

The Twists of Fate

by nagandsev

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

Reflections of Recent Events

Chapter 1 of 13

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Chapter One: Reflections of Recent Events

Nagini gave a deep sigh. She was quite happy, a rare emotion for her, at being allowed to stay at Hogwarts during the holiday break. Even if most of it had been in the hospital ward.

Madam Pomfrey had expertly cared for her; her swelling had diminished and her skin-colouring had almost returned to normal. She was greatly appreciative of Pomfrey and had learned a few more things about healing, which had been fascinating. And, of course, getting to know the one other patient sharing the space, Remus Lupin, had also been an unexpected revelation.

A marked enemy, given that he was a Gryffindor, Remus was in a bed diagonally across from her when she had awoken from nearly two days' unconsciousness.

She had gotten a brief glance of him being brought in; his body was bloodied, covered with random splotches and cuts. He seemed to have been attacked by something. Or someone. Whether a dark spell or a wild beast, she couldn't tell. Dumbledore himself and Pomfrey had both consecutively cared for him; soft chantings alternated by strange scents, and bottles of dubious content had continuously been brought in and given to him.

Nagini was stung with guilt. The fleeting thought that she had something to do with Remus' state kept eating at her.

But wasn't he partially guilty for her condition, as well? Part of her was trying to reconcile herself that if she had had anything to do with his present condition, it must have been out of self-defence.

Professor Galatea Merrythought, Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, had been holding an ongoing in-class competition of sorts between the students of sixth year. Wishing to challenge their creativity, as well as combining their Dark Arts hexes and Transfiguration skills, she had set the tasks of 'forcing your opponent to transform'. She was vague in instructions, giving them freedom to hex their opponent into anything from a sofa chair to a rodent. Which in hindsight had led to more than a few students being sent to Madam Pomfrey.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to her, she had an exceptional group of Slytherins and Gryffindors put together, formidably capable and eager to be 'on the offence'; who, in their private lives, had far surpassed the average required skills of Transfiguration and had a plethora of dangerous Dark Arts, wand and wandless, hexes ready to be unleashed at any given moment.

But Professor Merrythought didn't suspect, or perhaps ignored, the level of animosity that existed, as she thrived on the unexpected, and had announced the competition in a slightly whimsical drone: "The student who can demonstrate him or herself to be the most competent, the most clever, the most skilled, thus far, in the Dark Arts, drawing upon any other resources, will receive the Young Wizards Merit Award." And with a slight twinkle in her eye and a giggle, she added, "Also, five galleons worth of delights from Honeydukes."

There had been an outbreak of various comments and exclamations to these announcements.

She continued gleefully, "You will be called up, two at a time; one student will take the offensive, initiating your curse, and the other, the defensive, repelling as able. Good luck to all!"

Immediately, jeers and insults were tossed back and forth amongst the rivaling houses, working the classroom into a raucous frenzy. This tense air of competitiveness continued in and out of classes; the past month had proceeded with an atmosphere of mixed dread, high adrenaline, humiliation and exhilaration.

After weeks of harrowing events, leading a concerned, albeit, amused Dumbledore to comment about the number of classroom injuries, the final four contenders had been narrowed down to: Severus Snape and Nagini LeStrange of Slytherin House, and Remus Lupin and Sirius Black of Gryffindor House.

Everyone's nerves were set on edge. The final pairings had been announced: first, Severus Snape versus Sirius Black, second, Nagini LeStrange versus Remus Lupin. Either pairings were going to be disastrous. The ongoing hatred and viciousness of attacks between Snape and Black on each other had been going on for years now. Each time seemed to be more threatening than the last one; how either kept on surviving the other's assaults still remained a mystery and the subject of much gossip and speculation.

But what was more titillating was the second pairing.

Both Remus Lupin and Nagini LeStrange had to be the most reclusive, shy, unassuming students among the sixth year. The oddity of Lupin's closest friends being the extroverted, hyperactive James Potter, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew had also always been a curiosity.

Whereas Potter and Black were exceptionally skilled and let anyone and everyone know it, Lupin, in his own quiet way, had always shown a controlled expertise and precision in all hexes when having to demonstrate them and a disturbingly fathomless knowledge in the Dark Arts.

Anyone partnered against him had to double their concentration and will when attempting to hex him. His outwardly attractive, gentle facade and unassuming air seemed in itself a natural Shield Charm. When not in Dark Arts, the Gryffindor Prefect gave off the warmest, docile-like aura. But, in the Dark Arts class, he seemed to transform – his skills were irrefragable; his keen attention and focus were resolute. He was in his element. Distinguishable and separate from his housemates, he was his own person, absorbed completely in the Dark Arts material or task at hand.

Everyone speculated that he had great potential and adeptness for the Dark Arts, a little uncanny, considering he was a Gryffindor. The Slytherins had snidely remarked that regardless of his mastery, he was a half-blood of dubious background. Severus Snape diverted these remarks and commented on Lupin's pattern of disappearing once a month. "No doubt from his Mudblood Muggle blood", "chronic, contagious disease" were the general comments, and then, in disgust, the topic of Lupin was dropped.

In general, other students had long ago stopped trying to befriend him. He had purposely avoided initiating interaction with them and kept to himself. But Potter and Black, the two most popular and notable students of the Gryffindor House, along with a third highly excitable kid, Peter Pettigrew, had somehow adopted and included him in their social circle. Together, the four of them were a lively pack, calling themselves the 'Marauders'. And in the last few years, now and then, Lupin could be seen hanging out with a few other Gryffindors more often, mostly Lily Evans and Alice Dearborn.

Lupin's opponent, on the other hand, was a complete loner. Nagini LeStrange was hardly ever seen with anyone else, outside of classes. During her entire time at Hogwarts, even her Slytherin housemates had seemed to have overlooked her. There was the exception of a few shared whispers before classes between her and Severus Snape. Or, randomly, she could be found in the library sharing a table, seemingly tutoring the younger fifth year, Regulus Black.

But, as with Lupin, when it came to the Dark Arts class, as well as Transfiguration, she irrefutably stood out in skills and knowledge.

And today was the day. Both the sixth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors filed into the classroom. Everyone was trying to settle down as quickly as possible. Professor Merrythought cleared her throat, and with bated breath, announced, "First up, Severus Snape and Sirius Black!"

The cheers and catcalls shrieked out from the onlookers. Severus and Sirius, however, were morosely glaring at each other as they moved into the centre of the room, standing a respectable duelling distance apart. An unspeakable, silent dialogue was occurring between the two of them.

"Settle down! Settle down, everyone!" Merrythought called out. She rose from her chair and turned around to address a part of the unruly class, but at that moment, all hell broke out suddenly behind her between Severus and Sirius.

Adversaries Gone Awry

Chapter 2 of 13

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Chapter Two: Adversaries Gone Awry

Professor Merrythought turned around to find Severus and Sirius slashing into one another with powerful strokes of non-verbal magic. Sirius had already suffered two slashes across his face, and his shirts had been cut through, revealing his chest, which had one huge single cut, from his breastplate down to his navel, bleeding profusely. He had dropped to his knees, doubling over.

Severus' nose had been broken, blood profusely gushing out, already congealing. Reamed gashes were striped across his upper torso. Sirius had thrown one last hex at

Severus, causing him to fall, writhing in pain; he was flipping and flopping like a live fish on fire. And, for good reason. His backside was lit with flames.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" commanded Merrythought.

The Incendio hex was extinguished, leaving Severus moaning and lying, panting heavily, on his side. The acrid smell of burnt flesh and cloth had filled the room.

"Merlin's Beard! Merlin's Beard! Evans go for Madam Pomfrey!" Merrythought yelled, waving her hands wildly, jumping around the crumpled students, trying to access who needed emergency help first. Deciding it was Sirius, she knelt down by his collapsed body and started a counter-curse to stop the flow of blood.

The students were slowly rambling around, dazed by what had just happened. Some were trying clumsily to offer assistance to Professor Merrythought; others were just standing around looking lost, not knowing what to do or say.

Nagini was angered that the majority of attention was being given to Sirius. Even the Slytherin part of the class were absorbed amongst themselves in plotting and brooding, taking it in stride that Severus was some sacrificial casualty not worthy of further attention.

In a split-second decision, not waiting for anyone's approval or notice, Nagini knelt down by Severus. Pulling out her wand, she pointed it at Severus' face. *Episkey!* she said decisively, fixing his broken nose. Then, she quietly started chanting a counter-curse for his bleeding. Her mind was racing in angst about his burnt flesh, knowing he needed immediately healing ointments; the longer the necessary medical attention was delayed, the more severe the trauma and scarring would be.

Barely had Nagini started, when Madam Pomfrey entered quickly, followed by a heavily panting Lily Evans. Pomfrey was sweeping around Severus and Sirius with her wand out, muttering some esoteric incantation; assessing the nature and level of harm done to each one. She stopped, abruptly, making a decision. She said, "Galatea, if you will assist me in levitating Mr Snape to the Hospital Ward, I shall Mr Black. Please, step aside, Miss Lestrangle."

Conjuring a levitation spell, Professor Merrythought began to guide Snape's body towards the door. Over her shoulder, she called out angrily, "Class dismissed! Return to your common rooms!"

Such a display of adversarial hatred left a sombre residue on the students as they slowly trickled out of the room. A few dawdled around uncomfortably. And then, giving a look back at five particular Gryffindors, who remained huddled in a group whispering, the others randomly trailed out.

Having whispered something to Nagini, Avery and the other Slytherins unanimously stormed out of the room. Nagini needed to clean herself of a few stains of Severus' blood from her efforts to help him. Glancing over at the Gryffindors, and trying not to draw their attention, she softly said, "*Scourgify*", waving her wand over herself where needed. Then, she went quietly over to collect her rucksack, intending to snatch it, and hurry off to catch up with the other Slytherins.

The lingering Gryffindor students were still consoling their classmate, Lily. She, alone of the group, seemed to be deeply affected by what had happened. "It's horrible. Just horrible!" cried Lily. She was visibly weeping. "I just want it to stop, James. Just stop. You could make it happen," she pleaded with him.

"I can't control that greasy git. No more than you could, Evans. We all know you've tried to help him. Help him be different. But, he is what he is. Evil. Like all Slytherins." said James, casting a dark glance over at Nagini's back.

Lily sniffed haltingly. Then, she looked at James. Poignantly, she asked him, "And Sirius isn't? They seemed to be equally matched, in case you didn't notice. That fire hex was horrible he wanted to burn him alive?" She started crying in earnest.

"Lily, he was just defending himself," commented Remus quietly. "Anyone would have done the same," he added pointedly.

"But not everyone would have known how to do it, Remus!" she said imploringly.

"Not everyone was up against an embryonic Death Eater, Lily!" raged James.

At the mention of 'Death Eater', Nagini swiftly made for the door.

"Hey, Lestrangle!" It was Potter. "You wait a moment!" he commanded arrogantly, moving towards her.

Remus tried to stop him. He said, "James don't you don't need to..."

Ignoring Remus' attempted intervention, James spelled out, "Just to make it clear to you. If you try any underhanded Dark hexes on our friend here, I'll make sure, personally, that you regret it the rest of your miserable Slytherin life."

Nagini looked around at his entourage: Lupin, Pettigrew, Dearborn and Evans, sizing them all up. She couldn't let Potter have the last word. She took a step towards him. "Personally, Potter? You mean one-on-one, just you and I?" Affectedly, she fluttered her eyelashes at him.

James grimaced. She was taunting him, egging him on with her look.

Enjoying his look of repugnance, she continued smoothly, "But that's not your style, is it? Won't you wet your pants, without the others around to back you up?" Then, before he could retort, she lashed out, "You Gryffindor coward!"

Incensed, James whipped out his wand. Remus jumped in between them, grabbing James by his upper-arms and holding him back. He warned, "It's what she wants. Don't! She wants you..."

"That's right, listen to Lupin," Nagini cut in, "he is the brightest of your lot." Then, she smiled at Remus. "But, believe me, Lupin, Potter's not what I want. You, on the other hand..."

At her last comment, he turned half-way to face her. Remus and Nagini's eyes met. Her comment to him wasn't at all antagonistic, nor, as he held her gaze, even ambiguous. Her bright yellow eyes were searching his creamy brown ones with a secretive smile. A caressing, allusive invitation in their golden orbs.

Experience had taught Remus well not to trust surface impressions, definitely not to trust Slytherins. Rationally, he was telling himself she was capable of anything, knowing she was a notorious Lestrangle, knowing they were the finalists in this futile competition. He was telling himself that her look was but a coy disguise, an amusing, deceptive whim of hers to throw him off-guard. It was a mere tactic to set him up, to lower his defences and, no doubt, to humiliate him as he had never been humiliated before.

She broke eye contact with him, swirling around to the exit. Turning back, with a last taunt directed to James, she said, "See you around Potty-face, of course, with your pathetic minions in tow behind you, to clean up, after I'm finished with you!" With that, she swept out of the room.

James was furious. "Pettigrew! Lupin, let's go!"

Remus held his grip on James, not budging. "Prongs, stop! Let it go let her go. She's just trying to get us all worked up for nothing."

"Nothing?!" yelled James. "Sirius is in the hospital ward, cut up, by the likes of her, in case you've already forgotten! Whose side are you on? What has the skanky Slytherin tart charmed you out of your senses already?"

"James," Remus said quietly, controlling his rearing anger with disciplined force. "As you've pointed out, Sirius is badly hurt. I think we should all calm down, get our rucksacks, and go to the ward to check on him."

"I agree," piped in Alice Dearborn.

Lily also joined in with Alice to encourage the change of focus. She coaxed, "James, what's important is Sirius. Let's be on our way."

"We can always get Lestrage later!" Peter offered eagerly.

Still fuming, but being soothed by Lily's demure eyes, James grabbed his bag in silent compliance, and they all slowly made their way out of the Dark Arts room and headed to the hospital ward.

On arriving, Madam Pomfrey curtly greeted them, stopping them in their tracks. "You young people can go straight back to your common rooms; both boys are recovering well. Nothing permanently damaged. Both will be out and back in classes in a day or so; at least, they'll be out in time enough to enjoy the holidays. In the meantime, there will be absolutely no visiting, no further provocations from either side. Thank you very much! Off you go!" Shooing them all away, it was her final word.

Disappointed, and still disgruntled, they complied. Having heard the good news relaxed them a bit. Sauntering down the hallway, they were now able to more calmly discuss the recent events of the class as they made their way back towards the Gryffindor tower.

Three days later, the Dark Arts class had a solemn air about it. Being the last class of the term, everyone should have festively been looking forward to the end-of-term feast and going home for the holidays. Instead, everyone was morosely waiting for something dreadful to happen. The usual taunting and carousing atmosphere was non-existent. Resignedly, the students watched Professor Merrythought, who was silently pacing around the classroom, absorbed in contemplation.

Also, unexpectedly, the Headmaster, Dumbledore himself, had come to the class. He sat a little off, on one side, of the front row.

Seated, everyone patiently waited as Professor Merrythought slowly continued to stroll up and down in front of the class, immersed in some kind of rigorous dialogue with herself. But finally, she stopped, composed herself, and looked out at the class. Clearing her throat, she said, "Given the current events, I had wished to dismiss with the competition."

At this announcement, random protests piped up sporadically across the room.

Ignoring them, Merrythought continued, "We can safely ascertain that both Mr Lupin and Miss Lestrage are equally tied for their talent."

James Potter snorted loudly, and mumblings of disagreement were heard from various Slytherins.

Sternly, she continued, "However, the Headmaster feels we must finish what we've started, and he has kindly consented to help oversee and control the final pairing.

"Lupin, Lestrage, come forward!" she called out.

They came forward and distanced themselves, taking their places, seemingly regarding each other respectfully.

"You will strictly follow my instructions, step-by-step," Merrythought continued authoritatively.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. An amused look shone over his glasses, very intently.

"We'll start on simple hexes, and then, we'll work our way up," she instructed. "Hex one: disarming your opponent."

Remus and Nagini bowed to each other. Then, they each shifted into place, posing in stance, with wands held up high.

But Nagini was the first to act. *"Expelliarmus!"* she cried.

"Protego!" Remus countered swiftly.

Coruscated flashes of lights continuously bounced off of both wands, as both hexed and shielded each other synchronistically.

"Very good. Now, remember, control yourselves!" sang out Merrythought. "Offensive-Defensive spells!"

"Stupefy!"

"Impedimenta!"

Hexes continued to shoot out. Each one clashed in mid-air as it met against the counter-curse blocking it. Both were evenly hexing and shielding, back and forth, working up a hard sweat; drops of perspiration were visibly seen running down their foreheads and around their temples. Regardless of the apparent increasing strenuousness, they both seemed determined to continue indefinitely.

"Perhaps, we should jump to the main task which you had in mind, Professor Merrythought," suggested Dumbledore, temporarily halting the duelling. "I have a feeling we could be here all night, and we do have a feast to attend to." His clear blue eyes sparkled knowingly.

"Yes. Right then. Let's step it up a bit. Wandless Transfiguration," she announced.

Remus eyes steeled themselves on Nagini. *Here is the real challenge*, he thought to himself. His adrenaline started to kick into a higher gear. His eyes were dark and flashing, boring through Nagini's. Her eyes were like a beacon drawing him in, but he wouldn't be hoodwinked. Not by her. Not by anybody.

Not waiting for Merrythought, he initiated an attack by sending a silent incantation towards Nagini: *Transformiabus!"*

Caught off-guard, Nagini was a second late to shield herself. She felt the hex hit her. And, in a blink, Remus sent yet another hex on top of that one, hitting her full centre. She staggered backwards. She started to feel a tingling in her feet and legs. A bole-like layer started to appear on her shoes, her legs cementing to the floor.

Her mind raced. *He's too quick, inhuman reflexes like an animal*, she intuited. Her anger flaring up, she thought to herself, *That's it I'll see how his 'animal instincts' like this!*

Foregoing Merrythought's instructions, whipping her wand up, pointing it at him, Nagini whispered fiercely the incantation, *'Revelio Animagus! Revelio Animagus!'* She repeated it ferociously.

The incantation hit Lupin hard. He froze, waiting for any sign of Transfiguration to start. He knew the hex wouldn't produce what she intended but which effect would it have on him? He waited, the seconds seeming like minutes. The hexed sensation from the spell didn't materialise. But then, Lupin's face took on a feral look, as a clandestine realisation flashed across his face. His anger was unleashed; he retaliated viciously with a non-verbal hex, simultaneously making a fierce slash with his wand at her.

His hex hit Nagini, knocking her entire body back. As her legs had petrified together, she keeled over on the floor backward, her head popping hard on the floor. She watched, in throbbing pain, as this hex of Lupin's started changing the rhytidome layer that had begun to form around her lower limbs from the former hex. She felt her

entire body go weak and felt as if she was sinking into the floor. She was astonished as she saw her lower legs, which had been meshed together, mutate into a jelly-like substance.

Professor Merrythought was screaming, "Stop it! No wands! No wands!"

But Remus, even though he had, by now, fallen down, was sending yet another hex, which hit Nagini detrimentally.

At first, she thought it was simply a Stinging Hex, as it burned her, head-to-toe, in prickling agony. But, as her wand fell out of her hand, her vision started changing. Through blurring vision, she saw her fingers webbing together; then, they started to shrivel up. The pain of her bones disappearing caused her to cry out in a blood-curdling scream. Her skin was simultaneously turning purple and black; she felt her whole torso wavering uncontrollably, turning into one massive lump. An excruciating ache in her head was making her see black and green spots burst around her.

She felt herself slipping into darkness. Before she completely blacked out, she found her eyes finding Remus' or, rather, what used to be Lupin's for a wolverine creature was floating at her where he had been.

The room had erupted in panic and screams; students were fleeing left and right.

In the midst of it all, Dumbledore had stealthily walked to the creature that had been Remus, seeming to hold him at bay, with his fingers held out in a horned position.

Dumbledore said quietly, "Galatea, I believe Poppy is needed, yet again."

Visitors Bearing Gifts

Chapter 3 of 13

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Chapter Three: Visitors Bearing Gifts

After a few days of bed-rest, the privacy screens around the hospital beds were partially removed, and a beaming, bustling Madam Pomfrey smiled broadly at Nagini and Remus. "I'm happy to announce this morning you'll both be receiving the best medicine there is visitors!"

Almost imperceptibly, Nagini and Remus' eyes met, and oddly enough, it seemed they were thinking the same thing, "*Who in the hell would be visiting us?*" True, it was still the holidays, but Christmas was technically over, and the second term would soon begin. Hogwarts remained empty, except for a few staff members and house-elves; Pomfrey had stayed out of professional obligations and dedication, of course, particularly because of the peculiar circumstances and special patient care needed.

Neither Nagini nor Remus were feeling quite up to seeing anybody else; they had renewed strength enough to do the basics of sitting up, eating and washing. Also, both of them shared murky family backgrounds and had rarely ever had visitors or received any sort of correspondence.

"Madam Pomfrey, who is coming to visit?" asked Remus, slightly concerned.

"Well, your visitors, you'll be happy to know, Mr Lupin, are already here some of your housemates. I've almost had to cast a Shield Charm to hold them back!"

As she was saying this, four figures appeared in the entranceway of the Hospital Wing, and a polite voice rose above the jostling laughter, asking, "Madam Pomfrey, may we?"

"Yes, come on, come! He's ready for you. But mind you, no aggravating the patients either of them!"

"Us? Aggravating invalids?" enquired Sirius Black.

The sound of Sirius' voice made Nagini cringe, and her strength depleted upon seeing the traipsing foursome clambering down the hospital aisle towards Lupin's bed: Alice Dearborn, Lily Evans, James Potter and Sirius Black.

His eyes dancing with mirth, a joyful Remus asked, "Where's Peter?"

"Still at home, being disgustingly mollycoddled and spoiled, and loving every minute of it, the pampered git," said James, grinning. "He sends his greetings."

Lily was giving Remus a big affectionate hug, while Alice placed some wrapped Christmas presents on his side table. James and Sirius were jostling each other, each competing to show off the most.

In between dodging James' pushes and arsing around, Sirius said, "Let's have a look at you, mate." Giving James a final shove back, signalling the end of their mutual horse-playing, Sirius gave Remus a sober look, taking in the angry cuts and clawed-at raw scratches that he knew hadn't been from the duelling class incident, and sauntered closer to the bedside. "Blimey, Mooney! What an improvement much better than before," Sirius wisecracked.

"Thank you, Padfoot," responded Remus, amused. "You seem to be back in shape, at any rate."

"Oh yeah, mended all up! Ready for action, again! Snivellus didn't even leave a mark," grinned Sirius, mischievously, waggling his eyebrows. "Maybe next time? Can't wait." Hoping his flippant lie was glossed over, Sirius bit his inner cheek to maintain his façade as a dark flash crossed his eyes; Severus Snape's hexes had left deep, irremovable scars on his chest, and Sirius was burning with revenge.

While the friends were gregariously reuniting with each other and gushing with holiday stories, Nagini was sitting on the edge of her bed, making to stand up, and she called out, "Madam Pomfrey could you please... the privacy screen?" Impatiently judging that Pomfrey wasn't around, Nagini attempted to stand up and do it herself.

Sirius spotted her and swaggered over to in front of Nagini's bed. "Cripes! What have we here?"

Nagini and Sirius glared at each other.

"Need some help, Lestrangle?" offered Sirius to Nagini, but there was a calculating, challenging look in his eyes.

"From you? Never!" She spat out.

Sirius grinned nastily, his dark eyes flashing over her, relishing Nagini's anger and apparent weakened state.

Pomfrey suddenly reappeared and replaced the privacy screen halfway. "Now, Mr Black, I've thoroughly explained the conditions of visiting. You swore to be on your best behaviour, and if this is your best, I'll have to ask you to leave. No unsettling the other patient!"

"Is there a problem, Madam Pomfrey?" came a stern, crisp enquiry.

Everyone turned to look at who was asking the question and found themselves staring at Lucius Malfoy.

The rowdy group of Lupin's visitors hushed themselves upon seeing the unexpected figure.

Lucius strode loftily down the aisle towards them. "Hmnn... let us see," he said, glancing over the group. "Potter, Black and," Lucius paused seeming thoroughly delighted. "Miss Dearborn! *Alice*, isn't it? Betrothed to Longbottom? Lovely. So nice to see you again." Then, Lucius deliberately eyed Remus and Lily up and down, but didn't acknowledge them by name. Just a forced, curled smile froze on his face, and then, Lucius abruptly turned around to Pomfrey and enquired, "Where is Miss Lestrangle?"

"She's over here, Mr Malfoy," said Madam Pomfrey, indicating behind the opposite screen. "Congratulations on your recent appointment as a new governor of Hogwarts. Such an honour!"

Turning his back on the distasteful group, Lucius ostentatiously crossed around the partial privacy screen to where Nagini was lying down. He paused to turn back to Madam Pomfrey and replied, "Thank you." Lucius glanced at Sirius Black and James Potter. "Yes, well, as a new governor," he projected loudly, making sure Black and company heard his announcement clearly, "I've taken it upon myself to introduce some new reforms for more effective quality control here in Hogwarts. I have some issues to discuss with the Headmaster, particularly new proposals for enrollment criteria." Lucius smiled smugly. "Also, my brother-in-law asked me to visit our dear Miss Lestrangle here."

Sirius muttered something under his breath.

In a flash, Lucius whirled around to him, and enquired, "Yes, Mr Black? You wish to say something?"

They simultaneously glanced towards Pomfrey and back again at each other; both were barely covering their vexed states of being. Lily reached out and touched Sirius' arm. At her touch, Sirius turned halfway back to his friends.

"I thought not," added Lucius curtly and turned again towards Nagini, dismissive to all the others.

"We've met before, although it has been a few years. You've quite changed since the last time I saw you. You're a young woman now."

Nagini cast her eyes downward, unable to hold his gaze. She felt uncomfortable. It was enough being in a hospital bed, but Lucius Malfoy's presence renewed some distant memories of her past: vague events and shadows connected to her childhood. Most of them unpleasant.

"Madam Pomfrey, may I beg your leniency and allow me to put a Silencing Charm around Nagini and myself? I have some private family matters to discuss with her on behalf of the Lestrangle family, that, um, outside ears should not be privy to," Lucius informed the Matron.

"But of course, Mr Malfoy. Here, let me put the privacy screen fully into place." And with a wave of her wand, she shifted it to entirely block the view from the others and walked away.

Lucius slowly pulled out his wand. Then, with a quick flick, he placed the Silencing Charm around them.

Nagini struggled to push herself up against her pillow to sit a little higher, feeling she needed to be on guard for something. Again, the ominous feeling reared up. "I'm a little indisposed, Mr Malfoy."

"Naturally. Please, Miss Lestrangle, as you were. I understand you've been through a rather complicated recovery period. Just relax." Lucius looked intently at her. "I'll be brief. I'm here on behalf of your relative, Rodolphus. He is ...*unavailable* presently and couldn't make a visit." Lucius walked closer to the edge of the bed, within an arm's length of Nagini. "Being in-laws of sorts, besides being a close friend to Rodolphus long before our mutual marriages with the Black sisters, he and I are the closest confidants of one other. Therefore, you and I can be, in turn, as comfortable as family with one another as well."

He tried to assure her with a smile, but it didn't reach his cold steely eyes, which were keenly set upon her.

If you're so close to Rodolphus, then you know that he's all but disowned me, thought Nagini, remaining silent, waiting for him to continue.

"I've brought a present for you," announced Lucius.

Before she could think twice, she blurted out, "Why?" After seeing Lucius' askance expression, Nagini felt compelled to confess, "I've never gotten a present I mean, since I was a child, it's just..." A sudden flash of bitterness scorched within her. Since her parent's death, Rodolphus hadn't once shown any nicety towards her, let alone given her a gift. Immediately, she was all the more sullenly suspicious and wary of Lucius.

Instinctively smooth, Lucius replied, "A beautiful young witch such as yourself should be inundated incessantly with presents."

He seemed to be alluding to something else; Nagini felt her face glow warm from blushing and looked away from him again. Lucius stood, unmoving; he had the unnerving demeanour of expecting a reaction from her.

"You're very..." Nagini couldn't think of what to say the *correct* thing to say; but she knew out of etiquette, Lucius expected some response. He was a school governor, after all; she had to say something. Searchingly, she finally replied, "You're very...*kind*, Mr Malfoy. I'm not beautiful. I know I must look a horrible fright."

"You are nevertheless enticing, Miss Lestrangle." he softly whispered. Enjoying her blushing, her embarrassment by his compliment, Lucius continued, "I can be generous, my dear girl, very generous, but very few people would ever call me *kind*."

They looked at each other in an intensifying silence. Then, Lucius spoke first. "You'll find I have quite an eye for rare and precious *objects*, Miss Lestrangle. Flaws and marks do not deter me from recognising and fully appreciating uniqueness and the true, pure genuine original. On the contrary, marks such as *bruises* and *scars* can enhance the original's worth. Take people, for example; scars are an outward sign of irreversible passion; the beloved item is marked with the highest regard, enhancing its value."

Nagini could say nothing to this; indeed, what was Lucius expecting her to say? Her own body still ebbed with muscular aches, the swelling and burning from the disastrous hexing at Remus' hands. She reflected on what she knew and remembered about Lucius Malfoy. She recalled Lucius' delicate, pristine wife, Narcissa, but this only served to muddle Nagini's thoughts further. Narcissa was the archetype of the manic pureblood taste in witches, which Nagini knew Lucius trophied. Her youngest uncle, Rodolphus, had married Narcissa's older sister, Bellatrix. Together, the two couples set a new precedent for all future acceptable marriages and pairings in the

clandestine world of the new Dark Lord's followers. Purebloods, and only purebloods, would be allowed to engender from these selected couplings.

Nagini shuddered from the remembrance of fanatical rantings and ravings that resounded in her memories from her times at the Lestrange Manor or number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Memories of the vivid descriptions and images of graphic, violent details of torture done to Muggles, Mudbloods, and even various half-bloods and fallen purebloods, caused acidic bile to rise in her throat. Lucius Malfoy had been a part of all that. She just wanted Malfoy to leave. Immediately. She winced as a shot of pain seared through her back muscles, causing her to slowly undulate in agony.

Noting her discomfort with a cryptic smile, Lucius took one step nearer towards the head of the bed.

"Speaking of objects, I have here the gift for you." Catching Nagini's concerned expression, Lucius clarified, "Not from me, but from Rodolphus. It was your birthday quite recently ... just last week, wasn't it? It's not every day a young witch comes of age." He took out a small, silver-wrapped parcel from inside his cloak. He smiled beguilingly, saying, "And this, I'm to understand, is a special family heirloom, my dear, left by your dearly departed parents to be given to you when you turned seventeen."

Nagini was transfixed. She looked at him with eyes wide, and whispered, "How - how can this be? No one has ever mentioned it before..."

"Then, I'm satisfied that it will indeed be a real surprise for you," he smugly reassured her. Lucius handed it to her delicately, letting his hand catch and linger on hers for a second longer than necessary.

Ignoring his continuing touch, and slowly pulling her hand away to unwrap the gift, Nagini saw a small antique wooden box. It looked slightly charred on one side and had been indented on the other. She made to flip it open, but it was sealed shut. In an instant, Nagini understood. Surely Rodolphus had tried to pry it open by all means. Unresponsive to both magical and non-magical forces, the little octangular box had remained locked.

Lucius saw that she understood the real reason of his visit. Smoothly glossing over Nagini's comprehension of the situation, he said, "Rodolphus asked me to witness your opening of the gift ... to be certain of your delight."

"And the contents," she bitterly added.

"Yes," he softly hissed.

Nagini's anger wavered through, feeling her chest pulsate. Ever since her parents', Rolph and Portentia Lestrange, violent, public deaths when she was eleven, she had been left in the guardianship hands of Rodolphus, the youngest of the three Lestrange brothers. Having freshly wedded Bellatrix Black at the time, Rodolphus was judged by the Wizengamot as the most *stable* and 'settled down' of the Lestranges. Thereafter, Nagini had been scrutinised, every item in the family's vault itemised and spoken for. Every Galleon and Knut's worth had been counted, noted and then appropriated by Rodolphus.

As a child, Nagini hadn't minded. Indeed, monetary concerns had been beyond her concern or comprehension. The need to be safe had been, predominantly, her main awareness and worry. She had been grateful for the daily necessities provided to her by Hogwarts, and again during summer holidays at Orion and Walburga Black's home at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

During the year following her parents' deaths, a legal battle was fought behind Nagini's back, between the Lestranges and her mother's family the Belbys. The Wizengamot eventually ruled in favour of the Lestranges, despite pleas by Marcus and Damocles Belby that their older sister had been relentlessly abused and violently coerced by 'that insane Lestrange' (as they derogatorily referred to her husband, Rolph). Portentia had surely reacted out of self-defence, but, to no avail. Hard evidence and further conjecture of irreparable harm pointed the finger of guilt towards her, forcing the jury to hand over Nagini, solely, to Rodolphus.

The dubious circumstances and bitter accusations which presumably led to the final deadly conflict between Rolph and Portentia were disregarded and overruled; Portentia was guilty of using the Unforgivable Killing Curse on her husband, Rolph.

When Portentia took her own life, she succeeded in escaping arrest, prosecution and the ultimate punishment of the Dementor's kiss. The scandal had resounded for years throughout the Wizarding community.

Years later, Nagini's tragic childhood had been all but forgotten by the Wizarding masses. Public attention now focused on a political climate which bubbled with rumours; a New Order was emerging, led by a clandestine Dark Lord beginning to covertly attract followers from the echelons of pureblood circles and all corners of the Ministry.

Of course, Nagini had known from the time of her parents' deaths (a grey, blurred and volatile period for her) that she was strictly forbidden to make any contact with her mother's relatives, the Belbys. She inured herself to stop asking after them until, years ago, she ceased to acknowledge their existence. This act was fully reciprocated by the Belbys.

Due to Nagini's pedigree of pureblood status, Walburga Black had ostentatiously stepped in to offer help *incorrecting* Nagini's assumed dysfunctional upbringing, relieving Rodolphus and Bellatrix to be free in their new important roles in the New Order being brought about by the revered Lord Voldemort. The Lestrange and Black families being closely tied, as well as having two sons of the same age, Sirius and Regulus, Walburga Black was eager to participate in a manner befitting her generation and abilities. So she proposed Nagini to be sent to her during the summer months for *moulding* and Walburga's very own special mentoring. *"Even though she has been precariously brought up, she is a pureblood, nonetheless. And still reclaimable. There are so precious few of us; we must save as many as we can, instruct them in the old ways, as well as the new. She's not to be blamed for the wayward atrociousness of Portentia Belby."* Walburga could never bring herself to refer to Portentia as a Black; it gave her an immense sense of wicked pleasure that she would now be given full reign to shape Portentia's offspring in her image.

As Nagini brooded about Rodolphus Lestrange and his greed, beyond avarice, and how it forever surrounded her, she pondered, *the greedy bastard, can't he at least let me have one private thing for myself? And his lackey here, Malfoy, is to report back to him the value of the gift? It's disgusting!*

She glanced at Lucius, who stood patiently and seemed to be comfortable enough to wait indefinitely for any response.

Well, the sooner I open it, the sooner the creep leaves. He can slither back to Rodolphus, and both of them can sod off forever.

Aware that Lucius was taking in her comprehension of the situation, as well as her growing enmity to his presence, Nagini looked at the little box again and rubbed the centre nub sticking out at the front side. A design appeared on the wooden box, timeworn and faded. Nagini could scarcely make out the ancient ornate pattern, so she focused intently upon the delicate swirls and serpentine heads.

Intuitively, she lovingly hissed, "Open for me." The seal was dispelled, and the lid popped open.

Lucius' eyes grew wide, astonished, for Nagini's request had been in Parseltongue.

Lucius watched in silence as Nagini opened the top and exclaimed an appreciative, *'Oh!'* She turned the box halfway so that he could see the proof. "It's a ring... A Slytherin design an emblem of sorts."

"How very nice. Let's see how it looks on that lovely hand of yours."

Nagini hesitated; she didn't want to wear the ring straight away. *"It's a personal gift,"* she thought, wanting to savour the moment in privacy. She knew Rodolphus would have suspected the contents of the box to have hidden magical powers or another significance. If that were the case, it seemed all the more meant for her, and her alone.

Impatiently, Lucius prompted, "Well, put it on!"

"No."

Lucius blinked and took a second to think about her stubborn, disagreeable nature. After a few seconds, he said, slowly, "Miss Lestrangle, let me propose something, hypothetically, to you." Then smiling, amused by something known only to him, he continued, "Either you can be a *good girl*, and put it on yourself; or," Lucius dropped his façade and hardened his tone, "you can be *forced* to do it." Lucius paused a second to let what he was saying sink in. "And after that happens, curiously enough, you'll have no recollections whatsoever that you were ever even forced, which would be a pity. It might be a pleasurable experience you'd care to remember." He resumed his cool stare at her.

Nagini mouth dropped open, shocked; she couldn't believe that he, a governor of the school, would dare threaten *Imperio* and *Obliviate* her so blatantly. She was horrified by his detached, cold manner. But, by the look he was giving her, his wand ready in hand, she knew Lucius would do it.

Regardless, a wave of indignation flushed through her. Her righteous stubbornness prevailed; she couldn't give in. Wouldn't do it. "*How dare you?*" she thought, giving him a challenging look.

Irrked by her silent refusal, "*Someone needs to be put in her place. Someone needs to be taught a little lesson,*" thought Lucius, as he flashed his wand upward, flicked it in the blink of an eye, and before Nagini knew what had happened, she felt her throat constricting, and she started gagging, gasping for breath. Her hands reached up grasping at her throat as if doing so would allow oxygen in. Then, just as quickly, her hands dropped against her will, and slowly a grotesque, forced power manoeuvred one hand to open, and the other hand to pull out the ring from the box and slowly place it on her other middle finger.

With the deed done, Nagini fell back onto her pillows, her chest rising and falling, breathing deeply for air.

"Good girl," commented Lucius. He bent and grabbed her wrist, assessing the heirloom on her hand, and waiting as if anticipating something to magically happen. "Nothing," he said to himself quietly. Then, dropping her hand and looking hard at Nagini, he informed her, "How very disappointing."

Nagini didn't look at him. Couldn't look at him. She was still trying to formulate what had just happened. She felt nauseous with the overwhelming realisation that the bastard had actually *Imperioed* her. Her heart was racing, now terrified that Lucius would further strip any memory of his filthy, underhanded actions from her mind. *No, leave me that, leave me my memory, you shit!*, she thought anxiously to herself.

As if reading her thoughts, or perhaps from his plethora of past experiences, she heard Lucius whispering, "No, my dear. This time, I want you to remember. I want you to think about the possible consequences of your being 'naughty', and the next time, make a different choice."

She felt him move away from her bed and then heard Lucius say, "I'm going to leave you now, so you can think about what you've done wrong. And yes, there will be a next time. I have a feeling, very soon."

She heard Lucius make a rustling movement and then his footsteps walking further away.

The hub of sounds from Remus' friends and Lucius' parting words to Pomfrey were registering distantly, but Nagini was lost in her thoughts, trying to think rationally through the humiliation and shame which was magnifying her nerves. Slowly, she began to sob; then, uncontrollably, feeling violated and helpless, she turned on her side, squeezing the mattress and burrowing her face in her pillow, as the tears poured silently out.

"Hello, Nagini? Remus asked us to bring this over; he wants to share this with you ..." Lily's sweet voice stopped abruptly in surprise, as she caught sight of Nagini muffling her sobs.

Startled by the unexpectedness presence of someone, Nagini looked up and snapped abruptly, "What?" Looking at the two Gryffindor witches, Lily and Alice, standing and staring at her, she lashed out, "Just leave me alone!"

Alice and Lily knew something unpleasant had happened. They had a general aversion to Slytherins, but the big-hearted Gryffindors couldn't control themselves to offer help when needed. Undeterred by Nagini's rudeness, Lily asked, "Are you all right?"

Nagini refused to acknowledge either of them, more out of shame than dislike.

"Perhaps, we should just leave her," whispered Alice, trying to nudge Lily back.

Determined, Lily approached Nagini's bed slowly, and said, "Here. Remus wants you to have this. I'll just put it on your table."

Nagini couldn't even respond to her. She just wanted to be left alone. Ignoring Lily, she rolled over, turning her back to them.

She heard Lily place the little packet down and both of the girls shuffle quietly away.

Then Madam Pomfrey announced visiting time was over and kindly but firmly shooed the Gryffindors away.

Nagini was deep in thought, replaying what had happened, while gently tracing her fingers over the elegant Slytherin design of her ring. *A family heirloom... I wonder if it was my mother's, or grandmother's; if so, which one?* She lightly caressed the ring, which seemed to have a calming effect on her. An overwhelming melancholic yearning took over her to know more about the history of the heirloom, and the witch behind it.

But Nagini's bittersweet brooding was interrupted by Madam Pomfrey moving the privacy screens, having brought lunch in. "Now that you've both had a bit of company to sociably warm you up, you're ready to have lunch together. You two should keep your strength up, and tomorrow you'll progress to having lunch in the main hall, as well as be able to be back in your own common rooms by evening. I'll have you both in shipshape condition by the term's beginning; nothing less will do!"

Madam Pomfrey chipperly placed their meal trays beside their beds and left the two of them to have lunch.

Nagini slowly picked at her food, still feeling slightly queasy, while Remus dug into his meal, eating with a rapacious appetite.

Stealing glances, Nagini watched Remus from under her eyelashes. She was suddenly touched by how he was relishing his lunch, as if he'd never eaten anything so good as hospital food. There was also a carefree air about him that brought a faint, sad smile to Nagini's lips. She couldn't help feel that there was something strangely heartening about Remus, while at the same time pensively sad. A wistful melancholic aura. "*Looking at him, you'd never think he was capable of doing any Dark Arts,* she thought to herself, "*let alone be brilliant in it.*" She reflected on their duelling challenge. "*He must have needed to know, to be so skilled, to defend himself, protect himself for some reason...*"

"I'm sorry," she heard herself blurt out loudly.

Remus stopped shovelling food in his mouth and looked up at her. "What?" he asked, swallowing down the remainder of what he had chewed.

"I'm sorry," Nagini repeated. She started panicking. *What am I saying? Why am I saying this?* But feeling an unburdening, a release, she spilled out, "I'm sorry I did this to you."

"Did what?"

"Your condition!" Then, she started babbling, "You see, I can't remember what I did after I ... I know I blacked out; I mean, I can't remember further what I did to you. How I

hexed you cutting you up like that." Being in an unusually maudlin state, Nagini burst into tears and shoved the food tray table to the side. Throwing herself back down, laying on one side, she grabbed her pillow again and started squeezing it. *That damn slimey Malfoy unnerving me*, she couldn't get the image of Lucius' smug, satisfied look out of her mind. And now, this uncontrollable wave of guilt about Remus was welling up, consuming her.

"Self-inflicted," a voice said near her.

She jumped, startled, and looked up. It was Remus. He had crossed over, standing beside her bed.

"Please, calm yourself. Don't cry. Don't cry for me." There was a detectable harshness to Remus' low steady voice. "You're not to blame... well, not directly. I'm used to my condition."

"Your condition?" Nagini was confused. *What was he talking about? Were all the snide rumours and remarks her Slytherin classmates had made about Lupin really true? Especially what Severus had shared with her?*

"I'm not sure I'm ready to hear this, from Lupin himself of all people," she thought, as she looked at him, her eyes falling quickly over his body, catching the barely healed scars traced over his face and other visible skin not covered by his pyjamas and robe. Remus' closeness to her allowed her to distinguish other scratched and barely healed marks that seemed older than others. Nagini could also sharply detect Lupin's soft, musky scent. Pleasing and calming. She sighed heavily, momentarily confused and embarrassed by her awareness of and attraction to Remus' close, physical proximity to her, but was determined to explain, "Look, Lupin, it's just that things got out of hand when we duelled, and I'm sorry... I've never duelled someone like that before. In that way. You're highly skilled and I... I have a problem with my anger... I just see red sometimes..." *And yes, I've sometimes believed what Severus has implied about you; so much that I lost control and reacted as if I were fighting a wild, magical beast, not a highly accomplished young wizard,* she wanted to add, but didn't.

"It's all right, Nagini. I wouldn't have expected anything less from you." At the sound of her first name being used in such a soft, kind way, Nagini looked Remus directly in the eye. His warm brown orbs gave out an encompassing glow. She noticed that they were large, dilated. Remus smiled and said, "If you haven't noticed, you're in the hospital ward, as well. And, if you can remember, I hexed you first. I didn't go soft on you. I thought about it, you being, you know, a *girl* and all." His eyes were slightly dancing, his smile broadening into a charming grin. Nagini couldn't help herself; his teasing and good-naturedness was infectious. She felt her facial muscles hurting from a smile that had spontaneously crossed her face in response to Remus.

"A girl? You mean a *witch*? You're full of surprises aren't you, Lupin? I thought you'd be beyond being a chauvinistic wizard." They both started softly laughing.

Suddenly, Remus gave a pained yell; it seemed his legs gave out underneath him; he went into spasm and collapsed to the floor.

Nagini instinctively jumped out of bed, forgetting her own weakness and aches, and crouched down beside him, trying to brace and support his head and upper torso against her. "Lupin! Lupin, what is it?" she cried.

"Severe muscle cramps charley horses, spasms..." he sporadically eked out.

"Charley horses?" She asked, confused. Losing her kneeling position balance, she plopped down on her arse, but maintained supporting Remus upwards against her chest.

"It's a Muggle expression severe muscle spasms," he gasped out, strained. Then, he stopped, grimaced, inhaling his breath sharply, seized by some other excruciating pain.

"Madam Pomfrey!" Nagini screamed out, her clasped arms tightening around Remus protectively. "Madam Pomfrey!"

What seemed like minutes went by; Remus taking sharp, shallow breaths, his eyes clenched together; his face in a frozen moue of pain. Nagini held him in her arms, watching him, only aware of both of their laboured breathing. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Slowly, Remus' face started to relax. It seemed that the seizure was ebbing away.

Finally, Madam Pomfrey's voice was heard, "Goodness gracious, what have we here?" As she ran over to the two figures on the floor, a sharp, dangerous look crossed Pomfrey's face. Greatly vexed, Pomfrey fiercely accused, "What did you do to him, Lestrage?!"

"Nothing." Nagini's voice faltered, shocked by Pomfrey's tone, as well as being truly bewildered. "Nothing. I... He... Remus crossed over to my bed, and then, he had an attack muscle spasms - 'charley horses'..."

"Charley horses? What are you babbling about, Lestrage?" enquired Madam Pomfrey, tersely. Getting no immediate answer from the young witch, Pomfrey huffily levitated Remus back to his bed. She then went back to Nagini, who was still confused by what had just happened, and told her, "Here, let me help you up."

As Pomfrey professionally assisted her to stand up, Nagini urged, "The 'charley horses', they're something Muggle-related, a Muggle condition." Nagini thought this would help clarify everything.

"A Muggle condition?" snorted Pomfrey. "Get yourself back into bed, Lestrage. If I didn't know better, I'd say you're slightly delirious. We'll get to the bottom of this, later." Pomfrey snapped Lupin's privacy screen back in front of his bed and then disappeared behind it.

Nagini slowly sat on the edge of her bed, thinking about what had just happened. Again her eyes filled with tears, which didn't upset her as much as the odd feeling that burned and ebbed inside her chest. She saw Remus' face, contorted in pain, scarred by multiple scratches and cuts; his body convulsed in a petrified seizure. Nagini felt as if her heart would burst out of her chest.

She glanced over at the little wrapped package Lily Evans had left on her table from Remus. Timidly, she reached out and placed it in her lap, untying the little string and unwrapping it. There was a small basket of what looked like assorted wrapped and packaged delicacies inside it. Nagini took one out and peered at it closer.

The pentagonal cardboard box was intriguing; she opened the top part ever so slowly. She first pulled out a collectible card inside with the Headmaster Albus Dumbledore's name on it and informative tidbits of his past deeds; but his picture was momentarily blank. *That's odd*, she thought, turning it over and then back again. She placed it on the side-table, and then eagerly took out the sweet. It was a Chocolate Frog. *How strange*, she observed, looking at it curiously. Nagini had never eaten one before, never been allowed to go to the 'infamous' Honeydukes in Hogsmeade that all the other students always raved about. A single tear fell down her cheek and reached her lips. But her lips, this time, were gently smiling.

Thanks to Remus, it would be her first her first time to taste a delectable Chocolate Frog from the reputable sweetshop. Holding onto the little animated chocolate frog, Nagini took a slow, sensuous bite of it, savouring the creamy exquisite sweetness. Relishing this sensation, Nagini thought of Remus Lupin.

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Chocolate-Frog Girl or Sugar-Quill Girl?

Chapter 4 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

Nagini breathed in deeply. The crisp cold air tasted so good after her convalescent period indoors. It was one of those clear wintry days with almost blinding sunlight. From where she was standing, atop the Astronomy Tower, Nagini felt that she was in a completely different universe, on top of the world and one with the elements: herself and Remus.

She smiled shyly at the honeyed-haired Gryffindor Prefect, who was leaning against the tower's inner wall, gazing at Nagini with a soft curious expression.

Looking away from him, again focusing on the tree-lined hilltops, Nagini leaned on the opposite wall's railing and sighed contentedly. It was just as she had foreseen: she and Remus together here; now that her déjà vu had fulfilled itself, she knew that this particular precognitive vision would cease to occur. It was an encouraging sign. She had never felt so naturally exhilarated, so free, so... *happy*.

Lightly caressing her ring, Nagini reflected on how her recurring nightmares had lessened since receiving the heirloom gift, and the future visions that had flashed across her mind this past year of herself and Remus now made sense to her. She longed to share this part, her secret, with Remus, but knew how any reference to Divination would be misjudged. True Seeing and other powers associated with Seers were ridiculed and looked upon dubiously amongst the majority of the Wizarding world, this branch of magic being considered to be imprecise at best. Only those who possessed the power and a clandestine chosen few of them, controlled by the Ministry, understood it. *What would Remus think? If I were to tell him that I had seen us two here, before now, exactly as we are, what would he do? Laugh in disgust? Walk away in silence? I can just hear that odious berk, Sirius, and his hyena laughter.*

Nagini hesitated, unsure to speak about it or not. For she wasn't a pure Seer as her mother, Portentia, had been.

Nagini's dreams and visionary flashes had always been a source of self-doubt and stress. She was unable, every time, to re-direct her focus and concentration as her father had attempted to train her to do; only through Transfiguration and immersion in practical Dark Arts exercises could she overpower and distract the precognitive forces that would randomly flare up inside her, activating her Inner Eye sporadically.

When she was a child, as soon as she had displayed the first signs of future sight, her father, Rolph LeStrange, had attempted to put a stop to it, rigorously training the young six-year-old to redirect her energies to the other selected, more obscure skills and gifts she had been born with, relying on and exploring murky areas in the Dark Arts to dilute Nagini's powers. The severe redirection of her natural inclinations had been, at times, a painful experience, resulting in the stunting of her precognitive powers, as well as adding further fuel to the fire of the volatile relations between her parents. One tempestuous night, her mother had taken Nagini, and they had disappeared together, until her father, Rolph, had hunted them down...

Remus watched Nagini. He noted how she seemed to be struggling with herself, contemplating a matter of serious note; he started to say something, but then he was distracted by how the light fell upon her, how she smiled whenever she looked over at him. He still couldn't believe how she was responding to him, how he had been enjoying the company of a Nagini that no one else knew. She had dropped her guarded defensive airs, and Remus took that as an invitation to explore how far he could go, how many other unknown layers could be revealed.

Remus knew time was running out. For the first time, there was no Sirius or James around to discourage him the exhilaration of daring to come on to Nagini LeStrange, one of the Marauder's targeted 'enemies', coursed through his veins like fire. Nagini had haunted his thoughts even before the disastrous duelling day, but Remus could never have acted upon any precarious attraction he had for her; his condition, inferiority complex, and peer pressure had always kept him in check; let alone Sirius' and James' utter dominating influence on him. Had he dared to share even the slightest serious interest in Nagini to them, he would've been subjected to unrelenting goading and ridicule. Remus had already had enough of that to last a lifetime.

But since the day he collapsed beside Nagini's hospital bed, even though he was in heavy spasm, Remus could recall her grabbing and holding him, screaming for Madam Pomfrey, how her body pulsed in the exertion of holding him fast, clinging to him, her distinct feminine scent. Even now, watching her, Remus remembered her touch and longed for it again; but on different terms, on his terms.

Nagini looked over at Remus, reflecting on how, with unexpected delight, two days ago at the evening meal she had entered the Great Hall to find an emaciated-looking, but definitely healthier Lupin, leaning on a walking-stick.

She had bounded towards him enthusiastically. "Lupin! You're out!"

"Oh, yes," agreed Remus, grinning at her. "Out and about, as good as new. Well, almost."

Having been released to go back to her dormitory three days before, Nagini had found herself feeling overwhelmingly lonely. It would be several days before the other students would be returning, but more profoundly, Nagini had realized that she actually missed the hospital ward. Not being incapacitated, of course, but she achingly missed Remus. She often caught herself restlessly staring out of her window, unable to study or relax, consumed with thoughts of a certain shaggy-haired Gryffindor.

They had both awkwardly held each other's gaze. Remus broke the silence. "Perhaps we could share our meal together? I've missed it." Remus' voice lowered softly as he pointed out, "I've missed you."

Nagini gulped, speechless. She looked around; only Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey and the groundskeeper, Hagrid, were there, and they had seemingly not noticed the two youths other than the initial greeting they had given them.

"Well, of course," responded Nagini, nervous and excited, ignoring his last comment. "I'd like that." Her mouth went dry and she couldn't form the words *I've missed you too...*

But now the predicament where to sit? Nagini and Remus both gave fleeting glances to their own respective tables before suggesting simultaneously another possibility.

"Ravenclaw?"

"Hufflepuff?"

Spontaneously, they both started laughing at the ridiculousness of it all.

Grinning uncontrollably, Nagini gave in. "Well, seeing as you're still a cripple, even though it goes against my principles, let's sit at Hufflepuff it's a few inches closer, less

distance to travel..."

Remus smiled broadly and, slightly hobbling, crossed over to the table with Nagini beside him.

Full meals and drink appeared instantaneously as they both sat down.

Neither spoke much. Partially because Remus seemed utterly famished and was making a visible effort to control and pace himself while eating; but also because they were enjoying simply being together: an odd, comfortable companionship had formed from their convalescent time together. They chatted lightly about general school-related topics, avoiding their obvious differences, opting instead to explore their similarities as well as general likes and dislikes. Sometimes they just fell silent and found themselves gazing into each other's eyes. Remus would always break the silence; he had an uncanny ability to cause Nagini to smile spontaneously just by a mere look, a silly comment, or gentle gesture. It was an indescribable feeling for Remus, knowing he had caused her to light up in such a way.

Gazing out from the tower's scenic viewpoint, thinking upon their other recently shared meals and walks together these past few days, Nagini beamed and then sighed as the whispering wind whipped around them.

"Knut for your thoughts," initiated Remus.

"The landscape is so breathtaking," explained Nagini, attempting to keep her focus anywhere other than on Remus. For whenever she held his gaze longer than a second, she felt an uncontrollable excitement, followed by a wishful yearning for something unknown, something which she had only whimsically mused upon in the faint shadows of her dreams.

"Especially when the wind blows, caressing through your lovely hair," remarked Remus in a soft low voice, taking in her unusual beauty.

Nagini turned to Remus, unable to ignore his comment.

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind... thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude'," quoted Remus wistfully.

"You're quite a poet, Remus," teased Nagini uncomfortably, for Remus' tone and expression were suddenly so sad. Something about it made her turn away and stare back over the wild, frozen landscape again.

"Not I... A great Muggle poet wrote that... 'Ingratitude' is a universal theme... not an exclusive Muggle weakness for Muggles alone..." As he gazed at the unattainable Pureblood witch, Remus felt as if he was about to have a spasm of sorts. "I'm grateful... so very grateful for your helping me in the hospital ward, so grateful for the time you've shared with me since." There was an intimacy in the timbre of his low, smooth voice that gave her tingles and caused her breathing to speed up.

Abashed by what he said, Nagini couldn't look at Remus. "Grateful?" *Why does he talk like that? It is I who feel...* Overwhelming need washed over her. *He's the first to ever seem to be happy just being with me...*

"I've never thanked you properly..." continued Lupin, walking slowly over to stand beside her. "And now, time is running out. The others will be returning soon, and all this... all this will vanish. Like a dream. Like the snow glistening on the treetops will soon vanish with springtime's awakening. Natural magic..."

Torn between the formerly unwanted, but now uncontrollable impetus, she turned to him. Nagini shuddered, partly from the cold and partly from an excitement beyond her control. Remus wasn't looking at the landscape but at her; there was an intensity and longing in his gaze, a yearning which took her breath away. Though his body stance seemed relaxed, she could feel he was poised and tense, ready to spring into action.

She looked away from him, her thoughts turning cloudy and confused.

In the silence, the sound of the wind continued to gently whip around them. Remus spoke, "Yes, there's nothing I'd rather do at this very moment than take you in my arms and kiss you. Unless I'm very much mistaken which, of course, is a possibility," he carefully pointed out, "it's what you want too."

Nagini remained silent. Gazing across the forest's treetops, she was unable to speak. Of course she wanted to be kissed by Remus. And more: to kiss him back, touch him, feel him... taste him. Observing him from afar had always been safe. He was an acceptable impossibility and therefore a safe fantasy; guaranteed to be out of reach.

But now, here he was beside her. She could feel his body heat and smell his scent of musk and cinnamon chocolate lingering around his nearing body.

What harm could come from one little kiss?

She bit her bottom lip, conflicted, mulling things over.

A Gryffindor. A Half-blood. A blood-traitor's son... All of the distasteful diatribe and derogatory remarks about Remus flooded her thoughts. Muddled, she remembered something even more cruel and tragic... Rumour had it that Remus had had to pay the price for his father's offences to Fenrir Greyback, the notorious, paedophilic werewolf. There were only two ways in which Greyback took revenge: he would either take the chosen victim's life, or else he would calculatedly allow the victim to live, only then to force them into being another member of his pack and serve him accordingly...

Nagini refused to believe any of this. Ignorant of what the horror of the curse truly was, never having encountered Greyback or any other werewolf face-to-face, she resolutely believed the best of Lupin. *Remus is perfectly normal; more than anyone I've been around in my life. They're just vicious prats... jealous of his abilities...* Slytherins were well known for their vindictive, cruel edges physically as well as verbally.

Bitterly, remembering similar name-calling and hex attacks from Gryffindors, she thought of Remus, surrounded constantly by his peers: that strutting swine Sirius Black and that arrogant toe rag Potter in particular. They had always helped make sure that Remus would remain at a safe distance. The secure fantasy: there had been nothing to lose. But now?

Remembering her own murky background and past, nothing seemed to matter at this moment to Nagini except for Remus' nearness to her, his very real accessibility. Now, not only was he in reach, but she could feel Remus' virile, patient presence encompassing her as he stood so close, but not touching, waiting. Waiting for her to respond to him.

She flashed around; her eyes darted back and forth across Remus' face, searching his, trying to read what he wanted her to do.

"You can read my mind," she whispered.

"One doesn't need to be a Legilimens to know what you're feeling about me right now and what you want." *She's waiting for me to make the first move* he thought. Remus very slowly reached a hand up and with his fingertips, ever so lightly, he caressed her cheek gently.

Nagini was breathing softly, shallowly.

Remus cupped her chin, tilting her head back, lowering his lips to hers, and firmly making first contact.

Nagini received his kiss, reciprocating the pressure and waiting for him to go further; *wanting* him to, *willing* him to... Remus had raised his head back up to gaze over her flushed face, gauging her tense body, her lips full and ready for more.

Placing his hands attentively in the small of her back, Remus firmly pulled her into him, and slowly manoeuvred them into the inner wall's alcove. Her lips were parted

invitingly. Cushioning her back with his left arm, he ever so slowly lowered his mouth on hers, parting her lips, seeking to taste as much of her as he could. She tensed at first, but then relaxed into it, giving over to the moment, giving over to him. Aroused further by her initial timid touching, he felt his muscles tightening throughout his body; her hands had delicately stroked his chest upwards, reaching his shoulders, but then she clasped him to her tightly.

As their lips and tongues continued to delve in each other's hungry mouths, their hands explored the contours of each other's body. Until Nagini's fingertips, discovering and lightly grazing over his straining erection, caused Remus to pull away, gasping deeply.

He looked steadily into her eyes; her pupils were dilated, the dark centres eclipsing the golden outer-linings, anticipating an unknown culmination of their actions. Remus responded by kissing and tasting the soft flesh of her neck. Sporadically gasping, they both continued their frantic mutual explorations of each other's bodies until the welling tension caused Remus to halt, whispering, "Nagini."

They looked into each other's eyes, both of them panting heavily.

With effort, Remus struggled to form words coherently. "Nagini, I think... I think it's time to find out... if you're a ... Chocolate-Frog girl or a Sugar-Quill one?"

"A what?" Nagini was completely lost, only aware of their laboured breathing and body heat.

"A Chocolate-Frog girl or a Sugar-Quill girl," he repeated matter-of-factly. "A trip to Hogsmeade is in order... Honeydukes more precisely..."

Nagini couldn't comprehend what Remus was saying; her heart was beating fast and hard in her chest, and she felt slightly dizzy. All she could hear were bits of nonsensical babbling, and all she wanted was for him to continue and make love to her.

"You see, I have a secret; a terrible, dark secret."

Oh gods, she thought, giving him her full attention.

"I'm a ... chocolate addict." Remus seized her mouth with his, kissing her deeply. Then, breaking away from her, he emphasised, "Dark chocolate, preferably; but I'll take it any way I can get it..." He touched her moist full lips, tracing their shapes with his fingertips. "Honeydukes is part of my *speedy* recovery plan, and I can't wait until next week; I need a fix now."

Gently kissing his fingertips, Nagini whispered, "I can't go with you; I'm not allowed outside of Hogwarts grounds... Rodolphus never gave his permission..." She squirmed, aching for his touch.

"You're of age, aren't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then bugger Rodolphus Lestrangle!"

She couldn't help giggling. "No, it's not so simple; it's all too complicated; you wouldn't understand."

"Then explain, help me to understand." Looking very somberly at her, Remus insisted, "I want to understand, Nagini."

"Kiss me," she whispered instead, delirious with desire.

He obliged her.

After a lengthy endeavour, Remus pulled back again, intent on pushing his point, he said, "We'll have the entire evening and all of Hogsmeade to ourselves..." Nuzzling her just below the ear, he whispered, "Anywhere, everywhere... to enjoy ourselves more comfortably."

Remus, don't you want to enjoy yourselves, now? thought Nagini. Meekly, flushing red, she said, "I want you this as I've never wanted anything before." Nagini wrapped her arms around his lean, muscular torso, pulling him back to her.

He fiercely whispered, "Yes, I want you too." His lips crushed hers again. Breaking away for air, Remus huskily whispered, "But not here; not like this." But even as he hushed her protests, his hands had found and wrapped themselves around her again, seeking to record every inch of her in his memory.

Aroused beyond measure, letting herself enjoy the feel of his every stroke and kneaded touch, she gently teased, "You are very dangerous, Mr Lupin."

"How so?" Stroking her back with one hand and allowing his remaining fingers to slowly trace around, and ever-so-gently, brush the sides of her breasts, his touch wandered until he decisively began to explore her pointed, hardening nipples. Then slowly his fingertips traced downward along her sloping side to the curved firmness of her rounded hip.

"So controlled. Don't you ever lose control?" asked Nagini in a heated whisper, trying not to writhe from his caresses, but to maintain as much composure as she could. "You must." She challenged him. "It's such a paradox against your true nature, isn't it?"

"What is my true nature, Miss Lestrangle?" He started nibbling on an earlobe, flicking his tongue in the soft, sensitive lining of her ear, slowly sliding his hands gently downward, one hand slowly gathering, then lifting her skirt. Silently, Nagini dug her fingers into his back, grasping and clinging, encouraging him, speechless.

Finding the top of her woollen stockings, Remus slowly peeled the elastic band downward, meeting and then gently rolling her knickers lower until he felt the soft, fuzzy doe skin of her nethermost mound. He paused as she tilted and pressed her pelvis forward, pressing against his hand, burning with longing for him to continue. As Remus saw her desire, their lips met again, while his apt fingers pushed slowly one, then a second one, into her burning core, seeking the source of her innermost heat.

"Impulsive, instinctive seizing what you want, devouring it," she was gasping out, demanding he relieve the tension within her.

Stopping her mouth with a deep passionate kiss, a groan exploded inside her; Remus slowly pulled his fingers out of her, only to repeat entering her immediately, but now with a decisive rhythm, gently rocking and swaying her body's response to his guidance.

"Instinctive? Oh yes," he rasped out. *Gods, she's so wet, burning with...* "Yes, I can be impulsive, as well. Seize what I desire; I do so much want to devour you, right at this moment in more ways than one..." With a low, soft growl, his searing mouth trailed its way down her throat, sucking and licking, lower and lower until it rested upon a hardened nipple through which the layered material he nibbled and suckled at expertly.

Feeling she was going to explode, immune to the elements, Nagini pulled clumsily at her layers until the clothing was pulled up high enough to reveal bare flesh, letting her breasts be more easily accessible. Remus' eyes flashed appreciatively before setting his mouth upon them, he sucked and swirled his tongue around the delicate skin until the nipple had hardened to a piercing point.

Remus *couldn't* take Nagini now; he wouldn't... *however*, a feral sensation had been unleashed; he was fully aroused... *I have to taste her, I have to...* he started lowering his head, swiftly kneeling, nibbling strategically on her soft abdomen, licking her navel, sliding his tongue, pressed into her doe-soft skin, firmly downward until, in one swift movement, Remus placed his head under her skirt and burrowed, nuzzling into her mound's succulent, wet lips, drinking her in. Nagini was gasping and making soft mewling sounds in exquisite, abandoned pleasure.

Remus burrowed further into her, raising his head only to brace her lower back and guide her to raise a leg and rest it on his shoulder. Then, with full determination, he

spread her lips, while his tongue searched and teased and found her aroused clit. Finding the delectable centre, he flicked and flickered until Nagini writhed and screamed out his name, "Remus! Remus!" She came in hard, wavering undulations, her fingernails digging deep in his shoulders. He maintained his stalwart position, feeling both awed and empowered on such a deep primeval level at causing her climax, only relaxing his suckling minutely to enjoy more fully Nagini's writhing in ecstasy. As she started to come down from her climax, he pressed his mouth and tongue once more to give a parting lick and kiss.

Suddenly, Nagini clutched at him. "Remus! It's too intense," she whispered fiercely.

Remus slowly uncovered his head, coming out from under her skirt, and slowly rose, not letting their bodies lose contact. Looking deep into his eyes, Nagini pulled his head down to her, kissing him deeply, tasting her essence on his lips. Remus' fingers had now found her clit, and Remus drank in her luscious groans and gasps of pleasure as he began to rub it. *Gods, she's exquisite.* Remus was transfixed watching her breathtaking ecstasy. He slowly, rhythmically caressed her, feeling another swelling climax approaching. She ground into his fingers, keeping his gaze, clutching on to him for life. Crying out in unrestrained rapture, she climaxed for yet a second time.

Holding her in his tight embrace, Remus rocked her gently, savouring every second of her complete and utter abandonment and vulnerability. They stayed that way, lost in time, just clutching each other, Remus slowly massaging and enjoying her heat and wetness. Nagini, catching her breath, ever so slowly and awkwardly sought and found his throbbing, hardened member through his robes. She gasped and proceeded to slowly rub his shaft up and down.

But Remus gently caught her hand and whispered, "Not now. I won't be able to control myself, if you continue... and I must control myself... must be safe...you must be safe..." Seeing Nagini's puzzled expression, he kissed her reassuringly.

"Remus, I want to do something for you..." she whispered, breaking the kiss, embarrassed, but determined. "Don't you want me to?"

"I want... to savour every second every look and exquisite inch of you... but there's a time and place for everything, and here on top of the Astronomy Tower is not the place. I want this to be a special day for you for both of us. I want to treat you to new experiences, and not just what my John Thomas is guiding me to indulge in at this very moment. Indulgence leads to decay. Control leads to power."

"Power? You sound like a Slytherin."

"The power to please... to please you further physically, empowers me... the power of control."

"I knew it. I knew there was a control-freak hidden somewhere underneath all of your gracious and selfless airs."

"You have no idea, Miss Lestrange."

"Don't I, Mr Lupin? Try me," she teased him.

He kissed her passionately again. Her hand found his cock again still painfully straining underneath his robes.

"I can't let you go around in this condition."

"Won't be the first time," he half-joked, moving to stand up straight. "Yes, I don't know if I can walk." He winced slightly. "I'm so hard."

Swiftly, his hands reached under her skirt, but he then very slowly pulled Nagini's knickers and stockings upward, fitting them back in place. He stepped back, and leaned against the wall, with a conflicted, pained look upon his face.

"Madam Pomfrey ..." he huffed, pausing.

"What about her?"

"I have to go to her... I still must take some potions... for my condition." He grimaced.

"Your condition?" She stepped in to him, and he instinctively gathered her in his arms, his cloak encompassing, draping over hers, forming a cocoon. Bracing himself sturdily against the wall, he held Nagini as she leaned into him. Kissing her hair and breathing in her fragrance, he distractedly mumbled, "Tonight, at nine o'clock ... the third-floor corridor, meet me at the statue of the one-eyed old crone... meet me there... Hogsmeade..."

Snuggling against him, Nagini traced an invisible joy trail down his chest, lower and lower her fingers went. "I'm not allowed outside Hogwarts. I told you; I can't come with you."

"Oh, you'll come with me, if it's the last thing you do." He gave her a naughty look.

"Remus, Remus, don't tease me now." She whispered, "I'm completely yours... we don't need to go anywhere else." Her hand stroked firmly over his bulge. "Maybe I can help 'your condition'?"

He puffed, frustrated, helplessly aroused. "You don't give up, do you?" he whispered. His face was flushed and needy. She watched him as he struggled with himself, whether to stop her stroking him, but, any words of protests were stuck, and she felt his arms hold her to him encouragingly. Keeping Remus' gaze, and in between wet kisses, Nagini's hands clumsily fumbled and found the opening of his trousers, slowly unbuttoning them, allowing her full access to his pulsating member. As her hand inexpertly touched his burning flesh, their bodies locked into each other's, his leg placed between her thighs, propping and supporting her, aiding to give her the perfect angle to explore rubbing his lengthy erect shaft. They both remained in a locked, tight rhythm, her initially awkward pumping slowly smoothed out, then steadily increased in speed and friction until Remus grabbed hold of her, squeezing her so tight that she winced in pain; both of them gasped as he convulsed in orgasm.

They remained in an intertwined embrace, panting heavily; gently massaging and stroking one another.

Nagini had rested her head on his shoulder; she slowly started to ineptly rebutton his trousers, mumbling, "I'm sorry... you're all messy now...but..."

"Nagini, Nagini..." whispered Remus, stopping her hands. She looked up at him to see him gazing intently at her. He gently kissed her forehead and folded her into his arms again, holding her, interchangeably kissing her face and hair lovingly. Pausing, he asked, "Do you trust me?"

"More than anyone..." she whispered, feeling like a knot was in her throat, tightening her arms around him.

"Trust me and come with me. The one-eyed witch statue. Meet me there. Nine o'clock sharp." He gave her a soft peck on the lips, pulled his wand out, cleaning and redressing himself. "Shall I?" He offered to Scourify her.

"No. No, I'll clean myself later," she declined, suddenly self-conscious. First, Nagini wanted to lie down and savour as long as she could what had happened between them; then, a long hot bath...

As Remus slowly guided her to the stairwell, she asked shyly, "Can I walk with you to the hospital ward?" Suddenly she wished to be with him as long as possible, wanting to continue the languid feeling of his touch and presence.

"Absolutely." He offered his hand to her, and they proceeded slowly down the stairwell heading towards the infirmary. They walked hand-in-hand in silence, both reflecting on each other.

I have to be careful, so very careful, pondered Remus. *She is so proud. Fierce and wild, impulsive...* Then, he frowned; a dark thought crossed his mind. *But, she's*

somehow so unsure, inexperienced... How wrong Sirius was about her... everything... why did he lie about Nagini? She's nothing like he said she was...

As they reached the entrance of the hospital wing, they both stopped, lingering, neither wanting to be the first to depart from the other.

Remus stepped in and kissed Nagini. Looking into her eyes, he caressed her cheek and moved a loose lock of her hair from her face, slowly stroking his hand through her hair.

"Nine o'clock, then?"

She nodded her head, unable to speak. For an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty had washed over her, clashing with her desire. But Nagini wouldn't back down now, regardless of an ominous feeling ebbing through her. Pushing this presentiment aside, accrediting it to the whirlwind of sensual excitement, she forced herself to confirm, "Nine o'clock sharp!"

They embraced only to be interrupted by a familiar, disapproving voice.

"Mr Lupin! You're late very late! Now, that won't do," chastised Madam Pomfrey. Giving the young couple a portentous look, the Matron warned, "You two had best keep yourselves to yourselves *apart* from one another. Mr Lupin, I'll have a word with you privately!"

As Remus started to enter the ward, he grinned back at Nagini and reminded, "Tomorrow after lunch, Madam Pince returns; meet you in the library maybe she'll let us into the Restricted Section."

"Right," agreed Nagini, turning and walking away as nonchalantly as she could, hoping the Matron hadn't seen her face flush red in pleasure and amusement at Remus' obvious lame decoy.

Madam Pomfrey had not only seen Nagini's reaction, but well knew the cause of it the same cause of the young woman's dilated pupils and overall changed essence: Remus Lupin. Frowning, the Matron entered the ward to retrieve Remus' potion, prepared to give the randy young wizard an 'uncomfortable truth' lecture, before things got out of hand.

Pomfrey sighed. *Perhaps, it already is too late...*

The Matron's instincts were spot on; Nagini and Remus had already crossed a threshold of no return they were both about to risk more than either could imagine.

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Chocolate-Frog Girl or Sugar-Quill Girl? Part Two

Chapter 5 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

As Nagini quietly made her way down the third-floor corridor and approached the one-eyed humpbacked crone's statue, she couldn't help but keep looking over her shoulder. *I know that was Mrs Norris following me; Filch is sure to be around somewhere near.*

"Nagini," beckoned a calm voice.

With relief she met Remus and curled into his outstretched arms. In the background, a clock tolled nine o'clock as the two embraced. "Ready?"

"Yes," she whispered reservedly. "Can we hurry?" She was trembling.

Taking in her jittery state, Remus didn't reply but gave the statue's hump a few taps with the tip of his wand. He whispered, "*Dissendium!*" It opened for them, allowing a gap for them to squeeze through and slide down into the dark, earthy passageway. "*Lumos!*" muttered Remus, and immediately Nagini drew her wand and did so as well. She seemed a little startled, peering around at the low-ceiling, murky passageway.

Remus took her free hand tentatively. "I should have asked if dark, tight places bothered you. If you're claustrophobic, there's another way we can go." His thoughts flitted to the other passageway behind the mirror on the fourth floor.

An odd expression crossed Nagini's face. "No. No, not at all. On the contrary, I rather like them; the cosier the better. They're a great place to hide if one needs." Remus studied her fretted brow in the shadowed lighting. She explained, "A great place to get away from Filch in a pinch."

Taking control of the situation, he pulled her hand gently and slowly began to guide her forward into the unending darkness of the tunnel. "The passage will twist and turn for several minutes, but then we will start ascending up steps a lot of steps, but it'll take us right into Honeydukes' cellar."

"Remus, I'm nervous," she confessed shyly. Random, blurred images had flashed in her mind throughout the day of Remus and her, standing side-by-side, unsure of their surroundings, in an unfamiliar space. A worried feeling had accompanied each image, but every time it had ebbed through her, the heirloom ring had throbbed, and the portentous vision then hazily disappeared to be replaced by a clear picture of them walking through pristine, glowing snowfall hand-in-hand. No further feeling was attached to these clairvoyant occurrences other than an overall impression of peacefulness derived from the seemingly warm glow of natural light dawning.

She was unsure of the meaning and the reaction of the ring; however, she felt comforted by the fact that she hadn't been troubled by nightmares since wearing it and that any minacious presentiments seemed to have been replaced by salubrious ones. It occurred to her that the ring was a gentle protector of sorts, sentient but docile, and she yearned to believe that, regardless of the Slytherin design, her mother, Portentia, had Charmed it at some time before her death especially intending it for her, and her alone, to possess it.

Noting Nagini was lost in thought, Remus squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry; I'll help you through the dark."

"No, it's not that." Their bodies were brushing together as they paused and peered searchingly into each other's eyes in the luminous lighting. "Maybe... We're bound to run into someone from Hogwarts. Some Slytherins or..." She hesitated because she had avoided until now bringing up her uncle's name. "Rodolphus' circle of, um, acquaintances."

Remus raised an eyebrow, sceptical. "Yes? What are they calling themselves? 'Death Eaters'?" He frowned, unimpressed, and assured her, "Trust me, Lestrangle or Malfoy and his cronies aren't the types to ever set foot in the places we'll go tonight."

Nagini let out a tense sigh.

"As for your Slytherin mates, I'm sure they're being pampered and indulged elsewhere in their posh manors or abroad." Seeing she wasn't quite convinced, Remus noted a shadow of doubt crossing her face. He pulled out a phial from inside his cloak and added confidentially, "At the first hint or sight of anyone you even remotely recognise, we have this." He shook the small potion bottle. "If you'd like, you can take it now, just to be on the safe side."

"Polyjuice Potion?" She gave a concerned look and asked, "You made it yourself?"

"No! No, I'm not so consistent with my Potions brewing. Peter did." He clarified, "Pettigrew."

"Pettigrew? No way! I can't drink that; who knows who or what I'll turn into?" The mere thought of Pettigrew was repugnant to her.

Remus seemed at a loss at her disgust and adamant refusal. They had both been so careful to avoid directly criticising each other's friends. It was the first time since the hospital ward that any derisory comment had remotely surfaced, and they both realised it. Trying to soften her dislike of the idea, she explained, "I mean, do you really want to be seen snogging Peter Pettigrew for all of Hogsmeade to see?"

Remus guffawed and an appreciative grin spread across his face. "You have a point; even I'm not brave enough for that."

Nagini was relieved that Remus took her point good-naturedly even though she truly was still apprehensive of the mere thought of, let alone the actuality, drinking something that Peter Pettigrew had concocted. Remus mulled over the predicament. "Look, if I can't put a Disguise Charm on you in time, you'll have to swig it. Besides, it's probably not Peter; it's probably a Gryffindor girl."

"He collects the hair of girls in your House? Ewww..." She shuddered. "What? Does he have a collection of some sort? That's creepy."

"Nothing worse than what Macnair collects... Parts of dead magical beasts, isn't it?"

Nagini frowned, not liking the comparison but unable to dispute it. She also didn't like the changing tone and unpleasant content their discussion was taking and offered, "Let's stop talking about Pettigrew and Macnair."

"We can still go back." Remus glanced upward from where they had slid down. "It's not too late."

"No, it's all right; I'll drink it if it's the only thing to do. I'll risk it." She squeezed his hand tenderly and whispered, "For you, I'll risk it. Whoever it turns out to be, just remember that it's me." She rose up on her tiptoes slightly to give him a quick reassuring kiss. "Please, let's go on."

Remus smiled beamingly. *She's willing to do it for me.* The realization of Nagini's willingness to risk several things for him sent sparks of excitement coursing through his body.

So he led her on, hand-in-hand, speedily forward. The time seemed to speed by in a blink of an eye before they began ascending upward. In their growing excitement and apprehension, the multitude of steps was eagerly climbed. Breathing heavily, flushed from the exertion, they both halted under a section of ceiling which looked much like the rest of the tunnel. Remus listened attentively while touching the surface in estimable spots; then, with one assertive shove, he lifted and slid over the opening.

Securing his wand inside his cloak, Remus cupped his hands together. "Here. Step into my hand and I'll lift you up." Nagini's heart was racing. She suddenly became self-conscious and felt like she was eight-years old again unable to control herself from mischievously going along with some nonsense that Sirius and Regulus Black challenged her to do in the forbidden rooms of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Nagini shoved the childhood flashback aside and eagerly placed a boot in his proffered hands whilst grasping his shoulders to help propel herself upwards through the opening. With this momentum, she found herself thrust up and out of the tunnel. Clumsily clambering on wooden crates to stand upright, she found that she was in a storage room of sorts. Immediately, Remus had limberly hoisted himself upward and within mere seconds had already fitted the trapdoor covering back into place.

"Here we are!" he whispered as he pointed at the old wooden staircase. He led her, climbing up the stairs and then pausing at the door, carefully listening for signs of life. Suddenly, in one clean swoop, they had slipped through it and out into Honeydukes' main shop room.

Adjusting to the bright lights of the store, Nagini blinked, slightly dazed, and tried to register the cornucopia of creamy chunks of nougat, toffees and sumptuous chocolates and other sweets surrounding her. The delightful aroma was pleasantly dizzying, and the festive atmosphere was as deliciously infectious as the mouth-watering confections enclosing them. Nagini discreetly glanced around at the other buzzing customers, no doubt giddy on sugar highs from the myriad of free samples displayed in open baskets throughout the sweetshop, and with relief she saw that this clientele would indeed never be found anywhere near the likes of number twelve, Grimmauld Place or Lestrangle Manor.

Immediately, she relaxed and squeezed Remus's hand in excitement. He flashed a knowing grin and pulled her over to one side where an overwhelming selection of chocolate products waited to be indulged in. Picking up a pentagonal box, he asked, "Remember this?" It was a Chocolate Frog.

"Yes. Yes, I do." Before they knew it, they had given each other a soft quick kiss. Remus straightened up to his full height, and taking a second to scan the sweetshop for any onlookers, but finding none, waggled his eyebrows. He coaxed, "One more?"

Nagini teased, "The Chocolate Frog or the kiss?"

He answered her with his lips. Nagini felt lost in a wild rush of emotion, unable to gain her footing but giving over to the falling sensation rather than withdrawing from it. She clung to him and reciprocated. Under the enjoyable, determined pressure of Remus' lips and gently urging touch, she no longer could think to worry or care about anyone or anything around her.

As they parted from their kiss, Nagini was clutching tightly to Remus. Her intense hold, along with her large golden eyes longing for him to continue, sent a shudder through him.

It had only been several months since he'd discovered the beginnings of true carnal pleasures. His painful lycanthropic transformations had always warped his otherwise normal human hormonal fluctuations, but this past year, as he turned seventeen, his erectile arousals from various sensual stimuli had become both a blessing and yet another curse. At times, the scent of witches, their mere natural fragrances, drove Remus wild with desires he had not fully understood, and his impulses to not physically respond were more and more difficult to control. He was losing it. And his control meant everything to him.

Remus had been forced to control himself on fundamental levels longer than he could remember. He'd mastered restrained conduct and impassive patience to counter his constraint being violently ripped from him every month by the merciless powers of the powerful goddess Selene. He couldn't remember when his existence was not one of stoic patience. Since Fenrir's rape-like mauling, self-deprecation and forbearance were his defence and strength against the world. He'd learned a long time ago to keep to himself, immersing himself in his books, giving platonic quips and indifferent advice when asked by those brave enough to try to befriend him.

Sirius had been the one who had keenly noticed Remus' growing discomforts and had tried to coerce and finally convince him that the time of denying his needs for sexual

release and activity was over. Padfoot had generously paid for and taken Moony to his first public house in Knockturn Alley where the young wizard was treated to a strange new wonderful world of sensual delights and sexual experiences he'd had only dreamed of in his restrained, suppressed musings and frustrated impulses. Sirius later laughed about how he became an Animagus to accompany and control Remus during his werewolf transformations, but how Remus had to come along to keep him under control when they prowled around to the selected brothels his Uncle Aghard had introduced him to.

Having gained knowledgeable experience, power and pleasure from both magical and Muggle brothels, Remus no longer mused on what it would be like to make love to someone who was his peer. The knowledge that he could be just as 'normal' as the next wizard, granted in select and careful circumstances, gave him a secret confidence and detachment from the pubescent goings on at Hogwarts. When he felt any lascivious urges, Remus only reminded himself that he needed patiently await the next waxing-moon period when he'd allow himself further indulgences in the ways of natural coital magic. For now, Remus had his secret libidinous outlet whenever he and Sirius needed; although, more recently, he'd ventured out alone, as Sirius was quite the successful Lothario of Hogwarts, and Padfoot found he could easily keep from being bored from the easy pickings of willing witches within the school body.

Remus' new amorous adventures had enabled him to endure the unendurable, allowing him to ignore the whims of schoolgirls' immature flirtations.

Until Nagini. He'd noticed the Slytherin Lestranger giving him 'the look' this school year. Remus could not deny that he liked what her gaze and quaint smile, which always followed it, promised. He'd seen, and by now understood well, that 'look' among various Hogwarts couples: even James and Lily shared it between each other, and he recognised it amongst Sirius and the uncountable number of witches, including the enticing doxies paid for promising fulfilled physical pleasure.

It had become harder and harder to ignore Nagini's subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, teasing of him. He'd never thought to act upon them; he'd fantasized about their implications, but never seriously believed anything could ever tangibly come of it. This morning at the Astronomy Tower, Nagini had responded to him fully, revealing and confirming her true attraction, and his raw desires had been unleashed. It'd taken every ounce of his willpower and control not to follow through, not to force himself on her. Even before this morning, during classes, whenever he'd be near her, her unique scent had always caused his mind to immediately wander to salacious thoughts, driving him utterly to distraction.

So that now, looking into Nagini's brash expression, feeling her touch, recalling the taste of her essence, he knew full well the tell-tale signs of lascivious desire coursing through him, hardening his muscles.

"Let's get a plump stash of sweets," suggested Remus eagerly gathering substantial amounts in a customer hand-basket. "Then we can head over to the Three Broomsticks. There are some nice cosy corner booths just made for two that I'd like to show you. We can continue this," he kissed her more ardently this time, "along with a few Butterbeers, or whatever else the lady would like." He waggled his eyebrows at her again.

Nagini laughed, flushed with pleasure seeing Lupin so giddy and happy. Most of the time in school, he was either being the austere but efficient Gryffindor Prefect, patrolling the corridors, or either the less-animated, but resolutely fixed part of the obnoxious foursome that he, Pettigrew, Potter and Black comprised. Again, she shoved these thoughts aside and decided to enjoy the here and now.

"Sounds good. Let's do it!"

A silly madness came over them as they made their way to the till, and they were quickly grabbing handfuls of nougats, Bavarian Gnome cherry-cream drops, and all sorts of other delicacies. As Remus placed the basket of goodies on the till counter, Remus lunged to grab a Sugar-Quill hanging from an upper shelf.

"You have to try one of these, just for fun."

Nagini scrunched her face, puzzled. "A Quill?"

"A *sugar* one. Edible," emphasized Remus, smiling wryly. "But I've a hunch, well, more than a hunch evidence that you're a Chocolate-Frog Girl through and through."

"And why is that?"

"Sugar-Quill girls are so tangy and lemony-sour that just a little taste is enough to satisfy one's curiosity."

Nagini raised her eyebrows, surprised and a bit stumped; even though she knew he was being playful, and the bubbling, randy part of her was turned on by the thought that he was so sexually experienced to casually joke about things, something about it reminded her of Sirius and his arrogant, lewd ways. It put a damper on the moment. But only for a moment, as she quickly retaliated, "And a Chocolate-Frog girl?"

"A Chocolate-Frog girl is," Remus locked eyes with Nagini, "creamy, succulent and her taste you can never have enough of; her taste," his voice became low and husky, "melts in your mouth, lingering and lingering, leaving you longing for more and more... always yearning to savour her flavour... One can never be satiated... constantly craving her."

Nagini felt her face burning, recalling his administrative skills in arousing and fulfilling her awakened erotic needs this morning in the Astronomy Tower.

"You're quite the connoisseur of, um, chocolate." A tremble flowed through her, as the sensation of how she came twice from Remus' expertise, how she could taste their unrestrained lovemaking, causing her most intimate muscles to clench uncontrollably, and she gasped, embarrassed.

Seeing an unusual, flushed expression on Nagini's face, Remus joked, "Not that I'm an expert, but everyone needs a hobby, yes?"

"Am I a hobby for you, then?" She felt light-headed with growing desire and needy curiosity; she didn't care if he was serious or joking. Her lips had parted and even though she wanted to seem playfully flippant, Remus' teasing had struck a deep carnal chord within her, causing an unbridled yearning for his touch.

"No, you're not a common hobby. You're a unique obsession a one and only." Drinking in her amatory gaze, quietly, almost in a whisper, he spoke simply, "My sweet secret Slytherin obsession... *my* Nagini."

"Would you like all of this wrapped or in separate bags?" They both snapped out of their intense captivation turning around to face a shining bald, round-faced shopkeeper.

"One bag will do, thank you," answered Remus.

As the shopkeeper started packing the candies, Nagini eagerly reached inside her cloak. "My treat," gushed Nagini, elated to finally use and share her hoarded savings which, ironically enough, Walburga Black had discreetly given her time-to-time, for something enjoyable.

Remus looked at the stuffed coin purse she held out, puzzled. He then smiled awkwardly. "It's already paid for."

Now it was Nagini's turned to be puzzled. It was well-known that Lupin had been left in dire straits. His once affluent pureblood father had lost his position at the Ministry several years ago and was unable to ever re-enter his former social circle. Whether this was due to incriminating accusations within the Ministry or the supposed dubious threats of the fanatic followers of the new Dark Lord, or both, no one quite knew. What was known was that he subsequently had a chronically ill son and terminally ill Muggle-born wife to take care of without sufficient means. Moreover, shortly after the wife's death two years ago, John Lupin mysteriously disappeared, leaving Remus in a state of extreme distress.

Meanwhile, Remus had turned back to the cashier and informed him, "Lupin, Remus. On the Young Wizard's Merit Award account of Hogwarts."

"Ah yes, I've been notified; here's your name." The shopkeeper ticked off a name on a sticky syrupy-stained parchment. "And here are your sweets, Mr Lupin you still have two Galleons credit when you've finished this bundle. Enjoy! Make sure you and your friend are sure to come back soon."

As Remus lifted the hefty bag of confections, he turned to Nagini, finding that her exuberant smile had faded.

He reminded, "The reward for the competition, remember? The five Galleons worth of sweets?"

"I'd forgotten about it," Nagini processed aloud. "So, you won? You won the award? When did Professor Merrythought tell you?" *And why didn't you tell me?*

As if reading her thoughts, Remus explained, "She didn't. Merrythought told McGonagall. And McGonagall just told me this morning that we could cash in on our sweets when we wanted."

"We?" Nagini became very still. "You. You won the Young Wizards Merit Award, not I." Trying not to be petty, she forced, "Congratulations."

Exasperated, he insisted, "Don't be ridiculous, we both won. Or lost. Depends how you look at it... Either way it amounts to the same thing: we're equally skilled; we were equally injured we'll share the reward Galleons!"

Before she could stop him, Remus had swirled around and called back to the shopkeeper. "Sir, there's a second wizard, er, witch who tied in winning first place for the Young Wizards Merit Award... in all the holiday excitement they must've made a mistake and forgotten to list her. Please put her name down along with, or instead of, mine for the remaining Galleons: Lestrangle. Miss Nagini Lestrangle."

The shopkeeper gave a knowing nod and assured, "Right away, Mr Lupin." he said while writing down her name. Peering kindly at Nagini and then back to Lupin, he informed, "All the young lady needs to do is give her name in the future and her purchases will be paid for on this account for as long as it lasts."

Unsure if this had solved the problem, but hoping it had, Remus thanked him and tartly opened the door, holding it, impatient to leave. Nagini briskly exited first, followed by Remus, nettled.

Once outside, they slowly sauntered along silently. Snow began falling lightly around them as Remus led the way towards the Three Broomsticks.

"That was unnecessary," commented Nagini finally.

"On the contrary, it was quite necessary," retorted Remus.

"It's not the money."

"I know."

"It's the principle."

"I know."

"You Gryffindors," huffed Nagini. "It wouldn't have mattered what I did. Merrythought Professor Merrythought was a Gryffindor..."

"She came out of retirement to teach for one year, to help Dumbledore out..."

"Another Gryffindor..."

Remus halted and then dropped to his knees, holding the large package of confections to his chest like a shield of some chivalrous knight. "I'm yours to command. Tell me what to do." Nagini was at a loss for words, conflicted by rivalling emotions. She was angry at him for not seeming to understand the unfairness of the situation but unable to not be amused by his playful idiocy.

"I'll do anything you want to make up for it. You want me to hex Merrythought? Would that make it better? McGonagall?" Remus waggled his eyebrows at her puckishly and offered, "Dumbledore?"

Nagini couldn't help herself and laughed softly at the absurdity of Remus' sportive behaviour. She suddenly felt the triviality of her little tantrum over the Young Wizards Merit Award and could only gaze at the warm brown eyes now rascally observing her, full of affection.

The snowfall had intensified, and she watched the fluffy flakes falling on Remus' eyelashes and cheekbones and instinctively reached out to gently brush them away. "I don't care what Merrythought really thinks of me, but you..." Her voice failed her further, and she withdrew her hand.

The snow had already formed a thin layer on Nagini's hair and shoulders. Remus rose and gathered her cloak's hood up and around snugly framing her face.

A sombre mood had befallen on both of them, and all Remus could do was to reassure her of how he felt about her with a kiss.

But as he lowered his head to meet her lips, Nagini jerked her head away startled and gasped, "Oh gods, he's here!"

Remus hastily turned around and looked in the direction Nagini was staring. There, near the entrance of the Three Broomsticks, stood two dark figures. Nagini was fixated on the taller one, his cruel, chiselled features distinguishing him as the notorious Rodolphus Lestrangle.

Nagini had shrunk back beside the nearest building's wall. "The Polyjuice! Give it to me!"

A/N: Greatest thanks and appreciation to betas: blue artemis, star_girl & agnus castus!

Beast or Coward?

Chapter 6 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

Remus paused in the flurrying snowflakes, frowning and gazing at Rodolphus Lestrangle and the other dark figure standing near the entrance of the Three Broomsticks.

The increasing snowfall caused more and more shadowy figures to scurry about to and fro. Not wanting to draw attention by using his wand, in a split-second decision, Remus turned and stepped nearer to Nagini. Deciding it would be the most prudent, he pulled out the Polyjuice and handed it to her.

Nagini gulped it down. She immediately gagged from the rancid liquid, dropping the phial in the snow, grabbing and leaning on Remus to catch her breath while the transformation took place. Remus wrapped a supportive arm around her, bracing her against him.

Nagini felt light-headed and queasy as she felt the potion coursing through her veins. Her body was tingling and sporadic bursts of intense heat pulsated throughout; then it suddenly stopped. She stepped back from Remus, raising her head to deeply breathe in the crisp, clean wintry air for relief. Leaning against the wooden building's wall, she panted, "What do I look like *who* am I?"

Stunned speechless, Remus was unable to respond immediately. Something had gone wrong with the Polyjuice.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she whispered, frightened.

Remus swallowed hard and said reassuringly, "Nothing. Nothing is wrong. It's just that you didn't completely transform, but it's enough of a disguise. Nothing horrible. Just a bit uncanny. You look, um, fine." Remus was noting her hair, in particular, with an odd embarrassed expression.

Nagini pulled a tress of it around in front of her eyes. Her hair was red. "Evans'? Pettigrew used Evans' hair? Bet she doesn't even know, the creep."

Remus was flushed, uncomfortable, unable to contradict her. He silently agreed. It was peculiarly unsettling and inappropriate *I'll ask Wormtail about it when he gets back to Hogwarts.*

Attempting to assuage her worries, he reassured, "You still have your own lovely eyes; your nose is only a bit different. The red hair is more than enough to completely fool anyone, which is quite helpful no one will recognize you!" Remus smiled supportively at her, and then looked carefully around again to where Lestrangle still stood; only now, yet another figure had joined him, making a foreboding trio. Thinking fast, Remus said, "Let's go this way. There's another place I know."

He led her in the opposite direction away from the main road. As they walked through the snowfall, Remus tucked the bundle of sweets as best he could under one arm. Draping his other arm around her, he covered Nagini with his cloak and held her by his side, guiding her as she loosely steadied herself against him.

Remus' thoughts jumped from deliberating Peter's motives for collecting Lily's hair to Rodolphus Lestrangle and the unexpected predicament he and Nagini now found themselves in. Secretly, he wouldn't have minded confronting Rodolphus as well as his cronies. *But another time and place, I need to take care of and protect Nagini. Immediately!*

Deep and burning within Remus was the belief that these eponymous 'Death Eaters' were responsible for his family's demise.

The Dark Lord had chosen Fenrir Greyback to add to his collection of diverse followers, the werewolf being particularly useful as a threat against those wizarding families who wouldn't cooperate and support his new Wizarding Order. Having such a menacing myrmidon amused and pleased Voldemort to no end. Assuring Greyback of werewolves' worth and value in his new order, Voldemort knew how best to use Fenrir for his own purposes. The Dark Lord relished his decision: the threat of the werewolf's curse would be one of the perfect means, the perfect example of what would happen to those pureblood families who refused to show proper acquiescence to him.

Remus' father, John Lupin, had been one of those outspoken purebloods who openly defied as well as mendaciously threatened Greyback to 'know his place' in the Wizarding world, thus sealing the family's ironic fate. It had been all too easy for Voldemort to choose the first targets for Greyback to attack as prime examples of what other purebloods would suffer if they insisted on adhering to the 'old ways'.

Underestimating the Dark forces that backed Greyback, John Lupin then experienced the horror of what it meant to stand up and magniloquently pontificate and declaim against the new Wizarding order and the filthy 'beasts' giving allegiance to the self-proclaimed 'Lord' Voldemort.

John Lupin didn't stand a chance. His small son was singled out to pay the price: the 'sins' of the father.

With uncanny ease, Fenrir had stalked and followed the little boy's daily routine week after week, knowing when the child and mother frequented the neighbourhood playgrounds, noting when Remus was most likely to be left alone. Positioning himself near the child, exactly timing his lycanthropic transformation, and hungry for the taste of young flesh, Fenrir needed only a few minutes to do the abhorrent, defiling deed. So, he watched and waited, and the very first eve of the full moon, Greyback gloatingly masticated the boy, purposely spreading his curse rather than putting the young child out of his misery with death.

Brooding darkly over this defining moment in his past, Remus huffed in frustration, but reminded himself *Now is not the time for vendettas. I have to keep Nagini out of harm's way which I've put her in.*

Nagini had started at Remus' decisive exhalation. He glanced at her and saw that she had noted his fierce countenance.

He softly assured her, "We're almost there."

It occurred to him that Nagini may be thinking that her transformed appearance had caused his intense expression.

True, her incomplete transformation was a bit off-putting, more than he wanted to admit, but it was the emergence of the unexpected Lestrangle which had provoked his response. But if she knew the real reason of his vexation, his particular enmity and animus of Rodolphus and all of the self-proclaimed Death Eaters and exactly what the connection was, what he was his curse... *There's a time and place for everything, and this is definitely not it!*

Remus knew the time was nearing when he and Nagini would have to disclose who and where they came from; they couldn't push the topic conveniently to one side for much longer. *She knows as well as I, what Death Eaters truly are... We have to speak about it eventually, but first, to get her to safety!* He guided her to the left, catching sight again of her uncanny half-Polyjuiced features. *I don't know why it bothers me. Lily's red hair... At least, Nagini's beautiful golden eyes are the same...*

As they made their way down the main street, they passed Zonko's Joke Shop, then the Post Office. Abruptly, they turned up a side street and Remus motioned towards a creaking sign swinging in the swirling snow. "The small dark inn over there." They headed for it directly. "Students don't usually come here, just harmless, eccentric riff-raff: this is the Hog's Head." He pointed at the sign, illegible in the dark and snow. "As you'll see, it's pretty dingy, dark, and the clientele well, it's hard to recognize them clearly which is good for us."

Relieved to arrive, Remus swung the door open and ushered Nagini inside. The Hog's Head bar area was dimly lit with sporadically placed stubs of candles on rough wooden tables unevenly lighting the seemingly small room. The air was stifling, heavy with smoky, gamey odours. A few hunched-over, hooded figures slouched over one or two tables, cramped, and muttering indistinct sounds of conversation. Nagini caught the silhouettes of two figures out of the corner of her eye. They disappeared into the dark shadows to the immediate right; the unlit space seemed to stretch further back, barricading another area which they had gone behind. Sounds of furniture being shoved and a few muffled voices were heard speaking exclamatorily.

"Go straight," instructed Remus, almost in a whisper. "You can't tell from here, but at the very end, the room slopes down sharply on the right of the bar shank, in between it and some stairs leading to the upper level rooms. There's a half-enclosed booth built into the stairway; it should be empty. We'll have some privacy there." As Nagini drew nearer to the other end, she saw indeed a lower level appearing. This side seemed to lead to the inn part of the old structure, with crooked beams supporting uneven levels,

branching out and denoting different times and sections of construction.

She spotted the cosy, enclosed nook under the stairway and made a bee-line for it while Remus ordered two Butterbeers from the scruffy-looking, old barman who was giving them a hairy-eyeball stare. The old man grunted something and began rummaging under the counter.

Relieved to finally be able to catch her breath, Nagini slid into the dusty, snug booth and lowered her hood, breathing a sigh of relief.

Remus placed the packaged sweets down beside her and looked around. "I'll be right back." Nagini closed her eyes, breathing deeply, feeling exhausted, but then smiled up at Remus as he returned momentarily with two dust-covered bottles and placed them on the rustic surface. "Here we go!" Remus waved his hand over the bottle tops, and they popped open one by one. Using his shirt sleeve cuff, he wiped around the mouth of one bottle, and then the other, handing it over to Nagini. Clinking hers, he plopped himself down and ran his hand through his shaggy bangs, tucking them behind his ears. Remus let out a long sigh, his warm, concerned eyes not leaving Nagini's for one second. "How are you?"

"I don't know. I don't know," she repeated, whispering. "I don't understand why Rodolphus is *here*, in Hogsmeade."

Remus brooded slightly, watching her intently. He took a deep swig of his Butterbeer, thinking about how to comfort her, the right thing to say about their predicament, when he heard, "You!"

Remus snapped around and up, his wand ready in hand to defend or attack. Behind him, Nagini pulled hers out, ready to pounce, and nervy to see who had just shouted.

Standing taut and ready, Remus protectively placed himself in front of her and the oncoming figure. Figures. Recognisable ones. Regulus Black and, in the background advancing, Walden Macnair.

"I knew it was you!" gloated the young Black. A malicious, vicious sneer crossed the troubled features of Regulus. "I could *smell* you." Macnair didn't laugh at Black's comment, but a nasty, knowing smile crept over his face, accentuating the maniacal gleam in his eyes.

"Where's my..." Regulus stopped and glanced furtively around. Noting Macnair near him, Regulus raised his voice unnaturally and continued, "... that filthy blood-traitorous brother of mine?"

Fully composed, Remus seemed unperturbed by Regulus' insulting, disturbed energy. Nonchalantly, the Gryffindor challenged the haughty Slytherin yobbo. "Say his name, Regulus."

Regulus' mouth dropped open, and then the young bullyboy became truly enraged. "How dare you!"

Coolly, Remus pushed, "Why don't you say his name? Afraid?"

"You'll learn not to speak to your betters like that, you filthy beast!" Regulus raised his wand but was instantaneously disarmed from the figure stepping out from behind Remus.

Nagini swiftly caught Regulus' wand in her hand, having non-verbally cast the Expelliarmus spell.

Regulus blinked at the red-headed witch, shocked and huffing. "Evans?" Then a crazed look crossed his face. A disturbed grin spread over it. "Oh, I see this is what you two *honourable*, Gryffindor Prefects get up to behind that sod Potter's back! No more than the filthy blood-traitor deserves, choosing filthy Mudbloods and half-breeds over his own kind!"

Macnair stepped to Regulus' side, and the youngest Black cocked a snook at Lupin and 'Evans' before giving Macnair an excited look and sniggering. "Even that cruddy brother of mine will be put off when he hears about this! His loyal, best mate shagging his other best mate's slag!"

Looking blasé, Macnair eyed Remus and drawled lazily, "My father told me that your kind have officially been put on the Ministry's Undesirable list, categorised as 'magical beasts', I believe. Can't wait until 'open season'." Macnair's dull eyes got a sudden gleam in them. "Guess who I'm going after first?"

"Looking forward to seeing you soon, Macnair." Remus got a strange look on his face. "Can't wait, in fact."

"Brave one are you?" jeered Macnair. "Not much good it's going to do you."

Remus' tight grin broadened wryly at this comment.

"That's right," joined in Regulus haughtily. "You filthy half-breeds!" He sniffed disgustedly in Nagini's direction. Believing he was having the juicy, rare chance to insult the Gryffindor, golden-girl Lily Evans, he excitedly pontificated, "Filthy Mudbloods! Filth like you will soon know your true place!"

Faster than a blink, Nagini saw Remus' wand extend upwards. "Seems you need to clean up your vocabulary a bit, Black." Non-verbally, he sent a hex with the flick of his wand.

Regulus' eyes grew wider as his mouth gaped like a dying fish. Soap suds began to slowly sputter out of his mouth. Regulus grasped onto Walden, spastically knocking Macnair's wand out of his hand in the process. The snooty Black was flailing about and desperately attempting to breathe in between heaving and regurgitating from the Scourgify spell.

"Remus, stop it!" pleaded Nagini. "Please!"

She turned to Regulus who had slid to the floor. For one second, Nagini and Regulus' eyes met. Eyes-bulging and tears flowing down his face from the effort to breathe, Regulus blinked hard as something caught his attention about the Gryffindor Mudblood's expression. And about her eyes. He was confused. For a second, she reminded him of another time, another place, someone else he knew. But, Regulus couldn't finalise his realisation: a wave of vomiting bubbles spewed out, preventing him.

"Remus!" Nagini had never seen Remus with such a determined, cruel look on his face before. She'd never witnessed him so severely determined to humiliate someone and resolutely enjoying it. She touched his arm and pleaded, "Remus!"

Remus lifted the spell as subtly as he had placed it. His demeanour had unswervingly hardened as he kept his eyes fixed on the young, floundering Black. Unmoved.

As Macnair helped up his mate, the gruffy bartender had appeared and crossed over, huffing. "Look here, you two," he pointed, jabbing in the air at Macnair and Regulus, "You need to get back to your little meeting, yonder." He jerked his head to the area behind the bar's far left side. "And you two seemed to have business together over there." He indicated the dim-lit booth. "If you can't stay in your places, minding your own business, then there's the door for all of you!" growled the crusty old wizard loudly.

"Give me back my wand, Mudblood!" spat the humiliated Black.

Nagini forgot herself, who she was supposed to be under the Polyjuice effects, and lashed out, "Just shut it, Regulus!"

Regulus' mouth gaped open in shock, and then his eyes narrowed in dawning suspicion.

The bartender raised himself to his full height, and authoritatively commanded, "Enough! There'll be none of that!" He turned to Nagini. "Now then, lass. Return his wand to him." He pointed a warning finger to Regulus. "He daren't use it on you or he'll be answering to me!"

Nagini slowly gave it to the bristling old wizard, who warily handed the wand back to Regulus, while Macnair found and picked up his.

Even though she wasn't Evans, Nagini was trembling from Regulus' verbal assault. She felt the intentional cruelty and humiliation, the power of a word *the* word: Mudblood. It hit her hard.

Guided back to the main bar space with a grunt and gesture from the bartender, Walden and Regulus lumbered away; Regulus paused for a brief second, giving a glance back at 'Evans' and then he turned and caught up with Macnair.

Remus turned swiftly back to Nagini. Exigently, he whispered, "Your face your nose has changed back completely; your face is yours only the hair, it's still red!" Remus grimaced, frustrated and his heart thumped wildly. *The Polyjuice is fading fast! She'll be completely transformed back any second now!* "We must leave! Immediately!"

Not waiting for her reply, he grabbed and tugged Nagini's hand, pulling her behind him towards the exit.

They were stopped in their tracks. From the shadowy, camouflaged corner behind the other side of the bar, a livid Severus Snape strode towards them with determined intent on his mind.

The sixth-year Slytherin's attention was drawn immediately to Nagini. Severus started to speak but became choked up as he noted the red hair. His eyes darted to Nagini's. *Golden. Not green.* "Regulus told me he thought..." Severus stopped, and couldn't continue momentarily. It was too painfully bizarre. Staring at the red hair, he winced. *Polyjuiced Lily?* It was a blasphemy to him.

"What did you do to her?" hissed Severus, outraged at Lupin.

"Nothing. Nothing that she didn't agree to have done."

Lupin's cool attitude only served to infuriate Snape further.

"It's not enough that you endanger Nagini by your mere presence, Lupin, but you have to coerce her, endanger her" Snape stopped, and attempted to control himself, but lost. He lashed out, "Couldn't wait until a full moon to harm someone? Threatening my life wasn't enough? But even Dumbledore won't be able to keep you from being expelled once Rodolphus finds out! Vengeance, none too soon!"

Unnerved and overwhelmed, Nagini cut in, "Severus, Rodolphus is here, in Hogsmeade! Why?"

"That's irrelevant," warned Severus, his eyes darted quickly at Lupin, then back to her. "Just get out of here! Before that sorry excuse for Polyjuice Potion completely wears off!"

Eyes glittering with disgust and contempt at Lupin, Snape sneered, "If you have any true 'merit' in you, you'll use every ounce of your Gryffindor *bravery* to see that she gets safely back to Hogwarts."

Vexed, Remus stared at Severus. "She'll get back to Hogwarts safely, if it's the last thing I do, Snape!"

"Promises, promises, Lupin..." Severus looked like he would spit.

Nagini had crossed around to Severus, gently touching him on the arm. "Don't!" she pleaded softly, not wanting Severus' and Remus' mutual animosity to blow up. Snape flinched slightly at her touch and request. They stared at each other, his onyx orbs boring fixedly on her.

"Severus, please, don't tell Dumbledore! We'll leave immediately. It was my idea! Remus only went along with me."

"Remus', is it? Not 'Lupin'?" commented Snape, snidely.

Ignoring his derogatory tone, she urged, "He helped me, Severus." Snape seemed to relax before Remus' eyes at Nagini's coaxing and soft caressing of his arm. "I chose him; I chose to be with him. You understand; I know you do."

Snape gazed at her, lost in thought for a few seconds, but then his eyes narrowed. He frowned disapprovingly, inhaling slowly, struggling while deliberating his decision.

"Very well," agreed Severus finally, disgruntled. "But, we will discuss this," Snape's eyes flashed hatefully at Remus, *privately* when I return to Hogwarts."

Remus' facial muscles flinched, a spate of jealousy rushing through him. His mind was reeling with presumptuous accusations, and he felt flushed with humiliation at the revelation of Snape implying a special privilege with Nagini. *Of course they are Slytherin mates, but...* Remus reflected on the obvious. *When not by herself, or in the general group classes, I've only seen Nagini noticeably befriended by Severus or Regulus around Hogwarts. Otherwise, quite the solitaire... but Snape?*

Seeing Nagini and Severus right in from of him, sharing some clandestine moment, sent a sharp pain in Remus' chest, an arrow in his heart.

"Give Voldemort my regards!" quipped Remus impulsively, unable to control himself.

Snape froze. Slowly, he looked at Remus, his black eyes glittering dangerously. "Why don't you tell him yourself, Lupin? Or, is your tail between your legs as usual?"

Nagini saw Remus' flexed arm and duelling fist, clenched in tension, a second away from hexing Severus.

Severus' wand had appeared in his hand as well, ready and waiting to react in a blink.

"Your Dark Lord seems to fancy eager, disillusioned, *infatuated* boys to fill his ranks of admirers. Thanks for the invite, but I'm not of that persuasion." Remus' Marauder thoughtlessness flared further, and he couldn't help to add, "Unlike *you*, it seems, Snape!"

Severus snarled and almost lurched himself on Lupin, barely controlling himself at the last second as Nagini stepped in between them. Regardless, Severus proceeded to goad Remus, throwing his taunts over her head.

"The Dark Lord wishes to fill his ranks with all kinds of wizards and," Severus gave Remus an odd leer, "'beasts' the brave and the cowardly."

Remus' heated assurance wavered.

Snape's black eyes glistened with malice. "The moon is waxing wan, isn't it, Lupin? So which describes you the best today beast or coward?"

Remus couldn't respond, momentarily stunned at his affront. Dumbledore had assured Remus that Severus had agreed never to blatantly tell anyone of his true affliction, regardless of the enmity felt. He caught Nagini's wide-eyed confused look at Severus. *Clearly, Snape hasn't told her yet, or she hasn't believed him, but...*

Snape sneered, "Both, is it?"

Remus jolted, half-knocking a table beside him out of the way.

But then, several things happened at once.

Severus hissed out, "Nagini, your hair!" Lily's red hair had disappeared. Remus halted his impetus at Snape's words and turned to see that Nagini had fully transformed back: the Polyjuice's effects had completely vanished.

Simultaneously, the door of Hogs Head had slammed open and Rodolphus Lestrangle, impatient and seeking someone, had entered. Regulus Black and Walden Macnair came out of the shadowy back room to meet Lestrangle, who, upon seeing Severus, called out, "We must Apparate now! Rabastan has already gone before us is there a problem?"

Upon hearing Rodolphus' voice, Remus saw Nagini instinctively cover her head with her cloak's hood. She gave him a fleeting glance, and he shot her a knowing look, then she ran back to the far end of the bar counter, whispering fiercely to the grumpy, weathered bartender.

Remus was left stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Severus swirled in a flash in Rodolphus' direction and answered coolly, "It's nothing." Turning in a blink, he grabbed Remus' cloak, gathering and holding it fast in his fisted hand. He jerked Remus roughly to him, bringing their faces close, and fiercely whispered, "Gryffindor bravery, Lupin!"

Remus' features flickered for the briefest second in raw, panicked understanding, but then he recovered and aggressively shoved Severus away from him, instinctively pulling his wand higher to attack or defend as necessary. His eyes darted around at the foreboding four, glaring in particular at Rodolphus. Waiting to be attacked.

Unexpectedly, Regulus, who had been watching silently as if Petrified, joined in. "It's just a Gryffindor: Sirius' mate."

Rodolphus took a step forward. "A Gryffindor one of Sirius' cohorts?" As recognition dawned on his cruel, chiselled face, Rodolphus' eyes narrowed with burning intensity and he softly enquired, "You're John Lupin's son, aren't you?" As a distant, distinct memory dawned, a smug smile spread on Rodolphus' face. "Yes, I agree with you, Snape. *Nothing* here."

Macnair crossed from standing in the shadows to Rodolphus' side. He smirked and casually commented, "Look at him, holding his wand. After his father's dismissal from the Ministry, one would think that his kind would know their place in the world. In *our* world. Surely, he doesn't think of himself as a wizard?"

"The Ministry of Magical Beasts Department has him registered quite differently, yes? Or has that old fool Dumbledore been telling him otherwise?" replied Lestrangle nonchalantly.

Rodolphus turned sharply back to Remus and, as if commanding a cur, shouted, "Heel!"

As Rodolphus and Walden shared a hearty chuckle, abruptly, the gruff voice and presence of the Hogs Head bartender appeared and warned, "Now see here, Mr Lestrangle, if you've business elsewhere, it's best that you be off to it. I'll not have any of that threatening and insulting talk or any other nonsense! You'd best be off and take them with you!" He motioned to Snape, Regulus and Walden. "If they're why you came here no need for me to be callin' for any authorities, is there?"

Rodolphus scoffed and reached into his cloak's inner lining. Pulling out some coins, he threw a few Galleons at the bartender's feet. "For your feeble worries, you old goat!" he sneered condescendingly. Then, Lestrangle turned, waving the door open wandlessly, only to turn back again and give a look of disgust at Aberforth and Remus. Satisfied, Rodolphus then motioned for the others to precede him before exiting.

Only after the door had flung shut did Lupin slowly lower his wand.

The bartender's piercing blue eyes combed over Remus before he finally said, "As for you, your*friend* is up those stairs. Third door on the left. She told me to tell you."

Nagini! Remus swiftly fled to the upstairs level and frantically followed the crooked doors when he abruptly came upon an open one. He found Nagini inside the tiny room, wand in hand, en guard.

She gasped out, "Quickly!"

No sooner had he entered than the door slammed closed. Nagini immediately began murmuring incantations to Charm the room against outside forces. Remus instinctively joined in, only stopping when he noticed that Nagini had seemingly finished.

Giving Remus a grave look, she gazed back at the doorway and raised her palm commandingly and ever-so-quietly chanted another spell.

Lupin froze and quirked his head watching and listening to her. She was whispering in soft, hissing patches of sounds emanating gently from her, culminating with an intelligible: "*Diffindo!*"

Immediately, a slash on her palm let forth fast flowing blood, but Nagini merely motioned her hand around in a counterclockwise movement against an invisible force, hissing indistinctly, placing a final barricading spell. Rather than falling to the floor, her blood was sucked into an invisible void, evaporating: an extra final shield to warding the room off.

Having finished, Nagini stood with a woeful look on her exhausted features, staring dazed, as if seeing through the solid walls. With a hollow voice, she said, "Just because we can't see them doesn't mean the threat is not there... that *they* are not out there... waiting for us. To harm us."

As if depleted of all energy, she staggered backwards slightly and slumped down onto the dowdy covered mattress of the small bed.

'Heel!' The degrading insult was still ringing in Lupin's ears; it now mingled with the soft hissing of Nagini's incantations echoing in his mind. Shakily, with wired energy caused from the culmination of provoking and humiliating taunts and events related to Rodolphus and company, Remus took a moment to collect himself.

Inhaling deeply, he looked around at the slanted ceiling and shabby, dim room sparsely furnished with only a corner bed, table and waxed-over candleholder. A perpetually burning taper flitted softly. He regarded Nagini and tersely reflected, *Of course she knows Dark Arts very well... bred and raised on them...*

Watchfully, he said speculatively, "I don't think I know that Charm."

Nagini had scrunched her eyes closed and wistfully prayed to the powers that be for any sign: any clairvoyant image to affirm or warn her of what was waiting outside these walls for them, what lurked in the immediate unfolding future. She silently began begging her Inner Eye to reveal the merest glimpse that they would be safe, return to Hogwarts unharmed. Nothing responded to her beckoning will. Only a dark void. Weakening, she felt empty. Abandoned.

She numbly replied, "My blood sacrifice bonds our spells together, fortifying, strengthening them."

"I'm quite familiar with blood spells," commented her curt companion. "Dark spells, if you'd like."

Remus bit his inner cheeks in tension, remembering the myriad of desperate attempts his own parents had made, the depths of defilement they underwent: searching, exploring every known and forgotten Dark spell, charm, potion, begging, grovelling to any Dark wizard to have mercy and assist them in their desolate need to find a cure for their son's affliction.

Uncontrolled bitterness crept through Remus, his thoughts turning dark. *To no avail. Left bereft and isolated. Ostracised from the Wizarding community... from the pureblood community...*

Dryly, Remus confessed, "But I must admit, Parseltongue skills are one thing I lack."

Incognizant to his wryness, she simply replied, "My father taught me that spell."

"We have our own secret language, Nagini. Only you and I can understand one another. Isn't that wonderful, my little one? See how it makes your Mummy angry? She doesn't like it that we have our own language, that we can have our own secrets, does she?"

"Your father was a Parselmouth?"

Nagini didn't answer him directly, suddenly self-conscious and ashamed.

"It's not what people think," she processed out loud, fiddling distractedly with her heirloom ring. "My father was the only one I ever spoke it with; the only one I could speak it with... That was a very long time ago."

A memory of her father's death flashed through her mind. "He... he was killed." She gave a quick glance at Remus to see his reaction.

"Yes..." Remus shrugged, remembering Sirius' vivacious and vivid account of the story. He crossed slowly over to the wall, the open space between the head of the bed and little table. He leaned against the wall's cool, rough surface, peering down at the wooden tabletop and then into the candle's weak, flickering flame. He sighed heavily and shifted his focus upwards. An octangular window was letting in faint moonbeams.

Remus sniffed and finally replied, "Yes, by your mother."

Glossing over this, Nagini responded, "Since then, only garden snakes or forest serpents have found me. Quite boring really. Snakes just like to complain a lot: how noisy and clumsy humans are. Not very interesting."

Remus gave Nagini a hard look. His percolating anger struggled with his overwhelming compassion for her. In one irate and irrational moment, he had wanted to blame her for their predicament, feeling so frustrated and vexed. But as he took in her benumbed state, pity and empathy gushed through him. He inhaled deeply and arched his head slightly back pressing against the wall, contemplating their dilemma.

Straightening up, he decisively and swiftly crossed over and sat beside her. Remus took her wounded hand in his, turning it over. "Here, let me," he offered, pointing his wand. Not waiting for her approval, he cast a Healing spell on it. The flesh slowly throbbed, and then the torn skin healed magically back together, sealing against any further blood flow.

Awkwardly, Remus scooted away from Nagini, resting his back against the high headboards of the rustic bed. Scrunching his eyes closed, he rubbed his face briskly; he then ran his fingers roughly through his hair. Frustrated and at his wits' end about the events of the past half-hour, his resentment was slowly rearing up again. But, this time, only at himself. *It's all been a mistake... I'm to blame...*

Reflecting, he had to accept that since Honeydukes, the evening had rapidly gone downhill. By now, any hopes for romantic endeavours had evaporated, and his only thoughts were to get them back safe and sound within the castle walls of Hogwarts. He knew enough not to push what was on, if not already over, the edge.

Remus gazed up at the sliver of a new moon seen through the small window and gave a deep sigh. He looked back at Nagini who had, by now, lain down on her side, turned away from him at the foot of the bed. He inhaled slowly. Her cloak had fallen back, exposing her rounded hips covered by a clingy black skirt. Her mercurial hair had fallen down and was spread loosely around her face and shoulders, accentuating her features. His eyes drifted slowly, taking in inch by inch her pleasing, feminine landscape of a body.

She's so lovely... her body is so... Remus swallowed hard, and looked away. He had a mad impulse to wrap himself around her, comfort her, kiss her, *touch* her...

Remus jerked his head up at the moonlight and exhaled impatiently. Resolved, he informed, "We'll wait a bit to make sure they've gone to wherever they're going. And then... we will leave. I know another secret way to get us safely back to the castle."

Nagini didn't respond. After a few seconds of silence, he heard her frail voice apologetically eke out, "I'm sorry... so sorry for everything. You must truly hate me."

Remus blinked hard. "Hate you?"

"For leaving you like that... running away... being so cowardly."

Having now met Rodolphus up close in person, several unsavoury scenarios of what her uncle would've done to her, if Lestranger had actually caught Nagini with him, flashed through Remus' mind.

"You had to... it was far too dangerous otherwise. It's what you had to do."

She slowly rolled over and languidly propped herself up, sitting up against the footboard, gazing in guilty turmoil at the sandy-haired Gryffindor. "I heard what they called you; how they insulted you." Her golden eyes were glistening, on the verge of tears.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," quoted Remus wryly. Seeing Nagini's credulous, round-eyed reaction, he smirked slightly, "An old Muggle saying." He took a moment to contemplate the pureblood witch's perplexed expression and felt an uncontrollable impetus to reveal, "My mother was a Muggle-born witch."

Remus forced a smile, and astutely continued, "A Mudblood."

Nagini felt her cheeks burn, ashamed, having freshly experienced the vicious, belittling intent of the word herself. She stared wide-eyed at him, embarrassed and disconcerted. "How... how can you be so calm about that word? How can you bear to use it so flippantly? Knowing what it represents?"

He snapped, "It represents nothing!" Remus saw that she felt painfully abashed, and he clarified, "Only if I give it meaning, *power* to the word... which I choose not to. It's that simple, Nagini."

Nothing's that simple, Remus...

They stared at one another. Their emotions were surging and raging, ready to erupt, precarious and volatile.

Nagini lowered her eyes and stared at a dingy spot on the tatty bedspread. Her thoughts raced on what she had overheard: the insults Remus had had to endure downstairs. Quietly, she asked, "Why do they taunt you so? Why do they repeatedly call you that? Regulus, Walden..."

"What?"

"A *beast*."

A shrewd smile appeared on Remus' face, only belied by his brow furrowing in grim contemplation and his eyes darkening. He said nothing.

"Even Severus called you a beast... and a coward."

At the reminder of Snape, the jealous pang winced sharply through Remus' again. Something snapped. "If you wish to know the inner workings of Mr Snape's mind," quipped Remus sarcastically, "then it is best you ask him directly. You certainly seem intimate enough to do so."

Ignoring his innuendo, exasperated, she pleaded, "I don't want to hear it from Severus; I want to hear it from you, Remus!"

Nagini saw an odd look come across Remus' face. He peered at her, a smouldering flame in his eyes. But she kept his gaze, willing, demanding that he give her an answer.

Abruptly, Remus politely smiled and then civilly answered, "Because that's what I am, Miss Lestrangle.

"I am a beast and a coward."

A/N: Greatest thanks and appreciation to my wonderful betas: blue artemis & agnus castus!

Darna Shealladh - Part One

Chapter 7 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

Nagini stared at Remus, stunned.

She blinked hard. Her eyes smarted, battling back the tears, remembering Remus standing bravely before four Death Eaters downstairs in the Hog's Head pub while she fled to safety. Not knowing what would happen next, she became overwhelmed and frustrated. "You're not a coward...I'm the coward! And you're not..."

He cut her off sharply. "I am a beast, to be feared, despised...you'll be thanking Uncle Rodolphus quite soon for 'enlightening' you; that is, if Snape hasn't already!"

Her frustration vented itself. Nagini felt warm tears running down her cheeks. *Why is he saying this? It's as if... A soft sob welled up and escaped from her lips. He wants me to reject him now! Push me away!*

"You're cruel, Remus."

Remus looked hard at her. Her pain struck him deeply, a blistering force splashing against his already taxed nerves. But, he had to put an end to this ~~them~~. The past hour's events had spelt that out loud and clear.

"Yes, when pushed to be, I can be quite cruel." Before Nagini could comment, he continued in a pedantic tone, "I'm a coward because I've never told you before that I'm a... beast."

"Remus... Don't..." Nagini felt as if she had become Petrified, except for the nauseous wave welling up inside her.

"Nagini, you *do* believe I would never ever hurt you, don't you?"

She nodded in agreement, pressing her tear-stained lips tightly together.

Lupin looked up at the octangular window with the moonbeams streaming in, softening the dim lit room with its glow. "The moon is waxing wan, and you're safe. ~~won't~~ hurt you. I can't hurt you." His brows furrowed, edged with torment. He repeated, "I would never hurt you, intentionally, that is."

Staring at her, Remus felt his pain and shame, aching and longing for her, all clash and battle through his veins.

"I'm a werewolf, Nagini."

Remus barely breathed as he watched her, intently, waiting for the panic to set in. The hysteria. The fear.

Nothing!

Nagini remained still. Her face was calm, no emotion. She only stared back at him.

Feeling compelled, the shaggy-haired Gryffindor Prefect quietly proceeded to point out, "All the rumours, all the snide Slytherin remarks, implications... they are all true."

Still no reaction... But then, a change occurred. Remus' chest tightened as the golden orbs peering at him shifted from being unreadable to filling with an emotion he loathed: pity.

True, he wanted her to stay calm. *She's already been through enough tonight...* but, he wouldn't allow this: *fear, yes; pity, no!* He expected her to respond differently, anything but this; he was used to rejection, *that* he had mastered well... *But sympathy, sorrow for the outcast I am? Never!* During my transformation period, I'm a hideous, uncontrollable beast." He looked her straight in the eye. "I'd just as soon rip your throat out as look at you."

This final statement struck a nerve in Nagini. She involuntarily bolted up and inched away from him until her back touched the wall.

Caught between frustration and shame, a surge of anger flared within Remus. He lashed out, "You're not saying anything, and you should!"

A cold, cloudy numbness had invaded Nagini's limbs and thoughts. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say." Watching Remus as he rose slowly, she shivered. "You just told me that you are a werewolf," she reflected aloud as best she could, her lips quivering, "but all I see when I look at you is..." She gazed at him with a sad longing. "You: Remus."

Suddenly, the vision of herself and Remus walking side by side through pristine, glowing snowfall hand in hand flashed in her mind again. But then, an even stronger sensation of déjà vu enveloped her: *Here! This room... together, before...*

She covered her face with her hands and cried out softly as a warm burst of energy issued from her heirloom ring, coursing up her left arm and pulsing through her body. As if in pain, she hugged herself in an attempt to control her shivering.

Remus mistook her cry as a sole reaction towards him. At seeing tears, once again, stream down her face, his heart broke. The sight of her in such a dire way was so miserable; his breathing became irregular and strained. He leaned against the wall, roughly running one hand through his hair in exasperated tension; he restrained himself from helping her in fear that any physical contact would cause her to snap into hysteria or worse. *Now that she knows what I truly am... How did I expect her to react to me? What was I thinking? I wasn't thinking. Remus, you selfish idiot!*

Nagini's teeth began to chatter from an invisible cold now creeping throughout her, absorbing any inner warmth.

Remus saw that she was trembling so hard, she could barely stand. Instinctively, he rushed over and caught her just in time as she began to slide down the wall and, in one swift swoop, lifted and carried her over to the bed.

"Darna Shealladh... Darna Shealladh," she rasped out in his arms, her head arched back and eyes clenched closed.

Believing she was having a seizure of sorts, Remus placed her down and proceeded to lie down beside her; he promptly clasped her in his arms, pinning her against him in a tight embrace. Her trembles ceased, although she continued to murmur, 'Darna Shealladh,' over and over again, until, slowly, she quietened. Relieved that the sudden onset had subsided, he relaxed his grip, and she lay cradled, her head resting on his chest, her body half draped over his.

Time passed with them lying in each other's arms.

Time passed with him relishing the sensation of her molded to him.

In the stillness of the night, only her soft breathing was heard.

In the coolness of the dim lit room, her body heat was all the young wizard was cognitive of.

All else was forgotten.

Except for the warmth of his hardening cock. *She feels so incredible lying in my arms...* He allowed himself a moment longer to enjoy the pure simple pleasure of it. For he'd never just lain with a witch like this, and the reality of it being Nagini ignited him from the core. *I've got to get her off of me before...* His Adam's apple bobbed, and he sat up a bit, trying to delicately roll her off of his torso. Nagini stirred and shifted her body weight; Remus tried to counter-shift away from her resting thigh pressing on his hardened member.

"Nagini," he whispered, his voice husky with emotion, lowering his arms from her, "We should leave now for Hogwarts..."

"Why did you finally tell me the truth?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He gulped, pausing. "I *care* for you, a great deal." Remus met Nagini's inquisitive gaze with the old forlorn look of longing for that which he should not. Against his better judgment, the sandy-haired wizard admitted with candour, "I want you, desire you greatly, almost uncontrollably. *Almost*. What remains of my control has allowed me to disclose this to you. So, now you know. And now, we can put an end to this before it truly ever begins."

Nagini lowered her head, resting it once again on his chest. She closed her eyes tight and hugged him even tighter. Lovingly.

"Don't," whispered Remus.

Ignoring this, she clutched him more firmly and said softly, "Darna Shealladh."

Trying to keep coherent over his throbbing hard-on, Remus' brow knitted as he enquired, "Darna Shealladh: 'second sight' what of it?"

"I... I have it. I've seen us here. Before. Just like this."

Remus registered her confession, at first, stoically. *The incongruity and absurdity of it all! If you had any true clairvoyance, you would have seen how disastrous this entire evening was to be!* But then, her naivety in believing this... *Her Inner Eye?*... the ridiculousness of it all, caused him to give her a gentle hug, not intending to encourage her. Or himself.

Involuntarily, he kissed her hair, only to jerk his head towards the window and stare once again at the mocking moonbeams. His thoughts turned pensive *But she believes it... just to get her back to Hogwarts, then we can discuss the absurdness of her Inner Eye later...*

"Your heart," murmured Nagini. "Your heart is thumping so hard."

Remus swallowed and then sighed heavily, his chest heaving.

"Yes. It's the effect," responded Remus slowly. "The effect you have on me." Nagini's bent leg, her thigh, was ever-so-slightly exerting pressure on his pronounced erection. He was running his fingers absently through her hair. *Like Selene, she has an involuntary effect on me. God, I've got to get her back to Hogwarts, and quickly...* His thoughts were in a whirlwind, but more distracting was her body pressing against his, slamming his libido into overdrive. Nagini's fingers were slowly feeling his sinewy, muscular chest, tracing softly downwards to his well-defined, sculpted thighs. As her fingertips gently grazed upward again, meeting his defined ribs, and then, lowering her touch further, feeling lightly over his taut, well-defined lower abdomen muscles, now tightening, her hand rested on his hip, pausing. He was unable to move. At her mercy. Waiting.

Nagini shifted her weight, sitting up languidly. Her mercurial, long hair flowed down, framing her face; her golden eyes were invitingly looking into his.

There it was. As their eyes met and held each other's gaze, both knew there was no going back.

Remus felt her lips, the most gentle kiss he'd ever experienced. And again. Then, she brushed sweetly over his eyelids, his nose tip, his cheekbones... He felt her move away and slowly opened his eyes to see that she was sitting back. Her focus had lowered to his chest.

Nagini decisively started to unbutton his shirt.

Remus felt his bare skin being exposed, being touched by her so very feminine fingertips. The tickling softness of her hair brushed his bare skin as she tilted her head downward, intent on what she was doing, causing his head to arch back in pleasure. In between her haptic actions, he heard himself making excuses, "I'm scarred; my whole body scarred."

Nagini paused and gave him a thoughtful look, but continued to unbutton, determinedly pulling his shirttail out of his trousers in order to undo the last one. Succeeding, she brushed aside the cloth and sat back, admiring his lean, tightly-muscled torso. Her eyes fell upon the multiple marks of various lengths and depth. She lowered her head, and Remus felt her full lips kiss and her wet tongue flick softly across the ultra-sensitive marked skin. As she caressed his flesh with her lips and licked across a particularly

long, scarred gash underneath his right ribcage, his chest rose and fell; his breathing became short and stringent.

She was slowly moving her head down. The warm air from her mouth made him all the more conscious of his now painful erection. His skin was tingling, and his hardened arousal throbbed expectantly as her lips lowered on the soft tufts of his joy trail, increasing the pressure, teasingly nipping and sucking his flesh. Her fingers had now found his old leather belt hook; the unwavering Slytherin tugged and unfastened the metal buckle and continued to open one by one the crotch buttons. Oblivious to everything, except watching her, feeling her touch, he arched his hips in anticipation, helping to assist, lowering and pulling his underpants and trouser off.

Nagini gazed at his nakedness, curious and admiring. Her burning cheeks and resolute touch inflamed him.

"Come to me," he uttered.

She slowly half-crawled between his legs; her clothed breasts brushed his erect cock's tip as she stretched upwards, meeting Remus' mouth. Their mutual kisses were now searching and demanding. Nagini felt Remus' fingertips exploring her breasts, searching for the opening to her blouse, and finding none, impatiently he leaned forward, grabbing her buttocks, nudging her hips to come forward.

"Sit on me," he throatily whispered.

She made to do so, but could not resist and swooped down to lick the tip of his luscious cock. Remus groaned and his fingers grasped her tightly, encouraging, spurring her to take in the first few inches. She felt his tension, his anticipation, and she started to lick and suck him, bobbing around and around, up and down on his cock.

Remus had pushed up and back against the headboard. His jaw slackened only to tighten in euphoric grimacing from her exquisite oral ministrations. In between his wincing in spouts of ecstasy, he stroked Nagini's head, gathering her hair away from her face. Through his half-closed lids, he watched her suck him: she was gorgeous. He could've gazed at her infinitely, but his hand suddenly clutched the bedspread as he contracted upward; he felt his balls tightening up. Not wanting to come so soon, he firmly grabbed Nagini, pulling her up by her waist and arm; he kissed her passionately and guided her to straddle him. His hands found their way to her skirt's waist hook, undoing it, quickly tugging and pulling the loose material up and over her head.

The narrow waist got entangled in her arms, propelling a frantic, animalistic urgency which took over both of them. Nagini ripped her skirt in the final tug over her head, then snapped her blouse up and off. With the freeing of her breasts from its clad constraint, Remus' mouth was kneading and sucking them hungrily. He teasingly nipped and suckled her nipples while his hands explored the flesh of her buttocks, tight and flexed as her legs straddled him; his cock burned against her thinly covered flesh.

Nagini arched back; Remus braced and balanced her weight as he continued to lick, suck and swirl her breasts and nipples; he had wanted to go slower, but felt a ravenous, carnal hunger unlike any he had ever known before. One hand found its way down, pulling aside her thin crotch covering, determined to gauge her arousal; he felt between her wet folds.

Explored her.

As Nagini mewled sharply, Remus knew he had found the rosebud he sought and pressed skillfully against the delicate nub, her mewling and wetness increasing tenfold. He panted, "Sit on me. Rise up." She did so, and he tried to guide her, taking his cock in hand, to lower herself on him. She placed her hand on his and slowly helped place his tip in her vaginal entrance and began lowering her wet cunt down. As she began to sheath herself on him, he thrust upwards, and she yelped in pain.

Remus stopped, panting hard. "Oh, fuck!" he gasped aloud, snapping up and embracing her to him. Panting, strained in carnal agony, he flipped her quickly on her back. Trying to regulate his breath, he stroked her breasts as he kissed her naval and soft flesh leading to her Venus mound. He hastily gathered and jerked her knickers off; he then stroked her pubic hair, strummed her vaginal lips, slowly inserting one finger, then another; he was trying to go slowly, but his painful erection needed relief soon, and she was... *A virgin! Fuck!* He crawled over to place his head between her legs, and just like that very morning at the Astronomy Tower, he enjoyed her succulent wetness, her moaning and whimpering, her clawing his back, her nails digging into his skin as her toes curled in orgasm, piercing into his shoulders.

While she was still undulating in post-orgasm, he slowly positioned himself on her, his erection at her entrance. Kissing her as gently as he could muster, he could only whisper, "Nagini, Nagini...do you want this?" *Please, please... the gods have mercy on me!*

Nagini whispered, "Yes..." He felt her hands pressing his buttocks, encouraging him to enter her. His body was only too ready. He pushed into her. As soon as he had thrust through her hymenal membrane, both crying out, he probed her to the hilt, at first roughly, but then in regulated rhythm, allowing her to adjust to his width and length, his force and speed.

Her soft groans and clinging intensified as she began to greet his movements with equal, measured carnal rhythm, undulating, moving and fucking in sync; Nagini met his hard pounding with equal force, her vaginal muscles squeezing him tight in intensifying contractions, both of them fucking deliriously. In his pre-orgasmic bliss, Remus forgot all else and pounded her pussy in lost oblivion until Nagini shook beneath him, clawing and clinging to him for life. Her cry of orgasm triggered him over the edge; Nagini felt his hot seed released inside her.

The night would be 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 and fucked at leisure, leaving no inch of either's body unexplored. Exhausted from their ravenous, salacious exertions, they drifted into a satiated repose, wrapped in each other's arms.

"We're home free," commented Remus, breaking the serene silence he and Nagini were enjoying as they reached the edge of the glistening woods. They had awoken in a drowsy, post-coital bliss, only to immediately become aware that the air had changed; dawn was nearing. Hastily they dressed and hurried out of the eternally dim lit room; casting undetectable spells around them, they cautiously snuck out of the silent and seemingly vacant Hog's Head as stealthily as possible. Knowing that dawn was fast drawing near, they proceeded and succeeded in quickly leaving Hogsmeade incognito.

Only one more low-sloped hill and they would head downward directly toward the Shrieking Shack where Remus would guide Nagini through the connecting tunnel and safely pass the Whomping Willow back to the castle.

As they followed the snowy path from Hogsmeade hand in hand, Nagini felt the freshness, the newness of her world *I am changed...* She impulsively confessed, "I want to spend every moment with you!"

Remus smiled, but there was a sweet sadness lingering around it. They had barely spoken throughout their torrid lovemaking; no words had been necessary. Only their needs. Their hungers. *But now, so much... so many things I want to say to her. I need to ask her...Where to start?*

At his solemn demeanor, Nagini nudged him gently. "How often can we watch the sun come up together like this?" She wished to savour every second of being with him and felt the lightness of being all around them, exhilarating her, as if they were in a winter wonderland. From her yearned for sexual experience with Remus to the present wintry truant wandering, Nagini had never experienced such liberties. Moreover, she wanted more. Her newfound freedom had unleashed a desire for all things sensual: experiencing nature to its fullest, experiencing all pleasures in their fullness, to make up for lost time.

Incomprehensibly, Remus had become tongue-tied; regardless, he knew he would not refuse her anything. He was relishing being in the wintry forest with her as much as she, even though the nagging thought of if they didn't hurry as fast as possible, it wouldn't be just the groundskeeper, Hagrid, that they might have to dodge. *Just to get back inside the castle walls. And then, to talk about everything about us!*

The glowing snow-covered path narrowed as they drew closer to the hill's peak; they pulled each other along, playfully. Lovingly. Once on top, with the Shrieking Shack in view below them, they held each other close and gazed at the pristine, frosty nature surrounding them.

The soft gleam of dawn was breaking bright.

They slowly trudged down; both had become sullen. The reality of returning to Hogwarts, to their separate Houses, their separate lives, hit them hard. They abruptly stopped and clasped each other tightly.

"You have the makings of a real Marauder, Nagini," joked Remus, attempting to cover up their dampened spirits.

Nagini peered up into his creamy brown eyes. "Do I? Would your mates agree?"

"There, now, don't be sad." Moving a tress of her hair from her face, he kissed her cheek. "It's all going to be all right. We'll take one day at a time. We'll find a way. A place to meet. Secretly. I know several." Forcing himself, he wagged his eyebrows.

She peered at him, worry written on her brow.

Determined to lighten their moods, he gave a cheeky grin. "For starters, there's the Prefect's bathroom on the fifth floor I'd like to sneak you into, er, show it to you; I have my own allotted times there... maybe this evening?" Impulsively, he kissed her. "There's the Astronomy Tower." A more ardent kiss was planted. "I know one of your favourite places is..." He couldn't help smirking. "The Divination classroom the easiest classroom to break into."

"Break into? Shame on you, Prefect Lupin," she teased, having become distracted from her brooding by his hands beginning to caress her in just the right way.

"Then, let's just say, it'll be in need of patrolling on my nightly rounds. Hope to find my one and only favourite Slytherin there, out of her House after hours, so I can personally," she moaned as his tongue encircled hers, "deal with matters at hand, escort you..."

Remus drew back to look at her face, just enough to take in her longing eyes. Her look of need, want of him, so turned him on. He forgot all else. Crushing her against him in a tighter embrace, he kissed her deeply again.

The light snowfall began to increase. The soft flurries glittered in the golden, awakening sunbeams of dawn.

From his kissing, Nagini moaned in pleasure, swaying slightly, clutching him, entwining her arms up and around his torso, pressing into him. Into his hardness.

Suddenly, there was a loud snap.

Nagini and Remus had just a second to look out into the trees through the glowing snowfall, hazed with soft flakes swirling lightly. In the fleeting, fading shadows of the woods, they caught sight of dark figures. Before they could even pull out their wands, the last thing they heard was multiple yells, "*Stupefy!*"

Both blacked out in drowning darkness.

The vision had been fulfilled.

A/N: My greatest appreciation and gratitude to quaffswinegaily, her keen Scottish tweaking and generous support with everything, to star_girl for her generous support and expertise, and to emdramaqueen for her wonderful beta support and encouragement!

Darna Shealladh - Part Two

Chapter 8 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

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A dim, dark seemingly infinite space with candlelit sconces filled the void in a blurred haze. Whispers... screaming... hushed whisperings... raucous laughter...

"Enough!" commanded a cold voice.

Nagini's eyes snapped open as an *Enervate!* command echoed in her ears. Her body snapped, fully conscious.

A wild cackle rang out, piercing her ears.

"Get up!"

Focusing her eyes as best she could, Nagini felt a force roll her over. Attempting to push herself upwards on her side, she clutched the nearest solid form her hands met and pushed against it. But as she jerked to sit up, she cried out in pain, collapsing. A bloody body, beaten to a pulp, broke her spastic fall; landing on top of Remus' unconscious form, she screamed in agony as a searing pain burned through her right side and realised, *My ribs... Something's cracked!* She could not move through the agony but lay shaking uncontrollably.

Through her trembling and blurred vision, Nagini looked around as best she could; one eye was half-closed, swollen and burning. *can't see... hardly...* She shook violently, but forced herself to peer through a haze of pain, dully registering where they were.

Surrounding them in dim lighting were masked, cloaked figures. The odour of something putrid and rotting stung her nostrils, and her throat began to tighten. She lay whimpering from the pain in between gagging on the stench. Suddenly, she heard a voice that caused an uncontrollable shiver to strike every nerve in her being.

"Let me finish the filthy beast off, my Lord!"

Through half-closed lids, she saw Bellatrix, her chest heaving and wand ready, panting in eager anticipation for permission to use the killing curse. She slowly knelt in front of a tall, gaunt figure with a face of formidable cruelty. "My Lord?"

"No." The distorted mask-like features of the Dark Lord gazed pensively at Nagini and then Remus' form.

"I am a merciful lord," Voldemort announced and then leered. "No, let the werewolf be taken and placed in front of Hogwarts as a warning to the old man... A message for Dumbledore: those who are unworthy must know their place or suffer the consequences thereafter.

"We will have a pure New World Order. Hogwarts will soon be what its original founder foresaw as the true purpose and existence for our kind. No Muggle blood shall defile us furthermore."

Nagini watched as Voldemort placed his foot on one side of Remus' bloody, unconscious face and shoved it, flipping it to the other side. "Nor any beast."

"Regulus, you and... Severus... shall do this little errand for me. I believe Bella has played with her catch enough for the evening...."

Two masked dark forms came near, hovering over and around Nagini, and as they scooped Lupin's body up under their arms, another distinct voice was heard saying, "My Lord, they'll have to take him beyond the wards here... If I lower them, we could be infiltrated... Aurors have been spotted about." Nagini closed her eyes as the recognition of Lucius Malfoy sunk in. *We must be in his Manor... or Uncle's... but...* She was too disorientated to think clearly further.

As they dragged Remus' body from underneath her, Nagini's head hit the floor and spurts of purple and black spots filled her vision, a darkness threatening to overtake her, but her heart thumped wildly as she watched Remus' body being dragged off, as if he were lifeless, further and further away.

"And what about her, my Lord?" rasped a menacing voice she knew all too well: Rodolphus Lestranger.

There was no answer. But then Nagini screamed as someone grabbed the front of her soiled robes and pulled her up.

Rodolphus' spit hit her face, and she whimpered in pain as she was thrown back down on the hard stone floor.

Another figure with long blond hair grabbed her by the hair and around the waist, ignoring her cries of anguish from the further pressure to her injured ribcage. He hoisted her up, propped and pressed her against his chest. "The Dark Lord wants your undivided attention, girl."

"She has the gift you say, Rodolphus?" enquired the calm, cool voice of the Dark Lord. "The gift of Second Sight?"

"My brother said she had it... but Rolph was known to *exaggerate* about many a thing, my Lord... He was wrong about her filthy mother, wasn't he?"

Her holder's grip loosened a tad as sardonic laughter and jeers rumbled around the cavernous dark space. Delirious, through the pain, Nagini struggled against the wizard holding her and heard herself whimpering, "Don't...don't..."

"Don't, what? Portentia Belby was a crazy, traitorous bitch!" shrieked Bellatrix.

"Don't..." Madly, Nagini twisted around in her captor's arms and pushed wildly, whimpering anew as her ribcage burned. The pain caused her to jerk spasmodically and jab at the masked wizard; she jolted in pain so much that her fingers pressed wildly around and upwards, clumsily pushing under the mask and against his face. On contact, her head suddenly lolled back, and she uttered in an altered voice, "She carries the child... the child... she waits alone and forlorn; she waits and waits for you..."

The blond wizard froze, except for his tight grip sadistically squeezing her.

"Is this true, Lucius?" Voldemort asked, visibly displeased.

The tall, eerie figure of the Dark Lord towered over her; his red eyes boring into her was all she knew before blacking out.

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"We found you, unconscious and trounced, on the Hogwarts lawn." Dumbledore sat stoically beside Lupin's bed in the hospital wing of Hogwarts, peering neutrally at the young wizard.

"There we go, Remus, one more dose." Madam Pomfrey forced Remus to swallow a generous dosage of blood-red liquid.

Lupin coughed and sputtered on the rancid potion. When he regained his breath, he pleaded, "Headmaster, please."

"I believe this," Albus held up a plump parcel, "is yours."

It was the packaged sweets from Honeydukes.

"It belongs to you?"

Remus gazed at the innocent package, speechless.

"The barman of the Hog's Head informed me that this had been left in a booth. That Nagini and you were there." Dumbledore paused. "Together."

Remus shook his head affirmatively.

"There was a bit of a commotion between you and a few of the other...*patrons*."

Remus huffed and then bit his inner cheeks, his eyes smarted.

"Headmaster, please. Nagini..." He couldn't breathe. "Is she... Is she alive?"

Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses, his face grim with suppressed anger. "Alive? Yes, so I am told."

Remus' breathing hitched; he was overcome with emotion.

"I must see her, sir. I must speak with her..."

"That, alas, is impossible, Remus."

Confused, he pleaded, "But, Headmaster, you just said she was alive and..." Remus faltered, seeing a stern, cold look on Dumbledore's face. "She's here, isn't she?" He scanned the empty ward in desperate expectation.

"No. No, she is not."

"Then, where? St Mungo's?"

"That is not known at present. Most likely, from what I understand, with her family."

"Her family? The Lestrangesthat's ridiculous!"

Albus' eyebrows rose in speculation, and he gazed somberly at the youth.

"I have it on good account that she is being well cared for. At present, the family wishes her whereabouts to remain undisclosed. They wish, above all, discretion. Considering what has allegedly transpired."

Remus shook in frustration. "Allegedly transpired? We were attacked!"

"And before the attack?"

"Before?"

"Yes, Remus, what transpired before the attack?"

The young wizard became glum and taciturn.

After several seconds, he muttered, "I don't know. Nothing."

The Headmaster tilted his head slightly backward, assessing the young wizard.

Under the Headmaster's all-seeing gaze, Lupin offered, "We were, um, walking back, on the other side of the Shrieking Shack..."

"A very serious charge has been pressed against you, Remus."

Remus froze. "Charge? What..."

"A governor of the school has been here, speaking on behalf of the Lestrangle family: Lucius Malfoy."

Remus raised an eyebrow.

"They have charged that you have...*assaulted* Miss Lestrangle."

Remus froze. He couldn't understand what the Headmaster was saying. "Assaulted?"

"*Violated* her, to be more specific."

As Dumbledore's meaning sunk in, Remus felt a wave of nausea roll over him. He felt an involuntary spasm ignite. He lunged over to the side of the bed and vomited up the little content he'd had inside.

"Poppy!" called Albus, and the matron appeared as if already expecting this. She waved Remus clean and then the floor before Accio'ing a potion-filled phial.

"Drink this. Drink this like a good lad."

"No! No," protested the sandy-haired wizard. Remus wanted all of his wits to denounce the preposterous, outrageous accusation; he wouldn't be sedated. Not now.

"Headmaster, you can't believe this! I would never... never..."

"Remus, I must hear your side of the events, which have been brought to my attention. Have a bit of the Calming Draught; it'll help you sort through things."

Resolutely refusing, he adamantly insisted, "No. I don't need...where's Nagini?" He demanded irrationally, "I must see her, talk to her; she'd never say this! Who..."

"Mr Malfoy has, speaking on behalf of the family."

"But Nagini? What has *she* said?"

"I too wish to hear it from her own lips, but that, alas, is not possible at this time. The Lestrangle family will not allow her to be available for any questioning. She is *unavailable*."

"Why? How?"

"Mr Malfoy has informed me that she is *indisposed* at present, recovering from the traumatic event. The Lestrangle family wishes that this matter be dealt with discreetly..."

"Dealt with?" Remus glared at the Headmaster.

"They wish for your removal from Hogwarts immediately. For you to be turned over to the Ministry and listed in the Dangerous and Magical Beasts Department, if not sentenced to Azkaban, or worse...."

Remus' entire world was crashing around him, and he tried to hold onto one concrete fact in it. "But Nagini, sir... She's...there's something wrongthey are lying! ~~We~~ *We* were attacked; both of us were attacked... It's Rodolphus! Her family have done this...I know it, sir! We've got to help Nagini; they've done who knows what to her..."

"The proof, Remus?"

"Proof?" He was shocked and livid. He spluttered, "What proof have they got against me?" He lashed out, "It's their word against mine! Only Nagini can help tell the truth."

"Mr Malfoy alluded that there is her ripped and stained skirt, knickers; her abused body was found near the Shrieking Shack, left for dead... so they claim..."

Remus shoved the image of Nagini harmed in any way aside for the moment; he knew he'd be no good to her, to himself, ~~to~~ *to* ~~them~~ if he couldn't keep things together in his mind. *Must keep control!* "You found me, quite trounced, on the lawn of Hogwarts. Did I do this to myself? They are lying; he's lying: Malfoy...he's one of them, sir!"

"Who?"

Feeling nothing to lose, in his raw anger, Remus clarified, "One of Voldemort's followers: Malfoy, Lestrangle, Black, Macnair...they're calling themselves Death Eaters, sir, they're..."

"Yes, Remus, I know what they're calling themselves." Dumbledore's face was etched with pain. "They've been impressed by Tom Riddle's power and promises. But again, I ask: the proof?"

Huffing in outrage, Remus blanched in anger and clutched the mattress, speechless.

"All is not lost. You have a witness, someone who will swear that all was not how they claim it to be."

"Sir, you know I would never attack anyone...not when the moon is wan..." Remus broke and began to weep in bitter, broken riffs.

"Remus, I wish you to remain calm... The barman of the Hog's Head will testify that the young lady who entered with you, the young lady who disarmed Regulus Black and who ran for safety, although her appearance had differed greatly from when she had entered, was indeed the one and same person: Nagini LeStrange." Dumbledore peered knowingly at the embarrassed youth. "Polyjuice is suspected to explain her having red hair and masked features when first seen."

"It is clear that there was some *mischief* at hand," the old wizard sighed heavily, "some mischief has indeed been done, but whether this mischief was mutually consensual is what is to be determined."

"The word of the barman is in your favour, Remus. He will testify, swear if need be, *if* charges are pressed against you, that Nagini was, for all intents and purposes, most consensually with you. And to his knowledge... stayed with you the entire night in his establishment of her own free will."

"There are the strongest spells detecting the moving about and whereabouts within the pub and inn continually; anyone leaving their room, whether under a Disillusionment Charm, attempted undetectable spells or such, are still detected... and recorded to memory. It is a Ministry-approved and enforced secret protection measure." Dumbledore gave Lupin an all-knowing look and reminded him, "The Aurors find this information quite helpful when needed for investigations of various sorts. Clandestine reconnaissance cooperation is always welcomed, naturally. Whether from a barman of the Hog's Head or... anyone else...."

"Moody...", Remus uttered quietly. As a tear rolled down his wretched face, the werewolf whispered, "Auror Moody... Contact him, Headmaster. I'm ready. I'll do whatever he wants me to."

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An Interlude into Futility

Chapter 9 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

A/N: The Mewling Quim establishment here is a branch location, which I've graciously been given permission to use from the original creators of it, the authors of *Where Your Loyalties Lie*, the one and only Advanced Smut Making. The wonderful JKR owns everything; I'm just playing around with her characters in another play pen.

oOoOoOo

In the bowels of the Ministry, Auror Moody hobbled towards the lift with his private apprentice, Lupin, by his side.

Remus' ears pricked up at hearing a sudden sound, and he stopped in his tracks. The sound of a voice he thought gone forever, only to be found in his dreams, was heard.

Turning around sharply, his mouth dropped open in shock as he stepped forward to the side corridor where the voice... *her* voice... was mixed in with others. First, he recognized by sight Broderick Bode and Augustus Rockwood. *Workers from the Department of Mysteries!*

His blood quickened seeing the third figure, Lucius Malfoy, and his breath stopped as he saw her *Nagini!*

His heart raced, as he could not believe his eyes. *Thirty-two months... thirty-two months... I thought she was...* It was her and somehow not her. She seemed a shadow of herself from the Nagini that he remembered. It was hard to believe that the stiff-necked, high-collared-dressed witch was her. Her midnight green and dark silver robes gave her skin an odd iridescent hue.

And pale... She's so pale...

"One cannot force her Inner Eye," Malfoy joked caustically to the two Ministry wizards. "Perhaps you'll have to try an Imperio on her...if you dare, an Unforgivable from an Unspeakable, Broderick?"

As the three wizards chuckled at an inside joke, Nagini's cold, dead eyes fell upon Remus'. A flash of life sparked through them upon seeing him. But then she snapped her gaze from his, as if compelled or trained by an unseen force.

But it was not fast enough. Her companions saw from where her attention had strayed and from whom.

As Alastor clumped nearer placing a hand on Remus' shoulder, a reminder for the young man to restrain himself, Lucius gazed coolly at Moody, and a sneer spread across his features as he noted, with malevolence, the Auror's apprentice.

"What is *his* kind doing here?" snarled Malfoy. "Roaming about freely in public?"

"Helping make the world a safer place to be in," Alastor quipped back. "You want your child to grow up in a Dark Wizard-free world, don't you, Mr Malfoy?"

Lucius smirked darkly, not answering.

Instead, Rookwood replied, "Recruiting *his* kind for a mercenary squad of some sort, Moody? One more, one less beast, eh?"

"We've always used highly skilled wizards such as Lupin for tactics and reconnaissance work, Augustus," replied the Auror. "The need for extra volunteer patrols has increased greatly this last year. What with *errant* wizards causing mischief round and about. Shocking really, what they're up to, you wouldn't believe...well, actually, you and your lot would, wouldn't you?"

"I doubt that, Alastor," chipped in Broderick, indignant.

"I don't, Bode, and you'd do best to watch your back!" growled Alastor.

As they quipped back and forth, Remus watched as Rookwood placed a protective arm around Nagini, guiding her into the lift. Malfoy casually followed them.

"We'll be late, Bode. Stop keeping Moody from tracking down his prey," warned Rookwood, "or you'll be put on his black list next, eh?"

Then the Unspeakable changed his tone.

"Unless you'd like to join us, Alastor? I'm having some boys over for drinks this evening. Perhaps you'd like to interrogate a few of them? Give them a thorough *probing*?" teased Rockwood.

"Let me check my black list, and maybe I'll make a surprise appearance, Augustus, just for you." One magical eye and one real eye bored relentlessly into Rookwood, then Malfoy, and then back again to Rockwood. "Don't worry, I know your whereabouts... Remus, be a good lad and fetch my list for me, will you? I'll wait here for you."

"You trust that *beast* with confidential material, Moody?" spat out Malfoy.

"I trust him with my life."

"Ah, a mistake you'll never know you made."

"Now then, that's a curious thing for you to say to me, Lucius...I might take it the wrong way, see? As if you're threatening me and the like." The two nemeses stared at each other balefully.

Then the lift's caged doors closed shut and whisked the foursome away.

As Moody patted him on the shoulder for moral support, Lupin watched Nagini fade out of sight, leaving him devastated. Yet again.

oOoOoOo

Remus stood outside the Mewling Quim, a haven for debauchery. The scantily dressed waitstaff supplied both drinks and sexual favours to paying patrons, although it was the lavishly wealthy that were the main targets and preferred clientèle.

I'm going to burst in frustration or... The lurid establishment beckoned to Lupin, and as he entered, greeted by a topless witch in a thin slip of lace at her groin, he was compelled to take the plunge and put a few drinks...and maybe more...on Sirius' ongoing open tab for the evening. *It won't be the first time I've used his account!*

The private club was an incense-filled den of inequity. As tassels and thongs on bared flesh swerved by him, he made his way to a darkened corner and slunk down into a cushiony club chair. Immediately, a curvy waitress flexed her goods in front of him and asked, "What'll you have, handsome?"

"Firewhisky. Three," he ordered. "Put it on the Black account, tab code: Padfoot."

"Alrighty, sweetie. Anything for you, Miss Lestrangle?"

"The usual," a faint voice replied.

Remus froze with a petrifying shock as an electrical thrill ran through him, head to toe.

The serving witch sashayed away to go fill the order, and neither spoke as Nagini slowly, stiffly sat down on a plush settee across from Lupin with only a tiny circular table separating them.

Remus clenched his fists and couldn't speak, staring at the table, while Nagini focused her eyes at a spot just below his chin. They sat there frozen in time as the wild cries, jarring music and garish colours of lingerie and bare flesh whirled around them, mixed with mewling cries of pleasure overlapping demanding barks for desires to be fulfilled...it all spun around them in a surreal whirlwind. But still, neither could move nor speak.

Glasses of their liquor being served startled both of them out of their malaise, momentarily. Then their eyes met.

"What are you doing here?" rasped Remus in anguish.

"I've been following you...", she hesitated, struggled to explain, "as soon as I could slip away... I saw you and Moody go your separate ways... and I followed you here."

"Slip away?" Remus took one Firewhisky shot glass and knocked it back in one gulp. Getting his second wind, he blinked hard and demanded, "From whom? That vile filth, Malfoy? Bode? Didn't know Rookwood fancied witches!"

"He doesn't. I-I..." She shuddered. "I just needed to...wanted to..."

"What? Gloat? Torture the fuck out of me some more?" spat out Remus, riled. "After all this time! No bloody word or...I was accused *ofape* and...I thought you were fucking dead!"

Nagini's face became neutral, deathly still, and she didn't speak. Noting her anaemic paleness again, Remus ran his fingers through his hair roughly before picking up the second shot glass and taking a quick, burning gulp.

Nagini was having an internal struggle to speak, and when she finally did, she asked mundanely, "So, you've become an Auror?"

Remus bit his cheek, giving her a fierce look. He bitterly droned out, "The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures has put me and *my* *mind* in the classification: XXXXX. Which means, I am a known wizard killer. Impossible to train or domesticate. Lethally dangerous. The Ministry is desperate, but I still don't quite meet their qualifications to be a *licensed* murderer, do I? Nor will I ever." He took another gulp of Firewhisky. "Never mind it; they always need someone to do their other secret, dirty work. And I qualify for that, wouldn't you agree, Miss Lestrangle?" He knocked back another swig, finishing the second shot glass.

At the look on her face and with the Firewhisky's help, Remus calmed down a bit, and for the first time, he slouched back in the chair and looked at her clearly.

His voice broke as he uttered, "Nagini... why?"

It was Nagini's turn to take drink for some courage. She forced herself to sip the fine elf-made cognac, and as the slightest hint of colour flushed her pale cheeks, she uttered, "I'm sorry. So sorry." Her eyes welled with tears. She shook her head, unable to speak further.

As she rose to make a dash for it, Remus grasped her arm and begged, "Don't!" His vitriolic frustration flooded away at the sudden fear of her disappearing again. There were too many answers he needed from her. Too much raw pain burned between them.

Nagini scrunched her eyes and pressed her lips together, struggling to control herself from crying as she heard Lupin plead, "Don't leave. Please." Remus was standing beside her, and she felt his warm breath on her neck and ear as he whispered, "Can you stay? Just a little while? Please, sit. Please, stay."

"Let me look at you. Just look at you... for a while longer."

From Futility to Forgiveness

Chapter 10 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

Like chill dawn waiting for sunrise, I am waiting for you ...Rainer Maria Rilke

oOoOoOo

Remus wasn't sure if he could touch Nagini, if he *should*, so he just stood there, a shoulder for her to lean upon of her own free will. Slowly, carefully, he gently held her in his arms when she clung to him, letting her cry as she wished and feeling the anger melt out of his body at her fragile touch.

Nagini wept on his shoulder, repeating, "I'm sorry, so, so sorry."

Suddenly, nothing mattered. The past didn't matter. Only the here and now.

Impulsively, Remus clasped her tightly to him. As soon as he did, he wished he hadn't. She cried out in pain, wincing, and he knew something was wrong, very wrong, and drew back, unnerved.

As he made to guide her to sit back down on the plush settee, the serving girl had crossed over to them, asking, "You two'll be needing a room, dearies?"

In the blink of an eye, Nagini whipped out her wand and flicked it, casting Disillusionment and Muffliato Charms around her and Remus.

Intuitively, Remus pulled his wand out as he heard Nagini hiss, "Danger! They are near!" and snapped his head to where she gazed.

Entering the Mewling Quim, the distinct figures of Lucius Malfoy and Broderick Bode came into clear view.

Their serving girl, shocked at the sudden disappearance of her previous customers right in front of her nose, just as quickly recovered and forgot about them as she turned and bee-lined to greet the newly arrived, distinguished patrons.

Remus and Nagini instinctively maneuvered together around tables and customers to the main door, exiting. Their breath puffed out in the cool October air as they fled to the nearest side alley. Standing there, staring at each other, they felt almost as if they were in Hogsmeade like so long ago, but, of course, too much had changed.

Nagini looked down at the ring on her left hand, the heirloom ring that Remus remembered she had often fidgeted with, but there was something unusual about it now, altered. The Slytherin emblem was charred as if something had exploded out of the metal, disfiguring it. He commented, "Your family ring..."

"If it glows, someone is nearing my chamber. If not, all is well."

He was curt and to the point. "And where is your chamber? With whom?"

She struggled to answer him, closing her eyes, and winced again, unable to answer.

She is under a Tongue-Tying Curse and others, no doubt, he noted as the realization dawned on him, *bound to keep her from answering or talking about a specific subject!* By now, Remus had observed many an interrogation with Moody and other Aurors to recognize the symptoms well: wincing, momentary befuddlement, triggered disarray...

As she opened her eyes, a cloudy expression followed, and Remus made a snap decision. He carefully held her close to him and said, "Close your eyes." He swallowed hard. "Trust me."

To his shock and delight, she complied. He pulled her closer to him, holding her firmly, and Side-Along-Apparated.

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With a loud pop, they landed on the top step of a threshold in some obscured building. Nagini's eyes snapped opened, but all she saw was a dark door before her and around them a distorted, murky veil. *Some sort of Disillusionment Charm!*

Remus waved his arm and the door flung open. "Please..." He gestured for her to enter, and as she did so, he followed her, the door closing behind them. Taking a moment, he motioned here and there; lit candles appeared, and soon the high-ceiling main hall of a posh flat was made visible. To Nagini's left was a French door leading to a spacious living room, and to her right, an open front salon. Remus gestured to the Victorian stairway on the left leading up to the second floor. "My room is upstairs..."

It's like a miniature number twelve, Grimmauld Place... There's something so familiar... As she made to climb the stairs, Nagini saw a photo framed and hung above the first step on the wall. *It's Sirius and... Alphard Black!*

At her fixated stare of the photo, Remus confirmed, "Yes, this is Sirius' uncle's home, or rather, it was... He was murdered, it appears..." He gave Nagini a sober look. "He left everything he owned to Sirius." Nagini looked around, slightly panicked. "No. No, he isn't here."

On the top landing, he indicated behind him towards the front area of the town house they'd entered. "Sirius' room." Then he listed off as they walked in the opposite direction down the hall, "Guest room, my room." He motioned as they stood in front of the door at the end of the hall, but instead of opening it, he opened a door to the direct right. "My *transformation* room."

Nagini peered into the dark space and felt compelled to enter. Stopping in the centre of the stark, ominous space, she stared at the thick reinforced bars placed not only over the windows but all around, the walls being fortified as well. Even the floor had a metallic twang to it as she took a few more steps; she glanced up at the ceiling: an odd, silvery gleam caught the light from the hallway's glowing sconces. She shuddered. *A cage! A huge cage!*

"Your...for when you transform...every month?"

"Yes." He saw her suppressed abhorrence at the dark empty space and offered, "It's not as bad as before... I'm on a test trial potion, cleverly named the Wolfsbane Potion, at present." His expression became fiercely hardened. "It helps pacify the more lethal instincts of my werewolf transformation." He sniffed. "You should be proud."

Nagini's brow furrowed in her confusion.

"Your mother's brother, Damocles Belby, invented it. Each month's dosage seems to be progressing, helping; it eases my symptoms. I seem to have some human awareness lingering more and more during it; my mental faculties are a bit keener. I still transform, but at least I..." He stopped himself, then curtly continued, "I have a place to stay, somewhere safe, and I sleep through the transformation... for the most part."

"That's...that's wonderful... A cure? Soon, there'll be a cure?"

A bitter, dark look passed over Remus' face. He crossed over to a side door and waved his hand, opening it. "Perhaps, you'll be more comfortable in here."

She entered an elegant bedchamber, full with matching sofa chairs, facing each other, in front of a fireplace.

Nagini warily noted the grand four-postered bed before asking Remus for a glass of water. He pulled out his wand, and as she heard his *Aguamenti!* filling two brandy glasses, she crossed and sat in one of the chairs.

Remus placed their waters on the side table beside Nagini and waved his hand, igniting the fireplace with warming flames. He then sat on the edge of the other sofa chair, leaning forward, his head's weight propped on his fisted hands clasped together. He pressed his lips against them while he observed her sipping the water from the glass, her posture stiff and straight, her gestures slow and with extraneous effort.

"You're hurt. Injured," he stated bluntly, remembering her cry when he clasped her tightly in his arms at the Mewling Quim.

Nagini looked at Remus in puzzlement, not responding.

Seconds ticked by in silence.

As he continued to observe her, she made a strenuous effort to speak. After struggling for several seconds, she finally was able to verbalise that which she sought from him this evening.

"Can you ever forgive me?"

In bitter strife with himself, Remus made a painful, huffed sound and, slowly, ever so slowly, rose from the chair, only to then deliberately kneel down on both knees in front of her and lay his head in her lap.

Gently, she ran her trembling fingers through his hair as Remus burrowed his face in the deep folds of her skirt. She protectively clasped him, only to then decisively sit up from his clinging form and gently caress his face.

Remus looked up at her, and she held his face in her hands. With a soft smile, she pressed her fingertips lightly as her head lolled back. She saw in her mind's eye the image of a witch with pink hair, her expression aglow with joy, and in an altered voice, Nagini uttered, "She knows happiness... You have given her that which she never knew could be... Such joy is hers..."

Then the Seer quietened and opened her eyes, now soft and placid.

Remus blinked at her, his brown eyes wide with concern. The days of him being cynical about precognitive signs and clairvoyance by so-called Seers and their Inner Eye were long gone. He had embraced and steeped himself into the study of Divination after recovering from their attack so long ago... as well as further research and experimentation in the Dark Arts in order to gain fuller understanding into the deeper, obscure corners of the Dark Lord's domain. *I must think how they think, know them, be them to fight them... to hunt and conquer Death Eaters...* Needless to say, he was given Dumbledore and Moody's full approval, support and guidance, developing into a formidable young expert.

"Who?" Lupin hoarsely whispered, "You?"

"I, what?" she asked him quietly, for Nagini could not, apparently, remember what she had just said, the exact words, only a feeling of peace was left from her vague prophecy.

Remus repeated the words she had just uttered, and she gave him a sad smile, closed her eyes and searched her psyche. "It feels like... It feels like..." With eyes shut tight, she trembled and slowly pointed out, "No... someone else... someone already in your life or who shall one day be."

Remus huffed derisively...he hated the obscure vagueness that Divination was. "That could bloody fuck be anyone... and I want it to be you...you, Nagini!"

Remus took her hands and kissed her fingers, then lay his forehead on them. They stayed like that, just being together, as the minutes ticked by.

Finally, Nagini whispered, "I must go." As Remus raised his head, his doleful eyes questioning hers, she reassured him with a complaisant expression, "We'll see each other. Soon. At the Ministry."

She flinched and Remus responded by rising up. He couldn't speak and trembled in emotion, not quite knowing what he wanted further to say. Too many questions whirled about in his mind that they rendered him speechless; he would have to be satisfied for the time being with this initial step in what he hoped, prayed...no, what he would force to be more chances to be together. *Hope*. That was a novel desire for him, and its fresh sensation cruelly decreed he would have to be content with just that: wishing for something inexpressible with the expectation of its fulfillment. *There will be time to find out... I must be careful with her, so very careful. Patience, Remus, patience!*

"Let me show you out," he hoarsely uttered, "to the Apparating point."

He slowly escorted her out of the room, letting her take the lead.

However, as they reached the bottom of the stairs, the front door opened, and figures started filing in: Sirius, Moody, Fabian and Gideon Prewett, the Potters, the Longbottoms, and to top the group off, Albus Dumbledore.

Apparently, an impromptu Order of the Phoenix meeting was about to take place.

His wand lashing out to send an Unforgiveable Curse at Nagini, shaking, Sirius glared at Remus and demanded, "What the bloody fuck is ~~she~~ he doing here?"

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From Forgiveness to Madness

Chapter 11 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

"Demons"

(...)

I wanna hide the truth

I wanna shelter you

But with the beast inside

There's nowhere we can hide

No matter what we breed

We still are made of greed

This is my kingdom come

This is my kingdom come

When you feel my heat

Look into my eyes

It's where my demons hide

It's where my demons hide

Don't get too close

It's dark inside

It's where my demons hide

It's where my demons hide

Don't wanna let you down

But I am hell bound

Though this is all for you

Don't wanna hide the truth

(...)

They say it's what you make

I say it's up to fate

It's woven in my soul

I need to let you go

Your eyes, they shine so bright

I wanna save that light

I can't escape this now

Unless you show me how

When you feel my heat

Look into my eyes

It's where my demons hide

It's where my demons hide

Don't get too close

It's dark inside

It's where my demons hide

It's where my demons hide

Lyrics from "Demons" by Imagine Dragons, January 2013, published by Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group. "Demons" is track two on the album *Continued Silence*.

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Wand up, Remus threw himself in front of Sirius and the others, guarding Nagini as a human shield.

He raised one hand up, as if an invisible wall were raised, saying, "Stay back! She's here on her own accord; I brought her here! Leave her be!"

Dumbledore and Moody stepped forward beside Sirius as the others started to pan out semi-circularly in the background, backing Remus and Nagini up against the wall. Gruffly, Alastor ordered in a matter-of-fact tone, "Spread out! Check the rest of the house."

The Prewett twins and paired others darted away to search the premises.

Remus watched Dumbledore with bated breath as the elder wizard peered intensely over his half-moon spectacles at Nagini. "Move away, Remus."

"No."

Sirius tsked in disgust. "Don't be a bloody twat. Move, Moony."

They glared at each other, and Remus noted that there was a more than usual grimness and edge to Sirius than usual, but he remained firm. "No. I brought her here so she wouldn't be harmed and she would feel safe."

"Don't make me hex you, mate."

"No one here!" came shouts from the others, affirming that no other undesirables were present, only Nagini.

There were simultaneous spells thrown in a flash of motions at Remus by Sirius and James while Nagini was disarmed of her wand by Moody, who roughly grabbed and tugged her into the parlour while Sirius and Fabian kept Remus at bay.

He watched as Moody held a thrashing Nagini, and Dumbledore cast a non-verbal spell; she froze, only to go limp, slinking to the floor. Then, her eyes wide open, she convulsed as Albus appeared to be probing her with Legilimency.

As the others trickled in around the periphery of the space, Moody grunted out, "James and Lily, go and pick up your infant and then go home. Frank and Alice, you as well."

"I'll go to Molly's with them," said Fabian, and Gideon instantly deduced, "And I'll escort you two to Augusta's." Then the twins chimed together, "We'll meet back here in the blink of an eye."

"Constant vigilance, you two!" growled Moody. "Stealth and awareness at all times. Death Eaters are having a busy night, preparing for a special Hallowe'en feast, surely."

Flustered, Potter insisted, "I'll take and leave Lily and Harry. But then I'll return to help patrol, Albus..."

"No, James. Think of your wife and child, as they need you more. Stay in hiding. Voldemort will strike, and he will strike *hard*. Go directly to your safe house until you're contacted."

Lily touched James' arm, and disgruntled, he nevertheless conceded.

The moment the group had exited, Albus pivoted around, glaring at Nagini intently, and watched as Remus, who had broken free from Sirius' hold, lifted and cradled her torso protectively in his arms.

Moody, Sirius, and Dumbledore were staring at them as he quietly said, "She's done nothing wrong."

It was Sirius who lunged down and ripped open Nagini's cloth on her left arm with his bare hands, fiercely whispering, "Wrong? She a fucking Death Eater's slag...look!" He forced Remus to look at the Dark Mark's serpentine tattoo on her arm. "So, she's not one of them, mate? She's an innocent?"

With disgust, Sirius rose, yelling, "What the bloody fuck were you thinking bringing her here?"

Dumbledore held up a hand to silence Sirius but to no avail.

"No, he needs to hear this...while you've been slumming it with her this evening, Benjy Fenwick has *disappeared* tonight! Her *master* and his cronies have been busy this evening. Where the fuck have you been, Moony?"

Remus refused to speak, his jaw muscles clenched in tension.

Alastor spoke up. "We saw her with a suspected lot o' them in the Ministry as we were leaving...Malfoy, Bode, and Rookwood. Then Remus and I left together, only to separate. Where did you go, lad? You said you'd meet up with us at The Burrow in no time flat," pointed out Moody in an uncharacteristically gentler manner.

"I needed a drink... I needed to be alone for a bit." Remus hesitated then admitted, "I didn't know, but she followed me. She followed me there..."

"Where?" demanded Sirius.

"The Mewling Quim."

"Ha! What a coincidence...how convenient, you bloody berk."

"It wasn't like that; nothing like *that* at all."

"Like what, Moony? The only thing the Quim is good for is a quick drink and a quick piece of arse."

"We just had a few drinks." Remus gave Dumbledore an embarrassed look. "I hadn't seen Nagini since... since that time." He gulped, remembering. "Malfoy and Bode showed up at the Quim, but we were able to leave undetected. We needed somewhere safe to go, so I brought her here. I needed to know the truth from her." He gave Nagini a gentle look. "I still do."

Sirius groaned, "Oh, bloody hell... So now, what the fuck do we do with her, Remus, hmm?"

Remus' heart was pounding as the Ministerial edict allowing Aurors to use the killing curse against Death Eaters raced through his mind.

"Mercy killing," said Moody grimly, moving a few steps nearer.

"Yeah, enough innocents have disappeared and been murdered. Let's send Voldemort a message he'll understand." Sirius raised his wand.

"Or we send her back to her lair," suggested Moody calculatingly.

"Which is where?" demanded Sirius.

Dumbledore finally spoke, "If my hunch is right from what you've told me, it is with Augustus Rookwood. The Unspeakable."

"Why him?" asked Remus.

"Malfoy and Bode seem to be out for an evening's entertainment; they would not be so carefree and careless if in charge of Voldemort's ward."

Moody nodded his head in agreement, adding, "And Rookwood said he was having some boys over for drinks... His reputation for pretty boys is well known. So he's having his *entertainment* at home... Nagini and he are Unspeakables... He's her supervisor, publicly, and her guardian or caretaker for Voldemort, clandestinely, no doubt."

"But why would Rookwood risk falsely giving Nagini LeStrange a position, taking her under his wing, at the Department of Mysteries for the Ministry? What's so special about her?" sneered Sirius.

"Firstly, if Augustus is indeed deeply within Voldemort's inner circle, he has no choice and willingly wishes it..."

"Or he's Imperioed, as they're all claiming to be if and when caught alive," snorted Sirius.

"And secondly, there's nothing false about her position there. There was an opening in the Department, and she's..."

"She's has Darna Shealladh," Remus lifted his eyes informing them, "the Second Eye. She is a true Seer."

"Which explains Voldemort's keen interest in her," said Dumbledore grimly. "Tom Riddle is searching for something... He is seeking something deep and protected within the heart of the Ministry. He is seeking the answers of what will be in his desire for domination and power..."

"She is merely one of many minions he has chosen to use," observed Moody.

"So the chance to infiltrate the Death Eater's circle is laying right before us." Sirius licked his lips, excited, and pointed his wand directly at Nagini. *Carpe diem*. We've got our special ticket to enter their circle right here."

Remus held her tighter as he saw Alastor, Sirius, and Albus stare at her intently again, each with his own purpose.

"He's right, Albus. It's a chance," commented Moody shrewdly, "but are you game for it, Black?"

"A chance to save Fenwick's life? Find out where he's been abducted to? Maybe find out a bit more of what's happened to my git of a brother?" spat Sirius, giving Alastor a dark, wolfish grin. "Oh, yes, I'm in, and I'll have ol' Augustus eating out of the palm of my hand and sharing information in no time. Just need to be left alone with the buggar intimately for a bit... We go way back... He introduced me to the ways of the world, shall we say?"

Dumbledore was still reflecting on matters, keeping his gaze solemnly on the pair, who were still holding each other protectively.

"Remus? Your thoughts?" asked Albus quietly.

He gave Dumbledore a solemn look. *The old man knows me all too well...* "We have to save her. Somehow."

Sirius cursed under his breath. "You..."

"If we go in, if we get in, if there's a plan to get out, a chance...Nagini comes with us."

"No." It was Nagini. Her voice was small and strained as she raised her head from Remus' chest and repeated, "No." Remus started to protest but she cut him off. "There is no going back. There is no return."

She snapped her head to Dumbledore, and her eyes seemed to have a red glint for the briefest second. "You will fail. And all of those that you hold near and dear will be tortured and beg for death."

Dumbledore raised his wand and hit her with a spell; an odd glow of dust-like elements surrounded her form for several seconds. She convulsed and twisted in Remus' arms, going limp, as he pleaded, "What are you doing to her? Stop!"

The old wizard continued for several seconds more and then ceased his probing. The exertion showed as he rasped, "Powerful spells possess her. She is unable to be released from them, to unveil within her mind what has exactly been done to her, anything about Tom Riddle..."

Several seconds passed in silence as all considered the next step.

"So we infiltrate," said Alastor firmly.

"And what will keep her from telling all our little secrets?" snarled Sirius in a low voice.

"Your promise," piped in Nagini again. She seemed weaker, subdued; her eyes were golden and more gentle again.

They all stared at her.

"Your promise to put me out of my misery, to let me rest, to give me peace."

"We can do that right now," stated Sirius bluntly.

"Slow down there, lad. First, let's just prevent her from being a party to our little brainstorming for a wee bit, shall we?" said Moody with a dangerously cold edge to his voice. He snapped his wand up, zapping and rendering Nagini unconscious. "So the plan, Black?"

"We deliver her to her lair... Innocent enough," said Sirius, smirking coldly. "She had one drink too many with her happenstance of a rendezvous with a very *old friend*, and knowing the ways of Slytherin opportunist all too well as I do, I'll explain my presence being that I wanted to use this chance to reconnect with ol' Augustus...I've chosen him out of all others to trust. He'll be flattered, as he's always had a special *fondness* for me."

Alastor's face scrunched in doubt. "A bit far-fetched, Sirius. He won't buy it."

"The trick to deceiving him is in the truth. Rumour has it I'm desperate to have contact with them, clandestinely, because of Regulus. And if I play the good ol' pureblood card, having seen the error of my ways, discontented, so very, very desperate, et cetera, I'll be able to talk Rookwood's pants off and see how deep I can penetrate that Ministry façade of his." Sirius gave a grim grin. "If you're right about him, Albus, he definitely can be the key to my gaining entrance into Voldemort's inner circle. Then we'll see what's on the menu."

"And Remus? Your thoughts?" asked Albus again, keenly watching him.

"She's our ticket as you say. To *inside*." His mind raced with summoning all the inside information, rumours, swirling around. "Voldemort needs someone to parley with werewolves." Remus stared into Sirius' eyes, burning as tensely as his hand that was gripping his wand in a death grip. *He's no doubt ready to murder Nagini at the blink of an eye! Must proceed carefully!*

Remus said slowly, "You've been wanting a way to find out where Regulus is... whether he's disappeared... or worse..."

Sirius winced and slowly sat down, ruminating, as Alastor commented, "That's it, start thinking like an Auror, Lupin."

"Your specific idea, Remus?" asked Dumbledore softly.

"Sirius and I return Nagini to her..."

"Lair," jibed Sirius.

"Returning her unharmed, under false pretences, will allow us some time, some credibility that we wish her no harm, on the contrary..."

Remus' thought faltered momentarily before stating the obvious. "She must be a willing participant." They all looked gravely at Nagini's unconscious form. "And as Voldemort seeks someone to parley with other werewolves...who better than I? It's what I've been trained for...the Dark Arts and Auror skills, though not allowed to officially be one due to my classification: XXXXX status in the wizarding world. I'm labelled a dangerous magical beast, a wizard murderer even by the Ministry, so I should fit right in with Voldemort's collage of subversives, giants, werewolves...even the goblins are said to be contemplating supporting him."

Dumbledore ordered Remus quietly, "Nagini's ring, give it to me."

Remus took it off her finger but hesitated before handing it over to him. "She, um, told me it's charmed already; it glows if someone is nearing her chamber..."

"Cursed and betwitched yet again seems to be the case." The elder reflected on the object with the Slytherin emblem charred as if something had exploded out of the metal. After several seconds he responded quietly, "It will do quite nicely." He then proceeded to cast a spell testing the resistance level of the object before spelling it with his intentional bewitchment. "Choose a word or phrase, Remus."

Remus was confused.

"Bond the object with a phrase, Remus, quickly!"

He blurted out, "Chocolate-Frog girl."

"So be it. One newly made Portkey." Dumbledore held the ring up, slightly smoking with magical enhancements momentarily before turning cool again, and then slowly handed it back to Remus, saying, "Some Portkeys are triggered only by a person's touch, but this shall be by both verbal and haptic means. When you need to escape, use it. It must be placed in the palm of one's hand, gripped, and the phrase spoken or thought. It will bring you to my private quarters at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore peered at Nagini. "Place it back on her finger." Remus did so, and the older wizard seemed satisfied.

"Now. Let's revive her," Dumbledore waved his wand over Nagini, and her eyes popped open, conscious and alert, "and inform her of the decision."

Moody stepped forward, enjoining her, "You're going to take Sirius and Remus home with you, girl. And you're going to play along on our side until it's no longer needed."

"You'll have to curse me stronger than the Dark Lord," she panted. "Do it! The force it would take will kill me...I welcome it!"

"No," said Remus softly; she turned to him and visibly relaxed. He quietly appealed to her, "Would you...could you do this? Help us, help me have a chance...a chance of infiltrating..."

"And if he searches my mind? Don't you understand..."

"By the time you see your master again, we'll be dead already or he will," snarled Sirius. "Voldemort is striking hard with each passing day; things are going to explode at any second!" He whispered fiercely, "We need tonight, Lestrangle; we need now!"

"You *need* something from me, Black?"

"Yes..." Sirius' voice incongruously softened as he entreated, "Do it for your mother's memory. Her votive attempt to save you from that living hell."

Nagini's eyes grew wide, and she glared at him, shocked as if awakening in ice water.

"I remember your mum, Nagini. Portentia Belby... I remember... I know the truth." Sirius gave Remus a look of understanding, as if resigning himself to the inevitability of the situation, and added, "And do it for Remus."

Her lips quivered as she struggled with something awakened deep from within her. Haltingly, she warned, "There is no going back; once you are touched by him and those who worship him, you will be scarred for life."

"Remus is already scarred for life, Lestrangle. I...we've all been scarred by the *Dark*, by Voldemort and the misery he's continuing to spread... Who knows that better than you? And more will be victimised unless we have a chance to stop him." Remus could see that Sirius was biting his cheeks with tension, waiting for her to respond to him, but Padfoot snapped and spat out, "In that dark, cold-blooded heart of yours, give us a chink of opportunity to try!"

"Cold blooded? You dare say that to me after you..." She abruptly stopped and continued to be struggling with an internal conflict, spouting, "If you wish to lower yourselves to all that is foul and evil, all that is tainted..."

Dumbledore spoke up, "Riddle cannot comprehend love or affection for another. He believes he is superior to everyone around him, so use your unfathomable weapon... Nagini, on that morsel of love you contain within for your mother, her sacrifice, for Remus..."

She protested, "I am irreclaimable."

"That remains to be seen... But your word, given now, your promise will not be irreclaimable. Redeem that part of you that can be. Vow not to disclose a word of this... of us for Remus' sake, for Portentia's sake."

"Is there *that* part, Dumbledore?" she asked darkly.

"Yes, it is there; I have seen and felt it within you, deep and raked over, as still burning coals of a fire... covered and layered over with curse after curse, but still alive..."

"An Unbreakable, Albus?" suggested Moody.

"No need to risk the unpredictable power of that magical bonding, should it render her dead from the force. No, her word to Remus will be enough. Will you not give it,

Nagini?"

She held Dumbledore's gaze for several seconds before slowly turning to Remus and promising, "I vow with all my life force not to utter a word or do any action to harm you and those that you hold dear." Her eyes welled up, and one single teardrop fell down upon her cheek.

Spontaneously, Remus leaned forward and kissed it, his lips wiping her cheek dry.

Sirius cleared his throat and huskily asked, "Shall we go then?"

Remus helped Nagini get up while Moody, Sirius, and Dumbledore quickly agreed that they should return to Alphard's place at the end of the evening's escapade and await further contact from the Order clandestinely, as once they explicitly infiltrated and committed to their newfound roles, they would be marked and followed by Voldemort's followers. Moody assured them all, "We'll find another secret headquarter's for the Order."

As Sirius and Nagini exited first, Dumbledore held Remus back momentarily, advising, "She has been marked by Tom Riddle, Remus, in more ways than one... More than even I have been able to ascertain. I have no doubt that you will further bond with her... but do not forget that he is devoid of normal human responses to other people's suffering, nor ever underestimate his skills nor his fickle *pettiness*..."

* R *

They arrived at the Rookwood's townhouse, much in the style of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Nagini whispered a spell to lower the concealment charm, and they slowly walked up the stairs to the front door. Sirius asked in a tense voice, "Everyone ready to put on a show?"

No sooner had Nagini raised the knocker and pounded it a few times than the door was opened by Augustus Rookwood himself. The tall, pock-marked wizard's eyes darted from Nagini's face to those of her companions in shock. He craned his neck and gave a decisive look behind them, asking, "Others?"

"None," answered Nagini demurely. "Just some old acquaintances from our past."

Closing his silk dressing gown tighter around his torso, he urged, "Hurry, then! Inside!"

As they entered, the door was slammed shut, and Rookwood raised himself to his full height. Remus could hear music coming from one of the back rooms mixed with the sound of a boisterous group of men having a good time.

The greased-back haired wizard gave a cool and curious look at them all but addressed Sirius with a slight twist to his lips. "Black? Long time, no see."

"Time and distance both make the heart grow fonder, Augustus." Sirius gave Rookwood a charming grin. "Or would you rather I leave?"

"Depends on why you're here."

"Happenstance."

"I doubt that."

Then Sirius bluntly said, "I'd hope that I could trust you. Like I could before... before I left my family, before I left Grimmauld Place. Remember?"

"Of course I do... But trust me about what?" It was obvious that Rookwood was immediately flattered and hooked, intrigued by Sirius being there, and he gave an irritated look back towards where the ruckus from his guests was coming from. "Just some lads I have over; you're welcome to join us, Sirius, and yes, perhaps we can have a nice chat, shall we? Like old times..."

Then Rookwood turned his attention to Remus. "But what are we to do with your furry little handsome companion here?" He smirked a lascivious smile. "Personally, I don't mind, Black; the more, the merrier, but some of the other, um, pureblood chaps in there won't feel the same way."

Remus saw Sirius give Nagini a quick glance, and something passed between them, volatile but tinged with remorse. "Maybe Remus could just help Miss Lestrange here for a few minutes and then try to join us later? Help her to a room; she's feeling a bit peaky. Came across her, and she seemed to have had one too many at the ol' Mewling Quim."

Rookwood's eyelashes fluttered as he registered something, turning to Nagini and asking, "Why did you go there?"

"Remember, Lucius mentioned that Bode wished to go there... and he wished for me to join them, as he knew you were having company here..."

Augustus looked Remus up and down. "I'm not sure that this would be so wise," he said slowly, but he seemed to be fervently calculating something else, as his eyes darted back and forth from the rowdy place where the sounds of his guests were heard to the faces of the three newly arrived.

Sirius took the initiative, touching Rookwood in a friendly manner on his bicep. "Poor thing, she was just sitting there, drinking alone, one too many by the looks of it. Not the best place for a tipsy witch to be left alone in, Augustus."

"I think... I think I'm going to be sick," whispered Nagini and started to dry heave, clinging onto Rookwood, who then frantically looked at Remus.

"Her room is the last one on the left down the hall. Go further inwards, through an inner chamber," he waved hastily, visibly irked at the situation.

She seemed to know that was the sign they needed, and she turned and feigned fainting, latching on to Remus. He knew Rookwood was watching them as he half-walked, half-carried Nagini down the hall.

Remus deliberately staggered as laggardly as he could until he reached the end of the corridor and then clumsily turned and gave a quick glance back. He saw that Sirius had already thrown an arm around Augustus' shoulders, chummily asking him if he had any decent Firewhisky, and they were beelining for the little soirée that was going on in another room.

Out of Rookwood's eyesight, Nagini slowly straightened herself up and motioned to Remus to follow her through double-panelled doors. "This is an inner chamber, but my bed chamber is directly across..."

Nagini tugged at Remus as if to hurry him through the stark, menacing inner space.

Remus ears pricked up; he could feel the vortex of magic in this room, the residue of charms, spells, wards, shields... and something else... He stopped in his tracks.

"And this?" he asked, scrutinizing the outer chamber, noting runic inscriptions on spiralled, patterned designs along the panelled woodwork, as well as an oddly designed but consistent placement of stained mirrors placed strategically around the circular room.

She hesitated before answering. "A salon of sorts. For Rookwood and his guests." She slid the panelled French doors open to her room.

Remus' nose twitched, chafed, as the pattern and meaning dully registered. "It's an ensorcelling triangle, Nagini."

She stared at him, not moving, and watched Remus slowly gravitate to the centre of the noted structure.

He slowly pulled out his wand and pointed it at the floor. "I'm positive that if I blast this with a Revelio Charm, an inner, blackened circle will reveal itself underneath this lovely oriental rug." He raised an eyebrow speculatively. "Not that you would or could know, but since Hogwarts, the Dark Arts have been my speciality." He smiled grimly. "Perhaps scrying stones will be embedded in your little Seer's circle's heart here... That would be rather fitting, don't you think?" He flexed his arm as if to cast the spell.

"Don't!" she whispered in a half-cry, grabbing his arm.

"Why not? What manifested entity will be summoned? *Yourmaster's?*" demanded Remus vehemently. "Is Voldemort's sigil beneath? The same filthy symbol that marks your arm, hmm?"

They stared at each other in silence until she decisively pulled him to follow her into her room.

Once they entered, she slid the panelled French doors closed.

Remus could not help but be reminded of that fateful night so long ago... But instead of Nagini warding off a dingy Hog's Head room, she seemed to be releasing enchantments in her bedroom of sterile grandeur.

She turned to him, and Remus suddenly felt the air crackle with an intense energy that made him feel for and tighten his grip on his wand. She apparently noticed how he had tensed and backed away. She stared at him with a curious look in her eyes as she slowly sat on the edge of the bed.

He watched her, noting the golden glint of her amber eyes. *She seems... released... somehow...*

"Can you speak more freely now?"

She shook her head at him, stilled and waited.

How to break through? I have to know what has happened to her, more... I must know more... Need to understand... Must try another way besides wizard magic. He sighed deeply, knowing he couldn't help his curiosity. *Did Voldemort take a special interest in Nagini only because she has the Inner Eye...clairvoyancy?*

He remembered in a flash when Lucius Malfoy had visited Nagini in the infirmary supposedly solely on the behalf of Rodolphus Lestranger. *Even then, they wanted to use her... to procure her powers for Voldemort... to use her as a conduit for seeing into the future in order to control the future, any possible tool that Voldemort could collect to add on to and help ensure his rise to power...*

Remus blinked hard, remembering what Dumbledore had just declared, *"Nagini, on that morsel of love you contain within for Remus..."*

He took courage from this and softly shared, "When I was a child... When I first was bitten and left alive, became a werewolf, my parents tried all sorts of remedies to ease my affliction... My mother was Muggle... She tried many Muggle ways of *altered states* to try to reduce the pain I was in, both physically and psychologically..." His voice trailed off.

What am I doing? Dumbledore's Legilimency didn't work... or perhaps he didn't tell me everything? The full truth of what he saw in her mind? It wouldn't be the first time the old man has held back information, for good reason, no doubt, but...

He looked at Nagini. The intimacy of the moment and opportunity struck him hard. *I must try!*

He asked in a low, husky voice, "Would you trust me now?"

"Like none other."

"I want to try to understand... what has happened, what is happening... I want to help you."

"That is futile."

"Would you trust me...will you let me try?"

She thought several moments and then nodded her head in agreement, her golden eyes shining.

"Lay down on the bed."

She tilted her head and gave him a curious look. But then she complied.

He slowly, carefully, sat down beside her form.

He tried not to think about how he wished to kiss her and hold her and try to forget about everything in the world outside of this room.

He pushed those thoughts aside, clenching his jaws and inhaled deeply. Clearing his throat, he told her in a low voice, "There are things even Voldemort does not know, Muggle things he would never value, so could never be aware of... If I can reach your inner memories through other means, if I can understand... information is knowledge, knowledge is power...power to strengthen what can be strengthen, to give one hope and fortitude, even in the darkest state."

He swallowed hard, waiting for her to rebuke his earnest belief, but she only gave him a non-responsive blink and stared at the ceiling before turning back to him, waiting.

"Riddle cannot comprehend love or affection for another. He believes he is superior to everyone around him, so use your unfathomable weapon... Nagini, on that morsel of love you contain within for Remus..."

"Yes, it is there; I have seen and felt it within you, deep and raked over, as still burning coals of a fire... covered and layered over with curse over curse, but still alive..."

He shook the memory of Dumbledore's words aside and took a deep breath again. Ever so gently, he said, "I'm going to touch you, take your hand... I'm going to stroke it with my other hand's fingers... Can you feel that? Can you feel me?" She nodded. "I want you to try to relax, trust me, to think of a pleasant memory, if you can...you will have absolute free will as I make suggestions, ask questions... and you'll respond how you wish... how you can. You'll have heightened focus, awareness..."

He watched the rise and fall of her chest become slow and steady and soon saw her whole body relax. She had a dreamy expression on her face which grew as he slowed his stroking down to nil as the seconds passed by.

"Choose and concentrate on a specific memory before... before... well, before the last time when we were together at the Hog's Head." He could not help himself and gave her a hopeful look. "If you can remember any thoughts of happiness together, before..."

His voice trailed off, but Nagini held his gaze and slowly her features relaxed even more. She was having a specific memory, and the weary and tense edges disappeared around her eyes, and the softest smile came on her face. Remus swallowed hard. He adjusted his body's angle, leaning a bit more towards her.

"Are you there?"

She nodded.

Remus knew his time was limited and pushed on. "Now go forward in time a month."

Her features saddened and tensed again.

"What do you see?"

"Grey walls, dark... a dampness in the air. It is cold."

"Is anyone else there?"

"He comes... No longer the house-elf but him... I am still wounded... Everything hurts so much. He is angry; he desires more prophecies... He is greedy to know what else will be... The arrival of his child is not enough. He is greedy beyond avarice... Greedy for domination, wealth and fame. And fear. He is afraid."

"What has happened to you?"

"I am broken; my body and mind have been... damaged. I am alone. I can't seem to raise my head. I am so weak."

Barely able to speak, he rasped out, "How long are you like this?"

Nagini blinked, her face completely blank. "I don't know. Time has no meaning to me... I know not days, nights, weeks... months. Until, at some point, ~~he~~ she is there. He reveals himself to me, but only to start... cajoling me... testing my second sight further."

She abruptly nodded to someone she was seeing in her hypnotic state then whispered secretively, "We speak in Parseltongue. The other one, the blond one, is angry but tries to conceal it. The other does not understand him. I understand him. We understand each other."

Her expression changed to neutral. "He knew my father. My Darna Shealladh has revealed that I am truly a Seer to the Dark Lord, and the prophecy is true. He too tries to force other revelations, other predictions out of me... but I am depleted... My second sight has forsaken me..."

She gasped deeply. "So I am used for other means... I touch his face and..." Her eyes fluttered shut. "I am one with him. Over sea, over land. All is revealed... It is so beautiful. So dark. So painful. The cool, deep Albanian Forest... The Diadem... so faraway, so beautiful."

"The Diadem?"

Nagini stared blankly back at the ceiling.

"The forest... so beautiful..."

"You were in Albania?"

A dreamlike look came upon her face again. "He took me there."

"Voldemort?"

"He said I was the chosen one."

"Chosen one? Chosen for what?"

"I would be his most precious one out of all of them." She blinked fretfully. "His living one. He would allow me to live."

"His living what? What?"

"Why are hurting me?"

Remus hadn't realized that he had grabbed hold of her at some time and was now squeezing her arms tight. He released his grip, gently instructing, "You have returned; you will remember the *now* and stretch slowly and awaken fully."

She started to stretch, but then convulsed before laying still. Remus saw that the trance was fully over and felt unsettled, unable to shake off what had been revealed. "Do you remember anything you've told me?"

She nodded and lightly touched his hand; he firmly held hers as time ticked by until she asked in a soft voice, "Hold me."

He carefully gathered her to him, guiding her to let him cradle her in his arms. Their lips lightly met, and in a flash, a surge of desire swept through them both simultaneously. It was only when he clasped her to him tightly that her cry of pain brought him back to their stark reality.

* R *

From Madness to Darkness

Chapter 12 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

A/N: I am so grateful and give a huge, deep thank you to the extraordinary, one and only gem of a writer and exceptional, generous reviewer Fairfield, whose feedback and

questions have allowed me to experience further levels of writing and who has gently nudged me and inspired me to finish this tale, which I've been wrestling with since falling in love with the Harry Potter universe many years ago. Again, thank you for everything!

Disclaimer: The wonderful J.K. Rowling owns everything...the Harry Potter fandom/Potterverse fandom. I do not own the Harry Potter fandom, nor the characters in it. I do not make any money from the writing of this story.

* N & R *

Remus immediately loosened his clasp on Nagini.

Fuck... Oh, gods... She's injured... "Where does it hurt? Your back?"

"It doesn't matter," she said quietly, laying on her side, facing him.

He looked around and leapt to the en suite, looking around urgently. He could make out her robe and towels but no other accoutrements or toiletries were visible*Accio Dittany!*

There was the sound of glass bumping against other glass and rustling from within a drawer in a cabinet before it opened, and a small brown bottle flew to his hand.

He crossed back to Nagini and instructed softly as he showed the bottle of brown liquid, "Essence of Dittany. Take off your top."

"No. He...they don't allow any wounds to be healed."

Knowing it was futile to ask who *they* specifically were, he swallowed hard. "Well,*they* are not here."

"I must be scarred... The scars must show... And the pain must last... be continued."

He crouched down beside her bed, his head level to hers, and whispered fiercely. "I need to find Dumbledore, but first," he gently touched her finger with the charmed family heirloom ring, "while you were unconscious at Alphard's, Dumbledore spelled this to be a Portkey. It must be placed in the palm of your hand, and then the phrase spoken, and then you'll be transported to his quarters at Hogwarts."

"The phrase?"

"Chocolate-Frog girl."

She gave him a weak smile and held his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "It will take a Portkey stronger than this to help me escape away from *him*. Far, far away."

"Then, we'll get one, a more powerful one," he said grimly, "and we'll go far, far away. Over sea, over land..."

He watched her as she sat up and unbuttoned her top from the front. As she reached the stiff-necked, high-collared blouse and unclasped it, his jaw muscles clenched, seeing fresh bruising around her neck, as if she had been grabbed and strangled. He felt the blood burn in his veins as she fully took off her outer blouse, leaving her bustier that revealed her shoulders marked with cuts and burns. He could barely speak but managed to rasp out, "Lay down."

She complied, laying face down, and he sat down beside her and ever so slowly unclasped her bustier in the back. It was not a surprise that his fingers met damp flesh, wet with her blood from what appeared to be freshly lashed wounds reopened. He hissed as he carefully peeled back the undergarment as these fresher, open wounds were intermingled with older, welted ones.

He gave a glare at Voldemort's mark on her now bared left arm and took a deep breath to control himself as he opened the Essence of Dittany and started to apply drops, one by one, over the tears of flesh.

As he got to her lower back, he saw that the lash marks continued to her buttocks. "Nagini, I must..." He gently unclasped her skirt and tugged the cloth back and downwards. His mind was in a roaring whirlwind of thoughts and impulses to immediately find and strike out at any and all as he recapped the Dittany and non-verbally summoned her robe.

Hoarsely, he instructed her, "Here, put this loosely over your front. Your skin needs to breathe."

She slowly complied and asked him in a weak tone, "Could you give me a glass of elixir from that bottle? I'm so thirsty."

Remus followed her look towards the left and saw a bottle of dark liquid on top of a tall side table near the room's French doors. From the built-in shelves he took a small goblet and poured some of the content. His nostrils flared as he registered the sweet, aromatic fragrance filling the air.

"What is this?" he asked, sniffing the bouquet deeply. "I don't recognize the aroma."

"It's a special restorative elixir, much like a sweet Blood-Replenishing Potion blended with a Strengthening Solution. It revitalizes me." She raised herself to sit and drink from the goblet.

Remus couldn't help but notice her nudity, only her robe was crumpled and loosely covering her lap and legs. Nagini seemed oblivious as she drained the cup dry and asked for more, adding, "Its bouquet is a mixture of purple thorn blossom, snake fang, and a bit of salamander blood."

"Who brewed it?" Remus asked offhandedly, knowing the intricacy and skill involved for such potions.

"A friend," she replied quietly.

"Snape?" he blurted out before he could think.

She gave him a small smile, answering, "No."

Lupin's curiosity was keenly piqued. "Who then? Someone I know?"

Nagini cocked her head, her expression going blank. "I don't believe you do, actually. Or you wouldn't recognize him if you did... just someone who scurries in and out, once and a while." A far away look passed over her gaze. "He helped me... He tried."

"How?"

"It doesn't matter now. His help was detrimental... to him as much as to me. Just as yours might be... and just as futile." She struggled but managed to say, "These recent lashes were because I acted upon his *help*..."

"He tried to help you escape? You can't give me a name? Is he a member of the Order?" Remus demanded tersely.

She shook her head as he brought her the second goblet full and suddenly offered, "Try some. It's quite restorative. It'll increase your energy."

Flustered, he swallowed hard, noting her bare shoulders, and lowered his eyes to her breasts. He gave a fleeting glance to where the robe was barely covering her lower abdomen and thighs and felt momentarily lightheaded. "Perhaps a sip."

The elixir had a bittersweet taste, not unpleasant, but it seemed to course through him at an unnatural speed. "It's quite potent, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied luxuriantly and slowly lay down on her side again, causing her robe and skirt to fall completely off, revealing her full form.

Remus slowly took in her breasts and ribcage, her lean abdomen all the way down to her soft, fuzzy triangle. "I think....," he attempted to utter hoarsely even as he took another deeper swallow of the drink, "I think you should get some sleep... and tomorrow..."

He was finding it hard to concentrate on what he wanted to say. He rubbed his forehead briskly. "Tomorrow, Dumbledore has his Wizengamot sessions as the Chief Warlock. Can you come there? Get away from the Department of Mysteries? It'll be crowded all day. I'll be there and can signal to you...we can accidentally on purpose meet."

She didn't reply, and he slowly lay down on his side beside her, face to face. He placed his hand delicately on her waist even as she mirrored him, her touch on his hip causing a tingling sensation to shoot through him. She closed her eyes as if riding a wave of pain, and he asked, "Nagini, will you meet with me? See if Dumbledore will help you? Please, I need... I want to help you."

"Helping me is futile... I told you, once touched, unredeemable..."

He bit his tongue. *I don't believe that. I can't!* "Nevertheless..."

"My ring." The deformed heirloom was glowing. "Someone is coming!"

Remus scooted off the bed just as he heard Sirius' laughter match with Rookwood's in the outer ensorcelling room.

Remus whispered fiercely, "Can you get away from Rookwood tomorrow? From the Department of Mysteries?"

She nodded.

Adamantly, he repeated, "Meet me. During the lunchtime breaks, level ten, the Wizengamot dungeons where the trials are held." He barely had got this out when Augustus and Sirius entered the bedchamber.

"Lovely news, Moony. We've been invited to a *party* tomorrow evening...a very special one."

Rookwood gave Nagini and Remus a smug smile as she covered her nudity with her robe, saying, "Sirius has told me of your interest, Lupin, in finding work as a liaison of sorts for your kind. There will be a gathering, a revelry of sorts of the Knights of Walpurgis in preparation of the upcoming Hallowe'en festivities," purred Rookwood.

"Masked and cloaked all must be. *Anyone* can show up, perhaps a very special guest of honour."

"Voldemort?" quipped Remus brashly.

"The Dark Lord," corrected Rookwood. "You will need to mind your manners, Lupin, if the Dark Lord will make an appearance; rumour has it he doesn't take kindly to rudeness... Don't speak unless spoken to, yes? And if you still wish to offer your services perhaps... Well, is that still your intention, your *true* intention, Lupin?"

"Lots of *ifs* and *perhaps*, aren't there?"

Rookwood smiled coyly. "Yes. Makes life more interesting, doesn't it? All sorts of scenarios could play out... depending on your true intention, Lupin," he repeated slyly and gave Nagini a look.

Remus cleared his throat and answered humbly, "Yes. Yes, it is."

Augustus sniffed and smirked. "Very well. Tomorrow evening. Nagini can bring you with her from the Ministry, and then we'll all Floo together."

"To where?"

"Oh, dear, that's for me to know, and you to find out. Don't you trust me, Lupin? Your mate, Sirius, does...implicitly."

Rookwood gave another glance to Nagini laying on the bed. "But, no promises. One can never tell what kind of mood it will be or what sort of turn of events will occur at these gatherings. And the Dark Lord... Well, he may be feeling quite patient and generous, or he may not. He has been known to have quite sadistic tendencies, and rumour has it that he indulges behaviour of that sort." He gave a knowing look to Remus, saying, "But this is something that you know about first hand, isn't it, Lupin?"

Was he there when Nagini and I were tortured that night so long ago? Remus raised himself to his full height, his fingers itched to pull his wand out and hex the ever-living shit out of Rookwood, but he took a deep breath and merely nodded.

"Very well, gentlemen, let us let Nagini have her rest; it'll be a long day and evening tomorrow. And I have my other guests to get back to here. Unless you want to stay for the full evening soirée, boys?"

Sirius gave Augustus a cheeky grin. "Absolutely! Are you game, Remus?"

"No, I have to... I thought...Sirius, I thought we'd be leaving together."

"Now, now, Moony. I'm a big boy; I can get home by myself...or not. Might have to sleep over. Augustus?"

"Plenty of room for you, Sirius. Sleep with whomever you like, right?"

What's he playing at? Remus' thoughts raced. *I need to find Dumbledore, and I need to find him now!*

"Be good lads, and just wait outside." He motioned to the outer room. "I need to speak to Nagini privately for a moment."

As they shuffled into the ensorcelling room, Remus gave a heavy look back to Nagini, who gave him a small smile, and then she turned her head away, giving her full attention to Rookwood as he closed the French doors.

Remus turned on Sirius, snapping, "You trust him?"

"As I trust you."

"Really, Padfoot? How the fuck can you say that? You're saying you don't trust me?"

"I'm saying that anything is possible."

"What?"

"I know in your heart... in your heart there is good... always good." Sirius touched Remus on the chest, apparently for emphasis. "But... there is also emotion, passion beyond control... and no, I don't trust that. Nor should you."

"Thanks for nothing."

Sirius grabbed Remus by the face and gave him a fierce kiss on the lips just as Rookwood was coming out of Nagini's room.

Augustus seemed highly amused as Remus shoved Padfoot away, whispering huskily, "Fuck you."

"Later, Moony. For now, you were leaving, yes?"

Remus gave a terse look towards Nagini's chamber. Something was off. He didn't want to leave, but... He had to find Dumbledore, and Sirius wasn't helping, acting like a prick, more than usual.

As they slowly followed Rookwood back to the front entrance, Sirius said in a low voice, "Don't worry about her, mate. You're too close... too vulnerable. And you wonder why I suspect you of being a spy? Why you're not Secret-Keeper material?"

Remus flicked his wand discreetly, non-verbally casting a Muffliato.

"Don't...don't you fucking dare bring that up now!"

"Now, now, don't get your knickers in a twist..."

"You're intentionally pissing me off when everything is hanging by a fucking thread?" Remus felt like he was about to explode; he could feel his veins and muscles pulsating. "Are you fucking mad? You're not here just to wank off with your old flame Augustus, right? Don't talk to me about who is the least trustworthy. Wasn't very hard to switch sides in the second, was it? Missed your old posh cuss after all?"

Sirius snorted and grabbed him. "The moment you saw her again, you were utterly whipped, untrustworthy, mate! Were you about to screw her while Rookwood and I watched? Who's calling the kettle black?"

Remus shoved him, but Sirius only held on to him and jibed, "Voldemort uses tricks, jinxes, and blackmail to get people to join him. You really think you're strong enough to face him, mate? Pussy whipped as you are?"

"Shut it, Sirius!"

"Just find Albus or Alastor and update one of them, you bloody berk."

Remus whipped his wand sharply, releasing the Muffliato and roughly shoved Sirius away in his frustration. *Fuck you, Sirius!*

He heard Augustus' amused laughter as he exited, slamming the door behind him.

* R *

It had been a miserable remainder of the night.

Remus had Disappeared to The Burrow in a desperate search for Dumbledore, only to find out that Albus had just returned to the Ministry. Fabian and Gideon Prewett were missing, feared dead. The Auror Department on full alert. Remus left a hysterical Molly with her husband comforting her and promised to return as soon as he made contact with either Moody or Dumbledore.

He Flooed to the Ministry, hurried to the Auror's office, and when entering, he came upon a dishevelled Alastor being calmed by Dumbledore.

"Remus, where's Sirius?" snapped Moody.

Flustered, Remus shook his head. "With Rookwood."

"Alone?"

Remus nodded. "He insisted. He wanted to, um, infiltrate the male pureblood gathering that's going on there fully."

"And you, Remus? Why would you leave him there?" asked Dumbledore, peering over his half-moon spectacles at him.

"I wasn't wanted. He wouldn't leave, and I need to speak to you, sir, privately. Urgently."

"Urgently? Fabian and Gideon. They've gone missing. That's what's urgent, lad, in case you didn't fucking understand," growled Moody.

"Yes, I've just come from The Burrow." Remus ran his hand through his hair in agitation.

"Minister Bagnold has given the go. Kill on sight," informed Albus quietly.

Moody briefed, "Five Death Eaters have been spotted in the north, near Hogsmeade. Near where the twins were last seen. One of Voldemort's top henchmen was clearly identified: Antonin Dolohov."

"Dolohov?" Remus scrunched his face in anger, registering the highly-skilled, sadistic murderer's name.

"Let's go, lad."

Remus couldn't help but to hesitate, repeating, "Albus, I must...I need to talk to you."

"Is it so urgent? More than Order members' lives, Remus?"

"It may cause harm to them and many others if not addressed...everything is culminating, sir, intertwining. Sirius and I are to be received at a Death Eater's gathering tomorrow night, a Knights of Walpurgis revelry, but Voldemort is sure to be there..."

Dumbledore's face grew grimmer, and after a few seconds, he said, "Very well. Alastor, go to the others. Remus will head north and meet up with you all at the Hog's Head. Leave word with Aberforth if plans have changed and where Remus should go."

Moody gave a grunt and left.

The older wizard watched the Head Auror leave and then said quietly, "Now, tell me everything."

As Remus gave details, Dumbledore listened, stone faced.

It seemed like several minutes went by before the elder wizard fragmentarily uttered that he would make contact with a Squib who sailed the SS Mediterranean, currently

docked in London, or perhaps not. He would look into alternative possibilities and leave instructions by tomorrow noon, for Nagini's eyes only, in his Chief Warlock's chamber's at the Ministry.

But for now, Remus was much needed elsewhere. Duty called.

* R *

Outside the Wizengamot trials, Remus sat on a corner bench, fatigued, watching the crowded space full of wizards and witches scurrying to and fro from the courtrooms.

He was exhausted from the evening's patrol; he'd maybe slept two hours on some benches pushed together in Moody's office earlier before hurrying down to await Nagini meeting with him. Alastor had stayed north of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade with an Auror unit and sent Remus back to inform Dumbledore that they were holding their position and that neither Dolohov and company nor the Prewett twins had been found.

Just as he had given up on her showing up, Nagini appeared on the far side of the room. He stood and gave a sharp nod of his head towards the side hallway closest to him.

The dimly lit corridor led to the inner chambers for Wizengamot members. As he went further down the hall with the light sound of footsteps heard behind him, it led deeper and deeper downwards until he stopped at a corner door where the corridor then seemed to sharply turn upward at a steep angle, as if leading directly into a larger chamber far above. Remus didn't look back or speak a word, but instead pulled out an oversized key and opened the inner chamber, which was none other than the Chief Warlock's. He stood behind the door, holding it open until she entered.

He swiftly shut the heavy wooden door and locked it from inside. A golden light flared up and around the entrance, a Shield Charm of sorts, barricading anyone from entering. He looked around and waved his hand to light more of the sconces in the bare room, save for a desk and a large ornate chair, a wall bench, and shelves of parchments from floor to ceiling on two walls.

Remus and Nagini stared at each other; only their breaths were heard until he broke the silence.

"You look rested," he noted, surprised at how fresh and energized she appeared when compared to last evening.

"You look exhausted," she replied softly.

"It was a long night. A bloody, hard night." He blinked at her and swallowed hard. He caught sight of her décolleté blouse. Her chest was heaving up and down; she was breathing fast, as if she'd run a great distance. *She's crackling with energy!*

"Dumbledore? What did he say?" she asked breathily, snapping him out of his gaze.

He became overwhelmingly aware of how fagged and mesmerised and muddled he felt and tried to keep focused*Accio message!*

From the shelves and shelves of ancient and more recent parchments, a small scroll flew forward. Remus caught it and slowly handed it Nagini.

"Just give it a tap and it'll unscroll for you. But don't...don't tell me a word that's in it or show me the content."

Nagini did as instructed and read:

There is a golden Horklump in the heart of the Blackthorn tree near the fairy circle of yew trees in the Forbidden Forest where as a student you picked Horklumps for Herbology class.

When the time comes that Voldemort will know of your betrayal fully, and torture and death will be certain for you and those who have risked all for you, make your way to the forest in your Animagus form, hidden from normal sight of all. And there with your serpentine jaws grasp the fungus. You shall be Portkeyed to a Muggle device for transportation, which shall carry you far away.

Depart and pursue a destination of your own choice. Beyond Riddle's reach.

Tap this parchment to confirm that you have read and understood the content.

Nagini placed the parchment on the bare desktop and tapped it. She gave a startled cry as it crackled in flames and burnt itself to nothing.

She turned to Remus, who had sat on the old wall bench and was rubbing his face, as if to keep himself awake. She thought about how intensely and thoroughly Dumblededore had used Legilimency on her the night before.

Dumbledore knows my Animagus form...he has seen all from his penetration of my mind, my memories!

"Is it acceptable? What he proposes?"

She nodded slowly, sitting down beside him, still mulling over the message.

Yes... transforming into my Animagus should be the cleverer way to sneak out... but I've already tried once, just two days ago with the futile help of Peter. Her back twinged at the memory of being caught and lashed by Malfoy in front of the Dark Lord in the ensorcel circle at Rookwood's until she couldn't move. She had a vague foreboding and closed her eyes to search deeper into her psyche for any imagery, any clear clairvoyant sign.

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"You seem," Remus hesitated, "you seem more like your old self today. Fresher, sharper, somehow." Even in his tired state, he couldn't help but add huskily, "Beautiful as ever."

"The magical wonders of a peaceful sleep." She gave him a small smile. "And thinking of you, waking or dreaming."

He took her hand in his and gently rubbed it, trying to keep a dull but quickly growing awareness of how turned on he was around her at bay. Still. In spite of everything*in spite of all the madness we're caught up in.* It was beyond his control.

"And then, the Dark Lord, he is distracted...," she whispered dreamily. "His attention is released from me temporarily. I have more freedom of mind, of action, peace of mind...I feel...I see things clearer."

Whimsical ideas ran through Remus' mind; he huffed and said bitterly, "Shall we make a run for it? Or take me to him now; I'll duel him to the death for you. For your freedom."

"He has an army of quite devoted followers. I would not have you sacrifice yourself so when my brave Gryffindor deserves a fair fighting chance." She gave him a soft peck on his cheek, and with a sad smile, she touched his face, stroking his hair lightly. "You're delirious, exhausted."

At her touch, he shut his eyes and winced momentarily. "Not much sleep. I was searching all night for..."

"Shhh," she whispered and reminded him, "Don't tell me anything."

They pressed their foreheads together.

He suddenly felt a weight leave him and had the impetus to say, "My whole world is unravelling before me, crumbling around me; everything and everyone I was certain of, I now doubt. Only you seem *clear* to me. But I'm in the dark, a dark place, and incapable of helping you how I wish..."

"You've helped me so much, Remus." She shushed him again and began to place soft kisses on his face. "You've given me a chance. Another chance."

She was unnerving him. *Am I trembling?* He was so very much starving for her touch, her kisses, yes, *for her*, but he tried to maintain control. "You'll definitely take it? Whatever Dumbledore has offered?"

"It's conditional... but yes, if opportunity arises, yes."

Conditional? What condition? He looked at her tensely and suddenly had a wild impulse and felt like he was never going to see her again. "If we made a run for it, how far could we get?"

She gave him a tight smile. "Not very far."

Then he felt the touch of her lips again. This time on his lips. He was so bloody exhausted of everything, mentally and physically, except for a sharp heaviness, an aching in his groin, which...as he reciprocated her kiss hungrily...exploded like crackling flames throughout his body. He was groaning, "Oh, god"...*Or is she moaning as well? Together?*...as he groped and clasped her to him. Everything was in a blur; he could only register that she had curled around him, clinging *Oh fuck, she's straddled me? Yes!*

His hands were feeling downward, shimmying over her curves to under her buttocks; he firmly grabbed hold of them and held her in place, welcoming her grinding movements on his cock. She was holding his face as their tongues searched and explored each other.

His erection was hardening, the acute pain growing, needing release. He broke away from her lips and clumsily reached up to unclasp the frontal buttons on her blouse. He nuzzled her breasts with his lips and mouth, desperately seeking for a nipple to suckle. Finding one, he swirled and teased it until the rosebud formed a sharp point, and as he swiftly nipped and focused and sucked on the other one, Nagini's writhing and undulating was beginning to make his breathing hitched and erratic.

"Nagini?" he rasped.

"Remus?" she whispered.

He waited in excruciating expectation. A spasm ran through him as he felt her slowly unhook his belt buckle and pull the leather apart from the metal. As she kissed him, panting hard in between each contact, her hands continued to undo his trousers, and then he felt her fingertips pull down his underpants and guide his hardened cock out. She gave him a juicy kiss and slinked downward between his legs. He was gasping in irregular breaths as he watched her take his cock in her mouth and lick and suck and swirl her tongue around and around. She began to take him deeper and deeper, only to pull her head away and then tease him again, increasing her sucking tension in between nipping and licking his bent-up cock.

He felt his balls begin to tighten. *No!*

In a flash he had pulled out of her mouth and swooped down to the floor beside her, on her. He was searching her mouth with his tongue, guiding her downwards, pressing his full weight down on her, placing himself between her legs, grappling with her skirt, raising it, lowering his trousers, tearing her knickers aside, his cock at her entrance, pressing as gently as he could, entering her, probing slowly in and out. But as she wrapped her legs up and around his waist, the heels of her boots digging into his lower back, he lost control, sensing an overwhelming need to rut, urged on by her clasping him to her and whispering heatedly in his ear, "Please, I need you inside me. Fuck me."

He pushed and pressed himself deeper and deeper inside her, sheathing his rod to the hilt, her wet folds and heat squeezing him so tightly he felt he would explode inside her there and then. *No!* He wanted to savour this as much as possible. He slowly pulled out of her; she whimpered, and he sheathed himself again halfway in her hot cunt only to then take his thumb pad and determinedly tease and rub her sensitive nub in circular motions while fucking her playfully, as best he could control, for he had the impulse to ram her hard and deep and mercilessly.

But first he wanted her pleasure; he wanted her to come with raw need from his haptic ministrations. He lowered his head and whispered, entreating her, "Release yourself."

As his thumb pad pressed against and around her swollen clit harder, her vaginal muscles were clenching his cock tighter and tighter, pulling him into her, demanding he fill her fully and fuck her. She began to grind her cunt against him in harder and more articulated undulations as he kept his pressure on her clitoris steady and rhythmic. He watched as she suddenly froze, her face an exquisite moue of orgasmic intensity. He caught her mouth with his as he thrust his cock further inside her, thrusting upward and deeper. A frenzy took over them, and they both began to grind and fuck each other in a wild and delirious state. "Fuck me, Remus!" He felt her fingernails digging into his back. "Dominate me!"

He immediately complied, unleashing his instincts; his torso's full body weight pressed upon her pinning her down, and only his rhythmic thrusting into her cunt increased in speed and force. He lost himself in her tight heat and wetness, pumping in and out, faster and deeper with each thrust. Her encouraging moans caused his own deep guttural utterances to usher forth in carnal bliss. He was grinding into her in circular, sharp motions, screwing her cunt deeply, pounding her fast and hard. Then she convulsed in pleasure, crying out his name in orgasm, her clenching quim squeezing him so fiercely that he jerked sharply, ramming in and out of her until, in blind ecstasy, he spilled his seed deep within her.

* R *

From Darkness to Destiny

Chapter 13 of 13

What is the greatest sacrifice one can give? The final pairings of Remus and Nagini, and Severus against Sirius, in the Dark Arts competition for the Young Wizards Merit Award during their sixth year, gets out of hand. Unexpectedly, from

this one event, their lives become intertwined, changed forever. Nagini, the main female character, is actually a precursor to Voldemort's serpent, Nagini.

A/N: A deep thank you to the extraordinary, one and only gem of a writer and exceptional, generous reviewer Fairfield, whose feedback and questions have allowed me to experience further levels of writing and who has gently nudged me and inspired me to finish this tale, which I've been wrestling with since falling in love with the Harry Potter universe many years ago. Thank you, the reader, who has followed this tale...I truly appreciate it! And thank you, the one and only Clairvoyant, for patiently willing to admin my scribbling, time and time again through the years...you are an admin goddess!

Disclaimer: The wonderful J.K. Rowling owns everything...the Harry Potter fandom/Potterverse fandom. I do not own the Harry Potter fandom, nor the characters in it. I do not make any money from the writing of this story.

* R *

30 October, 1981

The Knights of Walpurgis revelry was *not* in full swing.

In fact, the atmosphere had a stagnant, morose feeling to it; the air was thick with incense...a film of mist in all shades of colour and scents. The sconces danced and flickered with the motions of figures moving deeper into what registered to Remus as a very old building.

Something is off, thought Remus. He huffed as he glared at Rookwood's back. *Isn't there supposed to be some festive action going on? Shouldn't the Death Eaters, like satyrs, be dancing the antic hay?**

Remus felt Nagini take his hand, and he shuffled slowly and loosely behind her. Cloaked and masked with a simple Venetian-style eye mask, he followed her. They seemed to straggle behind a hooded and masked Sirius and Augustus through the dimly lit, wide corridor of the Lestrage's manor deeper into the inner rooms of the manor. He could feel the flooring slanting and opening to a lower level as they moved further away from the previous space. The hum of murmured conversations was heard as they entered.

We're in the dungeon level!

"Stay back, until summoned," instructed Rookwood sharply to the three of them before heading deeper into what could be seen as a dark, crowded, cavernous space. Remus saw that Augustus made directly for the other end of the room. There appeared to be a semi-circular clearing there in the midst of unsynchronized movements of the attendees, and as his keen eyesight zeroed in on a pale, anorexic figure, his blood curdled in disgust. *Voldemort!*

Sirius' eyes glinted, and he followed Remus' gaze, saying under his breath, "Riddle!" But his barely audible intake was overlapped with a sharp loud crack of a hiss above the murmurings going on in the dungeons.

Nagini snapped her eyes upwards. She moved her head in an odd way and then gave Remus a look, her eyes doleful and large. "I am summoned!"

Remus watched her slowly go; she did not look back. He and Sirius slunk back into the shadows. Noticing that Padfoot seemed uncharacteristically subdued, he gave a steady look around, observing in detail in the dim light the other masked guests at Lestrage Manor. His nostrils flared slightly, and his eyes narrowed beneath his mask as he glanced here and there.

Remus spotted the arrogant stance and long whitish-blond hair protruding from under one Death Eater's mask, easily pegging Lucius Malfoy. *Ridiculous! Why the fuck do they even bother with these fucking masks?*

He clenched his fist, trying to suppress a growing urge to fight or flee. He could not now think clearly enough to differentiate whether this was due to the moon waxing near, almost complete in its fullness, or if it was from the repercussions of distasteful Death Eater conversation going on around them and why they were actually here.

As Sirius instinctively pressed him against the wall, as if to hold him back from his impulses, Remus continued to stealthily categorize all that he observed. He could recognize and label individuals by the person's gesture, his or her voice, a whiff of perfume, a waft of whisky, and of course, the scent of someone's sex.

He heard Sirius quietly speaking, "She never had a chance."

"What?" The wolf clenched his jaw and ground his teeth, his incisors feeling particularly sharper than they had since yesterday.

"Nagini."

Remus stopped observing and gave Sirius a vexed look. "Maybe not. Doesn't matter now. We're here to finish *him*. The past doesn't exist; it doesn't matter."

Sirius gave Remus a belligerent look. "It should. I need you to know..."

"What? For fuck's sake, what?" Remus controlled his nerves to speak more calmly. "Padfoot, speak now or forever hold your peace. I doubt, even *if*," Remus gave a cock of the head towards Voldemort's end of the room, "we're going to get out of here alive."

Sirius blinked hard and began speaking in a low voice. "Voldemort had pegged Nagini from the moment he heard she was a Parselmouth, gifted with a level of clairvoyance. Her father bragged once too much about how special these gifts were... Her mother, Portentia..."

"I know. I remember. She killed Rolph."

"Yes, but only after... Riddle *wanted* the girl, the child. But Lestrage offered him another choice... his wife. Voldemort took him up on the offer...she was a renowned Seer, a beautiful and powerful witch in her own right, and Riddle was curious at what else he could extract from the noted Belby witch... Afterwards, of course, he still demanded Nagini. Portentia took her and fled... until she was hunted down by Rolph..."

"Why are you bringing this up now?"

"Just that you know her troth plight to the House of Black was in some way my sick mother's way of protecting Nagini. That's all. Walburga Black was a vicious, supremacist bitch, but she never liked Riddle... though his political visions agreed with hers."

Remus swallowed down the bile rising in his throat, and his concentration wavered further as he reflected on the earlier events of the day, which now seemed like years ago. He let out a deep sigh, remembering, with a painful bitterness, his and Nagini's desperate fucking in the Chief Warlock's inner chamber. *No, it wasn't mere fucking... it was...* He felt his stomach tightened as he completed his thoughts. *It was saying... goodbye?*

They had barely spoken a word as they redressed and composed themselves. He would never forget the look on her face as she turned back to him before returning to the Department of Mysteries and he went back to the Auror department.

A quick but concise briefing soon afterwards was held with Dumbledore and Moody. Sirius soon arrived, joining the meeting and confirming that this evening would be the

beginning of the end. Body parts of one of the Prewett twins, Fabian it was believed, had been found, but the remainder of his body had not been found, either whole or in other parts, nor any traces of Gideon discovered... yet.

"Bartemius and his team found pieces... The fuckers cut him up...they've dismembered Fabian," growled out Alastor in a low voice. "We find out who did this, and I want to personally deal with them."

"So we cancel the Rookwood happening and go straight for patrolling in the north and do away with each and every Death Eater we come into contact with?" asked Sirius heatedly. "Leave one alive to get answers out of?"

Remus caught Sirius' eye, and they stared at each other, neither able to read the other's thoughts, as they heard Dumbledore's controlled authoritative voice instruct, "You two will still go to this evening's soirée, and at an opportunistic moment, you will strike together... kill Voldemort."

Remus snapped his head to Albus. He blinked hard and could barely manage to utter, "I think a room full of Death Eaters will notice if we've put a Disillusionment Charm on ourselves...a little suspicious to disappear after we've arrived." He tried to contain his sarcasm as he pointed out the obvious. "You expect us to just walk in, tagged members of the Order that we are, and be allowed to sit around as if invisible, permitted to wait until it's convenient to kill their leader?"

The silence was painful as Remus waited for someone to respond.

Feeling as if a shard of glass was piercing him, he heard Sirius softly speak. "We shouldn't be immediately noticed. Rookwood told me all will be masked, including us, except for Bellatrix and... Nagini... Voldemort prefers them to be... exposed, at all times."

"He told you that?"

"He gave me details and admitted that Riddle will most certainly be there."

Remus stared at a spot on the stone wall beside Dumbledore's head as he heard Sirius take a deep breath before continuing, "We'll have to have a distraction."

"Such as?"

"Nagini. Nagini will be the distraction."

"How so?" His throat tightened, and his voice sounded weak and thin as he said, "It would seem that she isn't... They are all familiar with her...how could she distract them? And Voldemort..." Remus ran his hands through his hair. "Nagini told me he... they..."

Dumbledore peered over his half-moon spectacles. "Distract him she will. We need not know how."

"Oh, but I think we do." Remus felt a wildness being unleashed within him. "Riddle...hepossesses her somehow; there is a dark and deep connection between them. He'll be watching for any sign..."

"No, it won't be so obvious; at least, it shouldn't be, not at first. We'll also distract him, approach him in a different way..."

"We?"

"Yes." Sirius bit his lower lip quickly before elaborating. "Nagini and I."

"You... and Nagini? When did you discuss this?"

"Just now, before I came to this briefing." Sirius cleared his throat and held up his left hand. On his little finger was a ring. He recognized *Nagini's! But is it? It seems different.*

"This gathering is under the guise of the Knights of Walpurgis, so I've been told...listen, Remus, listen," pleaded Sirius fiercely, apparently seeing Remus balk and flush with a deep anger.

"Why do you have her..."

"Family heirloom ring? I don't...it, this one is mine. It's been at Alphard's all these years. Well, it's my family's. It was to be claimed by either Regulus or me, being the male heirs of the House of Black...it's her ring's twin." Sirius allowed what he was trying to say sink in. "Purebloods have this thing about arranged..."

"You were troth-plighted to her? How noble, how *pure*, Padfoot," scoffed Remus. "Don't think Voldemort will give you his blessings."

"It's two fold, presenting this...one, it's a pretext to maybe have contact with Regulus. The berk's gone missing, you know. Don't know if he... escaped or if one of them..."

"You think that for one instant, Voldemort..."

"Two, just to bide time. One minute, thirty seconds...anything! Because, dear friend, remember who I was,*before*. Who I am to them. My father was a Knight of Walpurgis, like his forefathers before him...like everyone's in that room except Riddle's..."

"Who doesn't give a fuck because he's Salazar Slytherin's descendant! Who gives a fuck?" roared Remus.

"They want me to beg to be accepted back as much as they want to kill me! It'll*amuse* this crowd; the *futility* will amuse Riddle, and in that sliver of a moment, we can make our move."

* R *

Rookwood's voice snapped Remus out of his reflection.

"Come, Sirius. Lupin. It is time." He led them through the gathering, where Remus and Sirius stood beside Nagini, all in front of Voldemort.

"Rookwood, your and Nagini's special guests have dared to come, I see," stated the Dark Lord.

"Kneel," whispered Rookwood, suddenly irritated and tense. "And take off your masks."

Sirius' facial muscles clenched, but he proceeded to follow Augustus' directions, followed by Remus. But as Nagini made to kneel beside Remus, the voice commanded, "No, Nagini. Here."

Without a second's hesitation, Remus saw Nagini move in front of the pale, dark-haired figure and position herself, kneeling at his feet. Bellatrix had perched herself on Voldemort's other side, twirling her wand in her hand with a wild look in her eyes.

Voldemort's features were eerily distorted, stretched with a sickly hue as he whispered to Nagini in Parseltongue, "Relax, my pet. And watch. Be ready. The time is near."

Remus heard Riddle quietly hiss a command to Nagini, who then changed her position to a sitting one. Under his lashes, he saw that she stared blankly above the

gathering, as if looking through the dungeon's walls. But his eyes darted back to Voldemort as he heard him directly say, "Ah, Sirius Black... The one that got away, only to return... in need of what?"

"In need," Sirius halted and seemed to summon his inner will to force himself to utter, "my Lord, with kindred purebloods, in honour of this gathering to commemorate the Knights of Walpurgis, a token from a time past."

Voldemort barely moved his fingers, and the twin ring flew to his palm. "Your trinket does not appease me, Black."

"Perhaps my brother Regulus can..."

"Regulus? Ah, yessss, Regulussss..."

Remus felt and heard the room grow even colder and deathly still. He dared a glance at Rookwood, whose smug smile confirmed that he had led them to slaughter...not a revelry, but a slaughter. His fingers twitched and he made the slightest movement. "Don't," croaked Augustus in a low threatening tone, causing him to wince, knowing that Rookwood was completely *on to them*.

Voldemort gave a cryptic smile as he gazed at Sirius. "You wish to see Regulus?"

Remus saw Sirius give a quick glance around, as if expecting Regulus to step forward. But nothing happened.

"Rookwood informs me that you wish to return to the fold?"

"I feel I could be useful with the Ministry, Crouch, Moody, Dumbledore..."

"And yet you have chosen to keep company with a werewolf? With undesirables?" Voldemort's eyes flickered red at Remus momentarily before boring into the eldest Black brother again. "Aligned yourself with blood traitors?"

In a flash, Riddle snapped his wand at Sirius, spellbinding him.

Remus turned to Sirius, who had begun to laugh only for the sound to change, turning into a scream. A deep, agonizing one, and he collapsed on his knees and hands.

Remus had barely managed *not* to react, remaining in place. The plan was they were to strike together. *And now, what?* Waiting, watching, waiting.

"The werewolf would do this out of what, loyalty? To you, Black?" Voldemort's eyes flashed red. He slashed at Sirius' collapsed form while throwing the troth-plight ring to the floor. "And the Potters, Black? Reveal their hiding place to me...prove your true worth!"

There was only a defiant growl of sorts emitting from Sirius. Voldemort flicked his wand again, and Sirius writhed on the floor in agony, unhinged.

"Black has displeased me."

All of the masked figures seemed to titter and sway, and then blur, for Remus felt as if the room was turning as Riddle turned his attention to him.

"I have been told you wish to serve me discreetly. Would you pledge your service to me without Black? Or has this all been a futile ruse?"

A groan of consent seemed to eek forth from Sirius, and Remus' fingers twitched to grasp his wand and send an Avadra Kedavra at Riddle. But his instinct also told him he had to wait. *For what?* He caught Nagini's image in the corner of his eye, passive and petrified.

At Remus' hesitation, Voldemort's voice seemed to soften as he pressed, "You are willing to spy for me, against your kind, half-breed? Both the human and the animal? To be a liaison with your kindred werewolves?"

For some reason, he could only nod his head and made some unintelligible sound.

"You lie, son of Lyall Lupin."

"No," he heard himself whisper.

"What did you say?"

"Yes," he consented aloud vigorously.

Even as a wand flashed a Crucio curse, hitting Remus full force, he heard "Yes, *what*, beast?" It was Rodolphus Lestrage behind him, digging a wand into his back.

There was raucous laughter ringing in his ears as the pain of the curse burned through him, and he felt his body grow heavy, collapsing downward to the floor.

"On your knees, and repeat, 'Yes, my Lord!'" shrieked Bellatrix, pointing her wand at him, ready to hex him into another hell.

Remus raised his eyes and gave a fleeting glance to Nagini, whose eyes were now filled with an indescribable pain.

The final mistake was made.

It was not Bellatrix's nor Rodolphus', but Voldemort's wand that in a flash had been waved and placed him in an Imperioed state. Remus could not help but stare into the burning red eyes of Voldemort.

The longer he was held in Voldemort's gaze, the more his throat muscles tightened.

"So," Riddle hissed maliciously, "you dare in front of me to covet that which is mine, wolf?"

Choking from an invisible force, Remus rasped, "No."

"You lie again, Lupin."

There was a searing sensation around Remus' throat, like an electric wire lassoed around it, tightening.

"I know what you are, Remus Lupin. What you want." His eyes flashed red again in the light. "I have probed Nagini's mind, many a time. I have seen her every memory... *felt* each one," he hissed, his eyes glinting dangerously. "Do not believe otherwise... She has no secrets from me."

Remus heard a roar rushing through the room, like a locomotive engine going out of control. His heart pounded wildly as Riddle said quietly, "Now, Nagini. Do it."

Nagini rose, her eyes and features neutral. She raised her wand and slashed; Remus buckled. He heard Bellatrix cackling as Nagini came nearer. She raised his head and lunged around, grabbing and twisting his arm behind his back.

He suddenly felt an object being pressed into his palm, even as he felt her place her wand at his throat with her other hand. Nagini swooped down, as if she were hissing

an expletive in his ear, but hissed, "Both you and Sirius!" She squeezed his hand hard, which now gripped her heirloom ring.

He couldn't think straight, only, *No! Not without you!*, and made indistinct protesting grunts.

Voldemort jeered, "Cut his throat like a filthy Muggle, in tribute to his Mudblood mother!"

She raised her wand, as if to place a Diffindo spell, and then suddenly clenched and shoved Remus sideways, both toppling onto Sirius' prostrate form. Remus' fist loosened, and in lightning speed, Nagini squeezed it closed with her hand simultaneously touching a portion of the ring's edge and Remus' fingers gripped around the Portkey.

"Now! Together, Remus...*Chocolate Frog girl!*"

Instinctively, even as he said the phrase with her, Remus slid his free arm under Sirius' torso, holding him tight, and simultaneously felt the overpowering hook-like sensation pulling him into space.

But even in that very moment, as he clasped the heavy weight of his dearest friend to him, he also felt a sudden lightness overwhelming another part of him, physically and psychologically.

Nagini had let go.

* N *

Nagini felt the slash of a burning curse hit her in the second she uttered the words *Chocolate Frog girl* with Remus.

Her body was thrown against the wall by an invisible force.

She raised her wand to send one last curse at Voldemort. It was slapped from her hand, her arm feeling like it had been cut off.

There was a roar of commotion as in a wavering rippling effect, and Nagini struck back the only way she had left; not having her wand, but with her deepest wish, she transfigured herself into her Animagus form.

Riddle flinched in surprise, seeing her having dissolved and morphed; there were nervous exclamations and shrieks, fervent movements now that all faced a rearing, hissing serpent of substantial size. "Leave her to me!" bellowed the Dark Lord.

For Tom was only unnerved a second before he retaliated. Wrathfully, he 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 shall be an abomination to all that lay eyes on you," he hissed softly, smiling a cruel, knowing smile.

Then he screamed, "You dare to strike at me? *Finite Animagus!*" At his command, 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, Riddle 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 was propelling her into darkness.

His visceral hissing cut through her thoughts, "All shall loathe your form and fear you. You are mine, a part of me; I am a part of you."

Turning to his followers, Voldemort roared, "I want the pieces of that filthy blood traitor Gideon Prewett's carcass strewn all over Hogwarts! I want the old man to know he and those resisting me are next! GO!"

Voldemort held out his hand as if catching something large and invisible from the dispersing Death Eaters within his grasp. "Not you, Pettigrew," he hissed malevolently. "You remain here with me and Nagini."

Nagini could hear Peter's whimpering, "Yes, yes, my Lord."

Then the Dark Lord was standing above her, gloating. Nagini saw Voldemort's facial mask drawn back with a satisfied leer. Her throat was parched and aching as he grabbed it and squeezed tightly. "Nagini?"

With an unnerving expression, a mocking smile was given to her as he jibed, "It's time."

She shivered as his face beamed with smugness. "Our last time, witch," he hissed in Parseltongue. "The third time... The spell shall be completed. Thrice, thrice, thrice..."

Like a slap to the face, his distorted features were suddenly one inch from hers, his body laying hard and brutally on her, his skeletal sharpness pressing painfully down into her softness. Her heart was thudding wildly in her chest as he coaxed, "The last time, Nagini. The last layer of the spell... Our spell."

An odd look of placid satisfaction appeared on the Dark Lord's face, unnerving her further, as he suddenly, sultrily hissed, "Accept me completely... willingly... and I will be a merciful lord. I will spare the wolf's life..." He gave her time to let this sink in, smiling slyly. "Not just Lupin, but the others, Severusssss, all who have befriended you in one way or another; you shall feed on them as you wish..." As her eyes rolled back, the hand of power released her, and she gasped and clawed for air. Then his weight was on her, all over her, pressing her down, flattening and spreading her flesh upon the floor. Her chin was jerked and held, forcing her eyes to lock with his. "Open your body, mind, and sssssoul for me, Nagini."

She could feel the Dark Lord scraping around in her submissive mind, probing and tearing memories and images from her deepest corners. He smiled coldbloodedly as he saw Remus and her. He felt vicariously Nagini's pleasure, angst and... betrayal.

His red eyes gleamed, and she heard in her mind, *The new world order. My world order. But first... my power. My need. My release. My vessel. My Horcrux!*

Riddle gloated as he grasped her throat again. *All that exists is my power!* Feeling his long nails grasping her throat tightly, her body was jarred and inched back and forth in a sporadic rhythm; a ragged tune to Voldemort's thrusts as he fucked her, rammed her hard and deep, slowly then fast. Around and around. *My needs, my release... are all that exist, Nagini... You will act on my every whim...*

She became lost in his hypnotic whisperings and had no sense of time, mesmerized by his grimacing visage, only a dull registration of his burning, hard member spreading her flesh with each sharp thrust, piercing her core. But memories flooded back in her mind. Visions. Images. All the times before. Blood being drained. Blood being exchanged with Dark spells. Multiple times. Each time, she felt filled with... something... with *him!*

But there were two distinct memories, as clear as clairvoyant visions she had had, of a spell being involved. A spell that permeated and seemed to draw her very blood and soul out of her.

She went somewhere else in her mind. She was beyond pain. The touch of her dominator was all she knew, sharp and digging, demanding. Suddenly, she was aware of the sensations of a pain, a numbing pain from her waist down, throughout her entire body... beyond... encompassing her, encompassing him... *them* together. It was

searing through her, come and blood. She felt him, holding her hips in place in a vice grip as he impaled himself again and again until in a hard jerk he laid his full weight on her and whispered the Horcrux curse in her ear:

Thrice, thrice, thrice

Enter, master

Fill me, master,

Possess me, master!

"Repeat with me, Nagini, as I come inside you." All she knew was that she was one with him; all she knew was to repeat after him, with him; they were blurring and had become one. The fraction of her humanity was diminishing, the tether of a former being was stretching wispiest and wispiest as she felt a force of life energy, alien yet familiar, leave and then enter her.

* V *

Tom Riddle hissed a painful hiss as he came deep within Nagini, as a part of his soul yet again left him and transferred into a powerful object, a living object! He lay still, feeling momentarily weakened. Then, the awareness that he had succeeded in transferring another part of his soul into a living object sent a rush of invigoration through him. *I have pushed magic beyond its boundaries, further than Herpo the Great could have ever dreamed!*

As he raised himself, looking down at Nagini's comatose form, his eyes rolled back in exaltation *The months, no years, it has taken to prepare my vessel for me!*

And now, the Potters! I must eliminate the tyke they've spawned!

The Dark Lord stared down at her. He spoke another curse, hexing Nagini back into her Animagus form, imprisoning her in this state. Permanently. He Accioed her wand and triumphantly broke it in half, throwing the parts on the floor.

"When I have exterminated the Potters, I will call for you, and you will come to me."

* N *

Nagini felt both complete yet lost, floating in time and space. She felt the Dark Lord withdraw himself from her, point his wand, whispering a Dark spell, and felt her body throb and morph back into her reptilian form. *He will summon me and I will come to his bidding!*

She stared up at her master, fixated on him.

Voldemort had a satisfied look, odd yet decisively triumphant. He appeared to tremble, as if a force had left him, but he seemed to just as quickly recover. He stood upright, his eyes glowing red with a secret fire.

"Pettigrew!"

Nagini could hear the echoes of Peter Pettigrew's screams as she lay, not moving. She heard him squealing in pain, "Godric's Hallow! I'll take you there, my Lord!"

Then there was silence. She felt her frail human faculties were rapidly fading fast, slipping away. For a second, the thought of struggling against a strange, suffocating energy that seemed to encompass her occurred. Transforming into her human form fleetingly crossed her mind, then just as quickly vanished.

Her serpentine nostrils flared slightly, sniffing the air. It was daylight, and it was All Hallows' Eve 1981.

* R *

Remus was saying the words... He felt the warmth of Nagini's hand tight on his; yes, he was saying the words, so short, three little words. There was a fierce tugging, a suctioning force into space simultaneously occurring with a bright flash....

She isn't with me?

He only knew he was still grasping Sirius; they both were bleeding, but alive, gasping and laying on another but vaguely familiar stone floor. There was the hum and ticking of multiple clocks in the distance. Fawkes was staring down at them from his perch...they were in the Headmaster's office. They were safe.

She let go? Nagini!

* R *

31 October, 1981 and beyond

It was All Hallows' Eve, and Remus had been sent to the north of the country to patrol and search again for Antonin Dolohov and others for the brutal murder of the Prewett twins. He and Sirius had been quickly healed of physical wounds by Madam Pomfrey and Moody in Dumbledore's office and immediately sent on separate missions.

The world had gone irretrievably mad, and a panicky reaction ensued.

Remus was informed of Lily and James Potter's death. Returning to London empty-handed, he was numb, and in his grief, he searched for Sirius, Peter...his fellow Marauders for consolation. But they could not be found.

It was in agonizing pain that the unbelievable, apparently, had happened. Moody had to hold him down with a hex full force as yet further traumatic events were revealed to Remus: Sirius was the spy... Sirius had murdered twelve Muggles and their long-time best friend Peter Pettigrew.

Only Peter's finger remained...

Nagini! Sirius! Peter! Remus ripped at his hair, snapping. *A traitor to Lily and James? No! A spy for the other side? I knew... I knew that Harry had been identified by Voldemort as the child in the prophecy... a possible target. James and Lily! But the child has survived? Harry?*

He had been aware that James and Lily had used the Fidelius Charm. *Of course Sirius was their Secret-Keeper! Who else?* Destitute and wretched, Remus' body shook with sobs.

Traumatic event after traumatic event became Remus' life during those days. It would come to no one's surprise that he disappeared, became a recluse, lived in poverty, in a derelict cottage in Yorkshire. That is until Dumbledore tracked him down in the summer of 1993 and offered him the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor at Hogwarts.

It would only be then that he would become aware of Pettigrew's duplicity and know Wormtail *had* to be dead. An innocent happenstance of seeing Peter's name appear on the confiscated Marauder's Map that he and his dearest mates had created so long ago would cause him to suspect the unimaginable.

* N *

With all her strength, Nagini willed herself to move, arched her vertebrae, and set her long form into motion, slowly slinking and slithering across the floor and through a rotten wooden flap of the old manor's cellar, leading out into the tall grass and onto the cool earth.

She knew not how long she travelled through grass, over pebbles and dirt and stone until she at last came to a forest she knew well. She hissed at the castle in the distance and veered deeper and deeper into the thickness of the Forbidden Forest. Something propelled her to a grove where an old Hawthorn tree stood. And there in the heart of it glowed something golden, something tasty. *A golden Horklump!* She slithered up to it and, in an impulsive move, lashed out and clamped down on the magical fungi.

She found herself Portkeyed on the Squib's vessel; he seemed to be expecting her. He led her to the lower hull, where she curled up and slept a deep sleep. Feeding on mice and trickles of water, she voyaged in the ship until it was docked in the lower Mediterranean. She sniffed the air and it was familiar to her. *We've been here before, haven't we, Master?*

Slithering off the ship in the middle of the night, she slunk and moved into and through the deep, dark forests *Yessss, I'll wait where the Diadem was for you, Master... You shall come to me soon...*

For Nagini felt the Dark Lord's life force pulsing within her.

* R *

It would be in the distant future that Nagini's prophecy for Remus would be filled.

He would indeed finally accept another, be loved and fulfilled in a previously unforeseen way. He would lose himself in the arms of a pink-haired witch; she would try again and again to ease his torment, to *love* his nightmares away... Nymphadora would replace his nightmares with an unconditional love and hope.

Holding his infant son cradled in his arms, he would not remember that long ago time when someone he could not save had touched his face... and he had laid his head in her lap wanting time to stand still forever...

Long gone were those days.

The reality of and the precedent to wipe Voldemort off the face of the earth, once and for all, to ensure a safer place for his son and others to grow up in, would be his driving force in life.

It would be a cause he believed worth fighting for. And dying for.

* N *

It would be in the distant future that Nagini would return from the dark, deep forests of Albania with her master and their companion Pettigrew, enslaved and kept alive with a part of Voldemort's soul embedded and entwined with her own life force.

And it would be on an embattlement of Hogwarts, a cherished refuge for so many, that she would find her death at the blade of Gryffindor's sword, yielded by a pure soul, noble in heart and deed.

As the part of Voldemort's soul embedded within her also met Godric's searing blade, it disintegrated, and her life force was truly freed and ended.

She would then be allowed to be at peace, free from an accursed existence.

The twists of fate would allow that.

* FIN *

* 'My men, like satyrs, ... shall with their goat feet dance the antic hay.' (Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II* I, I, approx. 1593)