you relax and get a good night's sleep, and in the morning you'll feel stronger...fresher than ever! Yes, good for the nerves, it is." He poured out the contents in a whiskey glass and handed it to Nagini.

Much like Professor Flitwick on her first night in Ravenclaw, Professor Slughorn seemed to have only kind and best wishes for her, and in truth, she did feel a bit uncontrollably excitable still. She drank the potion, the bitter minty liquid caused everything from her sinus cavities to her toes to tingle. Even her eyes began to water.

Slughorn chuckled, "Yes, it's got quite a kick to it. But harmless, my dear. Run along now to your room and get some rest. You'll have enough time to prepare yourself for bed before the full effect takes hold."

\* N \*

It was then that as Nagini made her way through the Slytherin Common Room, Lucius invited her to sit and get to know his inner circle more intimately; and it was then and there where he demanded details of what had happened from her point of view in order to retaliate against her attackers more fully.

Apparently, Narcissa and Severus had informed him of some of what had transpired. Whether Lucius was solely short-tempered about Sirius' insulting remarks about Narcissa, him, the upcoming wedding, his father, or along with all of this, the blood-traitor's hounding of Nagini, all she knew was that Lucius was livid and eager to vent his frustration.

And yet, she rejected Lucius.

In front of his group of selected Slytherin wizards, she refused to do his will, refused to recognize and accept his leadership. For in that instant, she couldn't say why but she couldn't bear the sight of Rodolphus Lestrange nor the touch of Lucius grabbing at her, attempting to force her to comply with his wishes. Intertwining with her need to get to her room, the strange aftertaste of the slow but sure minty narcotic that Slughorn had given her was coursing through her veins, along with... her magical energy.

*So much like his father, Abraxas* she thought as Lucius shouted at her, reminding her of everything his father had done for her and to whom she belonged *What was it that Sirius Black said...? He's vile, evil, greedy...?* And so it was then and there in the Slytherin Common Room in her unsteady state, her magic swelled and exploded out of her, causing her to hex Lucius across the room.

*My magic is back in full force!* she thought and ran to her room for safety, feeling the heaviness of Slughorn's concoction kicking in full force, only to be followed by an infuriated Lucius, violently threatened by him, and then have him abruptly be called away.

Lying on her bed, she could finally give over to Slughorn's potion, but suddenly, blurred visions of Rodolphus Lestrange and Severus Snape came to her, causing her to struggle against her overcoming lethargy.

Random groggy thoughts and memories were whirling around in her mind. *Severus! It's all been for you... for you... Whatever he wishes me to do, I'll do... to protect you! He knows...*

The last thing she remembered hearing was the offer of help and concern by Severus Snape, and this act distinctly sealed Severus' image and his image alone in her dreams as she gave over to her narcotic sleep.

\* S \*

## Ophiuchus Ascending

*Chapter 21 of 22*

On Dumbledore's request, Severus tests and attempts to help Nagini control and master her Occlumency skills and assess to what extent her memory has been affected. Among the revelations, an unforeseen ricochet effect Severus experiences causes him to avenge matters regarding Rodolphus Lestrange.

From the Astronomy Tower, Severus stared at the night sky, noting how clear and brightly filled it was with a wealth of stars. He felt keenly the life force and magic of the universe entwined with its presence through nature and magical creatures on earth. *And Hogwarts is one small vortex in the grand scheme of things...*

His thoughts shifted to an even more immediate matter. *But a Pandora's Box of emotion and memory has been unleashed incongruously within Nagini...* He breathed in slowly and deeply, waiting for her to appear.

*Nagini... Her magic has become more volatile inside and out of the remaining classes; she is being perplexed by increasingly disjointed memories. But her strength and agility are admirable; her endurance of dynamic contraries seem for now conjoined within her.*

His mind began to race from what he had discovered from Lucretia's diary *Synocorp... Adolphus Rohn was Rolph Lestrangle's pseudonym... Rolph the Squib, the Lestrangle's estranged, banished son... working in genetic research with Muggles in Basel... With the help of Dymphna, they procured Gellert's semen after a clandestine visitation with him, impregnated Lucretia via testing phials... Muggles call it in vitro fertilization, but it has caused a deep schism within the Ministries of Magic throughout Britain and Europe, sentencing it a forbidden collaboration of Muggle Dark practices, contrary to what nature in all her magic and wonder offers... a heresy of unknown proportion or result... Biologically, Nagini is the offspring of Grindewald and Lucretia Malfoy. But what is the connection with Riddle that she feared and alluded to repetitively in her diary?*

He pulled the well-worn journal out of his pocket. *Must give this back to Nagini tonight!*

Severus continued to reflect further on the risks and history of being involved with her just as he had days ago when he lingered outside Nagini and Narcissa's dormitory door. *So much information to process from this wretched yet brilliant diary... So many questions I want to ask her directly about it, but...*

He inhaled sharply, remembering how he had made his way directly up to the Headmaster's office that morning after Nagini had barely managed to escape Lucius' full wrath and announced bluntly to the elderly wizard that he accepted the Potions apprenticeship for the summer.

Dumbledore had looked up, pleased.

"Excellent, Severus. However, there is one other matter I wish you to contribute to, as a true test of your skills and... control."

"Sir?"

"Nagini Malfoy." Dumbledore paused for a moment, as if considering how exactly to say what he had to say. "I need you to help assess her Occlumency skills."

"Sir?"

"I fear my time with and any possible influence on her shall soon run out," he pointed out, peering over his half-moon spectacles. "Sooner than later, in fact. You may know quite well that I share supervision of her whilst she is in Hogwarts, that is to say, custodial care of Nagini?" Albus gave a deep sigh. "I recall insisting on the terms myself; however, she shall soon be returned to her uncle's care at Malfoy Manor." He gestured to a few scrolls in front of him. "Both Bartemius Crouch and Lester Qualmsick have sent me reminders...but with Abraxas being terminably ill, I fear the responsibility of her supervision and well-being falls to Lucius. In other words, a very precarious situation."

Severus frowned. He knew Lucius had left even earlier than expected, being called home abruptly. He had heard him snarl something about Abraxas' illness, Dragon Pox, but had not known the true stage and severity of it. "What exactly are you asking of me, sir?"

"Merely to drill her several times, assessing her ability to block and shield her thoughts. Perhaps let her test her Legilimency skills as well, though more emphasis must be on her strengthening her ability to block a Legilimens attack."

Severus felt a slight tremble thrum through him. "I don't believe I'm qualified for that, sir. I doubt she would feel comfortable with me..."

"On the contrary," interrupted Dumbledore in a normal voice, "Of anyone she knows, she will be most comfortable with you and therefore able to trust you."

"How so?"

"Your past together, brief as it has been, should be enough. Aren't you curious to know?"

"I told you she seems to not remember anything that...that transpired between us."

"Perhaps and perhaps not, Severus. Emotions can be stronger than mental recollection."

"Sir?"

"A fragrance, a sound, a touch... such things can evoke even the deepest buried memories."

"And those that have been meddled with? Obliviated?"

"It is not a fixed field of magic, Severus, but fluid and mercurial, like the heavens. The strength or weakness of an individual to the spell innately varies...we shall see what and how much, if all or selective parts of her consciousness has been tampered with." Dumbledore gave him a hard look. "Will you do this for me, Severus?"

Severus still hesitated to fully agree.

Dumbledore challenged him with, "Aren't you curious to how strong you are, Severus? You swore last time we met that you were now in full control of your mind and... emotions. This would be a chance to exercise and test those claims... if you are not afraid of them. A chance to prove to me that my doubts about your level of control is..." the Headmaster searched for the right word, "mistaken." He peered hard and steady at Severus. "Am I mistaken about you?"

"When to begin, sir?"

"No time better than the present. This evening will do. I'll have Miss Malfoy informed...is there a preferable space?"

"The Astronomy Tower," offered Severus coolly and evenly. "N.E.W.Ts are over; no one should need it, unlike Professor Slughorn's Potions lab...he lets me use it often for extra projects."

"The Astronomy Tower it is...just put a ward on the staircase before you begin your exercises. Shall we say nine o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. I'll tell Slughorn to relay all information; needless to say, it is to be kept amongst yourselves."

"Yes, sir." He nodded curtly and left.

\* S \*

And so he waited in the Astronomy Tower for Nagini; it would be their third meeting for Occlumency, and he felt a restless anticipation. The first time had been almost unbearable for him; she had seemed both defiant yet vulnerable at first, but then, she had compliantly allowed him to guide her through step by step. Severus realized immediately she had had some previous training, for she knew to void her thoughts though not consistently.

He had been gentle but precise, and due to his knowledge of her mother's ascertaining diary, he could skillfully maneuver what to attempt to tap into and what to avoid. He had allowed and encouraged her to use Legilimency on him; and though she made skilful effort, he was pleased she could neither penetrate nor access anything from him.

He prided himself on his unerring ability to conceal his thoughts and feelings from her external penetration attempts.

He, on the other hand, had time to time opened a chronological stream of images and experiences from her childhood on up to more recent and very stringent episodes of her and an older witch, Dymphna, her caretaker, fleeing and hiding in various places. Fleeing from what or whom, he could not yet find. For as he established her boundaries and accessed parts of information and experiences, there were disturbingly murky gaps in her memories, blockages; blotches of a pulsating force barricaded him several times when attempting to retrieve a memory in between them.

*It's as if her memories have been selectively Obliviated and selectively blocked... To what depth have any been altered intentionally?*

It had then become increasingly difficult to navigate around in her mind, but by their second time, he had methodically chartered out which areas he would continue and build upon with her, constantly checking her endurance and concentration level by repetition and attempting to catch her both on and off guard to assess her range and level.

This brought him to another issue: Nagini's emotive surges of magical force and energy. He could feel her waves of magical energy surging and decreasing, only to swell again. He could feel and see that something had overall changed about her; it wasn't necessarily that she was more aggressive, but she had a distinctly constant magical force about her than before, very fluid and assertive...he detected a vitality that flowed and pulsated, an underlying strength and uncanny sharp focus. *Matching my own, equal to mine...*

And then, there were her discrete looks to him, kindling feelings he knew should stay in stasis *A smoldering yearning or searching... Why does she smile at me like that? Does she remember us before...? No matter. I must prove my control and ability to distance myself... at all times, regardless of...* He blinked hard and mentally shoved that train of thought aside. Yet he found himself using extra energy to do so, having to doubly restrain any impulses to respond to her when he perceived her giving him a particular questioning, yearning look. *As if...*

"Am I very late?"

Severus turned to her voice, snapping him out of his reflections. *Nagini's arrived finally!* "No. Not at all."

Nagini was flushed with an excitable energy emanating from her. "I've just finished my Defence Against the Dark Arts' final examination, the last of them. Now I'm caught up on everything!"

He could see she was eager to share with him. "It must have gone well..."

"Yes, it did. Oh, I also had a brief consultation with Professor Slughorn; he was very encouraging. He says... I have exceptional skills, and perhaps I should think of..." She stopped herself abruptly. "Well, even the Headmaster..."

"What?"

Her eyes were shining. "I meet all the requirements to apply to be a Hit Witch for the Magical Law Enforcement Squad."

Some sound emitted from Severus as he huffed in disbelief. He blinked at her, slowly registering what she had just said, even as his mind raced to decide how to tactfully respond. "You do know what Aurors...Hit Wizards, rather, actually are expected to do? Their function in the order of things? To hunt Dark Wizards?"

There was a brazen defiance about her as she replied, "They are tasked with arresting dangerous criminals."

"With seizing, *stopping* Dark Wizards, Nagini. *Dark* Wizards..." He stopped, exasperated at the preposterous idea. *What the fuck are Dumbledore and Slughorn up to?*

She actually smiled, clarifying, "Dark and duplicitous wizards, yes? Takes one to know one... I could be a true asset to the Ministry if they could trust me enough to use me to their advantage. What say you?"

"Do you think of yourself as purely Dark, Nagini?"

"Not purely, no, but I was created..." She broke off, seeming to struggle with something, asking again, "What say you?"

Severus knew he was treading on thin ice. "I think... you can take and draw from all of your experiences, the good and the bad, and all of your vast knowledge, and this will help influence what and how you make your choices."

"Lucius told me I was conceived solely...predispositioned from conception to be a Dark witch, a sorceress... He and Abraxas believe this absolutely...what do you believe?"

"There is magic, neither absolute Dark nor Light, rather the complexity of existence, of life, and there is you, a part of one complexity, out of multiple, infinite others. *She needs to read her mother's account for her actions!* He slowly held out Lucretia Malfoy's tattered journal. "Pandora and Xenophilius asked me to give this back to you."

"My mother's diary?"

As he handed it to her, he thought, *It's expected Slughorn would desire to take some credit for her considerable talents, her well-connected family name on the superficial side of things, but... Dumbledore? It would be as good as suicide for her to even consider anything as ridiculous as...*

"You've read it?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

He gave her a curt nod in response.

In a singsong voice, Nagini listed off, "Ancient runes, Muggle and wizard alike, calligraphy and transcriptions of ancient hieroglyphics... My mother had mastered the Elder Futhark... And the spells? Did you enjoy them? Runic spells, rare and precious ingredients... Her travel notes... Her personal notes..." Nagini opened the diary and skimmed through a few random pages. "Ah, yes. 'I will push magic beyond its limits'." She closed the diary with a snap. "That sums my mother up entirely."

There was silence, and then she looked up at him, suddenly woeful and conflicted, asking, "Did she record the other parts of her duplicitous life here? The ~~heretical~~ ones?"

"You must read it. Everything. You must read and label and judge for yourself." Severus' eyes narrowed in thought. *So Nagini is aware of everything?*

"Who else knows of its content?"

"No one, at least, no one knows of the hidden, spelled content."

"Hidden?"

"Your mother had throughout the diary certain sections concealed."

"And you discovered them?"

Severus nodded curtly again.

"Did Pandora and Xenophilius?"

"No, they seem to be blissfully ignorant, merely enthralled by Lucretia's Runic notations and original spells... Perhaps they shared this information with some of the other Ravenclaws..."

"But the Slytherins? You didn't share anything..."

"No, nor would I ever." Severus needed her to be rational about the obviously vexing diary. He pointed out, "When you read this, it will reveal the complexity of Lucretia's dilemmas with..."

"Does this tell how she abandoned me? *Why* she did?"

"No." He took a deep breath and smoothly observed, "However, one could deduce it would have been for a very good reason. Perhaps she felt you were safer without her than with her."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps she had tired of me, bored, as she was prone to be quickly with people. A very impatient woman. And she simply moved on."

"She was murdered, Nagini. Only her bones were found. Obviously, she was in some kind of danger. I don't think..." He had to be pedantic with her, for he could feel himself becoming distracted by her abrupt pacing and mercurial reactions. "Again, in light of that, one must deduce that she decided you were safer not knowing anything further of her whereabouts."

Nagini didn't answer, but in a flash threw the diary down simultaneously hexing it with an Incendio spell.

"No!" Severus looked aghast as the book burned and flicked his wand, throwing an Auguamenti spell to extinguish the flames.

But Nagini blocked it with a counter-spell and jumped in front of the burning and hissing journal. "It must be destroyed."

"Why?"

"It ends here. My past. I will reinvent myself." She gave him a defiant stare and seemed to be crackling with nervous energy.

"You must read her content, vital content..."

"I don't need to read it...I'm living proof of it!"

There was further crepitation from the cindered diary, as if the little compact book had been alive and yet still struggled against the flames.

"Nagini, it should not be destroyed. You could, perhaps, receive some comfort, some understanding of other things... Of why your mother was considered a practitioner of forbidden, unorthodox practices..."

They both stared and watched as the diary finally burned into a large lump, reduced to thick ash. As the cinders darkened, extinguished, in the second, Nagini's energy seemed to abruptly crash; she swayed as if about to collapse and asked in a small voice, "What do you believe, Severus? Am I an abomination? Was I created, *pre-wired* to be a Dark sorceress or can I be *re-conditioned*? Could I reinvent myself?"

She leaned against the Tower's wall as if sapped completely of energy, and Severus grew gravely concerned, unwilling to keep up pretences further and no longer caring to control and hide his thoughts and feelings from her. "You have been through so much. I believe... you need rest and time..."

"I haven't much time... Dumbledore hasn't told you? I must return to Malfoy Manor. Time is running out." She slunk down to the floor sitting up against the stone wall, all of her former bravado gone. "Decisions need to be made."

"It would be reckless..."

"Not a wise choice? But you see, I have so few before me."

"To choose to become a Hit Witch would be tantamount to..." he faltered, only able to finish his sentence silently, thinking *Suicide!*

"At Durmstrang, they heckled me constantly with 'all will know you for what you are...an abomination created by that heretic hag who you called your mother...' Even my uncle, dear Abraxas, called me an abomination. But Dymphna believed I was special, strong...that I could overcome anything; she didn't want to leave me at Durmstrang. But she said she had no choice..." Nagini's brow furrowed, apparently having conflicting thoughts.

Severus silently resigned himself to Nagini's apparent need to speak and have someone listen, and so he slowly sat down beside her, casting a warming spell on the cold floor and wall under and around them, as the open chill of the space seemed to be cloaking them with yet another level of dampened spirits.

"Gunther Von Sturmberg, the father of the Durmstrang wizard who branded Grindewald's symbol on my flesh," Nagini's facial muscles clenched in remembrance, "he was the Head Hit Wizard who hunted down Dymphna after she put me in Durmstrang. Perhaps we will meet again, one day, but this time, I will be his equal, not his inferior."

Severus asked carefully, "You wish to avenge... matters?"

"I wish to understand why my mother left me with Dymphna in the first place!" exclaimed Nagini. "Though I will be eternally grateful to Dymphna. She cared for me, further trained me; she was masterful and a powerful sorceress in her own right."

"Of course she was." He gently reminded her, "And she was your aunt. Grindewald's sister, yes?"

Nagini gave him a glum look. "She never referred to our biological connection... relationship; our entire time together, as far back as I can remember, she insisted I call her Dymphna, only that. We were always fleeing from an unknown menace, never in the same spot long, even living with Muggles, living as Muggles...but that never lasted long. Dymphna had to silence a few of them... permanently."

"Bagshot murdered them?"

"They would overhear us discussing magic or see us using magic and become hysterical. She tried Obliviating them, succeeded most of the times, but a few times, she lost her patience and became *violent*. Like Gellert, Dymphna said Muggles were stupid beasts, primitive and fated to forever be non-evolved..."

Nagini gave him an odd, bittersweet smile. "Her true surname being Grindewald, she took her British relatives' name for a level of anonymity... though that did not last for long. Von Sturmberg and his squad tracked Dymphna down right after she put me in Durmstrang. Everything was then known...the truth of who she was, who I was, and Gunther shared it with his son." She huffed. "The pathetic irony of it all is that they're all bloody hypocrites...in their esoteric circles they liked to boast and brag and put the

image of the great Dark wizard Grindewald on a pedestal... But when faced with his actual flesh and blood, it was only to exert their fear of the unknown and cruelty over that which was representative of the non-ordinary, something suddenly blasphemous to their false, exalted ideas... In the end, I represented heresy in all its unbearable forms to them."

"You seem to remember things... clearly from your distant past."

"Yes, these past few days, I've been consumed with overwhelming flashbacks, feelings, volatile and erratic. Some clear... some not."

"Since our Occlumency exercises together?"

"Yes, but even before. In the hospital wing, I had these visions... these nightmares... I was helpless in an infirmary bed, and yet in the dreams, I felt all-powerful yet frustrated and full of anger and hatred... But when I awakened, I just felt depleted of energy, weak, and more forgetful. But since my first day returning to classes and having my wand, I've felt renewed, stronger than ever, but volatile, so very, very volatile."

Severus swallowed hard and pointed out, "When you return to Malfoy Manor, you must not allow your emotions to come too near the surface, regardless of traumatic past experiences."

"I won't. I know my feelings; I know what's happened to me."

*Not everything!* thought Severus bitterly. *How to help her with so little time?* "I think you're repressed. And as time goes by, from what you're sharing with me, you will find it particularly difficult to suppress certain emotions forcing themselves forward, certain recalled memories."

"I won't. I will detach and control my emotions."

"You have seemed very capable of compartmentalising your life and your emotions. But now..."

"I have always done so. I learned at a very young age the method of loci, to create a mind palace, as well as to detach myself from... reality."

"Yesss..." Severus inhaled sharply, frowning. He felt himself growing impatient with her, with the situation, but mostly with himself for not taking action. "I understand."

"Yes, you do."

Decisively, Severus moved to sit directly in front of her so that they were face to face.

Waiting for and willing her to look him eye to eye, he then said, "As you know, more advanced Occlumency involves suppressing not only thoughts, but emotions as well, in order to prevent a Legilimens from perceiving them. Memories can be formed that would contradict whatever it is an Occlumens wishes a Legilimens to believe." His heart began to beat harder. "It is not obvious that Occlumency is being used even if the person is *lying*. I remind you of these points because this will be vital for you to survive with Lucius and his inner circle. Bellatrix, Narcissa... most importantly, the Dark Lord himself are..." Severus heaved a heavy sigh. "Nagini, it requires a great deal of will power, a high degree of mental and emotional discipline."

She gave him a puzzled look as if to say she was aware of all this. "You judge that I lack this level?"

"The mind is complex..." He moved a long strand of hair that had fallen away from her face and tucked it behind one of her ears. "Well, you are complex and many-layered... However, a highly skilled Legilimens could delve into your mind and not only discover what they want but... *hurt* you irreparably. I need you to further shield your mind from me attempting to invade and influence you. Not only your thoughts, but any feelings, emotions and memories that are repressed deep within you. Deeper than I have probed before." He felt a thrum of intensity go through him and asked, "Do you trust me? Can we attempt another round of exercises?"

"Yes," she whispered, fully mesmerized by him.

"You must try to block my attempts with all of your willpower. I'm going to do it nonverbally, so I will be very forceful. More forceful than times before, do you understand?"

She nodded.

He swallowed hard, asking in a low voice, "Do you trust me? That I do this out of... care and concern for you?"

She nodded again, her golden orbs gleamed.

Severus bore into her eyes, casting the incantation *Legilimens* nonverbally. He was plunged inside her mind, and at first it seemed to be in complete disarray, but then blotches of colour appeared interspersed with images of Nagini's past: *Durmstrang, Dymphna, a dirty, drunken Muggle cursed dead in a gutter, dark splotches of purple, black forests, a crisp, pious Muggle offering food, bright splotches of green, a quaint cottage in a forest; a dark, cramped hovel, a sterile chamber, black fiery bursts, a witch with long whitish blonde hair snarling, blackness...*

Severus pulled out, and they both were breathing heavily. Nagini's eyes were dilated and he felt inspired, whispering intensely, "And your memory from the more recent past, from your accident in the Forbidden Forest?" His heart was racing, and he suddenly felt vexed, asking, "Will you allow me to try deeper?"

"I'm ready. Do it!" she whispered back fiercely. "Continue..." Her voice trailed off, but she was staring intensely into his eyes, waiting for him to penetrate her mind further.

He swiftly complied, delving into her deeper buried thoughts, into her lower depths *Dark Hawthorne trees, a golden Horklump, Peter Pettigrew holding it, Nagini and him holding it together, darkness...* He demanded, *No, I want your memories, your emotions!* He launched the incantation again into her with even more force, unrelenting. *I can't penetrate this darkness!* Just then, figures and faces were becoming clearer in a blur of forms: *Black, green, red blotches, bursts and swirls of wisps and kaleidoscope visions flowing with a sense of violent energy.* Severus gasped sharply. He demanded again in her mind, *What were you feeling? What were the memories? Reveal them to me!*

Suddenly, some force of energy seemed to possess Severus, something extremely painful and all-consuming. He was Nagini *being kicked, hexed, forced to transform into her Animagus, a foot on her serpentine throat, black spots, green blotches, Voldemort's face jeering.* He groaned as a tingling pain singed through him; he was still Nagini: *being strangled, choking, gasping for air.* He could see Rodolphus leering, his distorted features, feel his weight, feel the impact of his fists, his hands squeezing and bruising her, feel him entering her... feel her being... There were images of Lestrage's face as he released himself inside her...

*Noooo!* Blotches of purple, black, green barricaded his vision, simultaneously sapping him of energy. He struggled and pulled back, breaking free, stumbling out of her mind.

Impulsively, he grabbed and held Nagini close to him. She was panting heavily, and oddly, she had a look of torpidity, asking him sluggishly, "What's wrong, Severus? What's..." She fell back in a state of listlessness.

*Nagini! Ah, fuck! What's happened to her? What have I done?* With his mind reeling, he hoisted her up into his arms and whispered a Levitation charm around her body and then carried her down the stairs as fast as possible, frantically thinking, *What the fuck has just happened?* As they neared Slytherin, he further whispered a Concealment charm around them and was doubly thankful that term had ended with most of the student body gone.

He searched desperately through his own detailed mental inventory of knowledge and experiences for an explanation of what had just occurred. Something clicked inside Severus; something deep and precise. *A ricochet shield of sorts placed inside her mind... Only a powerful sorcerer, one cunning and skilled enough as a Legilimens to manipulate and plant something in her mind like that against others... Voldemort!*

*Ah, fucking Voldemort! Fucking Rodolphus! This would never had even happened if that swine hadn't...*

Nagini made a sound; she was coming to as they passed through the Slytherin common room. Severus stopped as they entered the corridor to the bedchambers and placed her on her feet, though she still seemed like she was numb with shock.

"What...what's happened?" she asked him groggily.

"Let me take you to your room. Rest there. There's something I must do. Then I'll come back and explain." Even though his heart was racing with a deep seated rage pulsating through him, he managed to escort her calmly, repeating in a low, hushed voice, "It's all right. It's all going to be all right."

But as they neared her room, his eyes narrowed seeing Bartemius Crouch Jr lolling about outside the doorway. Hearing Bellatrix's specific shrieking coming from within, they halted momentarily as Bartemius gave them an odd, toothy grin, greeting, "Hullo, there! Severus... Miss Malfoy."

"Arranged marriages are arranged marriages, and everything that goes with it...accept it, Cissy!" screamed Bellatrix.

They entered slowly, and Severus had to hold Nagini up beside him as she led him towards her bed, her body growing heavy with a lethargic weight. Severus noted that Narcissa apparently was in the middle of packing, not just clothing, but all of her belongings into several trunks of various sizes.

"Ah, it's Severussss... and our Nagini," hissed Bellatrix. "What's wrong with you, girly?"

"Nothing. She just needs to lie down," answered Severus for her, helping Nagini recline onto her bed.

Nagini immediately turned away from them all, onto her side, curling up.

Bellatrix grinned an evil grin, sashaying up to him, wagging her finger. "What did you do to her, Sevy?"

"Nothing to concern oneself with. I was merely helping her drill some spells for her Dark Arts exams and used a little too much force. She merely needs to rest."

Bellatrix cackled wildly, throwing her head back and then glowered at him, "Liar, liar, liar! She had her final exam today." She inhaled deeply, glaring at him. "Unlike Cissy, here, I don't trust you, Snape. Something about you that's a tad iffy. But for some unfathomable reason, the Dark Lord *likes* you, so being a very *patient* witch, I'll wait and see if you prove yourself truly worthy." Letting out an amused cackle again, she jibed, "Thought you'd play around with her a bit with Lucius gone, eh?"

Making a great effort to control himself, Snape regarded Bellatrix coolly, saying, "Speaking of Lucius, where is *your* fiancé, Bella? He has also left, as well?"

She leered at him menacingly. "No, he and I are leaving early in the morning with Cissy...her marriage ceremony has been moved up, for invited witnesses only."

"There'll be a celebration dinner for others at a later date," said Narcissa quietly. "Lucius' father is... Abraxas is on his deathbed, so it's not a time to celebrate... But he demands...requests that the marriage take place immediately before he dies... The mediwizard says he has maybe only days to live."

Bellatrix gave an exasperated moan, saying, "Speaking of doing something that needs to be done...let's go, Barty!"

"Are you meeting up with Rodolphus?" asked Severus as calmly as he could, though he could feel his blood pounding in his veins.

"You are soooo boring, Sevy," hissed Bellatrix. "No, he's out and about in the castle, probably sniffing around the kitchens or Hufflepuff basement, searching for something to nosh on or have someone nosh him." She laughed wildly again, grabbing and tucking Bartemius with her, calling out, "We'll be using the Astronomy Tower, Sevy, now that you and Miss hoity-toity are finished!"

Severus immediately went to Nagini and consoled, "I will return." He looked at Narcissa, saying in a low voice, "There's something I must do. Then, I'll be back. She's had... a bit of a shock. Watch over until I return?"

Narcissa sat beside Nagini, observing as she touch Nagini's arm gently, "She's sleeping."

Severus noted Narcissa's serpentine ring on her finger; the sight of it causing his pulse to flare. "You're still wearing yours?" He spat out, "Rodolphus and the Dark Lord's *gift*? You still can't take the cursed object off?"

Solemnly, Narcissa slowly moved it up and off her finger, and then she slowly placed it back on.

Severus' eyes narrowed. "You can remove yours?"

Ashamed, she nodded.

"How? You have given yourself...?"

"It was either me or... Nagini." Narcissa shook her head, as if still in disbelief or denial, forcing herself to reveal the truth. "It started out as a game. I think, just between Bella and Rodolphus and Lucius. You see, Lucius 'won' Bella in some hedonistic game they participated in with each other... That's neither here nor there now... But then, Rodolphus somehow included the Dark Lord, who at first seemed amused by their antics. But it turned into something else." Narcissa confessed bitterly, "I was included, and then Nagini. The rings were given to...forced upon us. Lucius had to choose between us."

Trembling with rage, Severus rasped, "Why do you still wear yours, Narcissa?"

"Lucius asked me to do so, out of loyalty. He said it would please the Dark Lord to know I wear a trinket given by him, even one given in sport. "

Severus needed to release the rage within. *Fucking Rodolphus! Bellatrix!* He stalked out, repeating, "I must go, but I'll be back."

Burning to avenge Nagini, Severus headed directly for the Hufflepuff Basement area of the castle, and going down the staircase, leading directly under the Great Hall, he passed the kitchens area, giving a glare at the still life painting of a bowl of fruit entrance to the Hufflepuff common room. He halted just right of a nook on the side of the kitchen corridor. He sneered at the rounded doorways leading back towards the kitchen, thinking, *Where would that snake of a Slytherin be? Nice and cozy with his soft Hufflepuff he has on the side to occasionally hook up with?*

He inhaled deeply remembering his own favourite secret nooks that the castle's unique architecture offered students desperate to snog or other intimacies, neatly and conveniently tucked away. Stealthily going towards the shadows of the staircase's underbelly, he passed a stack of barrels which lined the wall four-levels up. Non-verbally, he cast a Revelio and smiled grimly as a passageway revealed itself, concealed within the thickest and darkest area of the stacked barrels.

Severus cast a Muffliato around himself and the space as he crept forward into it. *A side storage room of sorts!* He glowered as he heard the characteristic huffs and puffs of coupling going on and gripped his wand tighter as he slunk back against the wall watching the pair finish their carnal business. He breathed slowly and steadily as Rodolphus released a full-figured witch, grunting for her to hurry up with putting her knickers back on, and watched her swank away and pass him, tucking her skirt further

down, merely giggling and throwing him a coquettish smile as she whispered, "Excuse me!"

She left in a clumsy hurry; Rodolphus turned to watch her exiting and only then did he realize that he was not alone.

"Oh, it's just you," sneered Lestrage, tucking his shirttail into his trousers. "Enjoyed the show, did you?"

There was no verbal answer, but a subtle flick of Snape's wand along with the burning intensity in his eyes made Lestrage freeze in place as if he'd been Petrified. His facial muscles twitched and then his entire body convulsed as Severus waved him up against the wall. As he slid downwards, Rodolphus ever so slowly grimaced into a moue of excruciating pain as Severus nonverbally cast further a spell of his own concoction.

*Scalpere Interius Scrotum!*

As Rodolphus' eyes welled up with tears of insufferable pain, Severus came closer, watching him convulse with repeated spasms, begging hoarsely, "Snape!"

"As you should well know by now, Lestrage, I have a particular passion for the Dark Arts, especially curses," said Severus in a low and dangerously even voice. "I take deep pleasure in inventing spells, truly, but the curses, the hexes one can create if not rutting like a pig, Rodolphus, the possibilities thoroughly intrigue me... I've found I can be quite inventive."

Taking a step closer, Severus stood above Rodolphus, staring down at his squirming, agonized form, as Lestrage gagged out, "The Dark Lord will know of this... The Dark Lord will..."

Like lightening, Severus swept down and crouched, grabbing Lestrage's hair, twisting it back in his fist, forcing him to stare in his eyes, snarling, "Good!"

Rodolphus' eyes grew even wider in their pain with surprise.

"Yes, Lestrage. I want you to crawl to the Dark Lord, and you tell him exactly what I have done to you. Describe to him how your testicles feel as if they're being scraped and sliced from within. Let him know who is the superior wizard amongst us...you spineless piece of shite." Severus smiled a cruel, empowered smile at him. "It will only reinforce what he already knows about you; your only interests are in a rut or a wank...in other words, you're a sniveling, worthless parasite for him. Whereas I, on the other hand, push magic beyond the comprehension of privileged peons as yourself; I am truly worthy of a great Dark Lord such as Voldemort. So do it, you fuck. Run to the Dark Lord and squeal like the swine you are!"

Severus sent the nonverbal curse yet again, causing Rodolphus to shake and cry out in a howl, grabbing and clawing his own groin in agony. "No, no, no! Stop it, Snape! Stop it...what do you want?"

"I want you to feel what it's like to have your insides burning and bleeding... and I want you to remember it..."

Rodolphus garbled out some expletives before managing to cry out, "Make it stop! Tell me what you want!"

"Do you beg me, Lestrage? Beg me to stop?"

He grunted deeply and wailed, blubbing out, "Yes, yes, yes... Please, stop!"

Severus stood and shoved Lestrage's form over on his back, Imperioing him to stare directly into his eyes. "You will never, ever, touch or bother Nagini again in any manner during your miserable life. You will cease as of *now*. If I detect...if I perceive any whiff of intention on your part towards her, you will beg me for death." He swooped down and grabbed Lestrage by the collars and gave him a violent shake. "But I will not be merciful...just like you were not merciful to Nagini."

Snot was running down his nose into his mouth as Rodolphus' teary eyes darted back and forth at Severus'. Gasping for breath, he nodded in spastic movements, groaning, "All right, then. Yes, Snape."

Rising to his full height, Severus released him with a shove, causing Lestrage's head to pop against the stone, and stared down at him for several seconds before turning and walking away.

"Snape!" cried out Lestrage, straining through his agony. "When will your fucking hex cease completely...this bloody pain subside?"

Severus looked at him coolly, considering, *I have no idea. Well, it should wear off within the hour... or perhaps not. It is the first time I've applied it, but it seems to work brilliantly...*

"That's for me to know and you to find out. I don't trust you, Lestrage, so be a good prick, don't piss me off, and I may remove it sooner than later."

\* S \*

Severus left Rodolphus wallowing and returned to Nagini and Narcissa's room.

Only a few sconces were lit, giving the room a somber but calming feel. Narcissa had changed into her nightgown and was combing her long blonde hair as she sat at her vanity table. She looked up at Severus and motioned towards Nagini's bed.

He crossed over and gently sat beside her covered form; she was also in a nightdress but was turned away from him on her side. He saw that she was sleeping heavily, though with a fretful expression as if having night terrors.

He looked over to Narcissa with a questioning look.

"She's been making frightful cries, waking momentarily, only to fall back into a restless slumber." Narcissa crossed over, coming up beside him, saying softly, "She doesn't seem to need the hospital wing, but... Stay with us, Severus. It'd be comforting... for both of us."

Severus gave her a look, and Narcissa returned it with a serene, knowing stare as she said, "You are one of the few within Voldemort's circle who is capable of nurturing, of healing, of feeling... unconditional love. She needs you."

Severus froze. A thrumming energy still coursed through him from having used such force on Rodolphus, and he still felt as if his revved adrenaline needed to be channeled through further forceful, if not violent, means. He burned to pummel the stone walls like a Muggle pummeling a punch bag, not cuddle and snuggle with a fragile witch, who needed to rest and be left alone to heal in his opinion.

"You are mistaken, Narcissa." He retorted, "About everything."

"No, I'm not," she countered with her utmost haughty air.

He jumped up as he felt the touch of her hand on his arm. Suddenly, he was aware of another kind of adrenaline...given a choice between fight or flight, he made a split-second choice to flee.

"If you need me, Narcissa, if Nagini needs me..." He looked back to the blonde witch and saw that Narcissa locked eyes with him, boring into him with her piercing blue eyes.

"Don't even try!" he whispered fiercely at her, thoroughly nettled that she would attempt Legilimens on him.

"I am not mistaken about you, Severus!" exclaimed Narcissa ardently. "You who have been my true friend all these years, like a brother; you who are capable of devotion and loyalty as none other... Nagini needs you now! You have a way of handling her, of calming her, comforting her that I haven't. And there is nothing to stop you but..."

Severus felt his shoulders slump from the tension he was holding as he watched Narcissa regain control of herself, and with a huff and her eyes shining at him, she actually then teased, "Nothing but to take off your shoes and lie down and hold her if she needs you to do so."

She sashayed slowly to him and tilted her head slightly as she admonished him, "It will save me from sending a Patronus or coming myself to fetch you in the middle of the night, which I will surely do."

Giving the Black witch a shrewd and calculating look, Severus asked wryly, "May I be permitted to Accio my toothbrush?"

As perspicacious as always, Narcissa gave him a smug smile, waving her hand towards the room's inner lavatory. "I've already done that for you."

\* S \*

## Auspices of Capricornus' Ascendant Ophiucus

### Chapter 22 of 22

Amongst Ravenclaw revelry, Severus' personal dilemma regarding Nagini is intensified under the seeming auspices of Capricornus' ascendant Ophiucus, followed by a part of Nagini's recent past coming back to reclaim her.

\* N & S \*

Severus' eyes fluttered open to the feel of soft lips on his cheek.

As his vision focused, the distinct features of Narcissa became clear, looking down upon him. "I'm going now, don't wake her," he heard her saying as he gazed around in the early morning light, registering that all her trunks and baggage were gone.

"Don't get up. We'll see each other soon." The blonde witch had a sad expression on her face.

Registering the warmth and firmness of Nagini's body beside him, he carefully scooted away and slowly rose. He stared at Narcissa, momentarily not knowing what to say as for some incongruent reason the words of Sirius Black popped into his mind. *'But now, Lucius Malfoy?... I can't congratulate you.'* but he finally mustered, "I wish you all the best... on your wedding day."

"Oh, Severus." She gave him an impulsive hug, and looking at Nagini, said, "Take care of her. My father is waiting in Slughorn's office. I must hurry." And with that she left.

Severus blinked and sleepily looked back at Nagini snuggled in her bed and the flattened area of the mattress and covers where his body had lain beside her. He blinked again and slowly made his way to use the room's inner lavatory. Upon returning, he gazed down on her thinking, *Just a bit more... Will she be startled to awake alone in the room? Startled that I'm here? What all does she remember from last night?*

Carefully lowering himself back down in position, a thrill went through him as she nestled back into him. He relished the sensation of her, her body's heat and firmness, so much that he had barely slept the entire night, only to plunge into a deep sleep near dawn. He had held her when she awoke in fright, soothing her until she fell back into a restless slumber. Comforting her, he watched as she had gradually slept calmly from mid early-morn on, but he had been fluctuating between monitoring her objectively and being all too aware of his body responding to her nearness.

"Hello," he heard himself utter as she slowly opened her eyes. His Adam's apple bobbed as he searched her face to gauge her reaction of waking up with him beside her.

Groggily, Nagini raised herself on one elbow, registering that Narcissa was not there.

"She had to leave very early and said not to wake you... but we'll see each other soon."

Nagini slowly lay down again; her features were soft and dreamy. She looked at Severus, giving him a small smile and replying, "Hello."

He reciprocated the smile. He was relieved she was calm and relaxed but still quite concerned. "How are you?" He instinctively moved an unruly lock of her hair away from her eyes.

"You stayed with me the whole night?"

He couldn't help himself and smirked, "Obviously."

He became aware that he was enjoying too keenly the way she was smiling at him and said aloud what he was thinking, "I should be going, now that you're alright. We can meet after our intern obligations...I have ingredients for Slughorn to itemize and take inventory on, and you..."

"Don't go. Stay a little while. Please."

*She is so lovely...* thought Severus. Lying so close, looking down into her golden orbs, he forced himself to repeat, "I should be going."

He noted her dilated pupils and flushed cheeks as she gazed at him with penetrating acuity. As he felt her touch his cheek, he softly asked, "What do you remember of our last Occlumency together?"

Her hand dropped but a bittersweet smile spread across her face as she softly answered, "Everything."

Severus whispered, "Everything?"

"Mostly." Her features became neutral, devoid of emotion. "Some of the memories of being attacked... beaten, raped..." She scrunched her brow as if a sharp pain went through her. "I'm sorry. So sorry."



"For what?" he asked in an aching whisper.

"That you experienced what I experienced... as if you were me. Vicarious suffering..."

Shoving the memory of the vicarious traumatising aside, Severus gathered her into his arms. Her head was on his shoulder, and he felt her hold onto him as if she would never let go. He grasped her even tighter, whispering, "Lestranger'll never hurt you again. I've seen to that."

She didn't respond verbally, but clutched him even tighter.

They stayed like that in each other's arms, and he became aware of his heart beginning to beat harder and harder. Apparently, she sensed it too as he heard her comment softly, "Your heart..."

She raised her head, gazing up at him, and he cupped her face with a palm, their energy encompassing each other.

He heard her gasp softly as his lips ever-so-softly pressed hers. Severus raised his head up just enough to see her waiting in anticipation, waiting for him to continue. "I shouldn't have done that."

"I remember. I remember everything, Severus."

He clenched his eyes shut momentarily and gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry..."

"No, I remember everything between us...my memories of us, of you, have been flooding back." She touched his face. "You, me...a hodgepodge of recalls. From that very first evening, Lucius' engagement dance, the first time I met you outside Gringott's, how we touched under the Ravenclaw stairway..." Severus felt his body responding, tightening, as she placed a hand on his chest, "The last time you kissed me before our detention... before..."

Severus stared at her, a peculiar feeling washing over and coursing through him upon hearing this. He knew only that they instinctively were coiling and clinging on to each other, holding on as if they'd never let go. He felt his chest would burst from a mixture of pain and need, pulsating to be released.

\* N & S \*

Sitting across from one another at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, Severus and Nagini held each other's gaze.

As they sat in companionable silence slowly picking and nibbling at their food in between giving each other soft looks, he reflected on how they had held each other that morning, touched each other, and had drifted back to sleep entwined in each others' arms. Consequently, he had been late for his internship hours with Slughorn, and Nagini was late as well for completing her obligatory hours with Madam Pince in the library, causing neither to have had a break until now for the evening meal.

He had barely been able to concentrate in the Potions lab, being distracted by the membrane of how firm yet soft Nagini's skin was as he explored her body haptically that morning. At one specific point, he could not help himself and had slowly felt between her legs, her heat and wetness seeming to draw him to explore her innermost core. Her scent and fragrance could still be recalled strongly by him, causing his muscles to tense throughout his body as the thought of tasting her fully and losing himself deep inside her would not go away. He knew he shouldn't, perhaps, be pursuing this chain of thought further as he rationally observed that thinking of her purely sexually was the last thing she needed or wanted.

But she had softly smiled and guided his hand this morning...she had placed his palm on her Venus mound and kissed him lightly. She had parted open her thighs, wider and wider, and taken his wrist, steering it and inviting his hand and fingers to be free to go lower and inwardly, under her cotton knickers, between her folds, outlining her slickness, silently urging him to explore her.

And so he had.

Severus broke the silence. "Perhaps we could go for a long walk along the lake? I've missed..." Severus voice lowered as he pointed out, "I've missed you."

Nagini nodded, speechless. She looked around seeing Professors Slughorn, Flitwick, McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey and the groundskeeper, Hagrid, along with a scattered few students from the different houses. It seemed that only Severus and Nagini were left of their Slytherin class; however, the Ravenclaw table was curiously crowded in particular with sixth-years, thronging around one notable seventh year still amongst them, Xenophilus Lovegood. They all were participating in some sort of debate when Pandora cooed out excitedly, "Capricornus!" There was a cheer from the others.

Severus caustically replied, "The Ravenclaws are excited."

Nagini gave a wistful look over her shoulder to them, but then turned back to Severus and gave him a small smile. "They usually are. Always something new to be discovered."

"Hello, you two."

Both looked up to find an inquisitive Xenophilus and a dreamy looking Pandora gazing down upon them. "To celebrate our last night this year together, Xeno will be sharing some of his latest inventions to commemorate his finishing Hogwarts in the *cylch y Tylwyth Teg* tonight..."

"You mean the necrotic zone of dead grass beyond the lake near the Forbidden Forest?" asked Severus, immediately irritated by having anyone interrupt him and Nagini. For he found that he was relishing every moment they were together and had a pressing feeling that their time together was precious, unlike ever before.

"Exactly!" confirmed Xeno. "Come and celebrate the ending of another wondrous year of enlightenment with us."

Pandora continued eagerly, "We shall dance solstitial jigs and be one with the constellations in honour of all Capricornus!" She giggled in apparent inspired excitement. "You shall be our guest of honour, Severus...you shall be crowned he who exceeds his constellation, the ascending Ophiucus!"

"Divination is not a particular favorite area..." Severus began as a sudden wariness came over him at the Ravenclaws' implications.

"The formations of the heavens are not to be shunned or taken lightly," suggested Xenophilus good-naturedly.

"Exactly, Lovegood," hissed Severus.

Unflappable, Pandora pointed out, "Many a strong force has been bestowed upon those born within Capricornus' domain...modest and notorious alike...Dymphna Furnage, you..."

"Tom Riddle...", piped in Nagini faintly; all turned to her. "I was cataloging old alumni library records with birth dates by House for Madam Pince all day...M through R..." As her voiced faded, Nagini had a sad, faraway look as she thought upon something.

Pandora observed, "Yes, both notorious and great doers of magic are the Capricornus'. Regardless, as the dark and light create one, the magic must be celebrated with a dance...it's in the stars!"

Severus noted that Nagini still silently dwelt on something, and wishing for them to be left alone, he dismissed the vivacious Ravenclaws. "I think not; besides, neither Nagini nor I jig."

Undeterred, Pandora giggled again, and Nagini snapped out of her ruminating to look up and give him a curious smile. "It might be fun to try."

Frowning, he spelled it out, "I don't jig. Never have, never will."

Pandora gave an all-knowing look. "You say that now because you're preoccupied, but if a particular celestial force hits you, I have complete faith that you'll know what to do."

"We're going for a walk, perhaps we'll stop by...but only if Severus wants to..." offered Nagini, giving the brooding Slytherin a soft look.

Staring at her pensively, Severus countered, "If Nagini wishes..."

Xenophilius held up his hand, his forefinger pointed upwards, pedantically saying, "But you must carry her as you approach and enter the ring...the serpent bearer carrying his serpent...she who is half-creature, half human, the Sagittarius being borne by Capricornus' ascendant Ophiucus!"

Severus' forehead furrowed in incredulous perplexity at the Ravenclaw's nonsense, and as he scowled on the edge of offering a scathing retort, Nagini asked, "Will there be Billywigs?"

Pandora nodded enthusiastically, beaming. "Pixies. Budgies, *Gernumbli gardensi*, Imps and Fairies... All are welcome."

But something about the entire Ravenclaws' aura of carefreeness and liberty to express and enjoy speculating and creating such ludicrous folly about all things caused a deep resentment within Severus, and he could not let their glibness slide by. "Fools project their emotions and hopes on the elusive to cover the deep abysses in their existence, Lovegood, such as speculations on the formations of stars and planets."

"On the contrary, the heavenly bodies formulate and reveal the finite and concrete as set before time, allowing acceptance and peace, being one with all creation. That is, for those who choose *not* to be blind to see what is before them." Ignoring Severus' glare, Xenophilius cooed on, "The ecliptic is crossing through and intercepting with the constellation of Ophiucus, the Serpent Holder." He gave a pointed look to Nagini, "As it is *rumoured* that your Animagus is a serpent and your birth chart shows that the sun moves into Ophiucus and remains within your constellation's boundaries...we must defer to the heavens' mysteries, as tonight reveals the vortex culmination of each one's boundary touching...who knows how long Horologium will allow this phenomenon to last? *Carpe diem*, my dear Slytherins, *carpe diem*!"

As the Ravenclaws skipped back to their table triumphantly, Nagini gently took Severus by the hand and led him outside. As they strode down and along the shores of the lake, she broke the silence. "Point in fact, the sun spends more time traversing through Ophiucus than say Scorpius or Sagittarius, ascendant when combining with Capricornus, at its most powerful..."

Perhaps it was the mixture of Lovegood's Divination poppycock along with the fact that both he and Riddle had been so pointedly grouped together that deeply irked him. He found he was conflicted with having wanted to continue this morning's exploration of holding and touching each other and with feeling tormented by the inability to escape Voldemort's reach in all facets of his life.

He halted on the spot and gave Nagini a bereft look.

Seeing him in despair about something, she asked, "What is it, Severus? What is wrong?"

He shook his head glumly, unable to speak.

"Do you want to go back to the castle?"

"No," he said quietly.

She raised herself on her tiptoes and kissed him on the lips.

Taking his hand, they walked in silence, nearing closer and closer to the Forbidden Forest's edge.

As Nagini led them into it, Severus confessed quietly, "With all of my skills and relentless learning, I am wary of that which cannot be explained by tangible magic."

Nagini gave him a thoughtful look and then sighed as the whispering wind whipped around them through the forest's trees and growth. She seemed to decide upon something in particular and gently tugged him to follow her further into the woods.

Thinking that going into the forest would cause her painful memories to surface, he tugged her back to him. "Let us go back...your Ravenclaws should surely be waiting."

"No. I love the forest. All forests. But especially this one. Shall we search for unicorns?"

"No. That would be unwise."

"It is beautiful," she whispered. "Full of mystery, ancient riddles... full of life..."

"It is treacherous."

"Its very soil and air is invigorating..."

"And overgrowth dangerous, let alone the various creatures dwelling..."

"Exactly! Are we not also a part of them? Are we not magical creatures as well? I want to experience the forest's vibrancy with you. Its pulse of life. Its rhythm."

She snuggled into him. Their lips met. Then, their body heat melded them closer and closer; each one's softness and hardness being felt.

Amidst their heated arousal, Severus pulled back, offering, "Given a choice between this excessive growth of formidable vegetation or let us say, your bed..."

"Am I giving you a choice at this moment?" As she kissed him, her fingers strummed lightly down his torso, his side, his hips, over his trouser's cloth covering his cock. He was torn between his mind and body and emotions...everything that he knew versus wanting to be freely, completely physical with her. He could not deny that he relished her touch and that her dilated pupils confirmed that regardless of everything she had been through, she desired him. She wanted him to make love to her. In the second, he decided. He reciprocated her intensity without any hesitation so much that as they kissed and clutched, their grappling had them soon make contact against a wide, ancient tree. Severus' back braced them against its rough surface, and soon they slowly slunk down to the earth, the cool and fern-covered firmness beneath them amongst the shrubs of the fertile, dense growth.

With a deep, dark spark, Severus noted that Nagini's body seemed almost crackling with pent up energy as she lay on her back, whispering, "Come to me." The heavily fragranced overgrowth of leaves and ferns covered them above as he pressed her down on the welcoming earth, clothing tugged and opened, allowing access to necessary flesh to be kissed and tasted and touched.

Suddenly, Severus froze. "I'm no better than *him*."

"Severus?"

"I'm no better than him..., he repeated.

She caressed his cheekbone gently. "When you touch me it is out of affection, love; when he touched me it was out of hatred, violent domination."

Severus gulped and whispered, "I'm no better than him; I too desire to... dominate you...physically..." He took another gasp of breath. "But I want you to dominate me as well, equally... if you wish, completely." He felt her lips on his again, but still he asked, "Tell me what do. What do you want?"

Severus' facial muscles clenched in concern even as he stroked and touched her face and hair, gently brushing aside locks of her unruly hair away from her face.

She arched upward more assertively, placing a more ardent kiss on his lips. He found that he now hesitated to reciprocate fully back; he wanted to...very much so, but something continued to niggle him. Even as he welcomed her touch and attention, aware that his hard-on was very acute, he gently cupped her face in his hands and uttered gently, "Nagini?"

She gave him a curious look, waiting.

He whispered urgently, "I would never want to hurt you." He felt a pang in his chest as she gave him a knowing smile, replying, "Nor I you."

He pressed his point, "You have been hurt... in so many ways. Been through so much. And you haven't fully recovered."

"What is there to recover from? My past is my past..." She caressed his face. "I will reinvent myself; I will endure... But now," she smiled an inviting smile full of need and longing. "I wish to be embraced by my Ophiucus... fully..."

Severus pressed her body down again with his into the blanket of leaves and grass, allowing them to undulate and mold into one form again, feeling each others curves and angles, grooves and hardness. As she pleurably moaned and encouraged him, trying to control himself, he pressed his lips on her sensitive neck, going lower to the nape. He tilted his head back, taking a breath and checking her response, pleased that her mouth had opened to a lovely 'O'. More urgently, he placed kisses across one breast until he reached her nipple, and once there he increased his suction pressure, eliciting gasps. Giving attention to her other breast, he lingered longer on that nipple while his fingertips felt the silky softness of her legs underneath her skirt.

As his fingertips traced upward to her inner thighs, he hesitated before he began to peel her knickers down.

Severus swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, and hoarsely whispered, "I want to kiss you, taste you all over, Nagini." He felt up to her naval then underneath her loosely opened blouse and then slowly stroked downward to above her Venus mound where her skin was softer than anything he had ever felt before in his life.

He wanted to continue to watch her every expression as he explored her body, but she whispered, "Severus..." He felt her fingertips outlining his erection.

She pressed her body into his, inviting him; he groaned as she arched her pelvis against his, meeting his rhythmic slow thrusts as they both began undulating against each other in earnest, dry humping. He touched and felt the contours of her thighs spreading wider for him and the roundness of her arse. He kissed her in demanding circular movements as he shifted both of their body angles enough so he was able to release and place his cock at her slick entrance, pausing to savour her heat and wetness. Ever-so-slowly, he pressed and slid into her. As she whispered, "Yessss...", he captured her mouth making his tongue repeat what his cock was doing to her other orifice. He had to hold her tight around the waist, clasped in one spot as she had begun to writhe; he time to time watched her expression as he made love to her with his entire body and mind, relishing her sweet moaning of his name as she clenched her eyes tight and her vaginal muscles clenched him even tighter, and tighter...until her frame shook in orgasm.

As she came, Severus knew the imprint of her exquisite expression would be forever burned inside his memory; and as she coiled herself around him, clutching him tight and urging him even deeper inside her, he gave over to thrusting her steadily and deeply as she softly grunted in pleasure and carnal need for him to release himself inside her until he knew nothing else except his hot seed filling her, deeply, so very deep inside her.

In a post-coital haze, he managed to slowly gather her in his arms so that she laid her head on his shoulder. Nagini was breathing hard, trembling. Severus dully registered that he was as well. He knew not how long they stayed that way. But when he felt Nagini's finger strum over his waist to his cock again, he couldn't help inhale sharply and feel that all was right with the world and only they existed.

\* N & S \*

In the moonlit night, they made their way out of the forest and slowly came upon the Ravenclaws within their designated large arc of mushrooms, the fungus well grown and rooted deep.

Fairies were either sitting on the mushroom tops using them as dinner tables or dancing around the ring's edges; several seemed to be using them as parasols against the bright moonlight, curled as if taking naps. But Severus and Nagini's attention was drawn to the goings-on within the circle...levitating Ravenclaws apparently from the Billywigs' stings while others, giddy and swaying, were dancing around an ancient Hawthorne tree.

"Oh, look, some of them are floating from the Billywig's sting," noted Nagini softly.

"They're idiots. Poisonous substances, natural or wizard-made, are not to be trifled with. Even in sport," glowered Severus, but as he felt Nagini touch his chest in an adoring fashion, causing a thrum to trill through all the way to the tip of his cock, he more amiably conceded, "There's a reason why the Australian pests are rated XXX by the Ministry...uncontrollable hovering, severe allergic reactions...permanent levitating may ensue."

Her fingers were all too near his crotch; he felt raw with sexual awakening at the mere touch and look by her *it's unbearable!* Capturing her roving hand in his, he huffed, "True, their dried stingers are useful in several potions..."

She gave him a soft kiss on the lips. "And it's said that they induce an elevated frame of mind."

*I'm already elevated from your sweet ministrations, Nagini,* he registered silently as they kissed and her other hand was felt being placed delicately on his trousers' crotch area, all too near the tip of his cock for him to be aware of anything else in the moment.

"Ave, Ophiucus! Bear your treasure and enter!" hailed Lovegood's voice from the enchanted circle.

Like a bridegroom carrying his bride, he swooped Nagini into his arms and carried her into the fairy ring. The Ravenclaws cheered as they entered the circle of mushrooms, and as he placed Nagini on her feet, Xenophilus pressed a chalice-like cup into his hand, "Expand your minds! A drink or a Billywing stinger? Perhaps both?"

"Neither," quipped Severus. "Our minds are already expanded enough for one evening, Lovegood."

Pandora had excitedly grabbed Nagini's hand, her protuberant orbs reflecting the moon's glow, asking, "Shall we not meet our obligations in this *syloch y Tylwyth Teg*?"

Nagini gave a glance to Severus before asking, "Being?"

"Awareness of the good fortune bestowed upon those who comprehend...we dance!" She pulled Nagini to the others already in rhythmic swaying in front of an aged Hawthorne tree.

"Ave, Ophiucus!" hailed Xeno again. "He who rises from the Capricornus constellation, bearing a treasure beyond gold's measure. Our Nagini! Come, come, Severus, let us toast the ladies and honour the noble Pixie and Gnome and fellow magical creatures in a celestial homage."

He handed Severus the chalice again, which this time Severus did not reject, but instead took a large gulp, registering the ingredients as his eyes watered and throat

pleasantly burned. *Gurdyroot, Dirigible Plums, and elf-made Cucurbita pepo whisky?*

Sipping slowly at the remaining contents, Severus sat as Xenophilus demonstrated and cooed over his telescope-like invention, carrying on about its hybrid Billywig mind-enhancing abilities if one placed its diadem-like laurel on one's head.

As the enthusiastic inventor droned on, Severus' gaze focused away from Xeno to watching Nagini dance with the other witches.

An incongruous thought painfully struck him, *There is another born in Capricornus, an Ophiucus, another Serpent Bearer... Tom Riddle?* Like a shard driven violently in his chest, he suddenly felt out of breath and discordant to the mirth and frivolity surrounding him, and as his left inner arm twinged with the dulllest throb, the sentiment that *Nagini would never be safe with me, the depths and complexity of this realization struck him hard and deep, momentarily overwhelming him. She would never be safe with me... nor either of us untouched by or free of Voldemort and his whims...*

He grimaced, fleetingly and bitterly thinking of Lily. *Indeed, what witch would be? My life and identity has become to rely on and comprise of such dubious associations for support... And Nagini is plagued with a past beyond her control, seeking hope through Dumbledore, a protection of sorts with the Ministry?*

He looked around at the frivolity taking place. *In another lifetime, perhaps this would be the normal pleasures of life, dancing in a fairy ring beneath the constellations with laughter and music and...*

He took a deep breath in and sighed deeply, noting that Xeno had ceased to lecture him and rather had returned back to celebrating life in the here and now. *Look at Pandora and Lovegood, they're basically making love in front of us as if it were the most natural thing to do in public, a joyous occasion to share with all, no doubts and fears, sans Dark Lord and repercussions... no worries of the past or the future...*

As he contemplated matters, the others figures became a blur, and all he knew was that Nagini was flowing closer and closer to him. She gracefully slinked down beside him and uninhibitedly snuggled into him.

A dizzying sensation washed over him as he held her gaze with the others' giddy and frivolous goings-on swirling around them in the background.

Someone spelled flying flowers to dance and flutter in the air only to land in everyone's hair, and laughing, Nagini took *antris sanguinea's* flower petals of reddish-violet and blue-purple shades and placed them in his hair. "There." She beamed at him. "Beautiful."

The realization that love could exist for more than one person in unfathomable, multiple ways struck him intensely. He had only had this uncontrollable feeling for two people in his life, his mother and Lily, manifested so differently but the feeling of deep affection and concern nevertheless was painfully profound and inseparable to his core.

He trembled and whispered something unintelligible to Nagini. Their lips met. Pulling back their heads slightly, she asked, "Shall we go?"

Severus nodded. "If that is what you wish."

She smiled a Mona Lisa smile and took his hand, both of them helping the other up.

As they left, behind them the Ravensclaws were a blend of those who had let the Billywig wings prick them and hovered and floated about within the fairy circle and the others who lost themselves in each other and the rhythm of the universe.

Arriving back to the Slytherin basement, they stealthily made their way back to her chamber and bed. The night was filled with sporadic lovemaking: short bouts of resting, longer bouts of pleasuring one another fully. Deeply. Now that they had crossed the threshold of fleshly union, they touched at leisure, leaving no inch of either's body unexplored. Exhausted from their exertions, they drifted into a satiated repose, wrapped in each other's arms.

\* S & N \*

"Wakey, wakey, you two..."

Severus and Nagini awoke to the sound of an unexpected voice. Blurry-eyed, their focus made out one Bartemius Crouch, Jr leaning against a bedpost, looking down upon them.

"Crouch?" uttered Severus. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'd ask you the same thing, Sevy, but the answer seems pretty obvious.... I, on the other hand, am here on official matters... sent by good ol' Lucius himself, who is presently in Slughorn's office, dealing with bureaucratic parchments." As his tongue darted out, licking his lips, his wild eyes gleamed at Nagini. "You, Miss Malfoy, are needed at the Manor immediately."

"What? Why?" asked Nagini, pulling a sheet to cover her nudity, sitting up.

"That's for me to know, and you to find out..." Crouch's eyes gleamed with secrets.

Nagini demanded, "Does Dumbledore know?"

With a supercilious look on his face, Barty smirked, "Dumbles knows... Now, get your knickers on and dress yourself... you're lucky Lulu sent me down to fetch you instead of him coming here himself..."

Nagini and Bartemius stared at each other until he asked, "Shall I fetch Lucius, then?"

Her chest was heaving as her mind raced before giving Severus a troubled look and answering, "No."

"Why are you with Lucius in the first place?" asked Severus discerningly, watching Nagini slowly rise and gather clothing, laboriously making her way to the lavatory to dress.

As she shut the door, Bartemius licked his lips wickedly. "I brought a statement from me daddykins at the Ministry on behalf of the Malfoy family... Well, for vicious ol' Abraxas... Snape, dress yourself as well... be prepared for a Summoning..."

Attempting to keep his apprehension at bay, Severus asked smoothly, "When?"

Crouch, Jr gave him a crooked smile. "Soon... It's going to be a busy day for the Malfoys and the Dark Lord alike!"

"And you know this because...?"

Barty jerked up his shirt sleeve on his left arm, baring the Dark Lord's mark zealously. It was engorged and pulsating.

Severus was puzzled. "I haven't felt the Mark burning..."

"Probably because your blood has been busy burning and throbbing elsewhere," snarled Barty. An evil look crossed the disturbed youth's face as he jibed, "Quivering in a

quim where you shouldn't have been, Sevy... My advice, get your knickers on...come with us."

Severus viciously glowered at him but complied, the unpleasant realization that something ominous was afoot...but even as Barny's darting eyes flitted from watching him dress to watching Nagini enter again and Accio her wand, he felt a different kind of pulsation throughout his body, as if he could pounce and slash any and all that wished to harm her. An overwhelming protectiveness of Nagini consumed him. *No one's going to harm you!*

"Ready, my lovey-dovey lovely?" crooned Barny at Nagini, motioning for her to pass by him and noting her wand with a malicious grin. "Don't worry about your other things, a house-elf'll be sent if so needed."

Severus and Nagini held hands as the three walked along the dark corridor, but he saw that she was pensive and unable to look at him at any time.

As they entered Slughorn's office, Nagini locked eyes with Lucius, who sat in a tense and grim manner. He did not appear as she thought he would for someone newly wed; he looked ill, his skin edged with a grey tone; the dark circles under his eyes and drawn facial muscles denoted someone under intense physical and mental pressure, not one associated with experiencing a pleasurable state.

Lucius glared at Severus and then followed Nagini with a dark, fixed gaze as she crossed over and addressed, "Professor Slughorn."

"My dear girl, Lucius has informed me of some rather unfortunate news. Your uncle Abraxas has taken a turn for the worse; you're to be given family leave. Your cousin is here to escort you home."

"Does the Headmaster know?"

Slughorn waffled on whether or how to answer, so Lucius jumped in, snapping, "Dumbledore knows...the Ministry verdict allows family matters in such circumstances as priority. Even Dumbledore can not refuse our request." He tossed a parchment on Slughorn's desk.

The Slytherin Head unrolled it, mumbling, "Yes, yes. Ministerial stamps and signatures approved of... Even Bartemius Crouch Sr has signed... Hm, yes, right..." Mustering a shallow, forced smile, he instructed, "Well, dear, best that you fetch your things. I'm sure Abraxas is eager to see you."

Nagini gave Severus a fleeting glance before asking Slughorn, "I'll only be gone for a few days then? I'll return after... After..."

"Yes," hissed Lucius. "Leave your belongings here; you'll have everything you need at the Manor. Or we'll send a filthy house-elf for anything you might need that you've left behind, yes?"

Nagini saw the veins in his temple were throbbing and Lucius' jaw muscles clenched as he growled, "My father won't last long."

She gave a forlorn look to Severus and then to Slughorn, "It's not that, Lucius. It's just that I've accepted..."

This time it was Slughorn who interrupted abruptly, "We'll continue any school-related matters when you've returned, my girl." His eyes were sad as he said, "It's all right. Go, now." He waved to his fireplace. "The Floo is ready."

Nagini hesitated but Lucius jumped up and went directly to her, taking her by the arm. He threw Bartemius and Severus a surly look before telling her, "Shall we? You have your wand, what else does a witch need, cousin?"

As they made their way towards Slughorn's fireplace to Floo to the Manor, Lucius hissed as he passed by Severus, "Enjoyed your time together, have you, Snape?" He turned sharply to Horace and asked, "Could I trouble you once more, Professor Slughorn? The Black family has asked me to ask you if you could spare Snape this afternoon and evening...the nature of business they did not say. Only that they would be very grateful if you'd allow him leave to meet with Regulus in Hogsmeade immediately...they ask as a favour from one ancient Pureblood family to another. You know how *moody* Regulus can get, and Severus, as his close mate, seems to always help *calm him down*. Walburga would be especially grateful..."

Severus saw that Lucius gave their Head a tight smile, and Slughorn, flustered, consented. "Oh, yes, yes, by all means, bottle inventories and ingredients shall still be waiting unless they decide to walk off by themselves."

"Thank you, professor." Lucius then gave Severus a knowing look and nodded to Bartemius to follow him. Tugging Nagini to him tightly, he guided them into the Floo with Barny following after them.

Heart and mind racing, Severus blinked and then just as quickly excused himself from Slughorn, only to hurry to an Apparation spot outside Hogwarts' boundaries and Disapparate himself to the Hog's Head pub in Hogsmeade.

\* N & S \*

Flooding to Malfoy Manor, as soon as she stepped out of the fireplace, Nagini felt an immediate shove and found herself held by Lucius, only to have Barny flick his wand swiftly over her head and saw a handful of her hair fall into his hands.

"Will that be enough?" rasped Lucius.

"More than enough; the Polyjuices are ready...just need the final ingredient for who I'll be today," whispered a grinning Bartemius, his tongue flicking out excitedly.

Exasperated, Lucius released Nagini, yelling,

"Cissy!"

A gaunt, fragile-looking Narcissa appeared in the dark parlor as Lucius ordered, "Take Nagini upstairs." Giving his bride a more gentler look, he struggled to say, "Remember?"

The pale, blonde witch's eyelashes fluttered as she said softly, "Yes, Lucius. Of course, Lucius."

His nostrils flared as he asked, "My father?"

"He wishes to speak to Nagini."

"I don't know how long we'll be, but..." Lucius' shoulders sagged momentarily as if in exhaustion.

After several seconds of silence and giving darting glances to Narcissa and Barny, Lucius said, "Take her then to him." He had a nasty look on his face as he glared back at Nagini, only to then grab Bartemius by the arm and plunge both of them back into the Floo.

As the flames of the fireplace flicked and crackled, settling down after being disturbed, Nagini took a few steps to Narcissa and warily asked, "Polyjuice? What is happening?"

As if in mourning, Cissy only shook her head unable to speak.

"Where are they going? Bartemius will be *me* for what purpose? Why?" Nagini begged her, "Please, can't you tell me anything?"

"Where, I cannot say... And as to *why* they are going..." Narcissa gave her a small smile, even though her face was etched with pain and took a deep breath, whispering, "The *why* is... because of you."

Nagini shook her head in denial. "But I've been at Hogwarts; I haven't done anything..."

Narcissa's forced smile faded. "Not what you have done so much as what you are, what you mean to two very different loyalties the House of Malfoy has found itself in the midst of... either Lester Qualmsick or the Dark Lord... The decision is being made and dealt with as we speak..."

Incongruously, Nagini's mind raced not with thoughts of the horrid Qualmsick or Voldemort, or even what devious transactions were occurring as she stood there, but with the most profound thoughts of Severus and that not only she was in harm's way.

"Nagini!" called out Narcissa. "Abraxas awaits you...will you not come?" She gave an odd look to Nagini, revealing, "Severus will be with Lucius and the Dark Lord; the sooner they finish matters, the sooner they can return to us..."

Something was twisting and coiling deep inside her and Nagini felt as if her heart was a heavy, thudding weight with no relief to come. As she slowly began to follow Narcissa up the stairway, the tension was pressing and burning in her chest so much that she burst out, "Even Severus?"

"Yes, Nagini," soothed Narcissa, "Even Severus... For Qualmsick visited and has given us no choice this evening... And in the interim, Abraxas demands to speak with you."

Thinking upon Severus, Nagini felt a vague hope, giving her strength and fortitude to withstand whatever Abraxas was to say to her; and so, she continued to climb the stairs alongside the other witch, both trying not to lose themselves in maudlin and muddled thoughts.

\* N & S \*