

Star Sisters

by sevs_starsisters

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Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

I: Star Sisters

Chapter 1 of 41

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Chapter I: Star Sisters

Charis stood in King's Cross station on the draughty platform of nine and three-quarters, waiting anxiously. This would be her seventh and final year at Hogwarts, the last time she would wait for the old red steam train, and the very last time she would board it with her best friend.

The Hogwarts Express held very special memories for her. In fact, she and her best friend Morgana had met on that very train six years ago: they had both been a little scared and excited and had very much been looking forward to becoming proper witches.

They couldn't have been more different.

Charis was a Muggle-born, who had grown up not far from what was, centuries ago, the vale of Avalon. With fair hair and green eyes, she had been brought up as the youngest of four children in a modest country town. Her family were not rich, but they never went hungry. She had grown up with the sounds of yelling and arguing ringing in her ears as part of everyday life. Why her parents didn't just simply divorce and save everyone their constant bickering, Charis had no idea. However, she had accepted that this was the way things were and quickly learnt to stay out of sight when a fight was brewing. It had been this upbringing that had shaped her deep dislike of confrontation. And if there were some other way to resolve conflict, she would find it. She had become a natural diplomat because of that and also one to hold her tongue.

Morgana was a red-haired pureblood with icy-blue eyes. She was the youngest child of the line of Belakane, the last daughter of a family that could be traced back to the times of Merlin. But she had not enjoyed the pleasures children of pureblood families normally enjoyed. She had not been brought up in a Manor, had not had a private

tutor or played with gilded toys. She had grown up in an orphanage, as her parents had mysteriously disappeared shortly after her first birthday. The Ministry had investigated into their disappearance, of course, but never found a trace of them. But then again, many witches and wizards had disappeared during those troubled times.

Yes, Charis and Morgana were two girls from two different worlds, two different backgrounds. But by the time they arrived at Hogwarts, they had become friends, bonding over Chocolate Frogs and rumours of the delights that awaited them at their new school.

And then they had been sorted: Charis into Ravenclaw for her brilliant wits and her eagerness to learn; Morgana into Slytherin for her bloodline and her ambition to succeed whatever the price.

One would think that being sorted into rivaling Houses would have kept the two girls apart. But as the years had gone by, the Star Sisters had developed a bond as had rarely been seen before. They had shared laughs and tears, crushes and heartaches, and by their sixth year, they had realised that they also shared an obsession for their Potions master.

Charis shivered, looking around the platform once more. She was getting nervous. It was seven minutes to eleven, and Morgana hadn't arrived yet. If she didn't show up soon, she would miss the train. And besides, being late wasn't like her at all. *Something must have happened to her*, Charis thought and started wringing her hands.

'Is there anything wrong, Ms Byrne?'

The low, drawling voice made Charis jump, and as she whirled around, she almost bumped into her best friend.

'For fuck's sake, Morgana! Do you have to sneak up on me like that?'

The red-haired witch grinned. 'I thought you liked being sneaked up on by dark Slytherins. Or does that rule just apply to our dear Potions master?'

Charis pouted. Her friend had the uncanny habit of delivering biting remarks without even thinking twice how they might be received. She could be right-out cruel at times. And Charis wondered if she would ever get used to it.

'Oh, don't look at me like that, Ravenpuff,' Morgana chided. 'Unbutton your shirt and show some leg. We're of age now!'

Yes, they were. Charis had become of age one minute after the stroke of midnight on July fourteenth, and Morgana only two minutes earlier, one minute before the end of July thirteenth. Star Sisters, indeed.

'Come on now,' Morgana said with a mischievous grin on her face. 'Let's board the train and get to Hogwarts. We have a Potions master to seduce.'

The mood on the train was strangely subdued. Students stood in the corridors, huddled together in small groups, whispering and casting furtive glances over their shoulders. And they were all talking about the same three things: Harry Potter, the death of Cedric Diggory and the return of Lord Voldemort.

'Do you think Harry is telling the truth?' Charis asked her friend as they had found an empty compartment at the end of the train. 'Was Cedric really murdered by Vo... by *him*? Is he really back?'

'Why would Potter lie?' Morgana replied. 'It's not like he got too little attention last year. He doesn't need to make up a story like that.'

Charis swallowed. If Voldemort really was back, then her life as a witch would change drastically very soon. She knew just what kind of treatment Muggle-borns had received during the first Wizard war. The likes of Draco Malfoy and his cronies were bound to see this as an excuse to exacerbate their obnoxious, bordering-on-xenophobic behaviour. A gnawing ache began in the pit of Charis' stomach. She hoped this wouldn't drive a wedge between her and her best friend.

'Do you think things will change in your House if he really is back?' Charis wondered.

Morgana shrugged. 'I think you and me both know just who in my House is happy about the Dark Lord being back. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, to name a few. Draco has been longing for the Dark Lord's return ever since our fourth year. Do you remember the day the Chamber of Secrets was opened? The little twit had a field day.'

Yes, Charis remembered. She remembered how she for the first time had been called Mudblood that year. She remembered how bad she had felt, how humiliated. But she also remembered how Morgana had cast a really ugly hex at the Slytherin boy who had insulted her.

'Will we be in danger?' she asked. 'Those of us who are not in Slytherin, I mean?'

Morgana looked her straight in the eyes, and her friend's blue gaze made Charis relax. 'If the Dark Lord really has returned, then we will all be in danger. But at Hogwarts we will be safe.'

They sat in silence for a while, each absorbed in their own thoughts about Lord Voldemort and the future. A future of which none of them knew what kind of dangers it would bring. The death of Cedric Diggory had shown that, in these troubled times, not even being a pureblood was enough to keep from harm.

Their thoughts were broken by the arrival of the buffet cart, and by the time they had devoured some Pumpkin Pastries and Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, their topic of conversation had turned to something far sweeter in nature: the seduction of their Potions master.

They began plotting in earnest just after the train reached Birmingham. Exactly what did Severus Snape find attractive? And how could they find out? They were certain he wasn't gay, although all of the professors kept their private lives very much private. Come to think of it, they didn't know if any of their teachers had partners or spouses. Morgana made a crack about Flitwick and Sprout being an item, which made Charis snort pumpkin juice all over her new school robes. Bobbing Flitwick and frivolous Sprout. Such an unholy union.

Charis and Morgana soon decided that beyond the stony facade of their Potions master lay a hungry, passionate brute who would make a woman's knees weak with the intensity of his attentions. And by the time the train reached the Lake District, they had painted Snape as a devilish womaniser, skilled in the exotic art of love-making and with a manhood so impressive and virile it would make their eyes water.

They were now certain about their goal: they wanted to find out what slumbered beneath the billowing black robes of their Potions master. And before the school year was over, they would have their way with him. They would seduce him, use him and then walk away from him with their heads held high, never looking back.

Yes, the goal was staked out clearly. But how they would achieve it, the Star Sisters did not know.

And neither did they know that their little scheme would end in tears and heartache.

* * *

The Great Hall was filled with voices and laughter, and despite having spent six years there, neither Charis nor Morgana ever stopped being amazed by the magic of Hogwarts.

Before splitting up to join their House Tables, they positioned themselves by the entrance door from where they had a clear view of the High Table. And there he was, the object of their desire: dark, brooding, dangerous, dungeon bat, Potions master and Head of Slytherin House. Severus Snape.

'Is it just me or has he gotten even more alluring over the summer?' Morgana whispered and smirked at her friend who promptly blushed.

'I still don't dare look him in the eyes,' Charis whispered. It was one thing to dream about him every night, one thing to plan to seduce him. But actually plucking up the courage to even try approaching him was a completely different matter.

Morgana snorted. 'Once you have him between your thighs, all you have to do is lay back and enjoy. You won't have to look at him. And besides, it is said to be modest for a girl to close her eyes anyway.' And grinning madly, she left for the Slytherin table, leaving her friend standing at the door, blushing even more.

Charis grew nervous. She had fumbled with boys before, but seducing a MAN that was something else altogether. She felt a little out of her depth if she was honest, and yet her attraction to the dark wizard was undeniable. She thought about him before she went to sleep at night and in her most private of moments, when exploring her own awakening sensuality. But she took strength from the fact that she wasn't alone in her pursuit of the surly Slytherin, as she surely wouldn't have the courage to act on her feelings if she did not have the support of her equally-smitten best friend.

* * *

Charis was already enjoying buttered toast and a nice cup of hot chocolate when the seventh-year Slytherins came marching into the Great Hall the next morning, lead by no other than Severus Snape himself. His black robes were billowing behind him as he strode by, and Charis almost choked on her toast. He was an Adonis in black robes with a black aura that made her knees tremble and any intelligent thought disappear from her head. Oh yes, there was a reason why she dreamt of him almost every night.

She caught sight of her best friend, who was walking just a couple of feet behind her Head of House, her eyes slightly narrowed, her jaws set.

How could she walk behind that man, her eyes on his butt and not even break a sweat, Charis wondered.

But when Morgana walked by, Charis could see her eyes glitter. And when she raised an eyebrow and barely noticeable pointed towards the object of their desire, Charis realised that she was not the only one who found it difficult not to drool.

Five minutes later, Morgana flopped down beside her friend, making some third-years hurry away in fear by just looking at them.

'You shouldn't be doing that,' Charis pointed out, feeling that she needed to protect her House mates.

'Doing what?' Morgana asked, seemingly totally oblivious of the effect she had on the younger students.

'Scowling at the third-years like that,' Charis explained. 'You scare the shit out of them.'

Morgana lifted her hands in a defensive gesture. 'That's my Slytherin charm. Learnt from the best,' she said, gesturing towards the High Table where Snape was washing down his porridge with a cup of black coffee. 'He has managed to make two first-years cry already before breakfast.'

Yes, that was very much like him.

'He was in a weird mood today,' Morgana went on. 'Gave us a five minutes' speech about Slytherin House having to befriend the other Houses, that we cannot stand on our own against the dangers that are lurking in the shadows.' She paused and moved closer to her friend, dropping her voice to a mere whisper. 'I think Snape believes Potter. I think he believes that the Dark Lord has indeed returned.'

Morgana picked up a piece of toast and started crumbling it with her fingers. She had seen the looks Snape had received from Draco and his pals *They* did certainly not think that anyone in Slytherin House should socialise with any student from another House. And neither had she missed the look Draco had given her when she had walked towards the Ravenclaw table.

'So, sister dearest,' Morgana continued smoothly, desperately trying to change subjects. She had no desire whatsoever to discuss House loyalties at the moment. 'Got your timetable yet?'

Charis started rummaging in her book bag. Professor Flitwick had provided the Ravenclaws with their timetables after the Welcome Feast, and she knew it by heart already. But she didn't want to look too brainy.

'Oh no, they split us up for DADA and Charms,' she complained as she compared her timetable to Morgana's. 'But we'll have Transfiguration together. Oh, so you decided to go for Runes after all. That was a good decision, Morgana.'

'That's not what he said,' Morgana replied, inclining her head in the direction of Professor Snape. 'He thinks it's a waste of time and I quote a subject unworthy of a true Slytherin.'

'He can be such an ass,' Charis commented, knowing how proud her friend was of being in Slytherin House.

'An ass, you say?' Morgana mumbled, a lusty look in her eyes. 'Hm, but it sure is a delicious one.'

Charis giggled and let Morgana take the timetable out of her hand.

'Guess who's having Potions together?' Morgana asked.

Charis' eyes went wide. 'We're not?' That was just too good to be true.

'Oh yes, we are,' Morgana said, grinning. 'And we both know what that means: we'll be able to attack him from two sides at once. The man doesn't stand a chance.'

* * *

The Star Sisters might have felt safe at that point. They might even have thought that their scheming had gone unnoticed. But Severus Snape never missed a thing.

Contrary to common beliefs, the Potions master always paid very close attention to the first-years when they entered the Great Hall in McGonagall's wake. He studied their faces, their body language and their eyes. He memorised their faces and added them to the information he and the other teachers had been given about them, and when he met them face to face for the first time, he would call every student by their name.

The way the students carried themselves told him a lot about their personalities. And in their eyes he looked for that certain spark that promised curiosity and the will to learn. Most people thought that Severus Snape did not even look at the first-years when they stood in front of the Deputy Headmistress, all shaking like leaves. But by the time McGonagall put the Sorting Hat on their head, Snape had most of the time already decided which students were even worth a second look.

He had not noticed Morgana before she had been called forth. She had kept quiet, had hidden in the crowd, had blended in perfectly. It was not in her nature to draw attention to herself unless she *wanted* to be noticed. But when she was called forth, she had certainly had Snape's undivided attention. Of course, the last of the Belakanes was reason enough to notice the girl, but her last name was not what had gotten Snape interested. No, he had noticed her icy blue eyes and the way she carried herself. Tall and unflinchingly, she had stepped forward. She had seemed proud, curious and ambitious. *There walks a true Slytherin*, Snape had thought. And he had not been mistaken.

Charis, too, had been worth a second look. He had noticed her curious green eyes already when she had let them wander across the staff table for the first time. He had also noticed that she had at once lowered her gaze as he had glared back at her. But he had never forgotten that curious and intelligent look in her eyes. And he had not at all been surprised when she had been sorted into Ravenclaw.

Potions had been the girls' first class the next day, and Snape had been both surprised and slightly annoyed by the fact that they had shared a table. A pureblood Slytherin and a Muggle-born Ravenclaw working together? What would come next? Hufflepuff winning the House Cup? But the girls proved to be a good team, and he let them work, curious at what they might achieve.

Over the years, Snape watched the Star Sisters' friendship grow and prosper. No one could ever have guessed that they were in different Houses. They worked together and studied together. They laughed together and consoled each other. They were inseparable. Even in the Great Hall, sitting at different tables, they managed to communicate with each other. They used secret signs, a wink, a smile, a raised eyebrow. They did not need words to understand each other. And Snape watched and approved. For a while at least.

Then the girls' sixth year arrived, and for the first time, Snape noticed that they had grown into young women, attractive young women. The boys looked after them in the corridors, and the girls gave them jealous looks. And both Charis and Morgana knew what effect they had on the opposite sex. But for the first time, Snape noticed a significant difference: while Charis blushed and looked at the boys with a shy expression on her face, Morgana eyed them coolly, even calculatingly. Charis was looking for love, Morgana for power. And Snape decided to keep an eye on them both.

Then the Dark Lord returned, and Snape's life changed: once more, he stood between the Dark and the Light, working for both sides, not belonging anywhere. But this time, he was not just working on his own agenda. This time, he had his students to protect. He had noticed the change in Slytherin House: several students were only too willing to join the Dark Lord, just like their parents had done two decades ago. And Snape promised to himself to save as many as possible from the Dark side.

It felt like a Bludger to the gut when he learnt that Morgana had started socialising with Lucius Malfoy. He had of course known that Lucius had paid for Morgana's education since the day her parents had died. And why would he not have? The Malfoys and the Belakanes were two of the oldest Wizard families in the country. Of course Lucius would look out for the girl who was the perfect match for his son. But why Lucius had now decided to sink his fangs into the girl himself was beyond Snape. And even less did he understand why the girl would let it happen.

By the time the girls returned to Hogwarts for their seventh and final year, Snape had worked out a plan. He could not let the girl fall into the hands of a wizard as dark as Lucius Malfoy. And if Morgana really had fallen for Lucius' charms, if she was in danger to be pulled into the Dark, he would need Charis' help to keep Morgana from falling.

But before he could trust Charis, he would have to test the girls' friendship.

It was a painful experience. The two girls and the friendship they shared reminded Snape so much of what he had once had. Morgana with her calculating mind and her cold attitude reminded him of the boy he had once been: so eager to find a place to belong, so afraid to get hurt. And Charis, she was like Lily: smart, kind, loyal. She even had the same green eyes.

The question was: would Morgana push her friend away when she needed her the most, just as he had done all those years ago? And would Charis let Morgana fall on the very same day, just as Lily had done with him?

Snape shuddered at the thought. He had observed those two girls for six years. He knew how much they cared for each other. He did not want to see them fall apart. Hence, he had to test their loyalties and, if necessary, separate the two before they started hurting each other.

And the fact that they both competed for his attention proved to be the perfect tool.

II: How to Approach the Potions Master

Chapter 2 of 41

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Chapter II: How to Approach the Potions Master

Charis and Morgana began their mission in earnest, by seeking to impress the Potions master with their skill and knowledge. However, if there had ever been a man who wasn't easily impressed, it was Severus Snape. The girls worked hard and assiduously, and the combination of Ravenclaw brilliancy and Slytherin cunning earned them the highest grades in Potions. But a word of praise from their teacher, there was none.

Not that they had ever expected any praise. The teacher in question was, after all, Severus Snape, and the day he would praise a student would surely be the day when Hades froze over. But working their butts off and not getting anything in return started to become frustrating. Both Charis and Morgana had thought Snape would value intelligence in a woman, and being girls of considerable talents, they studied diligently and mastered their potions to perfection in the hope they would receive, if not praise, then at least a keener interest in them and their work. Snape, however, much to their disappointment and frustration, did not treat them any differently.

By the middle of October, Morgana had decided to change her tactics. She had not been sorted into Slytherin for nothing, and she would get what she wanted, at any cost.

'I'm going to get myself put in detention,' she announced one evening when she and Charis were studying in the library.

'Detention? Are you out of your mind? You have never had detention.' Charis couldn't believe it. It was one thing to get the attention of their Potions master by behaving well, but risking his wrath with detention? She had always thought she would rather clean out Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts than be on the receiving end of one of Snape's notorious bad moods.

'Hey, I am not going for the Most Righteous Student Award here,' Morgana snapped. She was not in the mood for Charis' justified but still annoying advice.

'Snape is not noticing us when we are being nice,' she continued, 'so maybe he will notice us when we go bad. And you know what they say about good witches going to heaven and bad witches going anywhere they want.'

Charis started chewing her lip. Her record was spotless, and she was proud of that. Getting detention wasn't very high up on her priority list. But then again, this was about

getting close to Severus Snape. And *that* was certainly worth getting into trouble for.

'But you might end up with Umbridge,' she pointed out.

Umbridge. Both of the girls wrinkled their nose at the very name. The foul woman had managed to reduce one of their favourite lessons into a subject drier and more tedious than History of Magic. There was no chance to perform spells, and all work seemed to involve copying great chunks out of their revised and "Ministry approved" textbooks.

It was their NEWT year, the year when the sum of all their hard work should be honed before examinations in the summer. But no, instead they were forbidden any practical work and were reduced to having to read meaningless fodder. Charis and Morgana both agreed that if Umbridge's un-pedagogic teaching methods caused them to fail DADA, they would personally use all three Unforgivable Curses simultaneously on her.

The woman was vindictive, though. Vindictive and poisonous. The girls had seen how appallingly Professor Trelawney had been treated, and whilst neither of them were especially fond of the old fraud, they did feel sympathy for the way she had been humiliated in front of her students.

And Umbridge's vindictiveness was also tinged with blatant xenophobia. Many times she had lectured them about *the dangers of interbreeding cross-species* and *the threat of Muggles on a peaceful, pureblood society*. Charis could feel anger and hurt well up inside her stomach as the toad-like woman spoke words of hate drizzled in her cloying, sickly, honeyed tones. This was dangerous. Umbridge was feeding the undercurrent of Muggle-born hatred that was bubbling within Slytherin House. And the Slytherins, Morgana and some other brave souls excluded, seemed to lap it up.

'Snape takes pleasure in giving out detention personally,' Morgana replied. 'He'd want to issue any punishments himself.'

'And just how are you planning to get yourself in detention then, Morgana?' her friend enquired.

To that, the red-haired witch leant back in her chair, arms crossed in front of her chest, grinning mischievously. 'You'll see, Star Sister. You'll see.'

* * *

Morgana got her first chance for detention that very same evening. She and Charis had been working on their Potions essays for three hours straight, and despite her burning interest for the subject, Morgana was getting bored.

She laid her head onto the table and groaned theatrically: 'Why did we ever sign up for NEWT Potions, Charis? Why? Why?!'

Charis had already opened her mouth to remind her friend of their reasons when a low baritone made her spin around in her chair.

'Are you falling asleep while doing *my* assignment, Ms Belakane?'

Morgana shot off her chair and seemed suddenly wide awake. 'Would never dare, sir,' she replied. She tried hard not to grin but was failing miserably.

'Sycophancy will get you nowhere,' Snape snarled, and Charis flinched at the mere tone of his voice. To her utter shock, she saw Morgana's eyes narrow slightly, and she knew that her friend was up to no good. She knew Morgana well enough to know that narrowed eyes meant trouble.

'I was sorted into Slytherin for a reason, sir,' Morgana started, 'I think sycophancy becomes us rather well.'

'I am very aware of the traits of Slytherin House, Ms Belakane,' Snape replied in a low, dangerous tone. 'Now get your ridiculous hide to bed before Madam Pomfrey diagnoses you with narcolepsy.'

'Narco... What was that, sir?' Morgana asked, looking innocent as a fawn.

'The condition where one falls asleep during intervals throughout the day without their control, Ms Belakane,' Snape explained in a tone that clearly showed his annoyance.

'During the day?' Morgana smirked. 'Sir, it is night.'

Charis groaned inwardly, her toes curling with embarrassment inside her shoes. Morgana was skating on very thin ice. And the worst thing was that she did not even seem to care that Snape might explode with anger any second now. Her eyes darted from Snape to Morgana, hardly daring to breathe. Morgana was acting very out of character, giving her Head of House such lip, and Charis knew Snape did not tolerate insubordination of any kind. She braced herself for a scathing retort.

To her surprise, Snape's voice was more snarky than angry when he spoke again. 'Well done, Ms Belakane. Your powers of observation impress me. It is, however, unacceptable that you are falling asleep while doing a Potions assignment or when a superior is talking to you. Or were you not taught basic manners by your parents?'

Morgana sat up straight. 'I am wide awake, sir. And no.'

'No, what?'

'Sir?'

Now she had done it.

'Miss Belakane, I do not appreciate your tone,' Snape spat coldly, any trace of snark gone from his voice. Now he was angry. 'Off to bed with you now before I am forced to take points from my own House.'

And with that, he swept out of the library, leaving a gaping Charis and a smirking Morgana behind.

'My, my, my. Looks like he had noticed us after all. Wonder if he meant my bed or his?' Morgana mused when Snape was out of earshot.

'Are you out of your bloody mind?' Charis chided her friend. 'You could have got detention for that behaviour!'

Morgana turned towards her friend and gave her a look that could just as well have come from the Head of Slytherin House himself.

'My dearest Charis,' she replied. *Getting detention* was actually the point of the whole game.'

* * *

They handed in their essays on Mind Controlling potions the next day, and Charis couldn't help but notice the mischievous grin on her friend's face. Nor did she miss Snape's eyebrow raising as he read the title of Morgana's essay.

'What the hell did you write about?' Charis whispered.

The grin on Morgana's face broadened. 'Lust Potions.'

Charis gasped. 'You did not!'

But then again, she knew Morgana. Of course she had! That was just the sort of thing she would do to get Snape's attention. That girl had no scruples whatsoever. Charis watched as her friend smugly took out her textbook from her bag. Whilst she wasn't sure baiting Snape was altogether the right way to approach their Potions master, she couldn't help but feel a little envious of Morgana's gall. An essay on Lust Potions! Morgana might as well have 'I've Got the Hots for Severus' tattooed on her forehead, it was so obvious! Charis would never have the nerve to do something so blatant. Fiddling with her own textbook, she pondered how Snape would react to this new bit of attention seeking.

And Morgana certainly *had* gotten the attention of their Potions master. In fact, he approached the two girls in the library the very same evening.

'That was a well thought-through essay you handed in today, Ms Belakane,' he said in a low voice. 'Three rolls of parchment, too. Ten points to Slytherin for your diligence.'

Charis gasped, and Morgana cocked an eyebrow at her teacher. Ten points and praise? Na, that was too good to be true. And Snape's slightly narrowed eyes proved them right.

'However,' he went on. 'Ten points will be taken *from* Slytherin for having your mind firmly in the gutter.'

Morgana snorted. 'My mind likes the gutter, sir.'

Snape raised an eyebrow at her and smirked. 'So it seems, Ms Belakane. So it seems.'

* * *

It was a Sunday afternoon in late October when Morgana fled her common room with a book in her hand. There was no way she was going to be able to read in there, not with Draco Malfoy showing off his new broom that his daddy had bought. How she hated that little brat! She had seen enough of him over the summer, when she had been invited to stay at Malfoy Manor. She certainly had no desire whatsoever to spend any more time with Draco.

But where was she to go? She couldn't take that book to the library. She had bought it in Knockturn Alley, and it was certainly not part of the curriculum. So she decided to find a quiet little alcove in one of the corridors in the dungeon. There she conjured a fluffy pillow and made herself comfortable.

Potions which enabled the brewer to ensnare the drinker's mind proved to be an interesting read indeed, and Morgana was just re-reading a very alluring passage about Lust Potions when a low baritone made her slam the book shut.

'Enjoying yourself, Ms Belakane?'

She raised her head to stare up into a pair of beetle-black eyes and smiled. 'I'm studying, sir.'

Snape cocked an eyebrow at her, and she could have sworn that he was suppressing a grin. 'Well, there is a first time for everything.'

Morgana bit her lip not to laugh. Snape knew her grades. And he knew damn well that she was a good student.

'I am not particularly keen on books, sir,' she replied. 'I am more of a learning-by-doing-person.'

Snape peered down at her book and smirked. 'Obviously. One cannot learn how to brew potions by merely reading a book.'

'Of course not, sir,' Morgana replied with a smile that could have made wax melt, 'Potions require more than intellect.' A little flattery couldn't hurt, now could it?

'Indeed.' Snape's eyes narrowed slightly, and Morgana felt a shudder go down her spine. She hated it when he looked at her that way. And at the same time, she relished it.

'And what, pray, are you endeavouring to learn today, Ms Belakane?'

What the hell did he think she was endeavouring to learn? She was reading a book about Mind Controlling potions. Morgana set her jaw and looked up at her Head of House. If she played her cards right, she might have a chance for a private lesson. 'Anything you'd see fit to teach me, sir.'

'It is Sunday, Ms Belakane,' Snape replied, his voice cold. 'You do realise lessons are for weekdays only?' Then a flicker of amusement appeared in his eyes. 'Are you asking me for remedial lessons, Ms Belakane?'

Bingo. 'Do you think I need them, sir?'

'Honestly? No.'

Morgana gasped. Had Severus Snape just given her a compliment? Horklumps might fly!

'There is no harm in practising, however,' Snape went on, already directing his steps towards the Potions classroom. 'Practice makes perfect, after all.'

Morgana got up, Vanished the pillow and put her book into her book bag. 'Then what might we be practising today, professor?'

'So you want to practice, right this instant?' Snape asked, suddenly sounding sour. 'You realise I will have to supervise you, don't you? I would have appreciated some advance notice or even the courtesy to be asked to use my classroom ...'

Morgana frowned. Talking about getting mixed signals. Here he was, telling her off for disturbing him, and at the same time he was already holding open the door to the Potions classroom. She had no idea if he wanted her to enter the classroom or not.

But Snape didn't move, was still holding open the door, and Morgana took her chance. She slunk inside under his outstretched arm and immediately turned to look at him. 'I'm sorry, sir. Since you opened the door, I thought that I was welcome. I would have assumed that you'd send me away if you found my presence here *disturbing*.'

'Disturbing?' Snape repeated, his black eyes boring into her blue ones. 'No. But had I realised you had planned on getting some practical experience, I would have been more prepared. It is, after all, only common courtesy to ask, seeing as you will be using ingredients from my store cupboards.'

'More prepared?' Morgana saw her chance for yet another dose of flattering. 'But sir, *you* certainly do not need time to get prepared.'

His gaze became even more intense, and Morgana had to take a deep breath to keep her knees from going weak.

'What do you mean by that, Ms Belakane?' he asked slowly.

'I mean that if anyone in this castle is man enough to take on any challenge at any time of the day, it must be you, sir.'

'It seems you have a rather inflated sense of ego, Ms Belakane,' he growled. 'You are no more of a challenge to me than a Doxy is.'

Of course he would have taken that the wrong way, Morgana thought. Oh well, the damage was done, and she might as well push a little further. Eyes slightly narrowed, she whispered: 'Try me, sir.'

His voice was a stern mask, but his voice was dangerous. 'Are you threatening me, Ms Belakane?'

Many other students would have run for their lives, but Morgana stayed put. Backing away now would be against her nature. 'Threatening you would be a waste of time, sir. Didn't you just say that I was no more of a challenge than a Doxy?'

'Then why are you trying my patience?' His voice was like thunder, but Morgana didn't flinch.

'Would you like me to leave, sir?'

She heard him breathe through his nose and expected a yes. But Snape surprised her:

'You may stay,' he growled. 'But you will be setting your own work. And if you try goading me again, you will be out of this classroom quicker than water off a Hippogriff. Do I make myself clear?'

'Crystal clear, sir,' she answered and smirked as he turned to unlock the store cupboard. It almost looked like she had managed to get under his skin.

Snape watched Morgana closely as she started to pick her ingredients and set up her workstation. She had obviously chosen to brew a simple Healing Potion. Nothing advanced, but a sensible choice.

He disappeared into the shadows of the classroom, pretended to be working on his own potion, but in fact, his eyes never left the girl.

Why him, he wondered? Of all the teachers in the castle, why did she feel the need to impress *him*? He knew that she had a knack for Potions. And she must know that he had seen her talent when he had given her an O on her OWLs. Then why was she trying so hard?

He could understand the motives of her little friend. He wasn't blind, after all, and had noticed how Charis blushed every time he spoke to her and how her pupils dilated when he gave her one of his intense looks. *That* girl certainly had some kind of crush on him. It was amusing, really. It had only developed in the last year or so, as she had become a young woman. The look in her bright green eyes had changed from one of intelligent concentration to one of longing. The little Ravenclaw had a crush on her teacher. Snape snorted. In all his time teaching, he had only ever recognised a schoolgirl crush in a handful of students, and the majority of those were from his own house. Still, it was fun to watch her blush and squirm, and Snape intended to see how far he could push the girl into further embarrassment from her little crush.

But Morgana? He wondered if the word *crush* was even part of her vocabulary. From what he had seen over the last year, she did not choose boys with her heart, but picked them according to what she could get from them.

She had become cocky over the summer, brattish even. It almost seemed to Snape as if she would do anything to get his attention, even the negative kind. She resembled a petulant teenager who would deliberately get into trouble for her parents to notice her.

Was that it? Snape frowned. He knew that Morgana had lost her parents at a very young age. She wouldn't be the first student to look for a father figure in one of their teachers. But *him*? The mere thought was ridiculous. He supposed the girl could be having Electra Complex issues – it wouldn't be impossible to imagine that the girl was projecting some kind of bizarre Freudian schemas on to him from the lack of a strong patriarchal figure in her own life. Snape mentally shook himself. Now he was indeed being ridiculous.

'By the way, Ms Belakane,' he asked as she was bottling her potion. 'I meant to talk to you about your essay. Why ever did you choose Lust Potions? Girls your age normally choose to write about Amortentia when studying Mind Controlling Potions.'

Morgana tried to look nonchalant, but the way her head snapped up told Snape that he had touched a nerve. Nevertheless, her answer and the cold tone in which she delivered it surprised him.

'Amortentia is a Love Potion, sir. And in my opinion, love is highly overrated.'

She handed him her phial for grading and silently cleaned up her workstation. Within five more minutes, she had gone. And Snape stared at the door she had closed behind her, wondering how a girl that young could have lost hope in love already.

III: Bludgers, Butterbeer and Brazen Behaviour

Chapter 3 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter III: Bludgers, Butterbeer and Brazen Behaviour

'Shit, Morgana! Fred and George told me about your fall! Are you alright? Let me have a look at you!'

Morgana looked up from the book she was reading and rolled her eyes at her friend's fussing. 'Nobody has died of bruises yet, Charis. But this is definitely the last time I volunteer to step in as Beater during Quidditch practice. Let's face it: I'm not a good flier.'

'Bruises?' Charis frowned and started pulling at the bed sheets. 'Poppy wouldn't keep you here for bruises, now would she? Show me!'

With a sigh, Morgana freed her leg from the sheets and pulled up her hospital gown, revealing an awfully swollen knee and bluish-yellow bruises.

Charis winced and then gave her friend a sympathetic look. 'God, that looks nasty. Does it hurt?'

'Only when I dance,' came Morgana's slightly irritated answer.

Charis laughed. 'Well, no problems there, seeing as you don't dance. But, just in case that it does hurt, I brought some Butterbeer. For anaesthetic purposes, of course.' Then her voice dropped to a whisper. 'You're sure Poppy's not here?'

Morgana nodded. Poppy had informed her that she would be gone for at least an hour, since she had to talk to the Headmaster.

Morgana studied Charis as she wobbled and sat on the bed beside her with a giggle. Her Ravenclaw friend, although seemingly quiet at first, had a liking for alcohol that Morgana quietly disapproved of. Charis drank to come out of her shell, Morgana understood that, but she secretly thought that Charis overdid it sometimes.

She could smell the alcohol on her friend's breath now. No doubt there was yet another party in Ravenclaw Tower. Ravenclaws, so it seemed, worked hard and played even harder. And it amused Morgana to think that the very students who valued intellect above anything else were also the ones with a predisposition for consuming substances which would ravage their brain cells.

'Where did you get that beer?' Morgana asked innocently.

'Some sixth-year is having a birthday party in the common room. I said I'd just have one ...'

Morgana snorted. 'Yeah right. Beer is a gregarious animal. There is no such thing as *one* beer. Chocolate Frog?'

Charis nodded eagerly and stuffed a Frog into her mouth. All that Butterbeer had made her hungry. 'Hmm, delicious.' She chewed thoughtfully whilst looking around Morgana's bed, her eyes finally landing on a huge, dark green box of chocolates tied with a silver bow. Her eyes widened. 'Who did you get them from?'

'You tell me.' Morgana honestly didn't know. She knew that the box of Frogs was from the Weasley twins, but she had no idea about the big, imposing *expensive-looking* box.

'God, Morgana, it could be anyone,' Charis said, with a mouthful of Frog. 'God knows you have enough Slytherin admirers. And there is this third-year Hufflepuff who always blushes when he sees you.'

'Now, that's because I happened to walk in on him in the Quidditch locker room one day.'

Charis giggled. 'Come on, you know that you are popular with the boys.'

To that, Morgana said nothing. Instead, she Vanished the caps of the Butterbeer bottles and offered one bottle to Charis, who immediately took a healthy gulp.

'Hm, would love to have a snack with that,' she mused, smacking her lips with relish. The Frog had set off her appetite.

'Now that can be arranged. I have connections, you know.' Morgana smiled and called for an elf. 'Winky?'

With a loud crack, the elf Apparated right in front of the bed, wearing nothing but a dirty tea towel. 'Miss called?'

'Any requests, Charis?'

Charis looked at her friend and grinned. 'How about some chicken sandwiches?'

'Would you mind, Winky?' Morgana asked with a smile so sweet that Charis almost choked on her Butterbeer. Since when was Morgana nice?

The elf, however, seemed to have seen that behaviour before. 'Miss is always so nice to Winky.'

'That's because you are cute,' Morgana replied. 'Here, have a posh choc for your trouble.' Morgana reached over to grab the impressive green box from the side table.

Winky stumbled backwards. 'Winky couldn't, Miss.'

'Why? Don't you like them?'

'Winky knows where the chocolates come from, Miss. They come from a bad, bad wizard.'

The girls look at each other open-mouthed. 'Winky?'

The elf started to tremble. 'Winky should not have said anything. Winky did wrong.'

Morgana picked up the elf by the scruff before she could start hurting herself.

'Don't you just hate when they do that?' she asked Charis, rolling her eyes. Then she focused on the elf again. 'Now, Winky, if we ask you questions, and you just nod or shake your head, then you have technically not said anything. Isn't that right?'

To that suggestion, the elf brightened up and nodded.

And Charis had the first guess: 'Third-year Hufflepuff. What's his name? Malcom McMorris?'

Morgana rolled her eyes. 'She said baaaaad wizard, Charis! And Malcom is hardly a wizard at all. And do you really think a Hufflepuff would have chosen green and silver? Now, Winky, hair colour. Is this wizard blond?'

Winky nodded.

'How disappointing,' Morgana groaned. 'I prefer the dark type. Preferably dark and broody. Well, well, is this wizard a student?'

Winky shook her head.

'A brother of a student?'

Again, Winky shook her head.

'The father of a student?'

Winky nodded, her eyes wide and her ears flopping.

'Is this student a Slytherin?'

Winky nodded so fast that her head seemed at risk of falling off.

'Fucking hell!' Charis exclaimed as she realised what the description added up to. 'Lucius Malfoy? Why is Lucius Malfoy sending you chocolates? This is insane!'

Charis knew Morgana had spent time at Malfoy Manor over the summer, but she had assumed that it was a thinly-veiled act of kindness to a poor orphan as an act of charity, which Malfoy dutifully undertook in order to maintain his reputation as an upstanding pillar of the community. But sending Morgana posh chocolates was obviously

a gesture that had more than just sympathy behind it.

Her exclamation was interrupted by Winky banging her head against the bedpost. 'Bad Winky, bad!'

Once more, Morgana pulled the elf towards herself. 'It's alright, sweetie. Remember, technically, you haven't said anything.'

'May Winky leave now, Miss?'

'Only if you promise me not to hurt yourself. Because I will know, and then I'll hide your Butterbeer,' Morgana threatened.

'Yes, Miss.' Then the elf Disapparated with a loud crack.

Charis swirled around to face her friend. 'Why is Lucius Malfoy sending you chocolates, Morgana?'

Morgana shrugged. 'As a token of affection?'

'What are you talking about?' Charis snapped. 'He's evil, Morgana. Evil!' She was livid. So her suspicions were correct: Malfoy had his eyes on Morgana. And the worst thing was that Morgana did not seem to mind this new development at all.

Charis didn't get chance to explore this horrid thought any further, however, as the door slammed open with a loud bang. She jumped, sending the empty Butterbeer bottles rolling to the floor. Thankfully, Morgana kept her cool and charmed them away with a flick of her wand.

A dark figure appeared in the doorway, robes billowing behind him, a sour expression on his face. And the girls did not even get a chance to say hello before he chided them. 'It smells like a brewery in here. Care to explain?'

'Winky was here, sir,' Morgana said quickly. 'The whole castle knows she has a drinking problem.'

'Nice try, Ms Belakane,' Snape snarled. 'As it happens, several Ravenclaws are already in detention for smuggling Butterbeer into the common room. I suspect that Professor Umbridge is making them polish her pack of porcelain Persian plates as we speak.'

He fixed his dark eyes on Charis, and naturally, she blushed and looked down. 'Care to defend yourself, Ms Byrne?'

Morgana opened her mouth, but her attempt to defend her friend was shushed by her Head of House.

'Well, Ms Byrne?'

'I ... um ... er ...'

'Eloquently put, Ms Byrne,' Snape said, his voice dripping with irony. 'At least, when your friend here lies, she does it with style.'

Again, Morgana opened her mouth, and again, she was shushed.

'Ms Byrne, get up and look at me,' Snape bellowed. 'NOW!'

Charis did as she was told and gasped as she looked into the Professor's beetle-black eyes.

'I can explain, sir,' she started.

A third time, Morgana opened her mouth, and this time, Snape had had enough. 'No, Ms Belakane. If I wanted to hear any word from you, I would have asked you. Seeing that I have not, I recommend that you keep your mouth shut!'

'We had a party in Ravenclaw Tower,' Charis mumbled. 'I had a couple of beers. And I knew Morgana was here alone, so I brought her one.'

'At the danger of repeating myself: for a Ravenclaw, you are rather stupid, Ms Byrne,' Snape snapped. 'Ms Belakane does not even drink.'

'I ... I tried to make her drink, sir,' Charis stammered. 'It's my fault.'

Morgana banged the back of her head against the headboard. Charis was talking herself right into his trap. 'You're fucking stupid, Charis,' she mumbled under her breath.

'Language, Ms Belakane' Snape chided her and smirked. 'But I agree. Now, Ms Byrne, how many points did I award you for your potion this morning?'

Charis grimaced. 'Ten, sir.'

'And can you guess what I will do with those points now, Ms Byrne?'

'Deduct them,' she piped. 'And some more. And put me in detention.'

Again, Snape smirked. 'My, my, the girl has imagination.'

Then he turned toward Morgana. 'How many points should I deduct, Ms Belakane? In your opinion?'

'Fifteen points, sir,' Morgana replied, grinning. 'And award five because she guessed right.'

To that, Snape snorted. 'You are unbelievable, Ms Belakane. Now, Ms Byrne, you are going to serve detention. With me. Right now.'

And without another word, he stalked off towards the exit. At the door he stopped and turned around once more.

'By the way, Ms Belakane, you are invited to lunch at Malfoy Manor tomorrow. We will be Flooing from my office at eleven thirty sharp. Try not to be late.'

'We, sir?'

'Yes, Ms Belakane. We. Your company has been requested.'

'Any dress code, sir?'

'Come as you are. And how about you, Ms Byrne? Do you need a written invitation?'

And Charis scurried to follow him, trying to shake off the thoughts of her friend spending tomorrow with Malfoy and his dishonourable intentions and focus on the impending trouble looming with the surly Potions master.

* * *

Charis had to jog to keep up with Snape as he swept down the stairs that led to the dungeon. Not an easy task. Firstly, because she had had one Butterbeer too many to

be able to jog properly. And secondly, because the sight of Severus Snape's billowing robes made the breath hitch in her throat.

As a tiny hiccupping sound escaped her lips, Snape fell dead in his track and turned to glare at her. 'For your information, Ms Byrne, every hiccup will result in five points being deducted from your House. Do I make myself clear?'

Charis bit her lip and nodded. There was no point arguing, and any sound from her would surely result in Snape flying off the handle.

'In,' he bellowed as they reached the dungeon. He ushered her inside and slammed the door shut behind her. 'Just how much did you have to drink, Ms Byrne?'

'Four Butterbeers, sir.'

His smirk turned into an evil grin. 'Can't hold you liquor, can you, Ms Byrne? Tell me, what more does alcohol do to you?'

Charis gulped, not knowing if it was a trick question or not. So she decided to play it safe and use her logic. 'Alcohol makes one less inhibited, sir. It makes people unafraid to do things they might ordinarily not do. Whilst alcohol is technically a depressant, for many people it enhances their mood and makes them sociable and flirtatious.'

If she had thought that Snape would be impressed by a textbook answer, she had been sorely mistaken. And the sound of his cold voice made her flinch.

'I did not ask about a medical explanation, Ms Byrne. I asked what more alcohol does to you.'

He watched the girl closely. He knew she could not lie to him. And he watched her squirm, enjoying her discomfort.

Sure enough, Charis blushed. 'It makes me giggly, sir. And, um, amorous ...'

'I see.' Snape saw his chance to push the girl further and took it. Just how far would she go with his prompting, he wondered.

He stepped forwards, closing the gap between them. He was standing so close to her now that Charis could feel his breath tickle her forehead. She could have sworn that it smelled of chocolate. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry, her throat tight. And there were goose bumps erupting all the way down her spine.

Snape leant in, just an inch or two, but it was enough for Charis to gasp at the sudden proximity. And when he whispered into her ear, his breath felt like the touch of a feather.

'Are you aroused, Ms Byrne?'

Charis' breath caught in her chest. This couldn't be happening, surely. Morgana had been the one who had been overtly trying to get Snape's attention. Charis had been convinced that he'd never noticed her at all. And yet here he was, outright flirting with her.

'Yes, sir,' she breathed eventually.

'If it were entirely up to you, Ms Byrne,' Snape continued in a low tone, 'what would you want me to do right now?'

Charis blinked as his words seemed to fill her mind like a gentle caress. And before she could stop herself, the words came right out of her mouth. 'I would want you to force me back on the desk and kiss me, pin my hands against the side of my head whilst you grind yourself against me ...'

She clasped her hands over her mouth. She couldn't believe she had just said that. How the hell had he managed to make her reveal one of her most intimate dreams?

But to her surprise, Professor Snape was not angry. On the contrary. For the tiniest of moments, Charis could have sworn that she had seen a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

Oh, Snape was amused alright. *The girl has imagination indeed*, he thought. And this little power game was far too much fun to stop now.

'And then, Ms Byrne?' he went on in his deep, rich baritone. 'What would you want me to do then?'

'And then I would want you to nibble at my neck whilst assaulting my breasts with your long fingers before working them inside my knickers ...'

Again, Charis broke off, blinking furiously. Why was she saying these things? Why did she not shut up?

'Go on.' Snape's voice was soft as velvet, persuading, urging. And Charis did go on. She just could not stop.

'And then I would want you to rip my knickers from me and enter me swiftly, right here on your desk, stretching me so I'd yelp with pleasure. And I'd be so tight around you as you drove into me, mercilessly, pinning me down with your strong arms and the intensity of your black eyes.'

She felt his long fingers cup her chin, and as she looked up, she saw them: those beetle-black eyes. They were boring into her, into her very soul. And she could not look away.

'Will I make you come, Ms Byrne?' he whispered. 'Will I make you scream my name?'

His lips were so close to hers that she could feel his breath. But as much as she longed for them she did not dare move. She could not even trust her voice to reply. Instead, she just gazed into the black abyss of his eyes, her pupils dilated with fear and desire.

But Snape did not need a verbal answer. He saw what he was doing to the girl and how powerless he was making her.

'On the desk, Ms Byrne.' His voice was soft, almost tender, but this had definitely been an order. And Charis complied.

Snape's long, slender fingers started pulling up her skirt, over her knees and over her thighs. Then he let them trace downwards over her inside of her thighs. And only too willingly, Charis spread her legs as his hands applied pressure to the inside of her knees.

Yes, he thought. *Let's see how far she will go.*

'Show me, Ms Byrne,' he whispered. 'Show me how you want to be touched. Show me how you want me to make you come. Let me hear you scream my name.'

Charis acted without thinking. It felt as if she were enchanted, spellbound by his velvety voice and his beetle-black eyes.

Whether she had taken off her knickers with magic or whether Snape had, she did not know. But when she reached her hand between her legs, she found herself exposed, hot and wet. She parted the soft folds of skin, her fingers brushed over her most sensitive spot, and a soft moan escaped her lips.

'Severus ...'

A triumphant smile played around Snape's lips. From the use of his name, he could tell the girl had imagined this particular scenario many, many times before.

He shifted slightly to watch her fingers deftly working at her core, working herself up into a frenzy, just for him. Just because he asked her to. The rush of power he felt right now was equal to the erection that was now straining through his trousers.

'Tell me what you want me to do, Ms Byrne.'

His voice was hypnotic, and Charis couldn't do anything else but give him an answer. 'I want to feel you inside me. I want to feel how you fill me up and stretch me ...'

Her eyelids fluttered shut, and she started to stroke herself more feverishly, imagining the feeling of Snape's cock inside her, just like she had done so many nights before.

'Does it feel good, Ms Byrne?'

Charis had no idea if his voice was entering her ears, or if his thoughts were echoing in her mind. But she answered him, her voice hoarse, her breathing heavy.

'Oh god yes, it feels so good. The way you pound me, the way you fill me ...'

'How good does it feel, Ms Byrne? Tell me. Let me hear you.'

'I'd be crying. I'd be moaning with pleasure as you took me, relentlessly.'

And she did moan. And her fingers were rubbing against her sensitive nub, vehemently, fiercely. She heard the blood rush in her ears, felt her body starting to tremble.

'Yes,' Snape hissed. 'Come for me. Scream for me!'

The thick material of Snape's robes scraped against Charis' bare thigh, and she felt his erection straining through them. And the thought of him being hard for her pushed her right over the edge.

'Yes!' she screamed as she came undone right there on his desk. 'Oh, yes, Severus. Yes. Yes!!'

Her orgasm washed over her like a tidal wave. Then she lay still for some moments, her eyes closed and her legs dangling limply from the edge of the desk.

Then she felt his breath tickle her ear, and a shiver went down her spine. 'Did you enjoy your little fantasy, Ms Byrne?'

Her eyes snapped open, and she found Snape looking straight at her, his black eyes cold as ice.

'This is what you want me to do to you, Ms Byrne?'

Charis just nodded, her hands trembling. Something was wrong, she could sense it clearly.

When Snape stood up straight, the look in his eyes went from cold to cruel. 'Unfortunately for you, Ms Byrne *you* are not the one to decide in *my* dungeon.'

He grabbed her by the shoulder, forcefully made her stand in front of his desk.

'I have no further use for you, Ms Byrne,' he snarled. 'You are dismissed.'

Charis' mouth fell open. She wanted to say something, but there was not a single sound coming from her throat, which felt raw with shock.

Still Snape was looking at her with those cruel black eyes. 'What did you expect, Ms Byrne? That sharing your little fantasy with me would make me hump you like a hormone-ridden teenager?'

Charis blushed. Stupid as it seemed now, this was exactly what she had been hoping for. And she felt confused. Wasn't that what he wanted, too?

Snape's lips curled into a cruel smile. 'You are too needy, Ms Byrne,' he sneered. 'No challenge.'

Charis swallowed and cast down her eyes. She felt so humiliated, so used. But she would not cry in front of him. She was not going to give him the satisfaction.

'Twenty points to Ravenclaw, Ms Byrne,' Snape announced. 'For your eagerness to please.'

His words were dipped in acid and struck Charis like a Bludger to the gut. She still kept her eyes on her shoes, but she heard him stride towards the door, heard him open it.

'You are dismissed, Ms Byrne.'

Charis didn't look at Snape once as she passed by him but hurriedly slipped through the door and left the dungeon. And only when she heard him slam the door, did she allow the tears to start streaming down her face.

IV: Lunch at Malfoy Manor

Chapter 4 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter IV: Lunch at Malfoy Manor

The next morning, Charis was sitting in the library, surrounded by and hiding behind a huge stack of books. She had decided that the library was probably the safest place to be. Snape was always busy in his private lab on Saturday morning, and he was the last person Charis wanted to meet that day.

Charis was still confused and hurt by the whole episode in the dungeon. The Butterbeer was responsible for clouding her judgement to some degree, but there was no denying Snape had encouraged her, and had flirted with her, even. What she could not understand was how he changed from purring seducer to heartless bastard in the blink of an eye. Had she misread his signals? Had she done something to upset him? Maybe the sight of her body had repulsed him.

She was so absorbed by her thoughts that she never heard her friend sneak up on her.

'Boo!'

Charis shrieked and slammed her book shut. 'God, Morgana, don't do that!'

The red-haired Slytherin grinned. 'Are we nervous today, Ms Byrne?'

The drawing tone of Morgana's voice and the way she used her last name made Charis shiver, and she quickly opened her book again. Should she tell Morgana what Snape had done to her? Or should she keep her mouth shut and pretend that nothing ever happened?

'How was detention?' Morgana asked as she slumped down on a chair, carefully closing her travelling cloak around her legs. 'Did you get to scrub cauldrons or chop Flobberworms?'

'Well, um ...' Charis squirmed. She would have preferred not to tell, not yet anyway. What had happened the night before was highly embarrassing. And as much as she trusted Morgana, re-telling those events made her still very uncomfortable. But now Morgana had asked, and she would not let her friend off the hook without an answer.

'Well, um,' Charis started again. 'Snape ... he made me do something in front of him.'

Morgana's right eyebrow shot up, and she leant over the table, an interested look on her face. 'Do something? Dance? Sing a song? What?'

Charis' voice dropped to a whisper. 'He made me touch myself.'

Morgana's eyes widened, and she had to cover her mouth with her hands not to burst out laughing. 'He made you *do what?*'

'Honestly, it was like he'd charmed me,' Charis blurted out, her cheeks going from pink to crimson. 'He was talking to me the whole time, asking me to describe what I'd like him to do to me.'

Morgana lowered her hands, a look of amusement mixed with shock on her face. 'What you'd like him to do to you? You didn't tell him, now did you?'

Charis blushed. 'I couldn't help it!' she wailed. 'His voice was in my ear, rich and smooth. And he was standing so close I could feel the heat from him.'

'And so you just *masturbated*? Right there in front of him?' Morgana was now biting her lip. This was just too amusing.

Charis lowered her gaze. She had hoped for some comfort from her friend. Having Morgana laugh at her was the last thing she needed. She tried hard to fight the tears that were now threatening to prick at her eyes.

'You don't understand,' she whimpered. 'He just has this power. I couldn't have said no if I wanted to!'

'For fuck's sake, Charis!' All of a sudden Morgana sounded angry. 'You should not have given him that much power over you. You know how he is.'

Yes, Charis knew. And she was ashamed. Not so much because Snape had seen her masturbate but that she had *def* him.

Then she felt Morgana take her hand, and her friend's voice was suddenly much softer. 'And Snape, what did *he* do?'

'He was urging me on with his voice. It was seriously horny, Morgana! But then, afterwards, I mean after I ... you know ... He went ice cold. Told me I was needy.'

Morgana snorted. 'Well, he was right about that, wasn't he?'

Charis flinched. That was exactly why she had not wanted to tell Morgana. She had known that her friend would not understand. This would never have happened *to her*. She was too calculating, too much in control of her emotions to ever let a man have such powers over her.

'Charis, look at me!' Morgana suddenly demanded. And Charis lifted her gaze. Gone was every trace of amusement from Morgana's face, and it had been replaced by a look of concern. 'Charis, did he *touch* you?'

Charis shook her head. 'No. But he was very, very close to me. And he was whispering in my ear ...'

Morgana cocked an eyebrow. 'Was he ... aroused?'

Charis blushed. 'His voice was getting thicker and hoarser. And I could feel his bulge against my thigh. But as soon as I came, he just went cold.'

'And then he just threw you out?'

Charis nodded.

'No hidden invitations to stay?'

'No. But he gave me twenty points for my enthusiasm to please,' Charis said wretchedly, looking down at the desk once more.

'Seems like the rumours are true then, that Snape doesn't sleep with students ...'

She seemed to be about to say something more, but the striking of the bell stroke cut her short. It was a quarter to eleven.

'I should get going,' she announced. 'Snape will throw a fit if I am late.'

Charis grabbed her friend by the arm. 'Be careful, Morgana. There might be loads of Death Eaters at Malfoy Manor.'

Morgana sneered. 'Oh, dear Lucius will look out for me.'

'*Dear Lucius*?' Charis frowned. 'Are you on a first name basis with Lucius Malfoy?'

Morgana narrowed her eyes, seemed to weigh her words carefully. 'Lucius and I ... well, you know I have been to Malfoy Manor before.'

'Morgana, Lucius Malfoy is a dangerous man! Everybody knows that! And something tells me this invite is not about services to the community.'

Morgana freed her arms from her friend's grip. Charis had no idea about anything that had happened at Malfoy Manor during the summer, but one thing was for sure, it was most definitely not about services to the community.

'There is no need to worry, Charis. Lucius Malfoy has every reason to be nice to me. And besides, Snape will be there. And one can say a lot about him, but he always looks out for his students.'

* * *

Morgana was immediately told to enter when she knocked at the door of Professor Snape's study. He, too, was already wearing his travelling cloak.

'I am glad you are punctual for a change, Ms Belakane. It would be the height of rudeness to turn up late to lunch at Malfoy Manor.'

Morgana bit back a retort. He had no reason to chide her for tardiness. She was never late. But she knew her Head of House well enough to know that this was not a good time to argue with him. The line between his eyebrows was deeper than ever, and his jaw was set. He looked positively pissed.

He passed her a box of Floo powder and nodded towards the empty grate. 'After you.'

Morgana closed her eyes and took a deep breath before calling out the words *Malfoy Manor*. She had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. A feeling that told her that by the end of this afternoon, her life would look completely different. But there was not time to think and definitely no way to talk herself out of this lunch.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself in the dining room of Malfoy Manor. She had been there before, but the huge oil paintings on the wall and the thick green drapes by the windows still gave her the creeps. So did the sinister figures that were now gathered around the antique mahogany dining table.

Lucius Malfoy rose from his chair in a fluid motion and hurried to take Morgana's hand to kiss it.

'Morgana, Severus. I am so glad you could join us. Elf!'

Morgana did not really want to take off her cloak. The dress she was wearing was way too short, revealed too much of her legs and she was highly uncomfortable in it. Plus she had had to perform a basic glamour charm to try and cover up the huge bruises from her Quidditch injuries on her legs. But Lucius had had the dress made for her and owled it to Hogwarts the night before. It would have been a grave insult not to wear it, and she knew better than to cross him. He was eying her now with unashamed lust, and she heard some of the men around the table grunt approvingly. And she did not miss the sneer on Snape's face either.

She let her gaze wander over the round of men sitting around the table. Most of them she had already met last summer. Avery, Crabbe and Goyle were on Malfoy's right, and on the far end of the table, Morgana caught sight of the only woman in the room: Bella! Bat shit crazy Bellatrix Lestrange, absentmindedly playing with her wand, her dark, bright eyes glittering menacingly. Now that woman would not be as easily charmed as the rest of the guests.

When Lucius pulled out a chair for her, Morgana tilted her head and gave him her sweetest smile. 'Tell me, Lucius, what gives me the honour to be invited?'

'The honour, my darling, is *ours*,' Lucius replied, his fingers softly brushing against her shoulders as she sat down. 'We are always on the look-out for the bravest and like-minded Slytherins to spend some time with.'

He swept around the table and took his seat before he continued. 'Professor Snape here tells me you are most capricious at school but still maintain the highest grades. That's the kind of person we find ... agreeable.'

'That is high praise coming from Professor Snape.' Morgana stated, inclining her head towards Snape, who was sitting to her right. 'Normally, he tells me that I cannot do anything right.'

The men around the table laughed, and Snape took the opportunity to discreetly give his charge some words of advice:

'I strongly advise you to watch your tongue here, Ms Belakane,' he hissed. 'Most of these men have no scruples. Avery here, for example, is up women's skirts like a rat up a drainpipe. Especially short skirts.'

Morgana oppressed a grin and pretended to be very interested in whatever anecdote Lucius was sharing with his acquaintances. She had, however, only ears for Snape.

'You may already have noticed that Bella does not take too kindly to female competition,' Snape went on, busying himself with his napkin so no one would notice him talking to Morgana. 'I would be on your guard against her. She sees herself as the *first woman* of the Death Eaters and likes to have all the male attention to herself.'

Morgana leant a little bit closer to her Head of House, covering up her movement by moving her glass from one side of her plate to the other.

'Professor, why am I here?'

'Lucius requested your company,' Snape murmured. 'As I saw from your performance earlier, you two are already acquainted.'

Morgana ignored his sneer and pressed on. 'This still does not explain why he wants me to meet the gang.'

'As I said, Ms Belakane, you ought to be careful. It appears Lucius may see you as a Death Eater in the making. Whatever extra-marital activities he may engage in with you, bear in mind that he does not love you and would not think twice about passing you on to the Dark Lord.' And for the first time during their conversation, Snape turned his head and looked at his student. 'If you mess with fire, you will get burned, Ms Belakane.'

Morgana narrowed her eyes. Had Snape just accused her of sleeping with Lucius Malfoy? Why would he even come up with that idea?

'You are young, naïve and inexperienced in the ways of the Dark Arts,' Snape growled. 'As for your experience in other areas, I believe your reputation speaks for itself.'

Morgana grabbed her napkin tightly to keep her hands from shaking as cold anger rushed through her. Had her Head of House just called her a slut? How dare he?! Her first impulse was to slap him in the face right there and then, but she thought better of it. This was indeed a dangerous crowd she was having lunch with, and she needed Snape by her side. She swallowed her anger and looked him straight in the eyes. 'Can I count on you to be there for me if I need you?'

'Unquestioningly, Ms Belakane,' Snape replied, his voice somewhat softer. 'I am here to look out for you. There is, however, only so much I can do. If you open your mouth and promise yourself to the Dark Lord, there is little I will be able to do to save you. So think before you speak in this company.'

Just when Morgana was about to tell Snape that she was aware of the rules of the game, the food appeared on the table, and Lucius got up to speak to his guests.

'I do not stand on ceremony with friends. Please, help yourselves.'

Morgana filled her plate with some pieces of roast chicken, vegetables and dauphenoise potatoes, skipped the wine and filled her glass with pumpkin juice instead. Then, carefully, tentatively, she waved her hand over her plate. She had never eaten anything at Malfoy Manor without checking it for any drugs or poison and had hidden her wand in the long sleeve of her dress for just this reason. Studying Defence Against the Dark Arts with paranoid Professor Moody for a year had obviously rubbed off.

When she looked up from her plate, she noticed Snape looking at her and giving her an almost imperceptible nod. It was the first time this afternoon that he seemed to approve of what she was doing.

'So, Morgana,' Avery suddenly piped up, his mouth full of unchewed food. 'What NEWTs are you taking?'

'I am taking Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration and Runes.'

Avery leered. 'Quite the Slytherin then, eh?'

Morgana raised an eyebrow. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Following in your Head of House's footsteps with Potions and DADA.'

A small ripple of laughter went around the table, and Morgana frowned. Whatever did Avery mean?

Lucius presented the explanation. 'Are you implying Morgana has a crush on her teacher, Avery?'

Once more, laughter erupted around the table, but Morgana did not join in. And neither did Snape. In fact, the look on his face could not have been any darker.

'I am hoping to become an Auror,' Morgana explained. 'That's why I am taking Potions and DADA.'

'But why Runes?' Avery asked.

'To challenge the mind.'

'Nothing challenging from a bunch of old stones,' Bella noted dryly, and the men around the table sniggered.

Morgana bit her lip. 'It would make a bad impression on my Head of House if I admitted that I am taking Runes to get some easily earned academic credits, wouldn't it?'

Snape sneered. 'I would expect nothing less.'

To that, Lucius chuckled. 'Oh, always so cruel, Severus.'

Morgana lowered her gaze and decided to keep her mouth shut for the rest of the meal. She was feeling uncomfortable enough, and the last thing she needed was Snape chiding her once again.

In contrast to the dining room, the drawing room seemed almost cosy with its chintzy chairs and sofas. And the Tiffin and fine Swiss chocolate Lucius' elf was offering with the brandy did indeed look delicious.

Snape positioned himself in the middle of one of the sofas, giving Morgana the tiniest of nods in order for her to join him, and she thankfully followed his invitation. Despite his snide remarks during lunch, it was most comforting to know that he was close by, watching out for her.

'Oh gods, Lucius,' Bella suddenly moaned. 'This Tiffin is so good, I've nearly come right here!'

Avery gave a bark of laughter, and Morgana bit her lips not to laugh. Seeing one of the most powerful dark witches in Britain coming undone because of a sweet was more than amusing.

'Having fun, Ms Belakane?' Snape murmured, leaning in to offer Morgana some Tiffin.

'This is a rather interesting gathering, sir,' she replied, looking around the room. Lucius appeared deeply in conversation with a knot of men, and Bella was flirting shamelessly with a leering Avery.

Almost without noticing, Morgana took a bite of the Tiffin and gasped. 'Merlin's pants. This is good!'

Snape smirked and gave her a look that made goosebumps erupt on her arms and her knees go weak. 'The Malfoy Tiffin is the stuff of legend, Ms Belakane. Dare I ask if it has the same effect on you as it does on Bella?'

Morgana raised her eyebrow, willing herself not to blush. Had Severus Snape just asked her if she was turned on? 'I am not that easily pleased, sir,' she replied with a slight grin.

Again, Snape smirked. 'Do not let Bella catch you saying that, Ms Belakane.'

Bella. Just the name made Morgana shudder. She knew that woman, had heard gruesome stories about her since her early childhood, and did not at all feel comfortable being in the same room as her. And still, every time their eyes met, she had a hard time turning away. It was as if Bella was calling for her, pulling her towards her, enchanting her.

She blinked and shifted her focus towards her Head of House. 'You have some chocolate on your cheek, sir.'

Snape's smirk disappeared and was replaced by a look of irritation. 'You are not my mother, Ms Belakane.'

'Hope not,' Morgana muttered. 'But by all means, leave it. It's said that dark chocolate is good for the skin.'

To that, Snape raised an eyebrow, and suddenly the smirk was back. 'I know something else that is good for the skin,' he whispered, his voice smooth as silk. 'Zinc'

Morgana couldn't help but blush. What the hell had gotten into Snape today? Snide remarks were one thing, but sexual insinuations? That was very much unlike him. She suspiciously eyed the glass of brandy Snape was holding in his hand. How many had he had? Three? Four? And just what effect, if any, did the Tiffin have on him?

By mid-afternoon, most of the guests had taken their farewells, and only Lucius, Avery, Bella, Snape and Morgana were left in the library.

Under other circumstances, this could have been called a cosy gathering: Snape and Morgana were still sitting side by side on the couch, Lucius was stretched out on a chaise longue, and Bella was sitting in Avery's lap, shamelessly grinding herself up against him. But Bella's eyes were on Morgana, and had been so for at least ten minutes

'You never told she was such a pretty thing, Severus,' she said in a falsely sweet tone, abandoning Avery's lap and making her way towards the couch, her hips swaying seductively. 'Those blue eyes, that pretty dress ... I can see why Lucius has taken a shine to you, little one.'

Morgana swallowed dryly. As much as she tried to, she found herself once more unable to take her eyes off Bella.

Slowly and with the grace of a cat, the Dark witch positioned herself beside Morgana on the sofa and stared stroking her hair. 'So young,' she purred. 'So sweet.'

'Watch your fingers, Bella,' Lucius chuckled, his eyes on Morgana's neckline. 'She doesn't like to be touched.'

Morgana felt every muscle in her body tense up. Yes, she hated it when people touched her without her permission. Why she reacted that way, she did not know. It had always been that way, and she did not even let Charis hug her. But the hunger she had seen in Lucius' eyes when Bella stroked her hair made her body scream out for physical contact, and Bella's fingers felt soft and warm against her skin.

Lucius shifted in his chair when Bella traced Morgana's neck with her long fingers. He seemed to enjoy the show, and suddenly Morgana wanted to be touched by Bella, wanted to touch her as well. Just because she knew that Lucius wanted it.

When Bella cupped her chin with her long fingers, Morgana took hold of them and moved them towards her lips. They tasted of Tiffin.

Bella leant forward, let her sweet little nose rub against Morgana's, her eyes closed and her lips slightly parted. And it took Morgana all her willpower to turn her head away. This didn't feel right. But she froze in mid-movement when she felt Bella's lips gently brush her cheek. Her lips were soft and their touch gentle, and Morgana wanted more.

Avery was now leaning forward in his chair, mouth hanging open and his erection clearly visible. And Lucius had sat up and crossed his legs, carefully disguising his own arousal. What Snape was up to, Morgana did not know. But she did not care. All she cared about at the moment was the sensation of Bella's lips against the sensitive skin of her neck and the way Lucius was looking at her.

He had made it very clear over the summer that he was interested in her, in her body. They had kissed, they had touched each other, and she had even licked his delicious cock and made him come right into her throat. But so far, she had denied him her body, had been the one in control. And she relished the power she held over him. And if she played her cards right, she would both expand her power and make Lucius want her even more.

She placed her right hand on Bella's thigh and leant in, started to place small, quick kisses on her collarbone. And her hand wandered upwards, up over Bella's thigh, her hip, her stomach until it reached her breasts. Bella moaned softly as Morgana continued nibbling at her neck, and her erect nipples were clearly visible through the thin fabric of her robes.

'Ohhh ... you have done this before, haven't you, little one?'

Morgana did not answer but glided smoothly onto Bella's lap. When she lifted her head, her eyes met Snape's.

She had all but forgotten about him. She had been sitting with her back against him ever since Bella had sat down beside her, and he had not made a single sound. He was sitting rigidly, his face typically impassive. But his crossed legs and his laboured breathing told Morgana that he was just as aroused as the other two men.

For a moment, she considered stopping, sliding down from Bella's lap and letting Snape take her back to Hogwarts. Surely, he would not ask any questions but just get her away from Bella. And in case he was angry, she could always claim that she had been too scared of Bella to resist her.

But then Morgana changed her mind and an evil plan formed in her Slytherin mind. If she continued her seduction of Bellatrix Lestrange, she would not only make Lucius lay at her feet, but she would also avenge her best friend. Obviously, Snape liked to watch. She would let him.

She lowered her head again to suckle at Bella's neck, while her nimble fingers started undoing the ribbons of Bella's corset, pausing regularly to cup the woman's breasts and give them a gentle squeeze. Bella squirmed, and Morgana felt her buck her hips.

'Tell me what you want me to do to you, Bella,' she breathed before taking Bella's earlobe between her lips. 'Tell me.'

Bella moaned and moved her hands towards her chest to rip open her corset, exposing her small, pert breasts and rosy, little nipples. Her voice was hoarse when she spoke. 'What do you think I want you to do, little one?'

Morgana smirked. Oh, she knew very well what Bella wanted. Just as well as she knew what Lucius wanted. Once more she sunk her teeth into the soft flesh of Bella's neck, making the Dark witch moan in pleasure.

'I want you ... to do that ... on my breasts,' Bella panted.

If it had not been for Bella's laboured breathing, one could have heard a pin drop in the drawing room, and Morgana ventured to cast a glance over her shoulder. Lucius was still sitting with his legs crossed but leaning forward now. Avery on the other hand had slumped back in his chair, his eyes on Bella's nipples and his hand between his legs.

Morgana did not dare look at Snape, but she did not have to either. She could feel his eyes boring into her with the intensity of his gaze. What was he thinking, she wondered. Was he aroused by what he saw? Would he remember what she was doing to Bella and wish she was doing it to him when he lay in his bed later that night?

Morgana bent and started kissing Bella's breasts, carefully avoiding the sensitive tops, not caring how much Bella was squirming. She was in charge now. Slowly, she let her hand glide down over Bella's tummy, her hips, shifted her weight in order to pull up the witch's skirts. And then, without warning, she closed her lips around Bella's nipple, drawing a deep moan from the woman's lips.

'Oh gods,' Lucius exclaimed.

Morgana cast another quick glance over her shoulder. Avery had shamelessly unbuttoned his trousers and wrapped his hand around his hard cock. And Lucius was perched on the edge of his chair, his legs spread and his arousal clearly visible. And Morgana didn't need to see his eyes to know the desire that was burning in them. She had him completely under her spell.

'Touch me,' Bella whimpered, her hips bucking up against Morgana's hand. 'Touch me, now.'

Morgana slid down from Bella's lap and sunk to her knees between the witch's legs, her eyes now on her Head of House. He still looked indifferent, but as Morgana moved Bella's knickers to one side, she could see Snape's nostrils flare. And when she started tracing her fingers along Bella's swollen lips, he shifted in his seat and slowly uncrossed his legs just to cross them again seconds later.

'Oh, little one ...' Bella whimpered as Morgana's thumb brushed against her clit.

Morgana heard the rustling of robes behind her, and before she knew it, Lucius was kneeling beside her, his eyes on her fingers and his left hand resting on the small of her back. And as she continued caressing Bella's clit with her thumb, Lucius started tucking at her skirt and grinding himself up against her.

Morgana felt panic rise in her chest. She had managed to deny Lucius access to her body for almost half a year. She was not going to lose that power over him now. Swallowing dryly, she playfully nudged her hip against his impressive bulge and inclined her head towards Bella.

'Kiss her,' she whispered. To her surprise, Lucius did as he was told and latched onto Bella's lips, kissed her greedily until they were both moaning. Clearly, this was not the first time they had embraced in such a fashion.

When he shifted his weight and positioned himself between Bella's legs, Morgana withdrew. And she did not even manage to get up from the floor before Lucius had buried himself up to the hilt in Bella's hot flesh. Morgana tried to hide her shock as she steadied herself. What had she done?

Snape was by her side in a blink of an eye, and a quick look into Avery's direction assured them that there had never been a better time to make an exit. The man was wanking himself into ecstasy, and Lucius was thrusting into Bella, eyes closed and moaning with pleasure.

None of them ever noticed Snape grabbing Morgana by her arm and shoving her furiously towards the fireplace.

V: Slytherin Thinking

Chapter 5 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter V: Slytherin Thinking

Morgana's heart was beating so hard that she was afraid it would crack a rib. And her mind was racing.

What the hell had she done?! The mere thought of being close to Bellatrix Lestrange made her skin crawl and her stomach turn. And still, she had let the woman touch her. And even worse, *she* had touched *Bella*, in the most intimate way imaginable. Why? In the name of Merlin, why?!

Back at the Manor, her reasons had seemed crystal clear. At first, she had wanted to toy with Lucius. She had seen the lusty look in his eyes the moment she had arrived at the Manor. And when the opportunity had presented itself, she had been unable to resist the temptation of making him see what skills she possessed, of making him long for her even more.

And then she had remembered Snape. The son of a bitch had humiliated her best friend only hours earlier by turning her on and then dropping her like a hot potato. Making out in front of his eyes was the perfect way to get back at him. Yes, she had done it to avenge Charis, Morgana tried to convince herself. But deep down, she knew that she was kidding herself. The fact that Snape had made advances on her friend had been a huge blow to Morgana's ego. *She* had been the one to work her butt off to get his attention. *She* had been the one to write an essay on lust potions. *She* had been the one to risk detention just to be close to him. And still, he had chosen Charis! So she had taken the chance and made out with a woman right in front of his abnormally large nose. And she had seen him shift in his seat, had seen the bulge between his legs. And her Slytherin mind had triumphed.

Yes, back at the Manor, her reasons for making out with Bellatrix Lestrange had seemed crystal clear. But now, back at Hogwarts, back in Snape's office, Morgana felt dirty and disgusted with herself. Her first impulse was to run, to hide herself from the world for a couple of hours, preferably taking a hot bath and wash off the feeling of disgust that was sticking to her very skin. But she never got the chance as Snape stepped out of the fireplace only seconds after her.

'That was quite a show you put on back there, Ms Belakane,' he growled, dusting ashes off his robe. 'Seducing one of the most dangerous Dark witches alive and then getting her brother-in-law to fuck her senseless? Fifty points to Slytherin for sheer audacity.'

Morgana didn't know if she was supposed to grin jubilantly or duck. Snape looked as if he was about to explode any second, but his voice didn't carry the usual sharp tone he used when telling off students. But she had never heard him swear before, and that alone scared her. She opted for silently inclining her head and then started to count backwards from ten, bracing herself for what was about to come. There was just no way in Hades that Snape would let her get away with what she had done that afternoon. Sure enough, he inhaled sharply as she had reached seven.

'However,' he went on, his voice still uncannily calm, 'fifty-one points will be taken away for doing it all right in front of my nose. There are some things I have no desire to see, Ms Belakane.'

Morgana bit her lip not to laugh. The bulge between Snape's legs was still very existent and suggested that he might just have liked what he had seen after all. But she knew better than to point it out.

'I know all about girls like you, Ms Belakane,' he snarled. 'Wanton little harlots, flaunting their sexuality ...'

He was standing behind her now, so close that Morgana could feel his breath tickle her ear.

'I believe,' he went on, his voice low, a mere whisper, 'the correct term for girls like you is *sprick tease*'

Morgana tried not to flinch. She would have lied if she said that touching Bella and having three men stare at her had not aroused her. And having Snape stand so close to her now, whispering in her ear, did not make things better. But she tried to steady her breathing, willed her heart to beat slower and kept staring straight ahead.

'You put me into a very compromising position, Ms Belakane,' Snape went on, sounding more and more menacing with every word. 'I am your teacher, your Head of House, and you seduced a woman in front of me in order to arouse me, to provoke a physical reaction out of me. Do you deny it, Ms Belakane?'

Morgana felt her breath hitch in her throat. He knew. Snape knew that she had tried to turn him on. Or was he just guessing?

She closed her eyes for a second and tried to fortify her mental barriers. It would be in vain, she knew that. Snape was one of the best Legilimens in the country. And the little she knew about Occlumency would not stop him from invading her mind if he wanted to. Still, she chose to lie.

'I very much deny that, sir.'

'A liar as well as a slut, are we?' Snape's voice was suddenly cold. And when he swept around Morgana to stand in front of her, she saw that his eyes were just as cold as the tone of his voice.

'What the hell were you thinking, you silly girl?' he asked. 'I tell you to be careful, and you engage in a sexual tryst in a room full of Death Eaters, right in front of your teacher. Do you not grasp the severity of the situation?'

Morgana looked up at him, and her blue eyes locked onto his black ones. And she felt her self-control crumble. 'I had to do this,' she whispered. 'I needed to know how much power ...'

Snape didn't let her finish. 'Is that what this was all about, Ms Belakane?' he bellowed. 'A twisted little power game?'

Morgana lowered her gaze again. 'You have no idea.'

Of course he didn't. Snape believed that she had done it in order to get *tohim*. But he had no idea why she wanted to have power over Lucius Malfoy, why she needed to have this power. And Morgana desperately hoped that he would never find out either.

'I am forbidding you contact with Lucius Malfoy from now on, Ms Belakane,' Snape went on with a tone that did not allow any protest. 'And if I find out that you have been in touch with him in any way, you will face expulsion. Do I make myself clear?'

Morgana's bottom lip started to quiver, and she felt tears of anger fill her eyes. Snape couldn't do that to her. He mustn't.

'Do you really think I was enjoying this?' she spat.

Snape glared down at her. 'I most certainly think you enjoyed making a room full of men aroused at your Sapphic display. And I will force Veritaserum down your throat if you try to deny it.'

Morgana's head snapped up, and there was now cold fury glistening in her eyes. And before she could stop herself, she told him to go ahead.

Snape didn't need being told twice. In a blink of an eye, he had retrieved a bottle of Veritaserum from inside his robes. He forced a few drops into Morgana's mouth, and she had no choice but to swallow as he was clamping his hand tightly over her mouth.

'The truth, Ms Belakane,' he demanded as he let go of her. 'Did you or did you not enjoy that sexual tryst at Malfoy Manor?'

'I did not,' she answered truthfully. 'The mere thought of being in the same room as Bellatrix Lestrange makes my skin crawl, and I hate Lucius Malfoy with every fibre of my body.'

Snape's eyebrows shot up in surprise. That had obviously not been the answer he had anticipated. 'Why do you hate Lucius Malfoy?' he enquired. 'He is your patron. He has paid for your education ever since your parents disappeared.'

Morgana struggled for a moment. She did not want Snape to know. She did not want anyone to know. But there was no use. The Veritaserum made her talk. And she had no choice but to reveal to Snape the secret she had carefully hidden away for so long.

'Lucius Malfoy has never done anything out of charity,' she spat. 'My parents did not just disappear. They were killed because they resisted Lucius Malfoy. They were killed because they resisted the Dark Lord.'

Morgana broke off. Veritaserum or not, she could not make herself go on. It was too painful. She dug her nails into her palms and willed herself not to cry. She couldn't tell him. She had never told anyone. And if Snape pressured her, if he made her talk, she would surely break.

To her surprise, Snape changed subjects. 'This does not explain why you are engaging in little sexual power games with the man, Ms Belakane. And it most defiantly does not explain why you found it necessary to do it right under my nose.'

'You did not seem to want to look away.' Morgana bit her lip, knowing that she had walked right into his trap.

'Then you admit that you enjoyed me watching you, Ms Belakane?'

'Yes, sir.' Damn that Veritaserum.

'And did you enjoy arousing the other men in the room, Ms Belakane?'

'I did not care about the others, sir.'

'But you enjoyed arousing *me*?'

'Yes, sir.'

Morgana groaned inwardly. Fucking Veritaserum. She had not wanted him to know, ever! She had seen what he had done to Charis the night before. And now he would certainly try to embarrass her in a similar way.

But Snape surprised her once more. Without a single word, he handed her a small phial.

'Drink this,' he ordered. 'It will counteract the Veritaserum.'

He watched her drink and continued, suddenly sounding tired. 'It has been a long afternoon. I would suggest going back to the Slytherin common room and staying there, Ms Belakane. You will not speak to anyone of this incident. And I mean what I said: no further contact with Lucius Malfoy. It is too dangerous.'

Morgana expected to be dismissed and flinched when Snape reached out and cupped her chin with his long fingers. 'I believe you owe me an apology for your behaviour, Ms Belakane.'

Morgana gulped. The effects of the Veritaserum must have worn off by now, but still she found herself unable to say anything but the truth.

'I apologise for putting you in an awkward situation, sir,' she whispered, not trusting her voice enough to speak up. 'But I will not apologise for having enjoyed you watching, because that would be a lie. And if there is one thing I don't do, then it's lying.'

To that, Snape let go of her chin and smirked. 'Liar.'

* * *

Snape had just closed the door behind the girl when a whooshing sound from the fireplace made him spin around. Someone was trying to contact him using the Floo network. To his surprise and uttermost irritation, it was Lucius' face that appeared.

'Severus, my dear friend. You departed rather hastily. Is everything alright?'

Lucius' eyes darted around the room. He was obviously looking for the girl. As he couldn't see her anywhere, a knowing smile appeared on his face. 'Worn her out, have you, Severus? I cannot blame you.'

'For your information, Lucius, I did not touch the girl,' Snape cut him short. 'I sent her back to the Slytherin common room.'

'Yes, of course you did.' Lucius was grinning. Obviously, he didn't believe a single word. 'I do hope you'll bring her with you again the next time you come for tea, Severus,' he went on. 'She's such an adorable little chit. So young, so innocent. Do enjoy her.'

Lucius' face had barely disappeared when Snape's whisky glass flew into the grate and shattered into thousand pieces. How dare Lucius insinuate that he was sleeping with one of his students? How dare he even think that he had any interest in the girl whatsoever? But then again, Snape had to admit that Morgana's little performance hadn't left him completely unmoved. And he was indeed intrigued by her motives.

He conjured a new glass and filled it to the brim with Firewhisky. He could just as well get drunk now. Lucius' little visit had destroyed any desire he might have had to retire to his bedroom and enjoy some moments of privacy with the memories of recent events.

He took a swig, pondering all that had happened that afternoon. What the hell had the girl been thinking? He had noticed the calculating look she had given Lucius at the Manor. At first, he had thought that she was trying to seduce the man, that she was enjoying the attention she was getting from one of the most influential wizards in Britain. But the bitter tone she had used to talk about the man later was disturbing. And Snape could not help but wonder what exactly was going on between the two.

Lucius' behaviour at the Manor had fascinated him as well. Lucius Malfoy was known for always getting what he wanted. And what he didn't get, he took. It had been very obvious that he lusted for Morgana, that he wanted to have her for himself. But when he had had the chance, when she had been kneeling on the floor right in front of him, he had not touched her. He had taken Bella instead. And Morgana had let him. What kind of twisted power game was the little vixen playing? And what was Malfoy doing, letting her slip through his fingers if he wanted her so badly?

Power. Snape sneered and emptied his glass. He had to hand it to the girl: she had held a power over the people in the drawing room that had been stronger than any Imperius Curse. Avery and Lucius had been so turned on by her little performance that they wouldn't have noticed if the Dark Lord himself had entered the room. And judging from the delicious noises Bella had made, she had not wanted the girl to stop. And as much as Snape hated to admit it, he had not wanted her to stop either. He had found it hard to take his eyes of her nimble little fingers, her delicious lips. And the mere thought of them made him get hard again.

He angrily shook his head. It was bad enough that he had let himself get turned on by Morgana's performance. But what annoyed him the most was that she had noticed.

He had shown her the cold shoulder ever since he had noticed her interest in him, had enjoyed her trying harder and harder every day, and had relished the power he had held over her. But the moment she had notice him looking, he had lost that power. And that annoyed him beyond anything else. But he would regain his power, there was no doubt about that. The girl may have succeeded in ruffling the feathers of her usually stoic and unflappable professor, but she would not get away with it lightly.

* * *

Charis was comfortably snuggled up in one of the comfy armchairs in Ravenclaw Tower when a loud crack made her jump. She lifted her gaze from her Arithmancy book and came face to face with Winky, who was holding out a scrap of parchment towards her.

'For you, Miss,' the elf squeaked and Disapparated without any further comments.

Charis recognised the handwriting of her best friend at once. And she also saw that the note had been written in a great hurry: the letters were uneven and the ink slightly smeared.

Room of Requirement. Now.

Charis smiled. She and Morgana had discovered the Room of Requirement during their fifth year, and they often met there to escape the judging looks from their House mates. Well, Morgana's House mates. The Slytherins not all of them, but quite a few did not like it when one of their own befriended a student from another House, especially not a Muggle-born. They had always been very clear about that, and had often given Morgana a hard time, but this year was worse than ever. The pureblood Slytherins with Draco Malfoy at the lead were convinced that the Dark Lord had in fact returned and that he would soon rise to power again and reward those who were loyal to him. And whereas they earlier had looked down at any Muggle-borns with slightly wrinkled noses, they now glared at them with open disgust. Many Slytherins had crumbled under the pressure and had all but broken with their friends from other Houses. Few dared stand up against the likes of Draco Malfoy. And those who did were treated in the same way as the Muggle-borns. And although Morgana did not seem to care what her House mates said, Charis knew that even her tough Slytherin friend needed a quiet place to retreat to now and then.

She found the Room of Requirement furnished with two squishy chairs, a huge sofa and a coffee table which was almost breaking under the weight of ice cream buckets, bags of crisps and a big bowl of chocolate. It often looked that way when Morgana and Charis met there. By now, the room even knew which crisps and chocolates they preferred.

Charis let herself fall onto one of the squishy chairs and put her feet on the coffee table, fishing for a bag of crisps. This was exactly what she needed today: some junk food and her best friend. The events of last night were still gnawing at her, and she had not even dared to look towards the staff table in the Great Hall because she had been afraid to meet Snape's eyes. Hopefully, Morgana would be in the mood to trash talk her Head of House tonight.

When Morgana arrived, she was wearing a long black robe, her hair was unkempt, and she had not bothered to put on any make-up either. In her left hand, she was holding a glass of whisky. On the whole, a very unusual sight.

'Care for a drink?'

Charis narrowed her eyes. Morgana and alcohol were two things that just didn't mix. 'Who are you and what have you done with Morgana?' she teased.

The red-haired girl just sneered, sipped at the amber liquid and grimaced.

'It is you then,' Charis joked. 'I'm so glad you're back safe.'

'Safe is not a word I would use,' Morgana responded before taking a healthy gulp.

That made Charis react. 'Merlin's sac, Morgana,' she exclaimed. 'You don't drink!'

Morgana shrugged. 'No, I normally don't drink. But then again, this afternoon has been filled with things I normally don't do.'

'I don't like the sound of this, Morgana,' Charis pointed out as she poured some Odgen's in another empty glass that had conveniently appeared and took a snifter herself. 'What the hell happened at Malfoy Manor? Are you okay?'

'Oh, I'm great,' Morgana answered with exaggerated enthusiasm. 'Did you know Snape thinks I'm a slut?'

Charis eyes widened. 'Did he say that?'

'I believe he used the term *brazen little whore*. And it looks like he has had that opinion of me for quite a while.' She emptied her glass and grimaced, silently wondering why that fact annoyed her so much. Why did she even care what Snape thought of her?

Charis snapped the glass from her friend's hand and stared at her. 'Tell me what happened now, Morgana! I've been really worried about you. Still am! You're acting very weird.'

Morgana slumped back in her chair. 'Well, let's see then, shall we,' she started, her voice bitter as an Arctic wind. 'I had lunch with eight Death Eaters, was drooled over by Lucius and Avery, got administered Veritaserum by our dear Potions master ...'

'Veritaserum?' Charis interrupted. 'That's forbidden. Why the hell did he give you Veritaserum?'

'Because he wanted to know if I enjoyed making out with Bellatrix Lestrange in front of him.'

Charis spat out her whisky and stared at her friend as if she had just been hit by a Bludger. 'You did ... with Bella ... WHAT?! How the hell did that happen? Did she give you Amortentia? Did she hex you? And why did that bastard Snape not try and stop it?'

Charis' little outburst made Morgana sneer. 'Dear Professor Snape was busy watching and pretending that he wasn't.'

Charis put down her glass. Her hands were shaking too much to be holding it safely. 'I ... I don't understand, Morgana,' she stammered. 'How did this happen? Did Bella pounce on you or anything?'

Morgana shrugged. 'She sat behind me, stroked my hair, touched me. And I let her, for a while at least.'

'Are you out of your freaking mind?' Charis exclaimed. But she regretted her outburst seconds later as she saw her friend bury her face in her hands.

'I created one big mess, Charis,' Morgana started, her voice muffled by her hands. 'I wanted to toy with Lucius, wanted to show him what he is missing.'

'But,' Charis started, 'fooling around with Bella ...'

Morgana snapped up her head and her eyes flashed dangerously. 'I made a mistake, alright? Against common beliefs, I am not a slut!'

Charis flinched at her friend's tone. She had never seen her react that vehemently. Normally, Morgana seemed to find it amusing that the whole castle thought her *experienced*. But then again, she never talked about any of the guys she went out with. And suddenly Charis wondered if the rumours about her friend were just that, rumours.

She wanted to say something, but Morgana cut her short. 'I am sorry, Charis. I am being mean to you.'

Charis immediately accepted her friend's apology. Morgana didn't apologise too often. But when she did, it was sincere.

'Why don't you just go on and start from the beginning, Morgana?' Charis said in a calm voice. 'I thought you fancied Lucius Malfoy, and that you were flattered by his attention?'

'I hate that man, Charis. He needs to be destroyed! In the same bloody way he destroyed my family.'

Charis didn't follow. 'But, Morgana, I thought your parents died in a car crash when you were a baby.'

Morgana snorted. 'Nice cover story, isn't it?'

She got up and started pacing the room. She had to let it out now. Snape had managed to open the door behind which she was hiding her darkest secrets, and now she found herself unable to lock the door again.

'The Belakanes are one of the oldest Wizard families in the country,' she started. 'And sixteen years ago, when the Dark Lord was at the height of his powers, Lucius Malfoy had the brilliant idea to give us as a present to his master.'

Charis frowned. 'What do you mean, present?'

'How happy do you think the Dark Lord would have been if someone had persuaded the Belakanes to join his ranks?' Morgana went on, surprised at how calm her voice was. 'My father resisted, of course, and was killed. What happened to my mother, I don't know. According to the Ministry, she disappeared. And I was sent to one of the finest orphanages in Britain, all paid for by my honourable patron, Lucius Malfoy.'

'My God, Morgana,' Charis breathed. 'How do you know all this?'

'That is not important!' Morgana snapped.

She wasn't proud of the way she had got hold of her information. She had always wondered why an influential wizard like Lucius Malfoy was taking care of an insignificant orphan like her. She had suspected that he might have been her mother's lover, and that he was now taking care of her out of guilt. But when he had started inviting her to Malfoy Manor and started making advances, she had become suspicious. She had not understood why he was interested in her, and she had started snooping around the Manor. And one evening, she had forced Veritaserum down a house-elf's throat.

A slight touch on her shoulder made Morgana snap out of her thoughts, and she looked up into her friend's green eyes.

'You know that I am here for you, don't you, Morgana?' Charis asked. 'You don't have to tell me anything. But if you want to talk, I'm here. Okay?'

Charis reached out to hug her friend, but the Slytherin shrank away. And Charis retreated, giving Morgana the space she seemed to need.

'How did you...?' Charis started, 'I mean, has anything actually happened between you and Malfoy? You know... physically?'

Morgana sighed. 'Something happened last summer. Lucius invited me to the Manor, and conveniently enough, Narcissa and Draco were out of town. We kissed and touched, you know, petting. It never got heavier than that. Oh, he was charming, Charis. He promised me the moon, and I believed him.'

It sounded dumb now as she was saying it out loud. But she really had believed him when he had told her how much he cared for her. And she still did every time she looked into his eyes. Maybe Lucius was trying to make up for what he did in his past after all.

They sat some moments in silence, Charis nibbling on a piece of chocolate, trying to take in these new revelations, Morgana crushing crisps with her thumb. Her thoughts seemed to be far, far away.

'Do you think Snape enjoyed it?' she suddenly asked. 'Watching me and Bella, I mean.'

Charis laughed, a short, bark-like sound. Sometimes, her Slytherin friend could be so naive. 'Of course he enjoyed it. Seeing some girl-on-girl action would give any man a hard-on. But he had the duty of care to you, as a pupil!'

'He knows that I noticed, Charis,' Morgana said slowly, her voice trembling due to the panic that was rising in her chest. 'And he knows that I liked that he was watching.'

Charis paled. 'Now he knows we both fancy him. Oh, this is not good! He'll use that on us!' She paused for a moment. 'He'll try to come between us, won't he, Morgana? He'll toy with both of us and make us jealous of each other.'

Morgana looked her friend straight in the eyes. 'Charis, do you have feelings for him? Actual feelings?' She had to know. If they were to continue this game, she would have to know how far they could go before anyone got hurt.

Charis blushed and lowered her gaze. 'It's just a crush.'

'If you had to choose, Charis,' Morgana went on. 'Love him or shag him. What would you choose?'

'Can't I have both?'

'No.'

The Ravenclaw thought for a moment, weighing up the logic of her decision. 'Then I'd say love. Because love comes with the promise of sex, whereas sex does not come

with the promise of love.'

Morgana groaned. She had feared that much. 'Oh, Charis! If Snape asked you to sleep with him, you would. And then you would be longing for him every day for the rest of your life, hoping he'd fall to his knees and ask you to marry you.'

Charis cast down her eyes. 'I know I am pathetic.'

'No, sweetheart, not pathetic, just hopelessly romantic.' Morgana cupped her friend's chin and made her look at her. 'Don't. Let him. Get to you. Do you hear me, Charis?'

Charis looked into Morgana's eyes and nodded. But they both knew that it was not going to be that easy.

The loud crack that signalled the Apparition of an elf made both girls jump. And when Morgana recognised the elf, she felt all the blood leave her face.

'That's Lucius' elf,' she breathed. 'Silvy.'

'Silvy is having a message for Miss Morgana,' the elf said in a piping voice and held out a tiny box. 'Master Lucius apologises for his behaviour and wishes to give Miss Morgana a present as a token of his apologies.'

The elf opened the box and revealed a beautiful silver ring made up of a coiled snake with emeralds for eyes.

'Oh, my,' Charis breathed. 'It's gorgeous.'

'This is crazy,' Morgana snapped. 'I am sure it is cursed or jinxed. Or maybe it's a Portkey.'

'There's an easy way to find out.' Charis withdrew her wand from her pocket and waved it twice over the ring, muttering an incantation.

'Well, it's not a Portkey, that's for sure. But we need to get this looked at properly, Morgana. There might be a Trace on it. Or it might be bugged.' Once more she waved her wand over the ring.

Morgana narrowed her eyes and fixed her gaze on the elf. 'Silvy, what are your master's intentions with this ring?'

'M-master said it's from Diagon Alley, Miss, f-finest money could buy,' the elf stammered. 'Master Lucius is very sorry, Miss.'

'Does your master send any other messages, Silvy?'

'Master says he had a lovely afternoon and would like to do it again some time.'

Morgana rolled her eyes and sighed. 'Silvy, take the ring back to your master and tell him that I am not allowed to be in contact with him anymore.'

The elf's eyes widened in fear. 'Oh ... Master Lucius will not like that, Miss.'

'You cannot send the elf to deliver that message to Malfoy, Morgana,' Charis exclaimed. 'He will punish her for it!'

'What the hell do you want me to do, Charis?'

'Keep the ring and send the elf back.'

'Silvy must not return without reply, Miss. Master has said so.'

Charis thought quickly. 'Then tell him that Morgana is delighted and that she thanks your master for his kind gift.'

To that, the elf bowed and Disapparated with yet another loud crack.

Charis swirled around to face Morgana. 'What do you mean, you're not allowed to be in contact with Malfoy anymore? Did Snape say that?'

'Of course Snape said that,' Morgana snapped. 'Who else? Merlin?' She snatched the ring from her friend's hand and held it up against the light, watching the emeralds sparkle. 'The man has taste, no doubt about that.'

'Are you going to keep it?' Charis wondered, craning her neck to get a look at the gorgeous piece of jewellery herself.

'My brain tells me to go and tell Snape,' Morgana replied. But the grin that was forming on her lips suggested that her Slytherin vanity had already dictated that she had no intentions of doing so.

VI: Mine is Your Mind

Chapter 6 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter VI: Mine Is Your Mind

It was late by the time Charis and Morgana finally left the Room of Requirement. They were nearly an hour past curfew, and they both knew if they were caught they would have some serious explaining to do. But despite the risks, Charis decided to walk her friend as close to the dungeons as possible before making a turn to the right and

ascending towards Ravenclaw Tower.

Milky moonlight reflected on the old stone floors as they made their way back, giving the castle a sense of serenity. Apart from the occasional snore and wheeze of the sleeping paintings, there wasn't a sound to be heard. Charis stifled a yawn as they rounded the corner for the corridor leading straight towards the dungeons.

'Tired, are we, Miss Byrne?'

From absolutely nowhere, Severus Snape emerged from the shadows, bearing down on the girls like a Dementor. He was the last person either of the girls wanted to see today, and if they didn't know better, they could have sworn he'd orchestrated the meeting on purpose, just to make them uncomfortable.

Both jumped with fright as their Potions master drew up to his full height and crossed his arms, and they cast each other a quick look: it was no good, they were busted, and they would have to take whatever consequences Snape felt like dishing out, no matter how unpleasant.

The dark professor turned his head and raised an eyebrow at Morgana.

'I thought I told you to stay in your common room and not to talk to anyone,' he began slowly, his black eyes glittering. 'It is clear to me that you are incapable of obeying simple instructions. Five points from Slytherin.'

Morgana opened her mouth to object but then shut it just as quickly. Snape rarely took points from his own house, and trying to protest would only lead to more trouble. Instead, she looked squarely at an interesting flagstone by her feet and said nothing.

'Five points will also be taken from Ravenclaw for breaking curfew.'

Snape glared down his nose at Charis, who glanced up timidly. This was the first time she had seen him since *that incident*, and at the sight of his onyx eyes a flush began to rise in her cheeks at the memory of what they had witnessed just a day before. She averted her gaze quickly, not letting herself be pulled into his eyes lest she never escape their fathomless depths.

Inwardly, Snape smirked. The equilibrium had returned. He had both girls where they should be: in his control, and now with the added certainty that both of them shared desirous feelings towards him. Even cocky Morgana now had the wind taken out of her sails from the inelegant way her true feelings were finally revealed. He took a deep triumphant breath through his nose as he watched the girls hesitating, unsure if they would receive further punishment.

No, he thought. Not tonight. Far better feed their jealousy by punishing any future misdemeanours separately and away from the prying eyes of Dolores Umbridge, he reasoned.

'Well? What are you waiting for?' he sneered. 'Return to your dormitories immediately. Unless you want me to deduct a round ten points each for time wasting.'

Charis was about to spin around and fly off to Ravenclaw Tower when Morgana suddenly staggered and clutched the wall, her face pale.

'Miss Belakane?'

The lights started to swim in front of her eyes, but the last thing Morgana needed was Snape making a snide comment about her not being able to hold her liquor. She just wanted to get away from him and lie down.

'I'm alright,' she slurred and even managed to stagger a few paces before clutching the wall again.

'Miss Belakane, you are not alright,' Snape answered tartly. 'You will see the nurse this instant.'

Morgana did not resist when Snape grabbed her arm and wheeled her down the corridor towards the hospital wing, Charis at her side looking on in anguish. She didn't have the energy to resist and, to be honest, she did not care either.

But then a jolt of pain rushed through her head, and she stumbled against the opposite wall, panting. And again, the world was spinning around her. There was nothing to hold on to, and she sank helplessly to the ground, gasping for breath. Suddenly, the lights seemed too bright and her skull much too small for her brain. The pain in her head was unbearable. A flash of white, then all was black.

When Morgana next snapped her eyes open, she saw her best friend and her professor trying to coax her to stand. They were saying words, but she couldn't hear them. She couldn't stand even if she wanted to. She had no control over her body, and her head was throbbing as if her skull had been split open. And there was ... she wasn't sure what it was. There were thoughts in her head that weren't hers. It was almost as if she were hearing a voice. Yes, someone was talking to her. But it wasn't Charis, and it wasn't Snape. The voice was coming from inside her head.

Morgana screamed. Or at least, she thought she was screaming. She didn't know. She couldn't hear herself. All she could hear was the voice that was filling her head.

Then Charis came into her hazy vision and grabbed her firmly by the shoulders.

'Hush, Morgana, honey. What is it? Talk to me.'

She *had* been screaming then.

It took Morgana all her willpower to make her brain and mouth execute the simple task of formulating a simple sentence.

'M-my head,' she stammered. 'It's hurting. I ... I cannot ... there are thoughts that aren't mine.'

As if burnt, Charis let go of her friend and looked up at Snape, alarmed. Snape, however, did not seem disturbed by Morgana's revelation. Or at least, he didn't let it show. With the grace of a panther, he knelt in front of her, his hands cupping her face to look into his eyes.

At first, Morgana didn't seem to notice, but when their eyes met, she screamed in panic and started crawling backwards.

'No, not you!' she screeched. 'Stay away from me.'

She started panting as her back hit the wall, and her eyes dilated in fear. She looked like a trapped animal. Her whole body was tense, her eyes darting around the dark corridor as if to find an escape route.

When Snape reached out for her, she raised her arms as if to shield herself from him. 'Don't touch me.'

Outwardly, Snape remained calm. But his mind was racing. He had seen this before. The pale face, the clammy hands, the claim that there was a voice inside her head: the classical signs of a possession. Yes, he had seen it many times before. The Dark Lord and his followers had considered it a hilarious pastime to invade defenceless peoples' minds and fill them with their thoughts until the mind went on overload and the victim cracked.

But who in blazing Hades had taken over this girl's mind? And how?

Ignoring her attempts to fight him off, Snape moved closer towards her and grabbed her face once more. He needed to be able to look into her eyes. 'Miss Belakane, listen to me,' he started, carefully expanding his own mind towards hers.

She howled as if in pain, slammed her fists alternately against his chest and then against her forehead.

'Morgana!'

Snape grabbed her wrists to keep her from hurting herself and tilted her upper body slightly backwards. He had to have eye contact.

'Close your mind,' he said in a powerful yet calm voice.

Morgana kicked at him and screamed. 'Go away!'

'I said, close your mind.'

For a moment, a look of comprehension flickered over Morgana's face, but was quickly replaced by a panicky expression again.

'I can't.'

She was shaking, and there were tears running down her face. And Snape could tell that uttering those few words had cost her too much strength for her to fight on her own.

He pulled her closer towards him. At least, he was getting through to her now, she was responding. Now he could help her.

'If you are unable to close your mind, I will have to close it for you,' he whispered. 'Legilimens.'

Morgana screamed as he entered her mind, and Snape stiffened. She was fighting him. Quite naturally. It was human nature to fight against the invasion of one's mind. But still, the girl shaking in his arms, screaming and crying, wasn't anything he enjoyed. Neither was the use of Legilimency, which he only used if absolutely necessary.

'I am doing this to help you, Morgana,' he whispered, as much to calm the girl as himself.

He pushed in further, meeting horrible, thick, black murk. He slashed through it, forced it to dissolve, to vanish. It was easier than he had thought it would be, and as soon as the light had returned, as soon as he could feel the girl's mind, he withdrew.

Morgana slumped forward against his chest. She wasn't struggling against his grip anymore, wasn't screaming. In fact, she had lost consciousness. He scooped her up in his arms and turned to face a very pale Charis. The Ravenclaw looked terrified, but Snape didn't have the time to console her.

'I need to get Miss Belakane to the Hospital Wing straight away,' he said sternly. 'Meanwhile, I need you to collect the Headmaster.'

* * *

Snape burst into the Hospital Wing, carrying Morgana in his arms. The girl was coming around, but her body still felt limp in his arms, and her head was resting against his shoulder. She moaned softly, and Snape cradled her against his chest, murmuring soothingly. 'It is alright, Morgana. You are safe now.'

Startled by the sound of the entrance door, Poppy had come running out of her office and was now staring at the pair in utter shock. 'For goodness' sake, Severus...'

Snape gingerly placed the girl on the nearest bed and turned towards the medi-witch. 'Miss Belakane here has just had her mind invaded by an unknown person. She was too weak to fight them off, and I had to take a very big risk and enter her mind myself and force them out.'

Poppy paled. 'You? But, Severus, that means ... You know what happens when you enter a person's mind. They will never... you will never...'

'I am aware of that, Poppy,' he snapped. The last thing he needed at the moment was Poppy lecturing him about the consequences of touching another person's mind. He was bloody well aware of the fact that there would always be a trace in the girl's mind, and his. But luckily, the person who assaulted her had left a trace as well.

Then the door opened and Dumbledore appeared with Charis at his heels. The Headmaster was wearing a purple dressing gown and his long white hair was dishevelled. Charis had obviously got him out of bed.

'Severus, can you explain what is going on?' Dumbledore started. 'Do you know who has entered the girl's mind?'

Snape frowned. He wasn't sure. He had seen the trace in Morgana's mind. He had seen it before, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Morgana's sobs made him spin around. She was sitting bolt-upright, gripping the bed sheets with both her hands. Her eyes were once more widened in fear, and she was shaking.

Poppy was with her in a blink of an eye and cradled the girl against her chest.

'Make them go away!' Snape heard Morgana whisper. 'Please, make those thoughts go away. They aren't mine.'

And then something clicked into place. The invitation to lunch. The look of hunger in the man's eyes. Lucius!

Snape grabbed Dumbledore by the sleeve and beckoned the Headmaster to retreat behind the examination curtain with him.

'Headmaster,' he started after having cast Muffliato around them. 'It is Lucius Malfoy. He is the one assaulting Ms Belakane's mind.'

The Headmaster frowned. 'Lucius Malfoy? Why in Merlin's name would Lucius Malfoy attack Ms Belakane's mind? He is her patron. And from what I hear, he thinks her a perfect match for his son.'

Snape shook his head. 'I am afraid you are mistaken, Headmaster. Lucius does not want her for Draco. He wants to claim her himself.'

Dumbledore looked horrified. 'She is a child!' he exclaimed.

Snape suppressed a sneer. After what he had seen at Malfoy Manor, he would not use the word *child* to describe Ms Belakane. And it was also pretty obvious what Lucius was after. He had seen the look in the blond wizard's eyes. But he couldn't tell the Headmaster.

'The Belakanes are a very old, pureblood family,' he started instead. 'Maybe Lucius wants an heir aside from Draco? With the Malfoys, it is all about blood.'

Once he had uttered the words, they sounded truly horrific. Dumbledore was right, Morgana was indeed still a child. And the idea of Lucius Malfoy wanting her as breeding material was outright disgusting. But then again, it was just the thing Lucius' power-hungry mind would come up with.

'We cannot let this happen. We have to protect her, Severus.' Dumbledore had taken some steps to the side and was now gravely looking down at Morgana. She had stopped crying, and Poppy had loosened the girl's robes and taken off her jewellery and was now dabbing her feverish forehead with a damp cloth. And Charis was sitting by her friend's side, holding her hand.

'What can we do, Severus?' the old man asked, his eyes still on the girl.

'Our first priority should be to make sure that Lucius is not doing any more damage to the girl's mind,' Snape stated. 'We will have to make him leave and teach her how to keep him shut out.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'Occlumency.' Then he turned to face Snape. 'Can you do it, Severus? Can you teach her?'

Snape just nodded. He would do his best.

He released the Muffliato charm and approached the girl's bed, ushering away Poppy and Charis. Morgana's eyes were closed, her breathing still laboured, and there was a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead. And she was pale, so dreadfully pale.

As Snape sat down on the edge of her bed and took her shaking hands into his, Morgana's eyes snapped open, and once more, he could see the terror in her eyes.

'Morgana, listen to me,' he said in a low tone, trying to make his voice sound as soothing as possible. The last thing they needed at the moment was her freaking out because *he* was close to her.

'You must discipline your mind, Morgana,' he went on, still keeping his hands tightly clasped around hers. He noticed that they had stopped shaking. 'You must control your emotions. This is the only way to drive him out.'

'I can't,' Morgana sobbed.

'Yes, you *can* do it, Morgana,' Snape whispered. 'Imagine a shutter coming down, lock him out ...'

A shudder went through Morgana's body, and her blue eyes filled with tears once more. Snape looked over his shoulder at Dumbledore.

'Headmaster, I am at a loss. We need to make Malfoy leave, but I have already entered the girl's mind once to boot him out. I am not sure if she will be able to take two people probing around in her mind for a second time. It might break her.'

The Headmaster looked warily at his Potions master. 'Do we have a choice, Severus?'

No, they hadn't. They could not let Lucius dabble around in the girl's mind any longer. Merlin knows what kind of twisted ideas he was planting in her mind. He had to be driven out, whatever the risks.

Snape cupped Morgana's chin and made her look at him. To his relief, she did not turn away. For the time being, she seemed to trust him.

He entered her mind carefully, ready to retreat in a heartbeat if she struggled. But nothing happened. And her mind was peaceful. Lucius had gone.

* * *

Poppy had an elf bring some tea, and she, Dumbledore, Snape and Charis were now sitting in her office, each clutching a cup. The mood was subdued, and they were all absorbed in their own thoughts. Morgana had been given a Dreamless Sleep potion and was now resting peacefully. Or at least, that was what everyone was hoping.

'Will Morgana be alright?' Charis suddenly asked. It was the first time she had spoken since she had arrived at the hospital wing with Dumbledore, and her voice was feeble due to the lump in her throat. She was terrified.

Poppy motheringly patted Charis' arm. 'She should be fine after plenty of rest, child. Don't you fret.'

'I have never seen her like that,' Charis went on. 'Morgana is never afraid of anything, especially not of ...' She broke off as her eyes met Snape's. Whatever had he done to Morgana ?

'Ms Belakane was fine when she left my office this evening,' Snape snapped. Charis had averted her eyes quickly, but not quickly enough. He had seen the accusatory look in her eyes, and he did not feel that he deserved it.

'Ms Byrne ... Charis,' the Headmaster started in a kind tone. 'As I understand, you have spent the evening with Morgana. What did you do?'

Charis swallowed. Now, she couldn't tell Dumbledore what she and Morgana had been talking about. 'We, um, we had some ice cream and crisps and, um, ... Well, Morgana was in a really bad mood, and we had a drink. But surely ...'

'If Ms Belakane was intoxicated, it would indeed have made it easier for Mr Malfoy to enter her mind,' Dumbledore stated calmly. 'It does not, however, explain how he got access to her. Are you sure that nothing unusual happened, Charis?'

Charis' eyes widened. 'The ring!' How could she have forgotten about that?

'What ring, Ms Byrne?' Snape was already standing up.

'S-silvy,' Charis stammered. 'Malfoy's elf. She brought Morgana a ring. As a present.'

'Where is that ring now?' Snape bellowed.

'By the bed. Poppy took it off.'

Snape was out of Poppy's office in a blink of an eye, Dumbledore, Poppy and Charis following.

'Six years of studying Defence Against the Dark Arts and you silly girls don't know any better than to put on a ring from Lucius Malfoy?' Snape muttered as he started examining the ring. 'How daft can one get?'

'But we did examine it!' Chairs piped up. How dare he call her stupid? She was a Ravenclaw, for crying out loud. 'We checked it for curses, hexes, ...'

She stopped talking as she noticed that no one was listening to her anymore. Snape and Dumbledore were both busy examining the ring, and Poppy was checking on Morgana.

What if they had missed something, Charis wondered. What if the ring had indeed given Malfoy access to Morgana's mind? What if ...

He musings were interrupted by Snape vehemently putting the ring back onto the nightstand.

'Just a trinket,' Dumbledore explained. 'A simple token of admiration. Now, Charis, I think it is time for you to go to bed.'

'Headmaster, if it's possible ... I would rather stay with Morgana.'

Dumbledore turned towards Poppy, and the medi-witch nodded. 'I think this would be a good idea, Headmaster. The girl will need comforting when she wakes up.'

Dumbledore smiled in a fatherly way and put his hand onto Charis' shoulder. 'Stay with your friend, then,' he said. 'You will both be free from classes tomorrow morning. I think you might need time to ... chat. And Poppy will make sure that you get chocolate croissants for breakfast.'

Charis watched the headmaster retreat with Snape at his heels, then looked at her exhausted friend once more. She couldn't shake off the feeling that the meeting at Malfoy Manor had irrevocably changed everything. And she was also disturbed that Morgana had chosen to hide the true nature of her relationship with Malfoy from her for so long.

How could Morgana have let herself be taken in by him? Sure, he was rich, charming, handsome, generous ... Charis shook her head. Of course she'd be taken in by him. She would bet her last Knut that Morgana wasn't the first female to be snared by Malfoy's web, and probably wouldn't be the last either. But still, the thought of her best friend in the arms of a former Death Eater made her skin crawl.

She sat on the edge of Morgana's bed with a small sigh. It seemed as though Malfoy wanted to control Morgana, but he had got it very, very wrong. Why didn't he use the Imperius Curse if he wanted her under his control? Charis scowled. The only plausible answer to that was, if Malfoy was discovered using an Unforgivable Curse he would be thrown into Azkaban quicker than you could say 'Alohomora'. And still, he had managed to take over her mind somehow.

Charis thought back to the ring Malfoy had given Morgana was it really only a trinket? They had tested it, even Snape and Dumbledore had looked at it, and found nothing. But it still seemed fishy to her.

How else could Malfoy have possessed Morgana without direct contact? Did he realise what damage he was doing to her? And why would Malfoy suddenly want to cause her harm, when they had been all but lovers in the summer? The whole thing made no sense whatsoever.

Charis rubbed her tired eyes. She had so many questions and no answers. With another sigh, she rose from her friend's bed. The best she could hope for was that the possession had left Morgana unscathed, and yet she knew this wouldn't be the end of it. More anxious thoughts whirled around her brain as she got changed and slipped between the crisp hospital sheets in the bed near her friend. Suddenly, her little embarrassment with Snape seemed like small fry compared to this viper's nest.

She closed her eyes, willing her brain to be still so she could get some much-needed rest. But she could not shake the cruel smirk of Lucius Malfoy, and the sight of her terrified friend, and instead fell into a shallow and fitful sleep.

VII: Malfoy's Plan

Chapter 7 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter VII: Malfoy's Plan

Snape watched the sun rise over the hills that surrounded the Black Lake. It was a peaceful sight, and he wondered why he did not watch it more often. It was not like he overslept. He was up every day at least one hour before sunrise. And still, he never watched it.

'Tea, Severus?'

Snape nodded absentmindedly. Yes, tea would be nice. Herbal tea, to soothe his nerves. Preferably a concoction of balm leaves to counteract the headache that had started creeping through his skull some hours ago.

'Dolores did not want any tea when she visited me shortly after midnight,' the Headmaster began. 'But she was very curious to know why both you and I had been in the hospital wing.'

Snape frowned. 'What did you tell her?'

Dumbledore smiled. 'I made her believe that Ms Belakane and Ms Byrnes have fallen victim to a nasty Bat-Bogey Hex. I am afraid the poor woman was up all night, trying to figure out who cast it.'

Serves her right Snape thought. Hopefully, that nosey hag had not been able to sleep all night.

He certainly hadn't. After leaving Ms Belakane in Poppy's care, he had returned to the dungeons and tried to figure out just how Lucius had managed to get access to the girl's mind. But he had failed. Every time he had thought that he had found a solution, some little detail had rendered the theory useless.

But what disturbed him even more was the fact that the girl had seemed terrified of *him*. But why? How, by Merlin's beard, could her feelings for him have shifted from a crush to fear in less than six hours? He had yelled at her after they had returned from Malfoy Manor and had even made her take Veritaserum. But for heaven's sake, the girl was a Slytherin. Treatment like this should just have made her want to try even harder, not to give up and turn from him. Something didn't add up.

'Care to share the thoughts that have kept you out of bed all night, dear boy?' Dumbledore asked as he put a cup of hot tea into the Potions master's cold hands.

'Lucius' mind was not actively connected to Ms Belakane's last night,' Snape started, focusing on the problem with the name of Lucius Malfoy. He would deal with his own problem later, privately. 'I saw his trace but not himself. It was as if he had planted his thoughts in her mind and then disappeared.'

'The girl did say that there were strange thoughts in her head,' Dumbledore mused. 'This does not, however, explain her physical reaction. The headache, the dizziness. Is it possible that Malfoy has administered some sort of poison? A drug, perhaps? Something that would weaken the girl's resistance and make it easier for him to access her mind?'

Snape shook his head. 'I have thought about that as well, Headmaster. Ms Belakane was admirably careful at the Manor. She checked the food for drugs with magic, even drank pumpkin juice instead of wine. And after lunch ...'

He broke off. The Tiffin. Neither he nor the girl had checked the Tiffin. The elf had put a tray on the coffee table right in front of them, and no one but Ms Belakane had

eaten from that tray. And what was even worse: *he* had been the one who had offered her the sweet.

He never explained his theory to Dumbledore. He did not even turn around when the Headmaster called for him to ask when he was going. He would explain later. Right now, he had to talk to Poppy.

The mediwitch, however, wasn't too pleased when he stormed into the ward.

'Severus, do you realise what time it is?' she hissed, keeping her angry voice low so as not to wake up any of her patients.

'It is seven twenty-five,' he snapped and pointed towards the curtain behind which he knew that the girl was resting. 'Did you check Ms Belakane for drugs?'

'Drugs?' Poppy looked flabbergasted. 'Why would I ...?'

'Check her now!' Snape interrupted her.

'Now? Severus, as you pointed out yourself, it is not even half past seven yet. The girl needs to rest.'

'If you refuse to check the girl, I will.'

The threat was effective, and Poppy immediately bustled off towards Morgana's bed. Snape could hear muffled voices, but he could not make out any words. Nor did he get to see the girl. Poppy had quite appropriately closed the curtain behind her.

Almost five minutes passed until the mediwitch returned. 'There is still some alcohol in her system, which I most certainly classify as a drug,' she began, eyes narrowed. 'But I reckon that this is not what you were looking for.'

'Are you sure that there is nothing else, Poppy?' Snape pressed on.

To that question, Poppy drew herself up to her full height. 'Are you questioning my competence, Severus Snape?'

Of course he wasn't. He was, however, furious with himself. He was now certain that Malfoy had slipped the girl some kind of drug. And if he had realised that earlier, they would have been able to detect it as well. But he hadn't been thinking straight, and now they had missed their chance. The drug had already been absorbed by the girl's system and was therefore untraceable.

He rubbed his tired eyes and then turned to the mediwitch once more. 'I will go and fetch a potion for Ms Belakane,' he announced. 'I know from personal experience how it feels to wake up after having had someone trampling around in your mind. She will need it.'

'Do try to come in a little more quietly this time,' Poppy chided him, a kind smile on her face. 'This is, after all, a hospital, Severus. And the people here need their rest.'

He did indeed enter the ward quietly as he returned with a bottle of potion that was usually used to cure hangovers. He was sure that Poppy had a stock of it in her cupboard, but he had wanted to do something useful. He had failed to protect the girl at Malfoy Manor, and his idea to check her system for drugs had come far too late to be of any use. The least he could do was cure her sore head.

It was deadly quiet in the ward. Poppy had obviously left for breakfast in the Great Hall, and there wasn't a single bed occupied. Except the two beds behind the curtains, of course, the beds where the two girls were sleeping.

As Snape approached the curtain, he heard a muffled sound. It sounded like a sigh, a moan even. And he felt panic rise in his chest. He ripped the curtain open, expecting to see Morgana struggle against her covers, trying to fight off her nightmares or in the worst case yet another invasion of her mind. But to his surprise, the girl lay curled up under her blanket, her red hair sprawled over her pillow and her eyes closed. She was sleeping peacefully.

He shifted his gaze to the next bed, and a smirk formed on his lips as he realised where the soft moans were coming from. The blonde Ravenclaw had kicked off her blanket and was now lying, half exposed, in her bed, wriggling and moaning in her sleep. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a smile on her face that suggested that she was having a very, very pleasant dream.

Snape was just about to put the phial he was carrying on Morgana's nightstand and leave when a sigh from Charis made him stop and cock an eyebrow in surprise.

'Hm, yes, Severus,' the girl mumbled in her sleep. 'Right there. Hm, yes, Severus. Yes.'

Snape couldn't help but snort. Having walked in on one of his students having an erotic dream was amusing enough. This student being Charis Byrne and her having an erotic dream about *him* was just priceless. And seeing that they were alone in the ward and that Ms Belakane was still fast asleep, he would just stay a little while longer and enjoy the show.

* * *

The Potions master's long, slender fingers were gliding over her naked skin, their touch feather light, making her whole body tingle with pleasure. He knew exactly how to touch her, how to make her body sing.

She arched up against him, searching for his lips with hers. He tasted of chocolate, dark, rich chocolate with just a hint of chilli. He tasted just as he looked: dark and hot. His tongue was massaging hers, and she couldn't help but whimper into his mouth.

Her whimper turned into sensual moans as his hands cupped her breasts and into ecstatic screams as he closed his lips around her sensitive nub and started to suckle.

'Yes, Severus. Yes, just like that. Oh, yes.'

'Are you enjoying yourself, Ms Byrne?'

Charis' eyes snapped open, and for a moment she was afraid that her heart had stopped. But it started hammering frantically in her chest as she lifted her gaze. Snape was standing just about seven feet away from her, on the other side of Morgana's bed, with his arms folded in front of his chest and a smug grin on his face.

'You seem to have forgotten that you are in the Hospital Wing and not in the privacy of your dormitory, Ms Byrne,' he started in a tone that made chills go down Charis' spine. 'Although, I doubt that sharing a room with three other girls allows much in the way of privacy. Have your roommates ever mentioned that you talk in your sleep?'

Now Charis' heart did stop, even if just for two seconds. And at the same time, all the blood in her body seemed to go to her cheeks. *Talk in her sleep?* Did that mean that he had heard her ... that he *knew* what she had been dreaming about? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

She grabbed the blanket she had kicked off and pulled it all the way up to her nose. Maybe, if she didn't move and keep her mouth shut, Snape would just leave? But of course, this was Severus Snape, and he never missed out on an opportunity to make a student uncomfortable.

'Did you sleep well, Ms Byrne?' he enquired. And Charis just nodded. She did not even try to utter a sound. She knew that there was no point.

'So it appears,' Snape went on, that horrible sneer still plastered on his face. 'Tell me, Ms Byrne, have you ever heard of Sigmund Freud?'

Charis paled. She knew exactly what he meant by that.

'Dreams are curious things,' Snape continued as he made his way around the bed and opened the curtains sharply. 'They can feel so real.' He paused, his black eyes boring into the girl. 'I hope, for your sake, they do not come true.'

And with that, Snape left the girl wide-eyed and snapped the curtain shut behind him .

* * *

Snape carefully closed the door of his quarters behind him, a smirk still lingering on his lips. A student having erotic dreams about him. How much better could it get? And the delicious sounds she had made ... it had almost been a shame to wake her. But then again, the look on her face when she had realised that he, the object of her desire, was standing mere feet away from her, had been priceless.

He brought a hand to his neck and rubbed his aching muscles. A hot, relaxing bath wouldn't be a bad idea. A hot, relaxing bath and the memory of Charis rubbing her thighs together in her sleep, moaning and calling his name. Unfortunately, his first lesson for the day would start in forty-five minutes. There was no time for a bath. But a shower should do the trick as well.

He had already started to undo his robes when the sound of wings and an impatient hoot announced the arrival of an owl. He groaned inwardly. How did those bloody beasts find their way down into the dungeons? But then again, owls were nocturnal. They probably preferred the dim light of the dungeons to the sunlight.

When he recognised the seal on the back of the letter, he groaned in earnest. A letter from Lucius Malfoy was the last thing he needed. After contemplating the option of incinerating the letter and then claiming that he had never received it, he broke the seal and started reading.

Dear Severus,

As loath as I am to trouble you during school hours, I am writing because I am deeply concerned about Draco's grades. By the looks of it, he will not have any grade above an A by Christmas. While I know that you, as his Head of House, provide nothing but the best guidance for Draco, his grades are, sadly, unacceptable.

Narcissa and I have discussed the possibility of getting extra tuition for the boy in order to help with his studies. An older student would be ideal. Naturally, the tutor should be someone from his own House, someone we can trust, and someone bright and academic.

Do you happen if Ms Belakane is available? If so, please do bring her to dinner tonight. It would be a pleasure to welcome her to my home again and to make her an offer regarding Draco's tutelage.

Your friend,

Lucius

Snape crumpled up the letter and threw it into the fire. Dinner at Malfoy Manor. What other joyous surprises would this day bring? Would the Dark lord pop by later and suggest that he should be roasted on a spit?

Discuss Draco's grades. Pha! Since when did Lucius care about Draco's grades? It was not like the boy needed good grades to get a good job in a couple of years. Daddy's wallet would surely take care of that. If the boy should ever have to work at all.

Snape sneered as he started to write a reply. He would not even dignify Lucius' unsubtle attempt to get Ms Belakane to the Manor again with an answer.

Dear Lucius,

As you know, the OWL year is demanding on all pupils. As Draco is in my House, his grades are, of course, also an interest to me.

I shall Floo to Malfoy Manor this evening at six thirty to discuss the matter.

Regards,

Severus Snape

He sent off the owl and glanced towards the clock once more. Thirty minutes left to his lesson. The prospect of that hot, relaxing shower was getting bleaker by the second. And when there was a knock on the door, Snape knew that he would have to settle for a Cleansing Spell. Any other activity he had planned would have to wait until the evening.

'Ah, Severus,' the Headmaster said as Snape ripped open the door. 'I was hoping to catch you before your next lesson. I am sorry to disturb you, but I am afraid this cannot wait.'

The old wizard held out a roll of parchment. 'Malfoy has tried to contact Morgana,' he explained. 'Fortunately, I put a charm on the door to the Hospital wing last night to make sure the girl cannot be contacted by him in any way. Hence, his letter fell into my hands. As her Head of House, I found it prudent to let you read it first.'

Snape snatched the roll from the Headmaster's hand. Yet another letter from Malfoy was not a reading he was looking forward to. And he had the ominous feeling that the contents of this letter would not be as easily dismissed as the contents of the first one. He was not mistaken.

Dearest Morgana,

I am concerned, beloved. The elf returned with nothing but a Thank You last night. Have I offended you in any way?

I beg you, my darling, do reply.

I am longing for you, my treasure. I am longing to be close to you, to touch you. And I am dreaming of the day when you will finally allow me to.

Yours, devotedly,

Lucius

Snape gave a disgusted huff and handed the letter over to Dumbledore. This was just appalling!

The Headmaster's brow furrowed as he read through the letter. 'Severus, did you know of their ... involvement?'

Snape sneered. Since yesterday afternoon, he most certainly knew. But he was not going to tell the Headmaster.

'Lucius has been interested in Ms Belakane's academic success ever since she came to Hogwarts,' he started. 'And as you know, Headmaster, he has been her patron since her parents disappeared. Just like you, I was under the impression that Lucius saw her as a potential bride for Draco or a potential Death Eater.'

He shook his head to get Lucius' words out of his head. But the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. The girl did come from a very old pureblood family, after all.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. 'I am sure Mr Malfoy would be highly rewarded for luring a witch of Morgana's standards into the ranks of the Death Eaters. However,' he paused and eyed the letter once more, 'this letter suggests that he has something else in mind as well. Seduction ...'

'Lucius is a well-known philanderer,' Snape spat. 'His extra marital interludes are well known. He only has to smile in order to make herds of witches lift up their skirts. He has chosen wisely when he took Narcissa Black to bear his child. But it looks like he has set his eyes yet more top-class breeding material this time.'

Dumbledore looked appalled. 'Severus, are you suggesting that Malfoy intends to produce *offspring* with Ms Belakane?'

Snape flared his nostrils with disgust. 'This is exactly what I am suggesting, Headmaster. The idea of uniting two of the oldest Wizarding families in the country can only spring from a power-hungry mind like the one of Lucius Malfoy. Especially now, as the Dark Lord is on the rise again.'

Dumbledore sank onto the nearest chair. 'Thankfully, this letter suggests that they have not engaged in any physical activities yet. For goodness sake, Severus. She is just a child.'

'She has yet to mature,' Snape stated in a cold tone, 'But Ms Belakane is definitely not a child.'

The memory of Morgana's lips driving Bella into a frenzy crept unbidden into Severus' mind, and he mentally slapped himself. This was not the right time to fantasise about a student. Especially not *that* student.

'Ms Belakane *is*, however, a student of *my* House,' he went on. 'I will not have Lucius Malfoy corrupt one of the most promising witches in Slytherin House.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'Do you have any suggestions, Severus? After all, you have known Lucius for quite a few years.'

'Aside from castration, you mean?'

Snape sneered, and Dumbledore chuckled. 'That is a bit drastic, don't you think, Severus? Effective, yes. But drastic.'

'I have been invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor this evening to discuss Draco's less than brilliant grades,' Snape declared, every trace of a sneer gone from his face. 'Whilst I am there, I will endeavour to find out what plans Lucius has for the girl. I fear we will have to be prepared that those plans may involve the Dark Lord. And I cannot leave that possibility to chance.'

* * *

Severus arrived at Malfoy Manor at six thirty sharp. Punctuality was one of his trademarks. To his surprise, he was not greeted by an elf, but by the Master of the House in person.

'Severus,' Lucius exclaimed, opening his arms and flashing his perfect, white teeth. 'Welcome to my humble home.' Then his smile faltered. 'You came alone?'

Severus bowed his head. 'Good evening to you, too, Lucius. Ms Belakane is unable to follow your invitation, I am afraid. She took a tumble on some stairs and is now in the hospital wing.'

'The hospital wing?' Lucius sounded heart-broken. 'The poor thing. I will have to send her some flowers. Roses, I think.'

Then a leer appeared on his face, and he lowered his voice to a whisper. 'Might her fall have something to do with her knees being weak after her little play date here yesterday afternoon?'

Snape ground his teeth, wondering just how bad a faux pas it would be to punch his host in the face before dinner was served. Fortunately, the arrival of the Lady of the House saved him the trouble of finding out.

'Severus, dearest. Welcome.'

As usual, Narcissa looked breathtaking. And as Severus bowed to kiss her hand, he noticed that she was still wearing the same perfume she had been wearing at school: jasmine and roses. It was intoxicating, and it had the same effect on him tonight as it had had twenty years ago. And once more, he wondered what a beautiful witch like Narcissa saw in a creature as foul as Lucius Malfoy.

'You came alone, Severus?' Narcissa enquired, echoing her husband's question. 'Lucius mentioned you would be bringing a friend.'

Snape sneered. 'I would hardly describe her as a friend, dear Narcissa. Ms Belakane is a merely student of mine.'

'Belakane? Morgana?' Narcissa seemed confused.

'I meant a friend of Draco, dearest wife,' Lucius butted in hurriedly. 'Now, would you mind checking on the elves? I'd rather not have them burn dinner again, seeing as we have a guest tonight.'

As soon as Narcissa had left the room, Lucius turned to Snape, eyebrow raised. 'Merely a student,' he chortled. 'Say, Severus, do you always salivate over your *students* like you did over Morgana yesterday?'

Since Snape didn't answer, Lucius pressed on. 'Come on, Severus. I saw you were looking at her. And who can blame you? We all liked what we saw.'

'My intentions towards Ms Belakane are nothing more than honourable,' Snape snapped. 'Which is something that cannot be said for you, Lucius.'

The blond wizard laughed. 'Can you blame me? Have you *seen* her body?'

'Why are you so keen on her, Lucius?' Snape enquired. He had decided that a direct approach was the best solution in the matter. 'What do you want from her? Besides burying yourself in yet another seventeen-year old, that is.'

A lusty grin appeared on Lucius' face. 'Now that, dear Severus, is good enough a reason. Wouldn't you agree? Young flesh that tastes of honey, deliciously tight ...'

Once more, Snape had the urge to hex Lucius into the middle of next week.

'I am not stupid, Lucius,' he growled. 'You would not have introduced the girl to Bella, Avery and the rest of them if you just wanted to fuck her. You have plans for her.'

'Maybe I do. Maybe I don't.' And with a mysterious smile on his complacent face, Lucius made his way to the dining room, giving Snape no other choice than to follow.

* * *

'Well, Lucius,' Snape started as the elves carried off the leftover hors d'oeuvres. 'I understand that you are concerned about Draco's grades.'

'As far as I am concerned, the boy is not getting a new broom for Christmas.'

Narcissa patted her husband's arm. 'Don't be too harsh on Draco, dearest.'

'The boy is lazy, Narcissa,' Lucius hissed. 'Stop mothering him.'

Narcissa sent Snape a pleading look. 'Is there anything we can do to help, Severus? Can Draco get a tutor?'

'Most certainly,' Snape replied. 'I can provide my services for additional Potions coaching.'

'The boy needs a tutor for all his subjects, not just Potions,' Lucius interrupted. 'And I want somebody we know, somebody who is competent and trustworthy. Morgana, for instance. I happen to know that she is one of the best in her year.'

'Absolutely not.' Severus put down his napkin a little bit too vehemently and had to explain himself. 'Ms Belakane is taking her NEWTs this year. It would be unfair to expect her to study and to coach at the same time. As you have pointed out, Lucius, she is one of the best in her year. And I would hate to see her grades fall simply because she is neglecting her own studies in order to help Draco.'

They discussed the possibility of Morgana tutoring Draco for the better part of the main course, and by the time the elves cleared the table, Lucius had gone as far as to offer Morgana ten Galleons an hour for her efforts. But Snape stood his ground. He was not going to let Morgana spend any more time with *any* Malfoy.

When Narcissa excused herself, Lucius leant over the table. 'Now, let us cut the chitchat, Severus. You and I both know that Draco doesn't need a tutor. The point is that want Morgana!'

Snape crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. 'Why, Lucius? Why do you want her?'

'Because she is the best fuck I have had in decades. Merlin's balls, you saw what she can do!'

Snape clenched his fists under the table. Oh, how he wanted to tell Lucius that he knew perfectly well that he was not getting any, that he had seen the letter, and that he knew that Morgana had been turning him down for almost six months. But he had to behave himself. If he insulted Lucius now, he would never learn the man's true reason for wanting the girl.

Lucius leant back in his chair and let his fingers glide over the edge of his wine glass, smirking. 'Tell me, Severus, why are you so protective of that particular student of yours? I always thought you did not like any of them. Could it be that you are yourself interested in her?'

'I am her teacher, Lucius,' Snape replied in a cold tone. 'It is my job to be protective.'

Lucius laughed. 'Your job! Don't be ridiculous, Severus. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you do not want to shag her?'

'Now *you* are being ridiculous, Lucius,' Snape retorted. 'If it came to light that I was having an affair with one of my students, I would be out of Hogwarts quicker than Nifflers on gold. And I do not think the Dark Lord would be too pleased about that. You see, Lucius, I unlike you cannot risk everything for the sake of a quick fuck.'

'This is not just a quick fuck, Severus,' Lucius bellowed, slamming his hand so hard on the dinner table that two glasses fell crashing to the floor.

And Snape smirked inwardly. It looked like he was finally getting under Lucius' skin and to the heart of the matter. Lucius seemed suddenly excited, ever so willing to share his little secret.

'Do you not realise who this girl *is*, Severus? The last of the Belakanes. That family can be traced back to Morgana le Fey, for crying out loud! Do you have any idea how much *power* that line possesses?'

Snape raised an eyebrow. He had been right then. 'So you wish to *breed* with her, Lucius?' he enquired. 'For what purpose? You already have an heir. Do you really think Narcissa will play happy families with a child who is not her own?'

Lucius shook his head and laughed. 'You really don't get it, do you, Severus? Use your brains. Who? Who in the whole Wizarding world would be interested in that bloodline? Come on, Severus. Think.'

Snape felt his mouth go dry. 'The Dark Lord ...'

'Yes, Severus. The Dark Lord!' Lucius puffed his chest out. He looked damn pleased with himself, triumphant even. 'The Dark Lord cannot produce an heir; you know that as well as I do. But *I* can present him with an heir from an almost royal bloodline. Morgana's child *My* child!'

Snape swallowed dryly. This was insane.

'What would you gain from this, Lucius?' he asked, trying to sound interested in order to cover up that in fact he was disgusted, horrified. 'Do you really think the Dark Lord will care about you once you have presented him with the *heir*? He would probably kill you on order to raise the child as his own.'

'He cannot, Severus,' Lucius exclaimed, madness glimmering in his grey eyes. 'It's the power of the bloodline. Don't you see? If I father Morgana's child, I cannot be disposed of. It would break the ancient magic of the blood. I will be untouchable. But I do not forget old friends, Severus.'

Snape frowned. What the hell was that lunatic talking about now?

'I know that the Dark Lord is doubting your loyalties. *I* can help you regain his trust. Bring the girl to me, Severus. Bring her to me, and I will make sure every witch and wizard in this country know that you had a hand in the making of the heir of the Dark Lord.

'But, if you dare try thwarting my plans in any way, if you dare lay hands on the girl yourself, I swear the Dark Lord will hear in great detail of your betrayal, and I will not be held responsible for his anger when he finds out what a valuable gift he could have had.'

Lucius stared calmly at Snape with steely blue eyes with such emotional detachment it made the hairs on the back of Snape's neck stand up. He realised what this was all about - currying favour with the Dark Lord. And this new development was going to make his life much, much harder.

* * *

Severus' heart was racing as he ran up the stairs to Dumbledore's office. It didn't matter how late it was or if the Headmaster was already fast asleep in his bed. Morgana was in grave danger, and Dumbledore needed to know about Lucius' insane plan. He needed to know right now.

The Headmaster had, however, not gone to bed yet. He was sitting at his desk, eagerly awaiting Snape's return.

'Ah, Severus,' he said as the Potions master entered the office. 'Did you enjoy your dinner?'

Snape shot him a look that would have made an oak tree wither. Did the old man really expect him to talk about the dinner?

'I myself had a very nice chat with Ms Byrne and Ms Belakane. We had herbal tea and ginger snaps.'

Ms Byrne and Ms Belakane? Snape frowned. Why on earth would the Headmaster have those two over for tea?

'It seems as if Charis is very concerned about the wellbeing of her friend. She fears that Morgana is ... not really herself today.'

'Not really herself?' Snape repeated. 'Would you mind being a little more precise, Headmaster?'

'For one,' Dumbledore started, 'she seems still to be afraid of you. Terrified, even. And although this state of mind is not unheard of among Hufflepuffs, I seriously doubt that you could have that effect on Ms Belakane, Severus, as a student of your own House.'

'Secondly, Morgana seems to find herself strangely attracted to Lucius Malfoy.'

'That does not make any sense, Headmaster,' Snape interrupted. 'Ms Belakane knows that Lucius Malfoy has been involved in the disappearance the death of her parents. She despises the man, passionately.'

'And still, she finds herself drawn to him. Tell me, Severus, is it possible that Mr Malfoy has not completely left Morgana's mind? Is it possible that he is still controlling her?'

'No.' Snape vehemently shook his head. 'The girl's mind was at peace when I entered it last night. Lucius was gone. Besides, you saw how strongly Ms Belakane reacted to him being inside her mind last night. Her whole system was affected. If he was possessing her again, I trust we would notice.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'So what can we do, Severus?'

'Nothing. As long as we do not know how Lucius has managed to enter her mind, we cannot do anything to protect her. It is, however, crucial that we keep a close eye on her. After what I have learnt at the Manor tonight, we do not under any circumstances want Ms Belakane to go wandering off to throw herself into Lucius' arms.'

'What did you learn at the Manor, Severus?'

Snape inhaled deeply and closed his eyes for a moment. It had been horrid enough to listen to Malfoy talking about his plan. Re-telling it to Dumbledore was nothing he was looking forward to.

'Do you remember me mentioning that it is all about blood with the Malfoys? Well, I am afraid that I was right, Headmaster. Lucius is indeed looking for breeding material.'

Dumbledore was calm and composed as Snape told him about Malfoy's wicked plan. But as soon as the Potions master had finished, the Headmaster got up from his chair and started taking down books from the shelf, one looking more ancient than the other. He leafed through them feverishly. And every time Snape tried to ask what he was looking for, the Headmaster just shook his head and continued his quest.

After almost a quarter of an hour, he finally looked up at Snape. 'Ancient blood magic, Severus. The most powerful of them all. I assume that Mr Malfoy has done his homework, seeing as he is aware of the fact that he, the father of the heir, is untouchable. However, I think that the same ancient law will help us to protect the girl.'

Snape frowned. He did not understand.

'Blood magic cannot be performed by force, Severus,' Dumbledore explained, pointing at a passage in the book that was lying in front of him. 'All the parties involved have to be there *on their own free will*. That means ...'

'That means that the girl has to *allow* Lucius to sire her child,' Snape breathed. 'That is why he has not touched her. She has to give her consent.'

Once more, Dumbledore nodded. 'As long as the girl doesn't say yes, Malfoy will not be able to touch her.'

A cold shiver went down Snape's spine. 'You know Lucius Malfoy. He is able to charm an egg away from a dragon mother. He will not rest until the girl does say yes.'

'Yet another reason to keep a close eye on her, Severus. She must not leave the castle. She must not meet Lucius Malfoy.'

Snape was already half-way out of the door. 'Do you know where the girls are now, Headmaster?'

'I overheard them talking about crisps and a bucket full of ice cream. I'd suggest the Room of Requirement.'

The old man watched Snape billow out of his office in a swirl of black robes and sighed lightly. Protecting Harry and Snape's own duplicitous lifestyle was a big enough strain for his Potions master. And now he had asked him to protect yet another students. He feared that this might just push the man to the breaking point.

But only Snape could do it, and they both knew that.

VIII: Innocence Lost

Chapter 8 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter VII: Innocence Lost

'This room is amazing! A jukebox! I can't believe it!'

The Room of Requirement had certainly outdone itself once more. Not only did it provide ice cream and chocolate in every flavour the girls could possibly think of, but there actually was as Charis had pointed out correctly a beautiful 1950s Wurlitzer jukebox, loaded with at least five hundred songs. And the most astonishing thing was that the Muggle device was actually working!

'Oh, you will love this, Morgana,' Charis exclaimed, already flipping through the choice of songs. 'I know just the song that will cheer you up.'

When *Love Potion Number Nine* started playing, a smile flitted over Morgana's lips. But it disappeared almost too fast for anyone to notice. She didn't feel like smiling, hadn't done so all day.

She had awoken with a massive, migraine-like headache. And when she had attempted to get out of bed, the room had started to spin, and she had almost thrown up. Poppy had tried to make her take some of the potion that was standing on the nightstand, but Morgana had refused and told the medi-witch that she was alright. She couldn't tell Poppy why she didn't want to take the potion. She wasn't sure herself. All she knew was that a bubble of panic had risen in her chest the moment she had recognised Snape's handwriting on the phial.

The feeling had increased over the day. Every time somebody mentioned Professor Snape's name, Morgana flinched. She didn't know why, but she had the ominous feeling that Snape was up to no good, that he was about to hurt her in some way, that he was about to harm ... Lucius.

Lucius Malfoy. That was yet another name that gave Morgana a headache, but in a different way. Since her eyes had fallen on the ring Lucius had gifted her the night before, she had been longing for him, yearning even. She wanted to lie in his arms, wanted him to kiss her, caress her, even ... yes, she wanted him to take her, wanted to give herself to him. Body, heart and soul. And although something deep inside her told her that this was profoundly wrong, she could not help herself.

Charis was now dancing to *Sympathy for the Devil*, but her eyes were on her best friend who was leaning against the wall, arms crossed in front of her chest, her brow furrowed and her thoughts seemingly far, far away. Charis could understand that Morgana wasn't in a dancing mood today, not after everything that had happened the day before. But she still didn't like the dark look on her friend's face. Nor did she like the things she had heard Morgana say during the day.

They had started talking almost the moment Morgana had woken up, and Charis had made a shocking discovery: her friend's emotions seemed to have made a complete U-turn. While she had shown nothing but disgust for Lucius Malfoy only twenty-four hours ago, she seemed to be yearning for him now. And Severus Snape, the man she had desired for over a year, had somehow turned into her Boggart. She flinched at his name and even refused to use the potion he had brought her.

This development in Morgana's feelings had scared Charis, and she had taken her friend to Dumbledore. The Headmaster had listened, and he had made Morgana promise that she would not under any circumstances contact Lucius Malfoy and that she would inform either him or her Head of House if Malfoy tried to contact her. Morgana had looked the Headmaster in the eye and had said that she understood. But Charis was afraid that her friend herself didn't know whether or not she was lying.

'You are not going to dance with me, are you, Morgana?' Charis asked, swaying her hips, although she knew what the answer would be. And she got it straight away.

'You know that I don't dance, Charis.' Morgana did not even turn to look at her friend. Her eyes were still attached to something outside in the darkness.

Charis pouted. 'Not even with me?' she asked. 'Not even if I've got you a present?'

She retrieved two necklaces from her pocket and held them under Morgana's nose. 'I made them this afternoon while Poppy was giving you a check-up,' she explained. 'I took my favourite pair of earrings silver stars of course and put them on two necklaces. Then I charmed them.'

Charis was beaming at her friend now. She was very proud of what she had accomplished. She had an O in Charms for a reason. 'Look, if you squeeze your star, mine will glow green. And if I squeeze mine, yours will glow blue. That way we can contact each other whenever we feel like it. And if you are ever in peril, if you squeeze it and say the word help, it will glow red.'

Charis demonstrated enthusiastically as Morgana smirked at her. Then she put one of the necklaces around Morgana's neck. 'It looks pretty on you.'

Morgana looked down at her chest. 'Now this day will go down in history as the day when Morgana Belakane started wearing jewellery. First the ring and now a necklace.'

Charis frowned. 'Don't you like it?' It was not an expensive gift. Just a thin silver chain with an old silver earring on it, nothing that could be compared to the ornate, expensive ring Morgana was wearing at her left hand. But Charis had hoped it would make Morgana smile.

'Of course I like it, sweetie,' Morgana started. 'It's just ...' Well, exactly what was it? What was it that made it so damn hard to say thank you and give her best friend a hug? Why could she not just accept that little gesture of kindness?

Morgana's thoughts were disturbed by an impatient pecking noise against the glass of the window. Out there on the windowsill sat a beautiful silvery-grey owl, carrying a long, narrow box.

Charis opened the window and petted the owl. 'It's for you,' she pointed out as she took the package from the bird and read the card that was attached to it.

Morgana didn't need to be told. She had recognised the handwriting on the card at once. And her heart had skipped a beat.

'Lucius,' she murmured and reached out for the package.

Charis put her hand on her friend's arm. 'Morgana, I am not sure you should open this,' she said warningly. 'Not after ...'

'And why not?' Morgana snapped. 'Do you have any idea how tired I am of everyone trying to make Lucius look bad? You, Dumbledore, Snape.' The Potions master's name tasted bitter on her tongue. 'Can't at least *you* be happy that once in my life something nice is happening to me? That someone cares about me?'

Charis withdrew her hand. 'We are worried about you, Morgana. We don't want anything bad happening to you. And Lucius Malfoy ... Morgana, you know what he is capable of!'

Charis didn't say more. It was highly unfair of Morgana to make it sound as if no one ever cared about her. Charis for one cared deeply for her, always had, always would. And now she was endlessly worried about her best friend. But she held her peace. The last thing she wanted was to fight with Morgana.

Morgana had picked up the package and was now busying herself with opening it, keeping her eyes resolutely on her own hands. She had not meant to snap at Charis. She knew very well that the other girl only had her best interest in mind. She also knew that Charis, Dumbledore and Snape were right about Lucius Malfoy. He was dangerous. And Morgana knew all but too well what kind of cruelties he was capable of.

'Roses,' she stated as she opened the package. Seven long-stemmed, blood-red roses. And there was a tiny card attached to them, carrying Lucius' artistic, slender handwriting.

Darling Morgana,

The summer is long gone, and the weather is colder. And so is the Manor since you have left: a cold and lonely place.

I am longing for you.

Lucius

Morgana let her fingers caress the flowers and smiled. No one had ever given her roses before. No one had ever longed for her before.

'They're beautiful,' Charis exclaimed.

Morgana quickly stuffed the card into her pocket and looked up at her friend, feeling slightly guilty. She had really not meant to yell at her. Charis meant well, and she knew that.

She touched her necklace and smiled, pushing the roses away. 'Roses wither, Charis. And they are nowhere near as beautiful as this necklace.'

And Charis accepted her friend's apology with a small smile.

Over the next hour, they emptied half a bucket of ice-cream and listened to more Muggle tunes. And Charis danced and sang, but did not make Morgana join her. She could see that her friend was tired and in no mood to dance or discuss her feelings for Lucius Malfoy any further.

'You should go to bed,' she suggested as she flopped onto the couch beside Morgana. 'I might just stay here all night. I am having way too much fun to stop. And besides, dancing is a great workout. Heaven knows I need it after all that ice cream!'

She was already up and dancing to Alice Cooper again when Morgana left. And she never saw the frown on the Slytherin's face when Cooper sang about poison running through his veins.

* * *

Charis began to sway her hips rhythmically to the seductive beat as the jukebox once again whirled into action. She loved to dance, and she found it liberating, a way of losing herself totally. When she immersed herself in music, she didn't think about homework, or her blood status, or her NEWTs, or even the embarrassing incidents with the sulky Potions master. It was just her and the music flowing through her.

Wanting. Needing. Waiting. For you, to justify my love.

Madonna's whispered, husky, urgent vocals gave Charis the urge to touch herself, and soon she was running her hands down her body, tracing her narrow waist, the swell of her breasts, the whole time her hips swaying sensuously. She danced with her eyes closed, gyrating in time, and was so lost in the music that she never even noticed she had an observer.

Severus Snape stood watching the girl dance provocatively, blissfully unaware of his presence. His eyes widened as he saw her perform wanton moves that were far beyond her years. She had taken off her school robes and was wearing a Muggle T-shirt that was far too tight, far too revealing, far too ... adult. It accentuated the soft curve of her waist, her breasts ...

Snape felt the blood pump through his veins as he saw Charis grab her behind with both hands and lean forwards, only to undulate her body upwards again in a smooth, delicate action. He sneered. This was the third time in two days that she had managed to arouse him, whilst not even going out of her way to do so. What was it about her that made him react in such a manner?

His bulge was now straining through the buttons of his robes as he approached her silently. She was a young woman now; there was absolutely no doubt of that. And who would have guessed the usually demure Ravenclaw could harbour such lurid fantasies about him, could have such vivid and explicit dreams, and could dance so gratuitously? To hell with good intentions and school rules. He knew that she wanted him, and it had been far too long since he had tasted a woman. He felt his breath become shallow as he was mere inches away from the girl, her hips swaying the whole time. And without warning, he grabbed her hips and pulled her towards his crotch.

Charis gasped, and her eyes snapped open as she felt the erection press against her buttocks. She flicked her face to the side and was met with the sight of Snape's onyx eyes glittering back at her, and she was captured in his gaze. How he had found her in the Room of Requirement, she did not know. In fact, at this point in time, she did not know anything. All rational thought had left her. The only things she could focus on were the hypnotic music, those black eyes, and the thick bulge pressing urgently at her behind.

'Five points from Ravenclaw for lewd behaviour,' Snape breathed, grinding gently against her and never breaking eye contact.

Charis was so shocked and aroused, she could only gaze back. At first, she found herself unable to move, but after a few moments in which she had contemplated if she was actually dreaming or not, she began to grind her hips in time with him. A small grunt told her that Snape was really, really enjoying this.

She shivered as his breath tickled her ear.

'Did I not tell you that I hoped for your sake your dream did not come true?' he whispered as one hand slipped up her skirt, to her thigh, and found the hot, damp material between her legs.

Charis shuddered with pleasure at his touch and whimpered, pushing back against him involuntarily.

'Do you like being touched, Ms Byrne?' he whispered softly, his voice as gentle as his caress.

'Oh, yes, sir,' she managed to reply as he began tracing little circles with his fingertips over the cotton covering her core. His touch was exactly as she had imagined it so many times, and it sent jolts of pleasure through her body.

As Snape bent his head to rub his nose against her neck, Charis' nostrils were filled with his musky scent - spice, chilli, dark chocolate and musk, all rolled into one. And the very scent made her breath become shallow.

'Tell me how it makes you feel,' Snape insisted, now pressing his lips against the sensitive skin behind her ears.

'It makes me feel ... vulnerable, and a little scared, but tingly, like every nerve is on fire.' Charis breathed. She could hear the tremble in her voice and knew Snape could, too.

'I see.'

His free hand now began to slide up over her hip, her belly, until it found one of her breasts. He squeezed it gently, feeling her nipple jutting out through her t-shirt, his other hand circling relentlessly on top of her knickers. Once more he leant in, his breath tickling her neck.

'Would you come for me if I asked you to, Ms Byrne?'

'Yes, sir,' Charis replied, her breath hitching in her throat. Yes, oh, Goddess, yes. That and much more. That and anything else he asked of her.

Snape knew that she was helpless in her lust for him. And the sense of power it gave him to have that control of her almost made him as giddy as the rose-scented fragrance she was wearing. It was like a drug, that high of control, of power, coupled with her complete physical craving for him. He had never known anything quite so intoxicating.

'Look at me,' he suddenly whispered, cupping her face with his fingers.

He needed to see that look of wanting, that look of pure desire in her green eyes. That look he had yearned for, for so long. He hungered for it, and she gave it so honestly.

That very look he wished Lily would have given him with *her* green eyes. The look of lust. The look of need.

Every one of his nerve endings was burning with raw passion, and he inched his face forward, just enough so their lips brushed. The girl's breath was sweet, the tang of her arousal almost palpable. In just a few short seconds, he would surely claim her mouth greedily and then take her right there, just as she wanted him to. And he would not care that she was his student and he her teacher. He would take her because he could and because they both wanted to.

He was just about to tease her lips open when he saw something red flash at her throat, and he pulled away. The sudden disruption had made him snap out of the haze of lust. For heaven's sake, this girl was not Lily! She was his student! And he had almost ...

He was just about to deliver a nasty comment to drive the girl away when he noticed that she looked terrified. Her hands were shaking, and her gaze was attached to the star that was dangling at her neck, glowing red as blood.

'It's Morgana,' she whispered breathlessly. 'She's in danger!'

IX: Poison Running Through My Veins

Chapter 9 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter IX: Poison Running Through My Veins

The Slytherin common room was all but deserted when Morgana returned. Her House mates were obviously still at the Quidditch pitch watching the Slytherin team showing off their new brooms which even this year had been sponsored by the Malfoys. And Morgana was glad that no-one had stayed behind. She neither had the desire nor the energy to confront her House mates tonight.

They had, of course, wanted her to come down to the Quidditch pitch, too. And when she had said that she was too tired, they had at once concluded that she was going to meet Charis. And two seconds later, the standard name calling and teasing had started. 'Make sure to use a Cleansing Potion before you go to bed. Wouldn't want Mudblood stench all over the dormitory,' Pansy had said, and everyone had laughed. And Morgana had just shaken her head and left. She had not been in the mood to pick a fight.

Her House mates had not always disliked the fact that Morgana's best friend was Muggle-born. Actually, the whole thing had first started in her fourth year, the year when the Heir of Slytherin had returned to Hogwarts. That year, right after the attack on Mrs Norris, Draco Malfoy had started to gather like-minded followers, and for the first time in many years, the word *Mudblood* had fallen in the Slytherin common room. And it had also been the first time that someone in her own House namely Montague had tried to forbid Morgana to socialise with Charis. Ha, as if Morgana would let anyone forbid her anything! She had stood tall and told Montague right in the face that she preferred Charis' company to his any day because Charis actually had enough brains to get dressed by herself in the morning. Montague, of course, had not understood the insult.

During the Triwizard Tournament, when Slytherin House had played host to the Durmstrang students, the word *Mudblood* had become so common that nobody even reacted anymore. Well, almost nobody. There were, of course, Slytherins who weren't purebloods and Slytherins who had friends that weren't purebloods. But those Slytherins soon learnt to keep their mouth shut to stay out of trouble. All but Morgana. She would hex anyone who used that foul word and had made many trips to the hospital wing after having been hit by a hex herself.

But this year, she had learnt that it was wiser to be careful. Ever since the return of the Dark Lord last summer for that was what he was called in Slytherin House, always the Dark Lord, never He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named the mood in Slytherin House had become more hostile by the day. Muggle-borns were now officially considered filth, and so were the people who associated with them. Some Muggle-born Slytherins had talked to the Headmaster about transferring to another House. Others had not even returned to Hogwarts after the summer. And any Slytherin who had ever had a Muggle-born friend had either turned their back on them or kept their friendship very, very quiet. And although Morgana didn't care about blood status, she, too, had learnt to keep quiet about her friendship to Charis.

Morgana let herself fall onto the leather couch by the fireplace, relishing the quiet that surrounded her. Thank Merlin that the others hadn't returned yet. The last thing she needed was Pansy sniffing at her clothes, telling her that the Mudblood had indeed rubbed her stench off on her.

She rolled her shoulders and flexed her fingers. It was only then that she realised that there wasn't an inch in her body that wasn't aching. It was almost the same kind of ache that accompanied high fever. It was dull, affecting every joint. Absentmindedly, Morgana scratched her left palm. It was itching, tingling. And the more she scratched, the more it itched.

'Oh, joy,' she mumbled. 'For the first time in my life somebody sends me flowers, and I turn out to be allergic to them.'

Instinctively, she rubbed her palms together, trying to numb the itch, but it didn't work. On the contrary, it seemed to be spreading. First her wrist started to itch, then her left forearm. For fuck's sake! She scratched herself until her arm was red, until her nails started to tear open the skin. But it didn't help.

Then she realised that it was not her skin that was itching. The tingly sensation came from under her skin, from inside her body. Morgana blinked and shook her head. From inside her body? That was just ridiculous. But still ...

... *poison running through my veins* ...

The chorus from the Muggle song Charis had played for her started to echo in Morgana's ears, and she started putting two and two together. She had been half-asleep when Poppy had cast a diagnostic spell on her early in the morning, but she had heard the mediwitch and Snape murmuring something about poison. Poppy had told Snape that she hadn't found anything. But did that mean that there truly wasn't anything there?

Morgana felt her hands start to shake. The itching had stopped and been replaced by a burning sensation. It was almost as if there were tiny pieces of glass flowing

through her body, threatening to slice open her skin from the inside. And she dug her nails into her flesh, scratched feverishly until she drew blood.

Blood. Morgana stared fascinated at the crimson drops that were forming on her pale skin. The blood seemed to be soothing the pain. Of course. If there was something creeping through her veins, it needed to be let out.

Next thing Morgana knew, she was standing in front of her desk in her dormitory. Her book about Mind Controlling Potions was still lying there, still opened on page three hundred and seventeen. And beside it lay the small bag in which she kept her scales, her basic potion ingredients and her small silver knife.

Snape was fuming with rage as he swept down the stairs to the dungeons, Charis at his heels. He was furious with himself. How the hell could he have lost control like that? Two days ago, he had had *everything* under control. He had meant to tease the girl, show her that he knew perfectly well that she lusted for him and that she would never get him. Because it was *he* who set the rules. But tonight, he had lost control. Merlin's crotch! He had been so aroused that he had almost laid hands on a student! And what was even worse, him letting his cock rule over his brain had delayed him in his search for Morgana. And according to Charis, she was now in danger.

The racket that was coming from the Slytherin common room made Snape run faster. There was a shriek, then agitated voices, many people talking very loudly at the same time. He flew down the corridor like a bat out of hell. It was twenty minutes past curfew, and any unlucky soul who happened to be in his way now would end up with at least three months worth of detention.

He had already thrown open the door to the Slytherin common room and taken a deep breath to yell at whoever was responsible for the commotion when Draco Malfoy bumped into him. The boy was pale like a ghost and had obviously been on his way out.

'Professor Snape,' Draco exclaimed. 'I was about to come and get you! It's Morgana ... in the shower ... Pansy found her ... there's blood everywhere ...'

Snape's eyes darted from the babbling boy to the group of students that stood huddled together at the door that led to the girls' dormitory. They looked just as terrified as Draco sounded. Obviously, the boy wasn't making up a story.

'The nurse,' Snape bellowed. 'Inform the nurse, Draco!'

Then he realised that Charis had caught up with him. 'Go back to Ravenclaw Tower, you silly girl,' he snapped at her. The last thing he needed right now was a Muggle-born in his common room. 'Your kind should not be down here.'

And without waiting to see if she was following his orders, he banged the door shut right in front of Charis' nose.

The group of Slytherins knotted around the stairs parted and granted him access to the girls' dormitory. He reached the bathroom with a few strides and fell dead in his tracks at the door. He had not been prepared for this sight. On the floor cowered Pansy Parkinson, cradling the limp body of Morgana Belakane in her arms. Her friend Astoria Greengrass knelt in front of her, trying to cover Morgana's bleeding arms with towels.

'Out,' Snape growled, still clutching the doorframe. 'Both of you! Out!'

The sound of his own voice made him snap out of his trance-like state. He launched forward, pushed the two girls out of the way and picked up Morgana. He was out of the common room and on his way to the hospital wing in less than thirty seconds.

Carrying that girl to the hospital wing was turning into a bad habit. But last night, she had at least been screaming and struggling. Now she was just lying limp in his arms, and Snape felt panic rise in his chest. He should have been there. He had left Dumbledore's office half an hour ago in order to find her. But he hadn't found her, and instead, he had almost fucked her best friend. And while he had been following his libido, Morgana had hurt herself.

'What have you done, you silly girl?' He wasn't sure if he was whispering to her or if he just heard his own thoughts echo in his ears. All he knew was that he should have been there, that he should have prevented this.

Poppy stood ready when he arrived in the hospital wing. Obviously, Draco had for once in his life obeyed an order and carried it out correctly as well.

Snape laid Morgana down on a bed, and Poppy started to peel off the bath towels Pansy and Astoria had wrapped around their House mate's arms.

'The potion, Severus.' She didn't need to say more. Snape was already at her cabinet to retrieve a bottle of Blood Replenishing Potion.

When he returned to the bed, the mediwitch was already busy charming the cuts on Morgana's arms.

'Do they close, Poppy?' he asked with a hoarse voice. 'Do the wounds close?'

Poppy nodded. 'Yes, Severus, they will close. I cannot guarantee that there won't be scarring. But they will close.'

Snape sighed with relief. For some horrifying moments, he had been afraid that the girl might have used magic. With shaking hands, he started administering the potion.

I should have been there, he thought, berating himself once more for his loss of self-control *I should have kept an eye on her, like I promised Dumbledore*

When the colour started to return to Morgana's cheek, Snape turned to face Poppy. 'The girl needs to be restrained, Poppy. At least until we know what drove her to such a desperate act.'

The mediwitch looked up at him and shook her head. 'I don't think this was a suicide attempt, Severus. Look at the scars.'

Snape frowned. Whatever was the witch talking about? The girl had sliced her arms open. If that was not a suicide attempt, then what was?

'Look,' Poppy explained, pointing out several scars that were already fading into thin white lines. 'None of these cuts are fatal on their own. None of them was aimed at the vein. Those are precise incisions, all the same size, the same space between them. Severus, those cuts almost look ... surgical. As if ... as if she was trying to cut something out.'

Snape swallowed dryly. Was the girl losing her mind? Had the strain of him and Lucius being inside her head at once been too much after all? Had he damaged her?

He cast another glance at her. She was still unconscious, but her cheeks were becoming rosier. Poppy would take care of her. And without another word, Snape turned on his heels and stomped out of the ward. He had to see Dumbledore.

When Snape arrived at Dumbledore's office, the Headmaster was already serving herbal tea to Draco, Pansy, Astoria and to Snape's surprise Charis. And the alarmed look on Charis' face told him that the girl already knew what had happened.

'Severus?' Dumbledore exclaimed at once. 'What news?'

'Miss Belakane has lost a lot of blood,' Snape reported in a cold tone. He had no intention of letting the students know just how shaken he was. 'She is still unconscious.'

'But alive?'

To that, Snape nodded, noticing for the first time that the front of his robes was covered with blood, Morgana's blood. And the crimson colour made him see red as well.

'I want to know exactly what happened tonight,' he snarled. 'Miss Byrne, you spent the evening with Miss Belakane. What did you do?'

'We ... we danced and had some ice cream and ...' Charis found it hard to concentrate. She was torn between being worried for her best friend and being embarrassed that she once more had let Snape get into her knickers. And him staring at her now, cold anger burning in his beetle-black eyes, did not help at all.

'Miss Byrne,' Snape bellowed, and Charis flinched.

'Get yourself together,' he went on. 'What happened in the Room of Requirement? Did anything suggest that Morg... Miss Belakane would commit such an act?'

Charis vehemently shook her head. 'Of course not, sir! Do you really think I would have let her go if I had suspected anything? She was worried, no, confused because her feelings towards ...'

She broke off and cast a furtive glance towards Draco. The little git looked completely unmoved. Did he not realise that his House mate had almost ... The thought made Charis shudder, and she felt tears well up in her eyes.

'Professor Snape, Headmaster,' she cried out. 'Morgana is a Slytherin. She is a fighter. She would never ...'

'She did do it, you silly girl,' Snape interrupted her with a voice so cold that Charis lost any control she had tried to maintain.

'No, she would never ... could never ...' Her vision blurred as the tears came running down her face. How could Snape stand there and yell at her? It seemed almost as if he blamed her for having let Morgana return to the dungeons on her own. How could she have known?

She felt a hand on her shoulder and accepted the handkerchief that was put into her hand. When she had dried off her tears, she realised that it was Dumbledore who was comforting her.

'Severus, please,' she heard the Headmaster say. 'There is no need to intimidate the students like that. They have been through enough tonight.'

'They have been through enough tonight? They?' Snape was about to fly off the handle. 'Headmaster, may I remind you that a student of my House is currently lying in the hospital wing, with her wrists slit open, fighting for her life? I demand to know what happened tonight!'

He swirled around to face the three Slytherins. 'Malfoy, Parkinson, Greengrass, your version. And I will not have any more tears!'

'Morgana did not want to come down to the Quidditch pitch with us,' Draco started. 'She wanted to meet the Mud... her Ravenclaw friend instead.' The boy's voice was filled with loathing and disgust, but if anyone Snape for example had noticed, they decided that it was not the right moment to address the matter. Charis looked to the floor, fighting back yet more tears.

'When we came back, Astoria and I found her in the bathroom,' Pansy continued. 'She ... she had already done it. I don't get it, sir. Why would she ...?'

Before anyone could answer Pansy's question, Dumbledore had stepped in front of the students. 'That will be all,' he said in a kind yet firm tone. 'I ask you to return promptly to your dormitories. I will instruct the elves to provide you with some Sleeping Draught should you require it.'

The Slytherins immediately bade the Headmaster and their Head of House goodnight and trooped out of the office. Charis, however, stayed behind. 'Please,' she begged. 'Can I see Morgana?'

Snape shook his head. 'Not now, Miss Byrne.'

Charis frowned. Any trace of anger had disappeared from the Potions master's voice. He just sounded tired now. Endlessly tired.

For the second time that evening, Dumbledore put his hand on Charis' shoulder. 'Your friend is being well taken care of, Charis,' he said as he softly pushed her towards the door. 'Let her sleep. Things will look brighter in the morning.'

The moment the door closed behind Charis, Snape collapsed onto the closest chair and buried his face in his hands. He should not have let this happen. He had been supposed to go and find the girl.

'What on earth happened, Severus?' the Headmaster enquired. 'Why would Morgana ...'

'I have no idea.' Snape blinked and sat up straight. 'This is not like her at all.' But then again, not much of what the girl had done over the last forty-eight hours was anything like her.

'No, it is most certainly not like her,' Dumbledore mused, peering at his Potions master over his glasses. 'Morgana is not the type of student to commit such an act on a whim. She is, as her friend pointed out, a fighter. Can this have anything to do with what happened last night, Severus?'

'Last night, the girl was utterly confused, Headmaster,' Snape began, the analytical part of brain taking over. 'Tonight, she had a plan.'

'A plan? Whatever do you mean, Severus?'

'The cuts, Headmaster. Poppy noticed it at once. None of the cuts were aimed at the girl's veins. None of them would have been fatal. And they were made in such a precise manner that they resemble surgical incisions. It almost seems as Miss Belakane was trying to cut something out of her arms.'

This hadn't made sense when Poppy had said it, and it still didn't make sense now. Just what would the girl have tried to cut out? And why?

Once more, Snape brought his hands to his face and inhaled deeply. 'She used her Potions knife, Albus. Her *Potions* knife.'

'Severus,' Dumbledore said in a commanding tone. 'This was not your fault. You have no reason to feel guilty in any way.'

The hell he hadn't. Snape mentally slapped himself. He had been supposed to go and look for the girl. But he had followed his cock instead and had forgotten all about her for some precious moments.

'Is there any possibility that the girl is still under the influence of Lucius Malfoy?' Dumbledore asked outright. 'Is there any possibility that he still holds on to her mind?'

'Her mind was at peace before I left her last night. Lucius was gone,' Snape explained. 'We would have noticed otherwise. You saw how she reacted to him being in her mind last night. And besides, why would he make her hurt herself? What would he gain from that?'

'I did not say that Lucius made her do this, Severus.'

Snape clenched his fists. Why could that old fool not just say what he obviously already knew? Why would he make him guess?

'I believe,' Dumbledore finally went on, 'that the girl was trying to rid herself of whatever had taken possession of her. You said it yourself, Severus. She seemed to have

tried to cut something out of her arms.'

'But how? How is he getting into her mind, Albus? Legilimency requires eye contact. In fact, any kind of mind control requires physical proximity. How could Lucius ...?'

'Do you know if Morgana received anything from Lucius tonight?' Dumbledore interrupted him. 'A letter? A gift, perhaps?'

The roses! He had smelled their scent. They had been lying on the very table on which he had planned to take Charis tonight. Long-stemmed, blood-red roses, tied together with a green and silver ribbon. Just the kind of gift Lucius Malfoy would have chosen.

Snape shot off from his chair and told the Headmaster to follow him to the Room of Requirement.

* * *

'Do you think that he used the same trick yesterday?' Dumbledore asked as they had examined the roses. 'Might he have daubed the ring with it, perhaps?'

'This is a possibility, yes,' Snape replied. 'Blackroot is a treacherous plant. It is absorbed by the skin almost immediately and leaves no residue. That would explain why we did not detect it on the ring last night.'

'And when you asked Poppy to check Miss Belakane for poison this morning,' the Headmaster concluded, 'the girl's system had already broken down the poison.'

Severus nodded. At least, now they knew why the girl had been acting so strange. Her desire for Lucius, her sudden fear towards her Head of House, it was all due to this ill-fated plant. Blackroot was commonly used in Dark potions, mind controlling potions, as it had an adverse affect on one's feelings and judgements. Under its influence, one could swear that black was white, and wholeheartedly believe it to be true. Or, Snape thought with disgust, it could even make an orphaned girl fall madly in love with her parents' killer.

'We must keep Lucius from using the plant on the girl,' Snape declared. 'Blackroot, in high doses, is extremely poisonous.' High doses. Snape oppressed as shudder. Hopefully, yesterday had been the first time Lucius had used the plant. Hopefully, today would be the last time.

The Headmaster nodded. 'We might find it difficult to persuade Lucius to stop using the plant. His motives are very clear. As we know from his letter, he is growing frustrated that Miss Belakane keeps turning down his advances. He wants her to change her mind. He wants her to come to him willingly.'

'And he is not going to rest until he gets what he wants,' Snape snarled. 'He never does.' This was one of Lucius Malfoy's greatest talents. He would literally kill anyone who stood in his way to achieving his goals. A true Slytherin, indeed.

Dumbledore crossed the room and gazed out of the window. It was a beautiful night. The moon was almost full, and the stars shone peacefully. Nothing suggested what evil plans were about to unfold.

'If we cannot stop Lucius,' Dumbledore started, 'then we must give him what he desires.'

Snape swirled around to face the old man. He must have misheard. 'I beg your pardon, Headmaster?'

'Morgana, when she is well,' Dumbledore continued, 'must offer herself to Lucius.'

Snape stared at Dumbledore in utter disbelief. Had the old crackpot completely lost it now?

'You said it yourself, Severus,' Dumbledore explained in a calm tone. 'Lucius will not rest until he gets what he wants. And what he wants is the girl's body. He wants her to carry his heir.'

'Headmaster, you cannot seriously be suggesting that we ask Miss Belakane to give herself to Lucius.' Snape was appalled. 'This is prostitution. And it is disgusting!'

'Severus, please. I have only the girl's best interest in mind,' Dumbledore went on, rising his hand to keep Snape from interrupting him. 'Morgana will offer herself to Lucius, but he will not take her. Because you will be there to ensure that he does not touch her.'

'Me?' Now Snape was certain that Dumbledore had lost his marbles. 'And how, Headmaster, am I supposed to do that? Shall I tell him that I would like to watch?'

Dumbledore chuckled, and Snape contemplated throwing a good hex at him and then owling the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's so they would come and take that lunatic away.

'Dear Severus, for being a spy, you lack imagination. Use your wand, dear boy. A Disillusionment Charm, an Invisibility Cloak. I don't care how you do it. But you will be there, and whether you have to stun, maim or damage Malfoy, you will stop him!'

Snape felt his mouth go dry. 'There must be another way. You cannot seriously expect me to watch Lucius seduce Miss Belakane and then step in at the very last moment to keep him from committing the act?'

'I am afraid that this is exactly what I am asking of you, Severus,' Dumbledore said gravely. 'And there is no other way.'

'And how, pray, are you planning to make the girl agree to that?'

'We will not have to make her agree to anything,' Dumbledore explained. Obviously, he had already thought everything through. 'The Blackroot seems to have served its purpose well. According to her friend, Miss Belakane believes herself seriously smitten with Lucius Malfoy. Now we just have to wait until she runs into his open arms. And when she does, you will be there to protect her, Severus.'

'I cannot watch the girl twenty-four hours a day, Albus,' Snape exclaimed. By Merlin, he had not even managed to keep an eye on her tonight! 'How am I to know when she decides to *run into Lucius' open arms* as you put it so nicely?'

'Now, to that problem, Severus, a certain Ravenclaw has already found a solution.'

X: The Unbearable Beast of Burden

Chapter 10 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter X: The Unbearable Beast of Burden

Charis was lurking in the shadows outside the hospital wing. She had, for the very first time in her life, disobeyed a direct order from a superior and felt terrible because of it. But what choice had she had, really? She knew that Dumbledore had meant well when he had sent her to bed. But how was she supposed to sleep when her best friend was fighting for her life?

Once more, Charis got up on her toes and peered through the little window in the door. One of the beds in the ward was shielded off by curtains, and she was certain that this was the bed where Morgana was lying. But she could not see anything. The light was dimmed, and Poppy seemed to have retired for the night. Did that mean that Morgana was well enough to be left alone? Or did it mean that there was no hope?

Charis felt tears well up in her eyes, and clamped her hand on her mouth. No, no, she shouldn't have such thoughts. Snape had said that Morgana was unconscious. Surely he would have mentioned if she was dying.

'Please, God, let Morgana be alright,' Charis whispered. She did not believe in God. But her mother did, and Charis had visited church every Sunday when she had been a child. And now, when she felt desperate and alone, she was willing to send a prayer to just about any deity.

'This is the second evening in a row that I find you roaming the corridors after curfew, Miss Byrne. Your rule breaking is becoming rather tiresome.'

Charis span around at the sound of Snape's voice. She had not heard him approach, but there he was, standing right in front of her, his black eyes boring into her skull. Instinctively, she tried to back away from him, but there was nowhere to go; her back was already against the entrance door of the hospital. Her heart was beating so hard and fast that she was convinced that Snape must hear it, and she felt embarrassed. Embarrassed and scared.

When he extended his hand, Charis cringed. She did not want him to touch her. Not now. But to her surprise, he was pushing open the door she was leaning against.

'Come on, Miss Byrne,' he said in a hushed voice. 'Let us go inside. But be quiet. Madam Pomfrey will certainly throw us out if she hears us.'

The pale moonlight cast eerie shadows and made Morgana's face look even paler. In fact, Charis had never seen anyone look so pale.

'She will be okay, won't she, sir?' She did not expect any comfort from the Potions master, but he was the only one around, the only one she could ask.

'Miss Belakane has been given several doses of Blood Replenishing Potion, and the nurse has healed her cuts,' Snape explained. 'There is no reason why she should not make a complete recovery.'

Once more, Charis felt her eyes fill with tears. 'I still cannot believe she would do that to herself. It's not like her, not at all. Maybe ... maybe this is my fault.'

'Miss Byrne, get a grip on yourself. This was not your fault. And stop crying.'

Snape's harsh tone made Charis turn her head away. Why did he have to be like that? Why could he not just for once be kind and show that he wasn't the hairy-hearted wizard everyone made him out to be? The tears were now rolling down Charis' cheeks, and she bit her lips to stifle the sobs.

'I mean it, Miss Byrne,' Snape hissed. 'If you do not stop crying this instant, Madam Pomfrey will hear. And I have no desire to be told off tonight.'

The picture of the sinister Potions master being told off by Poppy made Charis smile, and she wiped off her tears and sat down on the chair that Snape pushed towards her.

'What happened tonight was not your fault, Miss Byrne,' he went on, his voice suddenly much softer. 'Nor was it Miss Belakane's.'

He sat down on a chair on the opposite side of the bed, and Charis risked a glance in his direction. He looked just as pale as Morgana, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. And Charis wondered if he had slept anything at all last night.

She looked from Snape to her friend, and suddenly, the tears were streaming down her face again. And there was nothing she could do to stop them.

'Miss Byrne, seriously ...'

'I nearly saw my best friend killed tonight, sir.' How dare he tell her to stop crying? Did he really have no heart? Did this whole affair really leave him untouched? 'I know that she is in danger, and there is nothing I can do to help her. I am scared of losing her.'

There, she had said it. She had admitted her fear to him, and now he could do whatever he wanted with that information. Surely, he would ridicule her now. But Charis did not care.

To her surprise, Snape leant slightly forward on his chair and looked at her. 'Actually, Miss Byrne, there is something you can do. Tell me, those necklaces you and Miss Belakane are wearing, how do they work?'

'I ... I charmed them to glow when one of us wants to contact the other,' Charis started, surprised that Snape was showing any interest in their jewellery and that he had noticed the necklaces at all. 'We hold on to our necklace and think of the other, and then their star glows. Like this.'

She closed her hand around her star and concentrated on her friend *Morgana*, she thought. *Sweetie, can you hear me?*

Promptly, the star at Morgana's neck started to glow blue.

Snape nodded, quietly impressed. The charm was a form of Trace, similar in fact to the very Trace he bore on his own arm. Trace charms were very advanced magic, and the Dark Lord's own spell was extremely complex. That a seventh-year Ravenclaw could create a basic Trace charm showed that she did indeed deserve her O in Charms.

'Miss Byrne, I would like to borrow your necklace for a while. The Headmaster thinks it prudent to observe your friend for a while.'

Charis frowned. 'And how will my necklace do that, sir?'

'The charm will have to be changed slightly,' Snape explained. 'Instead of barely being able to contact Miss Belakane, the bearer of your necklace will know where she is at any time.'

'Why would you have to know where Morgana is, sir?'

Snape sighed. 'The Headmaster and I have reason to believe that Miss Belakane might soon try to get to Malfoy Manor. In case she does, we will want to know.'

Charis shook her head. 'Why would she go to Malfoy Manor? Sir, why is Morgana all of a sudden smitten by Lucius Malfoy? Everyone knows what kind of man he is. He is foul, dangerous ...'

'He is also one of the most influential wizards in the country, Miss Byrne,' Snape interrupted her. 'And he has charmed witches both smarter and more sophisticated than your friend here. It is not her fault.'

He got up and waved his wand at the nearest bed. Soundlessly, it glided over the floor and came to a halt beside Morgana's.

'I assume that you will want to spend the night here. Am I correct, Miss Byrne?'

Charis nodded. Most certainly, she did.

'Then I want you to lie down and get some sleep,' Snape went on. 'I shall wake you in the event that Miss Belakane regains consciousness.'

Charis looked up at him with big eyes. 'You ... you are staying, sir?'

'A student of my House has seriously injured herself tonight, and I do not know the reason for it. Do you really think that I am going to let her out of my sight?'

'No, sir.' Of course he would not. As Morgana had said the day before: Severus Snape did always look out for his students.

Charis took off her shoes, slipped under the cover and closed her eyes. But she could not sleep. Her mind was in turmoil and so was her heart. And she felt guilty that the main reason for it wasn't Morgana.

She cautiously opened her eyes. Snape wasn't sitting on his chair anymore. He was standing by the window, back straight, arms crossed in front of his chest, his brow furrowed. He looked worried, troubled even. And Charis couldn't help but wonder if there were anything else other than Morgana on his mind.

She wished he would say something, anything. He and her, they had almost ... Charis squeezed her eyes shut and willed her heartbeat to slow down. She had seen pure lust in his eyes earlier that night, and it had rendered her defenceless. Against her better judgement, she had let him touch her in the most intimate way. Despite the appalling way he had treated her during detention two days ago, she had let him touch her, because she had mistakenly believed he desired her. And had he asked her to, she would have let him do even more. And then her necklace had started to glow, and he had let go of her as if burnt, and the look of lust she had seen in his eyes had been replaced by a look of terror.

Of course he had, without delay, sprung to Morgana's aid. Of course his main concern was about her now. Charis would not have expected any less of him. But still, the way he was treating her now hurt her deeply. It was almost as if he was disgusted by her, as if he hated her.

'Your kind should not be down here,' he had said to her as she had tried to follow him into the Slytherin common room. Your kind! So that was what it was all about. The Head of Slytherin House was just like the rest of them. He could just as well have called her Mudblood.

Charis pulled the blanket over her head and started to weep softly into her pillow, desperately hoping that Snape would not hear her.

But Snape did hear her. His sense of hearing had always been very keen. And he had also noticed that the girl had been staring at him for a good five minutes.

He wasn't the stonehearted monster his students made him out to be, and he did not enjoy Charis' tears. In fact, they troubled him deeply. But that night, he neither had the words nor the energy to console her. In fact, he wasn't sure if he wanted to talk to her or could even look at her again without feeling a pang of guilt.

None of this should have happened. He should not have approached her. He should not have touched her. And he most certainly should not have lusted for her. But he had lost control that night. He had let his lust and the ghosts of his past lure him into a trap from which he did not know how to escape. He had projected his desires onto the girl with the green eyes, a helpless little girl of whom he knew that she would do anything for him because she had a crush on him. He had used her, and he hated himself for it. She was his student! She trusted him because he was her teacher. How could he have betrayed her in such a way? How could he have let her down?

This seemed to be the theme of the evening, letting people down. He had let Morgana down as well. He had known that she was in danger, and still he had let his libido distract him long enough for her to have the time to hurt herself. What if the Slytherin girls hadn't found her? What if she hadn't had the presence of mind to grab her necklace when she had noticed that she was losing control? She would have slowly bled to death on the bathroom floor. And he would have yet another death on his conscience.

He turned from the window and let his eyes wander towards the two beds where the girls were lying. Charis' sobbing had subsided. Hopefully, she was sound asleep. Hopefully, she was dreaming of something that made her happy. He approached Morgana's bed and looked down at his student. Her cheeks should be rosier by now, he thought. But perhaps it was just the moonlight that made her look so terribly pale.

Charis' necklace was lying on Morgana's blanket, and Snape picked it up, almost sneering at the idea of having to wear it himself. If anyone knew! But if it helped to protect the girl, he would wear it. He would not let her down once more.

He rubbed his tired eyes and sighed. He had to hand it to Dumbledore, the idea of letting Morgana go to Malfoy Manor and letting Lucius believe that his scheme had been successful was brilliant. Nonetheless, it was insane. Disgusting. And he did not want to be part of it. But he had no choice. Once more, he seemed to be the only man for the job.

He sank onto his chair again and buried his face in his hands. How would he ever be able to look into Morgana's eyes again, he wondered. When all this was over, he would have seen her naked, exposed, both physically and mentally. And she would know.

He would, of course, do what he did best. He would employ his Occlumency, make himself unapproachable and silently hope that the girl could one day forgive him. But what if she didn't? What if she hated him for what he had to do? What if she could not understand that he was trying to save her? Would she forever look at him with that look she had had in her eyes the night before, when her mind had been possessed? She had been terrified of him, and Snape had to admit that that had hit him hard. Against common belief, he did not get pleasure from being feared and hated. Against common belief, he had a heart as well.

* * *

'Miss Byrne.'

Charis buried her face in her pillow. The light in the room was far too bright for her to open her eyes, and it was certainly far too early to do so anyway.

'Miss Byrne, wake up. Now.'

Charis' eyes snapped open and locked onto Snape's. Instinctively, she pulled the blanket up to her chin. Merlin forbid she had dreamt of him and talked in her sleep again. But this time, Snape did not smirk at her. In fact, he looked so tired that Charis wondered if he would even have the energy to do so.

'I believe your little friend is coming around,' he announced and inclined his head towards Morgana's bed. 'I thought you might want to know.'

Charis scrambled out of her bed and sank to her knees by her friend's bedside. Morgana was indeed stirring, if only faintly.

Charis sneaked her hand into Morgana's, and once more she felt tears burn in her eyes. 'You gave us quite a scare last night, sweetie,' she whispered. 'But you're fine

now. And we are going to protect you.'

'Miss Belakane, do you remember what happened last night?'

At Snape's voice, Charis felt Morgana's hand clamp around hers, and the edges of Morgana's ring cut into her flesh. She looked up at the Head of Slytherin House, a fearful look in her eyes. But Snape just shook his head at her, and his face was stern, inscrutable.

'Miss Belakane,' he repeated. 'Do you remember what happened last night?'

Charis looked up at her friend and her breath caught in her throat. Morgana's pupils were dilated, and she looked utterly confused. And she was still holding on to Charis' hand for dear life.

'Sweetie,' Charis said in a soft voice, lifting up Morgana's arm. 'Don't you remember?'

Morgana's eyes widened when she caught sight of her bandaged arm.

'Miss Belakane,' Snape started again. 'Did you try to ... hurt yourself last night?' He couldn't make himself use the word kill. He did not want this to be a possibility. He wanted to be able to blame Lucius somehow.

'I ... I don't ... I can't ...' Morgana was still staring at her bandages, seemingly unable to understand. 'There was something ... I felt something crawling under my skin ...'

Charis gave her friend a frightful look. Whatever was she saying? Something crawling under her skin? This didn't make any sense at all! But when she turned to look at Snape, she found him nodding. He seemed to understand.

'Miss Byrne, it is nine o'clock,' Snape said in an imperative tone. 'Transfiguration starts in twenty minutes, and I want you to be there. Preferably showered and in new robes.'

For the second time that morning, Charis felt Morgana's grip tighten around her hand. 'Don't leave me alone with him,' she heard her friend whisper.

Snape sneered. 'There is no need to worry, Miss Belakane. I will not be staying. I have some dunderheads to teach.'

* * *

The vein at his temple was pulsating madly, and the potion he would need to cure his massive headache had not been invented yet. And the sound of students chatting and ladles scraping against cauldrons was slowly but surely driving him insane. But only when the last third-year had left his classroom did Snape unclench his fists and allow himself to sink onto a stool, secretly wondering if he would ever again have the energy to get up. He wasn't sleeping well nowadays. How could he? There were so many things going on, and he seemed to be involved in most of them.

Firstly, there was the Dark Lord. The maniac was getting increasingly frustrated with his plans not progressing the way he wanted them to. Getting hold of the prophecy was proving to be one hell of an undertaking, and his patience was running thin. And the more impatient he grew, the more Crucios would he fire. And it was getting more and more difficult to avoid them, even for Snape.

Secondly, there was Dolores Umbridge. Apart from Filch, the woman had made herself nothing but enemies in the castle. The students loathed her, and so did the staff. And every time Snape heard her oh-so-delicate cough or saw her clipboard, he hoped that someone would hex her into oblivion. Not to mention how much those blasted Ministry decrees she seemed to issue every day made his jaw ache in frustration. His aversion against the woman had gone so far that he had not even punished the Weasley twins when he had overheard their plans about poisoning the hag.

Umbridge was even involved in the third reason for Snape's lack of sleep. She had disbanded all student organisations just about the same time as Saint Potter and his faithful followers had decided to start practicing Defence Against the Dark Arts on their own. Dumbledore, naturally, had got wind of it and had instructed Snape to make sure Umbridge didn't find out. So now, besides patrolling the corridors at night in order to catch any students out of bounds, Snape also had to make sure Umbridge didn't get anywhere near the Room of Requirement, where Dumbledore's Army was practicing, and also rein in the overzealousness of her band of obnoxious little helpers, the Inquisitorial Squad.

Fourthly, of course, there was the constant protection of Potter, and his duties to the Order. Every time he went to Headquarters to give his latest report, Black would pester him about the boy. As if it were so easy to protect that brat. He should be keeping out of the limelight in these troubled times, and yet he had already landed himself in detention with Umbridge and been banned from Quidditch. Naturally, Black would make it sound as if all of this were Snape's fault. And Snape couldn't help but notice that Black wasn't the only Order member who was giving him suspicious looks. He tried to convince himself that he did not care. Dumbledore trusted him, and that should be sufficient. But he had to admit that it would be nice to hear a thank you now and then. Even if he would just reward it with a sneer.

And then there were the self-titled Star Sisters. Now, those two girls were giving Snape a headache of the worst kind, even if it were unintentionally. They had all but stopped their plans to get close to him, each for her own personal reasons: Charis had not as much as looked at him ever since the little incident in the Room of Requirement. If she were embarrassed or disgusted by his unprofessional behaviour, Snape did not know. But what he did know was that the girl kept her eyes firmly on her workbench during Potions. She had always been quiet, but nowadays she seemed so withdrawn; she did not even raise her hand. Nor did she chat and giggle with her best friend. Once or twice, most of the time after a couple of glasses of Firewhisky, Snape had thought about apologising to the girl. But as soon as he had sobered up, he had discarded the idea. Why in Hades would he apologise for something that they both had wanted? But he did not like the idea of the girl suddenly hating him.

Morgana did not look at him either nowadays. Her reasons, he knew: she still seemed terrified of him, flinched every time he addressed her and even fled the common room every time he showed up. And although Snape knew that these were not the girl's true feelings, they disturbed him. He did not want her to be afraid of him. He had honestly preferred her when she had been rebellious and cheeky.

And last but not least, there was Lucius Malfoy and his lunatic, megalomaniac plan of gifting the Dark Lord with an heir. Every time Lucius got the chance, he would remind Snape that he wanted the girl, and that it would cost Snape dearly if he tried to keep her from coming to the Manor. As if he were even trying! He had even allowed the elves to bring Lucius' gifts to Morgana again, and she was getting plenty of them: flowers, chocolates, dresses. Lucius was spoiling the girl, and Snape knew that it was only a matter of weeks until she would succumb. And when she did, he would have to be right there at her side and keep Lucius from claiming her body.

This was all too much. And no matter how many times a day Dumbledore told him that he was the only one who could do the job, Snape feared that he would soon crumble under the pressure. He had never been a jovial man, but the strain was making him even crankier, and there were days when he couldn't stand himself.

Oh, yes, he wanted to sleep, preferably for two or three days straight, just to shut out the world and hope it would be a better place when he woke up again. But there was no time. His NEWT class would arrive in ten minutes' time. And besides, he doubted that he would be able to sleep without a potion anyway. He was too tense.

He went to the bathroom to splash some water on his face and change his shirt, and when he took it off, his eyes fell on the silver necklace he was wearing. He had changed the charm slightly. Instead of the star glowing, it would turn cold. That way, he could wear the necklace under his robe, under his shirt even, and no-one would ever know. Because the last thing he needed was a student detecting that he, Severus Snape, was wearing jewellery.

He stood tall and menacingly in the front of the classroom as his NEWT class trooped in and frowned as he noticed that Miss Belakane was missing. It was not like her to cut classes, especially not Potions. But then again, the girl had done quite a few things that weren't like her over the last couple of weeks. Snape's gaze wandered to the workbench right in front of his desk where Miss Belakane and her friend normally worked. It was a strange sight to see Charis sitting there on her own. In fact, Snape was so used of seeing the two girls side by side that his mind actually struggled with the concept of seeing Charis alone in class. Somehow, she looked forlorn. And once more, she did not look up to meet his gaze. Not once.

The students worked hard and followed his instruction to the very last detail. Obviously, the rumours of his exceptionally foul mood had already spread. But then again, this was a NEWT class, and Snape expected nothing less than perfection of them. He billowed through the classroom, weaving in and out between the workbenches and was just about to remind the students of their homework when a shudder ran through his body. He clutched at his chest and felt the cold metal through his robes. The necklace was activated!

'Out, all of you,' he bellowed. 'Leave everything on your workbenches and get out. Miss Byrne, you stay.'

The students were out of the classroom as if he had Vanished them. None of them even dared question the Potions master's decision to dismiss them earlier. Only Charis stayed behind, just as he had asked her to.

'Your friend has left the castle,' Snape announced. 'I need you to inform the Headmaster.'

And without waiting for the girl's reaction or even caring about it, he swept out of the classroom.

XI: Mine Is Your Body

Chapter 11 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XI: Mine Is Your Body

Now that she was standing in front of Malfoy Manor, Morgana was not really sure how she had gotten there. She knew she had Apparated, of course, but what she couldn't remember was how or when she had made the decision to ditch class Potions of all things and go to see Lucius instead. But then again, he deserved her visit. That very morning, he had gifted her with the most beautiful piece of jewellery. For that, he deserved a kiss at least. Maybe even more.

She swept through the heavy oak doors that led to the Malfoy's impressive and luxurious lounge. The room was furnished in soft creams, rich browns and pastel green. Antique furniture lined every wall. The room breathed money and old money at that. Each tasteful piece that adorned the room, whether vase or ornament or painting, was surely an heirloom worth more Galleons than most wizards would see in a lifetime. The opulence was staggering, and somehow Morgana felt out of place. She had never known such luxury. Through the huge bay window, she could see two of his massive Irish Wolfhounds playing on the perfectly-manicured acres of lawn. And by the marble fireplace, holding a crystal tumbler of vintage brandy stood none other than the Lord of the Manor, Lucius Malfoy himself. And Morgana's breath hitched in her throat.

Lucius looked breathtaking. His platinum hair hung, flawlessly coiffed, over his broad shoulders. The delicate silver of his cravat and matching waistcoat set off his grey-blue eyes perfectly, fitting snugly to enhance the V-shape of his torso, and the cut of his grey moleskin trousers had the look of expensive and bespoke tailoring. Morgana could not help but admire the wizards' form, and Lucius smirked as he watched her eyes travel down his body. This was going to be so easy.

'My darling,' he exclaimed, his smirk turning into the most adorable smile. 'I'm so glad you're here at last! I've been barely able to sleep, my thoughts are so full of you.' He placed his tumbler on a side table and stepped before the girl, taking her hands into his own to kiss them. He noticed the delicate clutch of silver entwined around her wrist: a snake, with emeralds for eyes, the sister piece to the ring he had sent her. She had done what he had hoped then and put it on the minute she had received it. One could always count on Slytherin vanity.

He drew her hand to his face, tilting her wrist this way and that to admire the sparkle of the gems in the light. 'You like it?' he asked, his eyebrow quirked, his eyes searching hers.

'I adore it, Lucius. And I'm so happy to be here. But Snape did not make it easy for me to leave the castle.'

Lucius narrowed his eyes at the reference to her teacher. If Snape dared to put his abnormally large nose into his business, the Dark Lord would hear about it. And Snape would have to pay for crossing his plans. 'No,' he replied, trying to oppress a sneer. 'That jobsworth wouldn't have. But enough about him! You are here, with me, and we have the whole afternoon.'

He smiled indulgently at his young sweetheart, who offered a smile in return. But he could see that the girl seemed uneasy, and before he could find out why, she gave him the reason herself.

'Where's your wife, Lucius?' she asked, a trace of concern in her voice. She did not feel comfortable with the term mistress, and she had always been treated with kindness by Narcissa. It had been Narcissa who had taught her to walk in high heels and carry herself straight, to make pleasant dinner conversation and choose the right fork for the right course. She did not like the idea of hurting the woman in any way.

Lucius stiffened at the mention of his long-suffering wife, and his smile faltered. Heaven forbid the girl had developed a conscience. 'Narcissa is looking after a frail aunt,' he explained. 'She will be gone for some days ...' The smirk began to creep back onto his face now, and his voice held a lascivious tone. 'We have all the time in the world.'

With a smooth, well-practiced action, he lifted Morgana's chin with the head of his serpent walking cane and planted a soft, quick kiss on her lips. He could have sworn they tasted like nectar.

'Ah, how soft those lips, how much I have missed them.'

His eyes twinkled as Morgana smiled shyly in response. And once more, Lucius felt like clapping himself on the shoulder. The idea of giving the Dark Lord an heir had surely been his finest: the unification of two of the oldest wizarding families, bound by ancient blood magic in such a way that he could not be disposed of, would surely make him alone the most favoured out of all of the Death Eaters. And soon they would bow to him as they did to the Dark Lord himself. The fact that Morgana was an attractive young witch only made the task so much more pleasurable!

'My beautiful Morgana,' he whispered. 'Is it too bold of me to ask for an embrace?'

Morgana reached up and brushed a strand of silken hair behind his ear, feeling almost weightless with happiness. She could not believe her luck. One of the most influential wizards in Britain, a man who never had to ask for anything, was begging for her embrace.

'Of course not.'

Lucius' grey-blue eyes smiled down at the girl as she gave her first permission of the day.

'Then hold me, dear heart,' he whispered.

Morgana gingerly put her hands on his shoulders. She wasn't used to physical contact, avoided it as much as possible, but Lucius could make her tremble just by his proximity. Yes, she wanted to touch him. And she wanted him to touch her.

In return, he wrapped his strong arm around Morgana's waist, crushing her against him gently but firmly.

'Oh, I have been dreaming about your body against mine.' He closed his eyes and took a deep sniff of Morgana's mussed-up red hair. 'Your sweet hair ... Your sweet lips ...'

He ducked his face down once again to claim her mouth, but Morgana pulled back, looking up at his face urgently.

'Why me, Lucius?' Morgana asked, looking up at him anxiously. 'You could have any witch in Britain.'

'But you're not any witch, are you my sweet?' Lucius replied with infinite patience, as if talking to a small child. The girl feeling insecure was the last thing he needed. She had to believe that she was his goddess, that he worshipped the ground she trod on.

'I'm just an orphan,' she mumbled, looking forlorn.

'Don't say that, my love,' Lucius replied. 'Don't you ever say that.' He squeezed her hand tightly and placed a tender kiss on it, looking at her with big puppy-eyes.

'But that is what I am.' Morgana was beginning to tremble. Something was just not right. Why would Lucius Malfoy, a man who could have anything he desired, want her? Certainly, it could not be the Belakane fortune he was after. He had more Galleons than he could possibly spend. And it couldn't be her body he desired. Because the word beautiful was not one Morgana would use to describe herself. And still, there he was, whispering sweet words of love into her ear. And all she wanted to do was to believe him.

Lucius cupped her chin in his hand and gazed deep into her eyes. 'That is not all you are, dear heart. You are a beautiful, talented, intoxicating young witch. And I fear you have me spellbound.' With that, he reached in and gently kissed her neck, the soft fronds of his platinum hair falling into her cleavage.

Morgana exhaled through her nose and let her head fall back, giving him access to the sensitive skin on her throat. Oh, this felt heavenly. She had never known the touch of a man and was completely lost in the sensation. Lucius nudged further in, kissing behind her ear, each brush of his lips sending delicious shivers down her spine. It tickled, yet felt so good at the same time. A soft giggle escaped her lips.

'Mmmm, your giggles are like music to me,' Lucius whispered and continued planting a row of kisses along Morgana's jaw, and her eyes closed with pleasure. Slowly, her hands slid down his back, over the expensive material of his satin waistcoat, feeling the firm, masculine body underneath the delicate fabric. He smelled like he looked: sumptuous, elegant, expensive, masculine.

Lucius moved his mouth up to Morgana's lips, flicking his tongue delicately across them, swiftly and tantalisingly. She opened her lips willingly, almost dizzy from the sensation.

When he froze and pulled away, she felt disappointed at the loss of his lips, fearing she had done something wrong.

'Darling, am I going too fast for you?' Lucius asked, his eyes locked onto hers. 'You will tell me, won't you?'

Morgana nodded eagerly. She would promise him anything just to feel his lips again.

'Oh, I do want you, Morgana,' Lucius whispered, his hands firmly clasped around her shoulders. 'I want you so much. Tell me you want me, too.'

The look in his eyes nearly made her knees give way. Oh, yes, she wanted him. She wanted him to touch her, she wanted to be his. But something kept her from saying yes. 'Kiss me, Lucius,' she sighed instead.

'With pleasure, my love,' Lucius replied, leaning in for a deep, luscious kiss.

He felt the girl go weak in his arms, and he smirked as he ran a hand through her hair. All those years of waiting were finally paying off. He had come up with that brilliant scheme years ago, before the Dark Lord had disappeared, and had toiled and waited patiently for years to see it to fruition. Unfortunately, the girl's parents had not fitted in to his original plans. Her father had been a righteous fool, and getting rid of him had been essential and only too easy. And her mother had chosen to share her husband's destiny rather than provide him with a precious Belakane baby. Little had she known that he Lucius Malfoy would keep an eye on her daughter and ensure that she would provide the heir that her mother would not. Yes, he had waited patiently for sixteen long years, had seen to it that the girl never lacked anything at the orphanage. She had always known that he was her patron, and she had been ever so grateful. Yet, he assumed she knew nothing of the true deaths of her parents. And now, as she was becoming a young woman, he used his charms to make her his, showered her with gifts and tokens, appealed to her vanity and whispered words of love into her sweet little ears. And she was like putty in his hands. Soon she would succumb. Very soon.

'Sweet Morgana ...' he murmured between kisses as the girl in his arms whimpered with pleasure.

Morgana felt her whole body tingle. She had kissed boys but never thought it pleasurable. She had kissed girls and found it nice. But Lucius' kisses were of a different kind. They made her knees go weak and sent jolts of pleasure through her entire body. And she wanted more. Gingerly, she slipped her tongue to his mouth and felt him crush his body against her in response. She let her hands slip to his chest, dared unfasten his waistcoat and tried to get under the crisp Egyptian cotton of his shirt.

Lucius helped willingly and began to unbutton his shirt as he continued kissing her, right there on the hearth, and Morgana's hands slid down his smooth chest, his flat stomach. She once again thanked Merlin that the aging process was slower for magical people. Lucius may have been in his forties but his body was as taut as a twenty-five-year-old.

He smirked at her as she drank in his impressive physique. 'See anything you like, my love?'

'Hmmm ...' she mumbled, before latching on to his neck, kissing, suckling. The wizard was magnificent and the heat from his smooth skin fed her passion further. Suddenly, her insecurity was gone. She wanted to make him hers.

'Mmmmm, Morgana, I do love this wild side of you.' Lucius gasped as the tip of her tongue snaked over his collarbone, her hands moving over his smooth chest in small circles, teasing his small, brown nipples. He growled with pleasure as she left a trail of kisses down over his chest, her tongue flicking softly against his nipple, and couldn't help but smile as her blue eyes gazed up at him innocently.

'Do you like this, Lucius?'

His grey eyes met hers, glittering seductively. 'My darling, I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. I've been imagining your touch for so long.'

With a small smile, Morgana continued suckling gently at his nipple, her hands sliding down over his stomach towards the rapidly-stiffening bulge at his groin.

Lucius shivered with pleasure at the feel of her small, soft hands. 'My love,' he whispered. 'You don't have to please me ...'

But Morgana was hungry for his flesh and eager to shed her inexperience. And although she had the nagging feeling that she should not be yearning for Lucius Malfoy like this, she could not stop herself.

'Yes, I do,' she breathed. 'Let me ...' And with that, her hand slid between his legs, cupping the thick bulge through the soft material of his moleskin trousers.

Lucius watched her intently as she squeezed his erection through the fabric, still suckling his nipple.

'Oh Morgana,' he moaned, amazed at the girl's daring. She did know how to touch a man, and seeing how eager she was to show off her talent, Lucius wondered if he had to thank the Blackroot for this, or if the girl would be so willing to please him even without it.

Lucius and Morgana were so immersed in their foreplay that neither of them noticed the Disillusioned figure of Severus Snape, who had slipped silently in to the lounge and was now observing the scene with a look as black as thunder on his stern features. Surely, the girl must be under a spell, he thought as he positioned himself in the shadows. Why else would she throw herself at Malfoy like this?

'Am I doing this right, Lucius?' Morgana asked as her fingers rubbed against the impressive swelling between the blond wizard's legs. She did not have much practice with men, and she desperately wanted to please him.

'Your touch is exquisite, love,' Lucius purred in response. He wasn't even lying. The girl was talented indeed. But he saw the flicker of insecurity in her eyes.

'Lucius?'

'Yes, my love?'

'Wouldn't you prefer someone older and more experienced ... like Bella?'

Lucius breathed sharply through his nose. He'd apologised to the girl about his behaviour at the lunch and had assumed the occurrence was all but forgotten. The last thing he needed was that moment of indiscretion ruining his plan. With a sincere, searching look, he spoke once more.

'You know how much I regret that incident, dear heart. You made me so crazy with desire that afternoon, I lost control. I beg you, forgive me. It was you I wanted, not her. But I knew I could not have you. Not there. Not like that.'

Morgana looked up at him, her eyes full of need. She wanted to believe him, but she had been so shocked at their coupling. It had certainly looked as if Lucius and Bella were extremely familiar with each other, such was the way she had welcomed him into her. Morgana would bet her last Knut that they'd had sex prior to that occasion. And although she knew of Lucius' reputation of being a womanizer, the thought of him being with Bella made her feel queasy.

Lucius saw doubt in her eyes, and he persisted. 'Do you know that I was physically aching for you for days after that? I did not want to share you with her that day, love. And I did not want to be with her either. It was you who aroused me, and you I wanted. Please, believe me.'

He cupped her face in his slender fingers as Morgana reflected on the mess she had created.

'Oh Lucius ... I should never have touched Bella in the first place. I don't know why I did it.'

Lucius leaned forwards, nuzzling Morgana's nose with his own. 'Shhh. Let's not speak of such things. We both made mistakes, and they should be forgotten. Today it's just me and you.' He nuzzled her once again, this time behind her ear, as she whimpered.

Snape narrowed his eyes. Malfoy was always such a damned charmer. He could charm the Bowtruckles down from the trees. Hearing him spout pure nonsense and watching the girl lapping it up left a bitter taste in his mouth. And if Morgana were not so distracted by Lucius now nibbling at her ear, and Snape was not Disillusioned, she would have seen that Snape had a face like sour milk, and that every word that came out of Malfoy's mouth made him sneer.

Lucius was now kissing Morgana passionately, his smooth hands tracing the curve of her breasts through the material of her dress. And Morgana moaned into his mouth, bucking up against him as he teased a nipple gently through the fabric. 'Yes, Morgana, do you like this?'

'Yes, yes, Lucius, I do,' she hissed. She truly did. His touch was skilful, and he ground lightly against her some more as he nibbled her neck.

As they kissed, Morgana fumbled to undo the laces at the front of her dress. She was ready for him now, she wanted to feel his body against hers and give herself to him. And Lucius saw her fumble with her laces and smiled triumphantly, if only inwardly. He had succeeded. He had broken her defence. He effortlessly waved his hand, and the laces fell open.

Morgana gasped at his use of wandless magic. And as his fingers brushed against her skin, she suddenly felt a little shy and felt herself blush.

'Are you alright, my love?' Lucius asked, lifting her chin with a finger.

Morgana bit her lip. 'You will laugh when I tell you ...'

Lucius' face was full of concern. 'Of course I won't laugh.' Whatever was the matter with the girl now?

She continued chewing her lower lip nervously and then took a deep breath. 'I have never been with a man ... completely ...' She had fumbled with Wood in the Quidditch locker room. She had gone far enough to make him unable to sit properly on his broom, and Slytherin had won the game. But she had not let him touch her. Not like that.

'Dear heart ...' He stroked Morgana's hair gently. He couldn't believe his luck! The girl was a virgin! Merlin's scrotum, this made the whole scenario even better! Not only would it strengthen the blood magic of her giving herself willingly to him, but he also got the added bonus of deflowering a succulent young maiden. No wonder she had been reluctant to give herself fully to him over the summer. He had believed the rumour he had heard from Draco and had been convinced that the girl was experienced to say the least. Oh, if he had known, he would have chosen a different approach. She would not be the first maiden he seduced. And normally, he didn't need any Blackroot to speed up the process. The blood rushed in his ears, and he willed himself to stay calm. 'You have no need to be embarrassed. Would you like to?'

Morgana bit her lip again. Yes, she wanted this magnificent wizard to take her as his own. But she was nervous. Something just didn't seem right, no matter how delectable his kisses and how sweet his words. Was it just her fear of being touched by a man? Or was there something else?

Lucius brushed her lips with his fingers to make her stop chewing on them before she drew blood. 'I know, I know, sweet thing,' he whispered. 'I know you are scared, and I will not make you do anything you do not want to. And I for one do not want you ravaged on a couch like some uncouth tart! Come, let us go to my chamber. We have all afternoon to be in each other's arms.'

And with that, he gently lifted her up and carried her to his chamber.

Snape once more sneaked in behind them, unnoticed. He was fuming with rage. Morgana's confession had felt like a Bludger to the gut. And he had seen the triumph in Lucius' eyes. That bastard would certainly enjoy deflowering the girl, and it would mean absolutely nothing to him. She would be just another trophy, another notch on Malfoy's bedpost.

Lucius' chamber was a beautiful, very opulent and very pure looking white suite, complete with massive four poster bed, framed with organza curtains. The room was huge and adorned with a white sheepskin rug, white candles, white roses, and, Snape noticed with a shudder, lilies.

'The petals of the rose remind me of the blush of your skin, and the lilies remind me of your youth and innocence,' Lucius told Morgana with twinkling eyes.

Morgana kissed him for his sweet words, and he kissed her back deeply, pushing his tongue into her mouth before setting her feet on the floor.

Once more her hands roamed his taut body, and this time she dared to squeeze his delicious butt. She did not notice her bracelet catch on his waistcoat, nor the gentle thud as it landed on thick shag pile carpet and rolled underneath the bed.

Slowly Lucius tugged the open laces of her dress down over her shoulders as they kissed. And Morgana shrugged and the dress fell to the floor, leaving her in just her underwear. She blushed slightly, feeling exposed.

Both Lucius and Snape let their eyes wander over her body: the soft white skin, the curve of her hips, her breasts. And while Lucius smiled appreciatively, Snape scowled and mentally slapped himself. He was there to protect the girl. He had no business looking at her body. But still, he was unable to take his eyes off her. Nor could he keep his cock from hardening.

Lucius took one hand and slowly ran it from Morgana's neck and all the way down her body. 'Beautiful Morgana,' he whispered. His task would indeed be a delightful one.

Morgana shuddered with pleasure at his touch. 'Lucius, I am not sure how much longer my legs will support me.'

'Of course, my love,' he replied with a smile, and then swiftly and effortlessly lifted her onto the bed, laying her down gently.

Morgana sighed with happiness and closed her eyes for a moment, inhaling the flowery scent of the room. This is what it was supposed to be like! Never mind the spotty, ogling boys with their clumsy, fumbling hands. This was real romance, with an experienced, skilful, powerful wizard.

'Kiss me, Lucius,' she breathed. And he did. With grace and agility, he covered her, leaning down to place delicate kisses on her hungry pink mouth. He nudged between her legs, kissing her yet more passionately, grinding himself against her.

She moaned lightly. 'Oh, Lucius, I need you to touch me. I need to feel your hands on my body.'

There was urgency in her eyes, a look which made Lucius feel triumphant. Yes, she was ready. It couldn't take much longer for her to give herself to him. And he would take her, make her his and plant his seed into her womb.

'Oh, Morgana, I want you so much,' he muttered in response, unfastening her bra with a skilful hand. With a fluid movement he pulled it from her body, revealing her pert breasts. He lowered his face, breathing on the soft, pale flesh.

Snape couldn't see the girl's body as Lucius was obscuring the view, but he heard her laboured breathing, her delicate little moans. And he shifted from one leg to the other, tightening his grip around his wand, willing himself to think of something else than the delicious sounds that were escaping the girl's lips and the growing bulge in his trousers.

Morgana gasped as Lucius grazed his lips against one of her succulent orbs before flicking his tongue out and sucking it carefully. She exhaled sharply, grabbing his hair and pushing her chest up against his mouth. And Lucius suckled greedily at the awakened bud before doing the same to the other nipple.

'Oh, goddess!'

Lucius smirked at the girl's reaction whilst rubbing the palms of his hands flat over both nipples in circles, then pinching at them with his fingers, grinding his groin against her the whole time.

In response, Morgana bucked her hips against him, aroused and alarmed simultaneously. As much as she was yearning for Lucius' touch, she hated not being in control. And he certainly had rendered her defenceless.

'I want you, Morgana,' he breathed, his bulge pushing urgently between her legs.

'Lucius, I'm scared!' She felt ashamed to admit it, but she was. What if it hurt? What if she was a disappointment? And besides, she had a nagging doubt at the back of her mind that this whole scenario was just not right somehow, that she should not be at the Manor at all and definitely not naked in Lucius Malfoy's bed.

Lucius fixed her with a soft gaze. 'There's no need to be scared, my love. All you have to do is lie back and close your eyes, my sweet, and I'll show you that you don't have to be scared.'

As Morgana dutifully obeyed and her eyelids fluttered shut, the blond wizard kissed his way down her body, over her belly, until he reached the top of her knickers. Carefully, he hooked his fingers into the waistband, pulling her knickers slowly down, kissing ever lower as he did so. He slid them from her legs with ease and flung them to one side. They hit the Disillusioned Snape on the head, who inwardly cursed. Lucius changing his position had given him the full view of the girl's body. He saw her flushed skin, her erect nipples, her pink, glistening sex. And as much as Snape tried, he could not look away.

Lucius gazed at Morgana's exposed core with a lazy smirk and parted her lips with careful fingers before taking a big, slow lap with the flat of his tongue. 'Oh, I knew you would taste so sweet, my angel,' he moaned in delight.

Morgana's nerve endings were on fire. Never before had she been touched so exquisitely. 'Oh, goddess, Lucius!' she exclaimed, bucking up against him while her fingers clawed at the smooth satin sheets beneath her.

Relentlessly, Lucius lapped and twirled, flicking, sucking and rotating his devilish tongue as Morgana started rocking up against him. His tongue began dancing against her clit, driving her further into frenzy.

'Lucius, don't stop. Please, don't stop.'

Every fibre of Morgana's being was focused on the small nub of pleasure between her legs, which Lucius was now suckling gently. She whimpered helplessly as he pushed a finger inside her as he suckled, and he felt her muscles tighten around his finger. Gently, he eased it in and out, flicking his tongue rapidly from side to side, the differing techniques pushing Morgana towards the edge.

'Lucius, yes, oh, goddess, yes!' she shrieked, her heart beginning to race furiously, and her face flushing from the exertion. This was heaven, pure bliss.

How or when Lucius freed himself, she did not know, but he was now rubbing her clit with the head of his cock. And that, too, felt amazing!

'Tell me you want me, Morgana,' he rasped, his breathing laboured.

'Yes, Lucius,' she whimpered, her voice filled with desperate need. 'I need you. I want you!' She did, she truly did.

But as the blond wizard positioned his cock at the very edge of her entrance, her whole body suddenly went rigid, and her eyes widened in fear. It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of icy water at her. She was suddenly alert and felt the adrenaline pumping through her body. This was wrong! This couldn't be happening! It mustn't! It was not going to give herself to Lucius Malfoy!

'NO!' she yelled.

Lucius did not have time to move before a deep, familiar baritone cried, 'STUPEFY!' and he crumpled into a heap on top of a startled and confused Morgana.

Out of the shadows stepped the fierce-looking figure of Severus Snape, who simultaneously dragged the Stunned Malfoy from the girl and without looking at her threw her his cloak.

'Cover yourself!' he barked, as Morgana hurriedly grabbed the cloak, watching as Snape rolled Malfoy over and Obliviated him. She huddled underneath the cloak, too shocked and confused to even speak.

Finally, Snape turned to her.

'Miss Belakane, you have been in great danger these past few days. Lucius Malfoy has been possessing you.'

'He has what?'

'He has taken control of your emotions, making you fear me, and desire him.'

Snape bent down and picked up the bracelet with a sneer. 'These trinkets he has been plying you with ... it is my theory that they have been smeared with Blackroot, and that he is using it in order to control you and draw you to him.'

Morgana felt herself shaking at such a revelation. 'But, sir, doesn't possession require eye contact? And the use of Blackroot ...'

Snape whirled around impatiently. 'There is no time to explain now. We have to get out of here immediately. I will wait outside whilst you get changed.' And with that, he strode out on to the landing, simultaneously aroused and angry. His erection was pushing uncomfortably at the buttons of his robes as he tried to stop thinking of Morgana's little pink slit, the way her body was spread before him, and the way Malfoy drew such exquisite noises of pleasure from her. Damn the man, Snape thought. And damn Dumbledore for ever putting him in this position!

The past few weeks had been filled so much sexual tension, so much stimulation, yet Snape had had no chance of relief. He was only a man, after all, and hence not impervious to such proclivities, regardless of how improper the scenarios. And surely this was the most improper scenario of all, trying to stop a megalomaniac Death Eater from impregnating one of his students whilst being forced to watch the whole thing! But still ...

The sound of the door scraping open interrupted Snape from his thoughts, and seeing the girl was now changed and draped in his travelling cloak, he spun on his heels and began tearing down the stairs.

'Sir?' asked Morgana, trotting to keep up with him.

'Yes,' he replied through gritted teeth, not looking at her.

She took a deep breath. The few minutes it had taken her to get dressed had been enough to make thousands of questions pop up in her mind. And she knew that the one she was about to ask was not the most pressing. But still, she wanted to know. 'Were you here the whole time?'

'That is neither here nor there,' Snape snapped. 'Now hurry up, we need to leave.'

'Yes sir,' Morgana mumbled quietly and followed the dark wizard as he stormed through the hallway and into the grounds of Malfoy Manor. Her head was buzzing. None of this made any sense! Why would Malfoy want to possess her? Why was he seducing her, if not for love? And had Snape arrived in the nick of time, or had he been there all the time, watching Lucius making love to her naked body? The thought made her blush, and she felt a strange mixture of embarrassment and arousal. Severus Snape ... the man she had been lusting for since her sixth year ...

Snape halted behind a huge rhododendron bush and turned to Morgana. 'Can you Apparate, Miss Belakane?' he asked curtly.

'Wouldn't be surprised if I Splinched myself at the moment, sir,' she replied, looking at her shoes.

Snape breathed sharply through his nose. The last thing he needed was physical contact with the girl, but Side-Along Apparition was the only way to get out of here. He steadied himself and held his arms up at the sides. 'Very well,' he growled. 'Hold on tight.'

Morgana's eyes met his fleetingly before stepping gingerly towards him and wrapping her arms around him. If anyone had told her some hours ago that she would be standing in the garden of Malfoy Manor, holding onto Severus Snape, she would have asked which one of them was possessed. But there she was, taking in all the sensations her brain could cope with at the moment.

The first thing she noticed was his scent: it was less perfumed and muskier than Lucius' had been, but it was still unmistakably masculine and delicious. The second was his height: he was at least three or four inches taller than Lucius, and it made her feel small and feminine in comparison. And the third was the heavy-looking bulge that Snape was trying, unsuccessfully, to shield from her.

'Sir?' Morgana gasped, the sight of his arousal fuelling her own unsatisfied desires.

'Yes, Miss Belakane?' Snape ground out through a sneer.

'You are ... aroused, sir.' She gazed up at him, her eyes heavy with need. She was still very much aroused herself, having been brought so close the edge by Lucius, only to be stopped at the very last second. And being in such proximity to Snape just made it even worse. The fact that he was aroused from what he had just witnessed gave her the encouragement to approach him.

'Thank you for your swift and astute appraisal of the situation, Miss Belakane,' he hissed, drawing his robes around him sharply. Of course, he was aroused. And how could he even for a second have believed that she would not notice.

'So you have been watching,' Morgana stated in a tone that was so matter-of-fact that it surprised Snape and enraged him at the same time.

'I am not a voyeur through choice, Miss Belakane,' he replied coldly, glaring down his nose at her.

'No, you did that to protect me.'

'Someone had to.' He looked at her with fathomless black eyes. At least this time, he had saved her from harm.

Morgana's blue eyes locked onto his dark ones and he heard her whisper a thank you.

What happened next took them both completely by surprise. Before she knew what she was doing, Morgana had boldly grabbed the front of Snape's robes and pressed her lips onto his.

Snape tensed at first, unused as he was to intimate contact with a female, especially when the contact was initiated by the female. His rational mind screamed to push the girl away, but his body yearned to be touched and yearned for release. Within moments he relaxed and snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her to him as they kissed in the sunshine.

Morgana couldn't help but sneak a hand down to his bulge as they kissed, cupping him gently. And Snape pushed his hips forwards with a growl as her tongue darted over his lips and her fingers carefully tightened around his thick cock. He pulled her ever closer so she was crushed against him, his kisses becoming feverish. Morgana could not help but moan, and her hands started tearing frantically at his robes. She needed to see him, and she needed the sweet release that Lucius had promised her just minutes earlier.

It was Morgana fiddling with his buttons that brought Snape firmly back to earth with a bump. He pulled away sharply, looking at her with shock and horror written all over his face, his breathing laboured. This was the second time he had nearly taken a student, the second time he had nearly lost control.

'Professor ... I'm sorry ...' Morgana began, not knowing what to say. Oh, what had she done?

'Miss Belakane ... it has been a heated afternoon,' Snape stated, taking a step away from her. 'It is I that should be apologising to you. I am your teacher, your protector. This was highly inappropriate, and you must forget this incident. Now, we must get out of here immediately.'

Morgana looked at him open mouthed. They had just shared an intense, erotic embrace and he wanted her to forget it ever happened, just like that? Was the man deranged?

'We cannot pretend that this has not happened,' she protested, her desire still burning strongly.

Snape walked behind her scowling, clamping the top of her arms tightly in his big hands.

'We can, we must and we will,' he sneered. And with that, they both turned on the spot, Apparating directly to the outskirts of the Hogwarts grounds.

Morgana almost lost her balance as they landed, stumbling against him. He pushed her forwards, releasing her as if burned. He could not touch her, must not touch her, because he could not trust himself to. He took broad strides across the grounds, Morgana jogging to keep up.

'I'm sorry, sir,' she mumbled forlornly. She truly was. She should not have kissed him.

'Stop apologising!' Snape growled through gritted teeth, the wind whipping his raven hair across his face.

'Yes, sir.' Morgana cast down her gaze and followed him through the old oak doors and into the cool shade of the corridors that led to the dungeons. She knew that what had happened between them was wrong, but her mind struggled to understand why Snape was being as cold as Siberia. It was obvious he had enjoyed their embrace, so why the hell was he being so caustic?

She watched him as he raced down the stairs into the dungeons and swept off to his quarters. She desperately wanted to follow him, wanted him to look at her, just to give her one small sign that he wanted her, too. And if he did, she would have followed him faster than Kneazle out of hell.

To her disappointment, Snape slammed the door to his quarters shut, and left her gaping in the corridor, her heart heavy and her whole body screaming for his embrace.

XII: Secrets And Lies

Chapter 12 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XII: Secrets And Lies

'Severus,' Dumbledore exclaimed and got up from his chair immediately as the Potions master entered his office. 'You have been successful, I assume?'

Snape nodded curtly. 'Miss Belakane is safely back at Hogwarts, untouched.'

'And Lucius?'

'By now, he is probably coming around, believing that he has executed his plan successfully.' Snape more or less spat out the words, and they left a bitter taste in his mouth. Yes, by now, Lucius had certainly woken up and was congratulating himself on having seduced the girl, having taken her virginity and having had such an incredible shag that he had passed out.

Dumbledore was now standing by the window, stroking his long white beard. 'You know Lucius well, Severus. Can we assume that he will now stop pursuing the girl?'

'For the time being, he will most probably stop sending her gifts smeared with Blackroot,' Snape replied. 'He is arrogant enough to believe that the girl will come running back to him now that she has tasted him.'

Tasted ... Morgana's lips had tasted sweet, and they had been soft and warm ...

Snape exhaled sharply and crossed his arms in front of his chest, trying to ignore those thoughts.

'The question is, Headmaster, what will we do when Lucius grows tired of waiting? Sooner or later, he will want the girl to come back to him and impregnate her. And if she does not come to him of her own free will, he will make her. And I am telling you here and now that I will not go along to watch out for her once more!'

Her white skin, the soft curve of her hips, her pert breasts ... the memories of Morgana's body crept unbidden back into Snape's mind, and he shook his head to make them go away. He mustn't be thinking of her like this.

'You look worn out, Severus,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'Are you alright?'

'Watching Lucius Malfoy trying to seduce one of my students is not exactly what I call an entertaining pastime, Headmaster,' Snape sneered.

Dumbledore nodded. 'I hope for the girl's sake that it will never have to come to that again, Severus. By the time Lucius wants her to come back to him, we I should have come up with a plan on how to keep her safe.' He fixed his Potions master with a piercing look. 'I assume that the girl does not know why Lucius is interested in her.'

Snape shook his head. 'For the time being, she believes that he wanted to get into her knickers. Believe me, Headmaster, the girl was in no condition to be told the whole truth.'

And I was in no condition to tell her Snape thought. *I wanted her just as much as Lucius did, even if it was for a different reason. And it was more than wrong*

'Then, Severus,' Dumbledore continued, 'I think we should leave it that way. I would rather the girl did not know what sinister plans Lucius is making. It might frighten her.'

Snape almost snorted. So now the old fool was suddenly concerned with the girl's well-being? Now? But he held his peace. He had no desire to argue with Dumbledore.

'I suggest you rest before dinner, Severus,' Dumbledore continued. 'You have had a rough afternoon.'

You have no idea, old man Snape thought as he turned to leave the Headmaster's office.

He had almost reached the door when he heard Dumbledore call his name once more. 'Severus! Thank you.'

Snape did not even break his pace but marched right out of the office. *Do not thank me*, he thought. *Do not thank a man who saved a girl from the claws of Lucius Malfoy and then almost sank his own into her.*

* * *

The Weasley twins had bewitched a heap of dry leaves to turn into shapes and dance in the air. Of course, it being the work of Fred and George, the shapes were rather silly and at times just a tad offensive. But the students were having fun, and Professor Flitwick, who happened to walk by, whistled causally and pretended not to see.

The wind was carrying the laughter and cheers across the lake to where Charis was sitting on a bench under a tree, tightly huddled into a Ravenclaw blue shawl. She wasn't the brooding kind, never had been, but she did not feel like joining in with the fun, had no desire to laugh. There were thousands of thoughts chasing each other in her brain, and there was a storm of feelings brewing in her heart. And she wanted to be alone.

No, that was not true. Charis did not want to be alone. She wanted to be with her best friend. She wanted to cry at Morgana's shoulder and let out everything she had kept bottled up over the last weeks. She wanted some advice. For once in her life she actually wanted some cool, cunning Slytherin advice. But her best friend wasn't there.

Charis shuddered and pulled her shawl tighter around herself. It had been more than four hours since Snape had chased his NEWT class out of the dungeon and had sent her to the Headmaster. And Charis had done what she had been told, had run up the stairs to Dumbledore's office and informed him that Morgana had left for Malfoy Manor.

The Headmaster had been kind to her. He had offered her some tea and Ginger Snaps, and when she had been too anxious to either eat or drink, he had sat down beside her and answered her questions. So he and Snape thought that Lucius Malfoy had put Morgana under a spell which only could be broken if Malfoy got what he wanted? Or thought that he got it? And that was why neither Dumbledore nor Snape had stopped Morgana from going to the Manor? The whole idea seemed absurd to Charis. But she trusted Dumbledore. And she trusted Snape. Despite everything, she still trusted Severus Snape.

She started chewing at her nails, as she so often did when she was nervous. A disgusting habit, she knew that very well. But in situations like this, not even the best No-Biting Potion could help.

Snape. Just the thought of him made Charis' stomach clench, and she could not say if it was a good clench or a bad one.

Her dreams of him had become more intense. Ever since the incident in the Room of Requirement, she had dreamt of him every night. And whereas her dreams about him always had been of a sexual nature before, there was now something else as well. She dreamt of soft kisses, tender embraces and words of love. And when she woke up in the morning, her heart was filled with a loneliness that almost made her cry.

Charis buried her face in her hands. How had this happened? Three months ago, she had seen Snape as a sex god, a devilish womaniser. She had dreamt of him ravishing her, taking her to sexual heights she didn't know existed. And now she was dreaming of him making love to her, of him loving her.

But in reality, Snape was giving her the cold shoulder and had barely looked at her since that night. He had never been especially kind to her he wasn't kind to any student but at least, he had appreciated her work now and then, even if it only was with a small, almost unperceivable nod or a scratched comment on her homework. And now there was nothing. It was almost as if he avoided looking at her.

Charis bit off yet another nail and felt tears well up in her eyes. What had she gotten herself into? She could not be in love with Severus Snape! He would never love her, she knew that. She was too young, she was a Ravenclaw and she was ... a Mudblood. Yes, that must be it. He had chased her away from the dungeons that night, had said that her kind had no business down there. Yes, she was not good enough for him. He would never love her.

What a mess! Charis knew that she should not love him. She knew that he would never feel the way she did. But still, she could not make her heart change its mind.

She blinked away her tears and shook her head. How selfish of her to think about her messed-up love life when Morgana, her very best friend, her Star Sister, was in danger.

Once more she checked her watch. Snape had now been gone for four and a half hours. Surely, he must have found Morgana already. He should have brought her back to the castle by now. Unless something had gone wrong and Malfoy had hurt Morgana.

'Please, let her be safe.' Charis did not know to whom she was praying, but she desperately hoped that someone would hear her. She needed her friend by her side, now more than ever.

Yet another cheer from the other side of the lake made Charis lift up her head. Her eyesight was too poor to make out what kind of leaf-figure Fred and George had produced, but it was good enough for her to see that a hooded figure was making its way from the castle towards the edge of the lake. It was a small figure, about her own height, walking with quick yet measured steps. And Charis did not need a charmed necklace to know that it was her friend who was approaching her.

She was surprised when Morgana accepted the embrace she was offering and even more surprised when she felt the Slytherin's arms tighten around her.

'Are you alright?' Charis whispered, her voice muffled. Morgana accepting a hug, let alone her giving one, suggested that something was wrong. 'What happened?'

Morgana tightened her embrace even more and rested her head against her friend's shoulder. To be honest, she was not sure what had happened. She had a picture in her head of herself falling into Lucius' arms, of kissing and caressing him, of being kissed and caressed and of giving herself willingly to him. But she wasn't sure that all that had really happened. It felt like a dream, a horrible nightmare.

Snape had told her that Lucius had bewitched her, that he had used Blackroot to make her come to him and love him. And that, too, seemed like a bad dream to her. Nothing made any sense, but her mind was too tired to even try and make sense of anything.

What she remembered clearly, however, was the taste of Snape's lips, the feeling of his hot breath against her skin and the desire he had awoken in her. She would have

given herself to him there in the garden of Malfoy Manor. Had he wanted to, he could have had her. But he had pulled away. And she had not wanted to let him go. And now her body was aching for him, and so was her heart.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. She had not the energy to understand what she was feeling, and so she pushed her emotions away, hid them behind a defensive wall of inapproachability. She would not let any of her feelings slip until she understood them herself.

She put her hands on Charis' shoulders and held her friend at an arm's length, looking into her green eyes. 'Have you been crying?'

'No.'

Charis' attempt to dry off the tears that were hanging at her lashes was futile, and Morgana pulled her close once more.

'Don't lie to me, Ravenclaw,' she whispered softly.

A shudder went through Charis' body, and she buried her face at her friend's shoulder. The tears were now streaming down her cheeks, and she could not stop them.

'Hush, kitten. Hush, now.'

Morgana's soft voice and the tender way she was holding her made Charis cry even more. Morgana had never been one to hug and cuddle. And the way she was lending comfort now made Charis' heart ache still further.

She felt herself being guided back to the bench, and as Morgana sat down beside her, Charis caught a whiff of musk and dark chocolate. She blinked and shook her head. This was insane! Now she was imagining his scent as well.

'I am going crazy, Morgana,' she whispered, her voice still thick with tears. 'Loopy, nuts, insane.'

Morgana frowned. She had no idea what her friend was talking about.

'The night you almost ...' Charis started. 'In the Room of Requirement ... Snape and I ... we almost ... we ...'

Then the words finally came. They tumbled out of her mouth like Gobstones released from their bag. She told Morgana everything that had happened that night, from Snape's touch to the way he had turned away from her. And with every word, her conscience seemed to become lighter, sharing her burden with her friend.

Morgana listened without interrupting. Her face was impassive, but underneath Snape's cloak, she was clamping her hands, digging her nails into her palms. And a strange feeling started to grow inside her heart and writhed in her stomach like a nest of vipers.

She hated to admit it, but she was jealous and angry. Jealous that Snape had touched Charis, twice, and angry because Charis had not told her.

'I don't understand this, Morgana,' Charis exclaimed. 'Why would he touch me like this and then be so cold and foul only minutes later?'

Morgana shrugged. She had seen Snape turn from hot to cold in a matter of seconds this afternoon as well. She did not understand it, either. But she was not going to tell her friend. Not now, anyway.

'What did you expect from him, Charis?' she asked, her voice just a little bit harsher than she had intended. 'Did you expect him to fall to his knees and confess his everlasting love for you?'

Charis turned her head away. Why was it that Morgana so often managed to make her feel utterly stupid? 'I don't know what I expected,' she whispered.

Then she felt Morgana grab her shoulder.

'Charis?' Suddenly the tender tone was back in the Slytherin's voice. 'Are you in love with Severus Snape?'

Charis didn't answer. Saying it out loud would make it so real.

Morgana groaned. 'Answer me, Charis! Are you or are you not in love with Severus Snape?'

Slowly, Charis nodded. 'Yes, I am in love with Severus Snape.'

'For fuck's sake, Mudblood! You're dumber than I thought!'

The two girls swirled around and came face to face with the very last person either of them wanted to see: Draco Malfoy. He was standing mere feet away from them. Surely, he must have heard everything.

'Honestly, Mudblood,' Draco went on with a sneer that resembled his father's so much that it made Morgana shudder. 'In love with Severus Snape? Do you really think the Head of Slytherin House would touch a filthy creature like you?'

Charis sat as if she had been Petrified. Her body seemed to be made out of lead, and her brain was sluggish. She did not even react to Draco's insults. All she could think about was that Draco had heard her confessing her love for her teacher. She was mortified.

Morgana, however, reacted swiftly. She was half a head shorter than Draco, but she stood tall in front of him, fixing him with a gaze that could have made a Basilisk flinch. 'Shut your filthy mouth, Malfoy.'

Draco just sneered. 'You could do so much better, Belakane,' he replied. 'But if you don't watch out, the Mudblood will rub off on you, and no decent wizard will ever want to touch you.'

Then he turned and walked away, and Morgana stared after him, dumbstruck. She could just have told Draco that she indeed could do better, that she had done better, and that the decent wizard who had been touching her had been the boy's own father, Lucius Malfoy himself. But she didn't tell him. And she was sure that she never would.

* * *

It was dinner time when the girls finally made their way back to the castle. They had sat in silence for several minutes after Draco had disappeared. Then Morgana had made a comment about him being the result of centuries of inbreeding, and she and Charis had both laughed. And then silence had settled over their bench once more, and they had both been absorbed by their own thoughts, their own secrets. And the wall between them had started to grow.

In the Entrance Hall, they found their way to the Great Hall obstructed by a group of laughing, giggling students. And they were just about to push their way through them when Pansy Parkinson caught sight of Charis and shrieked in delight.

Morgana scowled at her House mate. 'And what exactly, dear Pansy, do you find so amusing?'

Pansy almost doubled up with laughter and pointed towards the wall. And before Morgana could make out what she was pointing at, she saw Charis' face fall.

On the wall hung a picture of a blond-haired girl in blue robes and a tall, dark wizard. And beneath stood in flashing letters: 'Charis Byrne and Sev'rus Snape, sitting in a

tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g!

Morgana had already withdrawn her wand to blast the thing off the wall when a low baritone made the students scatter. 'Why are you lot not at dinner like everybody else?'

Morgana closed her eyes, feeling unspeakably sorry for her friend who stood beside her, pale as a ghost and shaking like a leaf. Carefully, she grabbed Charis' hand and pushed her behind her back. There was a thunderstorm underway, and the last thing Charis needed now was to be yelled at by Snape.

To everyone's surprise, the Potions master did not yell. In fact, he did not say a word but just Accio'd the picture into his hand. Then he stomped off towards the Great Hall, and the next thing the girls heard was his thunderous voice echoing from the walls:

'I want to know who is responsible for this monstrosity,' he bellowed. 'Right. Now.'

The House tables fell silent, and so did the staff table. Those who had not seen the picture raised their heads in curiosity. And those who had seen it peered around to see who was brave enough to admit the deed.

'No takers?' Snape went on. 'How disappointing. Let me inform you that every minute I have to stand here is another Saturday the whole school will spend in detention.'

Dumbledore had risen from his seat and was making his way towards the Head of Slytherin House. Apart from him, nobody dared move a muscle. Nobody except two Slytherins: Draco Malfoy, who was leaning back, looking rather smug, and Morgana Belakane, who was approaching him stealthily from behind.

'It was you, wasn't it, you slimy rat?' she hissed into his ear as she had reached him. 'You listened to us.'

Draco lazily raised an eyebrow. 'Your little Mudblood friend should be more careful about what she says in public.'

Before Draco knew what was happening to him, Morgana had grabbed him by the arm and dragged him onto his feet. 'Professor Snape,' she yelled through the Hall. 'I think I have found our da Vinci.'

'My office,' Snape bellowed. 'All three of you.'

He did not need to clarify who he meant by that. Charis, still feeling mortified, tried to make her way out of the Hall without being seen, and Morgana pushed Draco in front of her, holding his arm hard enough to make sure he would bruise.

'In,' Snape hissed as they reached his office, and the three students slipped inside, none of them brave enough to even look at the Potions master.

Snape positioned himself behind his desk, palms flat on the oak surface, his nostrils flared and his eyes slightly narrowed. 'Draco,' he started, his voice soft like velvet and at the same time sharp like a razor. 'Was it you who put up that picture?'

The boy nodded, every trace of smugness gone from his face. There was no point lying to Snape.

'You disappoint me, Draco,' Snape went on. 'I expect more from students of my House. You are banned from Quidditch for the rest of the season.'

Morgana opened her mouth to protest, but Snape cut her short. 'Not a word from you, Miss Belakane,' he hissed. 'I want you both to return to dinner. And I strongly advise you not to utter a word about this incident. You are dismissed. Miss Byrne, you stay.'

Charis cast a pleading glance towards Morgana, but her friend just shrugged. Defying Snape was only going to create trouble. She could not stay.

When the door closed behind Draco and Morgana, Charis wished she could Disapparate and never resurface again. What was Snape going to do now? Was he going to yell at her? Or even worse, laugh?

To her surprise he did neither, but told her to have a seat.

'Miss Byrne,' he started. 'Do you have any idea why Mr Malfoy would put up a picture like this?'

'Because he overheard me speaking to Morgana,' Charis mumbled, at once regretting that she hadn't said it properly in the first place. Now she would have to say it once more. She took a deep breath and started over. 'Draco overheard me telling Morgana.'

'What, exactly, did Mr Malfoy hear you telling Miss Belakane?'

'That I am in love with you,' she whispered hoarsely.

Now Charis just wanted to cry. The words had cost her great effort, and her heart was heavy with shame. She had not wanted Snape to know, never ever. He would use this against her, she was certain of it. He would make a snide remark, ridicule her and break her heart.

But once more, he surprised her. 'And what, Miss Byrne, do you expect from me after this confession?'

Charis shook her head and kept her eyes firmly on the ground. What she expected and what she wanted were two different things. She expected him to show her the cold shoulder at best. But she wanted him to take her into his arms and tell her that he loved her, too. But she knew that he never would.

'Miss Byrne, sit up straight and look at me,' Snape commanded, and Charis complied, dragging her green eyes up to meet his black.

He was still standing behind his desk, but the look in his eyes had changed. He looked at her in an almost tender way. No, not tender, Charis corrected herself. But understanding, perhaps.

'Miss Byrne, what happened between us here in my office and in the Room of Requirement should never have happened. I am your teacher and you are my student, and my behaviour was unacceptable. I want you to be under no illusion that these incidents occurred out of lust only. And I strongly recommend that from this point, you forget all about them.'

Charis swallowed dryly and cast her eyes down once more. Forget was just about the only thing she could not do. Surely, Snape must understand that.

She heard him walk around the desk, and as she dared to look up, Snape was standing right in front of her, his beetle-black eyes boring into her as if they could see into her very soul.

'Can I count on your Ravenclaw brains to keep your emotions under lock and key, Miss Byrne?' he asked softly.

Charis nodded. 'They can most certainly try, sir,' she managed weakly.

'I hope they will try hard, Miss Byrne.'

* * *

It was long past midnight when Morgana, for the umpteenth time, turned in her bed. Her body felt tired and heavy, and her eyes were aching, but her mind was filled with too many thoughts for her to find the peace she needed to fall asleep.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she allowed herself to remember what had happened at Malfoy Manor. She remembered Lucius' fingers brushing against her skin, the taste of his lips. She remembered the feeling of his breath against her neck, the sensation of his tongue lapping her core. But most of all she remembered the look of desire in his eyes. Lucius Malfoy, one of the most powerful and influential wizards in Britain, had desired her. He had even made her believe that he loved her, had written words of love onto the piece of parchment that now lay, neatly folded, under her pillow, together with the bracelet he had given her.

My Darling Morgana,

I cannot tell you how disappointed I was that you snuck away from me. I understand you needed to get back to school before your absence was discovered, but I wanted to wake up with you in my arms. I beg you, dear heart, wake me up the next time so I can kiss you goodbye.

In your haste to leave, my angel, you left your gift. I have enclosed it here. Be sure to wear it often and think of me.

I do not know when I will see you again, darling. But my heart will be aching for you with every beat.

Owl me when you can, beloved, and tell me that I am in your thoughts as much as you are in mine.

Ever yours,

Lucius

Morgana squeezed her eyes shut. Oh, she wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe him so desperately that she refused to hear the little voice inside her head that told her that Lucius Malfoy was evil, that he was responsible for her parents' death and that he was only toying with her.

The voice she was trying to block out, the voice of her conscience was as soft as velvet, a deep, dark baritone that made her shiver in a similar way as Lucius' kisses had. And she knew whom the voice belonged to.

She had seen desire in *his* eyes as well. And had he not pulled away, she would have given her virginity to him, would have let him have her right there on the perfectly manicured lawn of Malfoy Manor.

But Snape *had* pulled away and had left her with a feeling of loneliness that seemed to tug at her heart, trying to rip it apart.

Was that the way Charis was feeling? Morgana wondered. Did Charis long for Severus Snape that much that she thought she was in love? And was she, Morgana, following in her friend's footsteps?

Morgana sighed and buried her face in her pillow. She had not told Charis what had happened at Malfoy Manor. She had not told her about Lucius, and she had not told her about Snape.

About Lucius, she had kept quiet because she did not trust herself. Her mind told her that Lucius was dangerous and evil, that he needed to be destroyed. But her heart told her other things. Her heart wanted to believe that Lucius loved her. And Morgana was afraid that the moment she opened her mouth, she would let her heart speak and not her brain.

About Snape, she had kept quiet for different reasons. She tried to convince herself that she had not said anything to spare her friend. Even if Charis' crush was thoroughly ridiculous, Morgana told herself that she did not want to hurt her friend by telling her what she had seen in Snape's eyes: lust, desire. For her and her alone. Yes, Morgana was trying to convince herself that she was keeping quiet for noble, almost Gryffindor-like reasons. And she did not want to listen to the little competitive Slytherin snake that lay curled up in the darkest corner of her heart, telling her that she should sink her claws into Snape and make sure that he would not turn away from her the next time, that she should make sure he chose her instead of her Ravenclaw friend.

Once more, she turned and pulled her blanket over her head, hoping that she would soon wake up from this horrible nightmare.

Morgana wasn't the only one tossing and turning in her bed that night, however. Charis had abandoned her bed altogether and was sitting in the window in the Ravenclaw common room, which overlooked the lake. But she kept her eyes firmly on Venus, which was shining brightly in the inky-black sky, and hoped that the Goddess of Love would share her wisdom with her.

She had not wanted anyone to know. Her Ravenclaw brain was making it very clear that being in love with Severus Snape would lead nowhere. He was her teacher, a grown man. And she was his student, just a little girl. He would never love her.

But Charis' heart was telling her something else. It was talking about a love so deep that it could move mountains, a love so deep that it could make Severus Snape love her back.

But then her sensible brain piped up again: 'It won't happen, Charis. Give up. Don't be ridiculous.'

No-one had called her ridiculous. Morgana had looked at her with eyes filled with warmth and compassion. 'I'm sorry,' those eyes had said. But with the little shake of her head and the almost inaudible sigh, Morgana had made it clear that she, too, thought that it was hopeless.

Charis closed her eyes and rested her head against the window glass. It was just as cold as the feeling that had crept into her heart when Snape had told her that she must forget what had happened between him and her. But how could she forget? His breath had been so hot on her skin, and the touch of his hands had made her whole body sing. And the look in his eyes had made her want to give herself to him. Body, heart and soul. How could she forget?

What would have happened that night in the Room of Requirement had they not been interrupted, Charis wondered. She had seen the desire in his eyes. He had wanted her that night. He would have taken her, and she would have let him. But the moment her necklace had started to glow, he had pushed her away.

'No, don't go there,' Charis whispered to herself. 'Don't blame Morgana.'

When Morgana had been discharged by Madam Pomfrey, Charis had wanted to tell her just how the incident between her and Snape had been interrupted, but she never had. What would she have said anyway? 'He was about to make love to me, and then he ran to you?' No, that would not have been fair, but still ...

And so Charis, too, had held her peace for loyal, almost Gryffindor-like reasons.

The third person not sleeping that night was Severus Snape. He had patrolled the corridors for more than three hours and was now standing on top of the Astronomy Tower, his robes and his hair flapping in the wind.

The stars were shining peacefully, and they seemed to be mocking him. There was absolutely nothing peaceful about that night. And he doubted that he would ever find the peace to go to bed.

Firstly, there was the matter of his little Ravenclaw admirer. When he first had realised that Charis had a crush on him, he had found that fact rather amusing and had enjoyed pushing her buttons and seeing how far she would go. But he had thought that her detention had been embarrassing enough for her to give up on him.

But she had not, and the incident in the Room of Requirement had made it very clear that she would indeed do anything for him. And now Snape knew why: the silly little girl thought that she was in love with him.

He shook his head. Did Charis even know what real love was? Or did she just confuse it with childish puppy love? Or just good old lust? He couldn't deny the allure of the power he had over her, the addictive look of lust in her eyes and her young, nubile body. Lust was something he could understand. But love?

He had told her to forget about him, to lock away her feelings for him. She must understand that he could not would not, ever love her the way she wanted him to.

But he had seen her shoulders drop and her lip start to quiver. And he had felt awful. It was one thing for your brain to tell you that your love was hopeless. But being told the same thing by the very person you loved was one of the most painful experiences there was. Snape knew that all too well himself.

He hated himself. Not so much for having told Charis to give up on him. That had been inevitable. But he hated himself for having led her on. He had been the one to approach her in the most intimate fashion twice! And just because he had been unable to restrain himself, the girl's feelings had gone from an innocent crush to heartbreaking love.

Snape mentally slapped himself. He couldn't believe that his cock, all of a sudden, was ruling over his brain. Such behaviour was against everything he believed in. He, if anyone, knew how to put on a mask and come across as unaffected by any temptation. And still, he had failed repeatedly over the last few weeks.

He closed his eyes and willed the memories of the afternoon to go away. But the more he tried, the clearer they became: pale, untouched skin, cheeks flushed with anticipation, lips that parted willingly and from which escaped the sweetest sound of pleasure. And he had relished Morgana's sighs and moans and had wished that he were the one eliciting them from her lips. And when she had been in his arms an hour later, he had almost lost control, so sweet had her lips been, so hot her breath against his skin.

For heaven's sake! He had gone to Malfoy Manor to protect the girl, not to lust for her! But he had lusted for her, twice, and he could not guarantee that it would not happen again.

It must not happen again! With either of the girls! He was their teacher, their protector. He was a grown man, and they were mere children. No, no, he corrected himself. They were certainly not children anymore. They were young women now. And they should not be wasting their feelings on him. He would see to that they both gave up on him. He just did not know how to do it yet.

And nor did he know if, deep down, he really wanted them to turn away from him.

* * *

It was now almost three o'clock in the morning, and the stars were still shining peacefully. And still, neither the two girls nor the Potions master had found enough peace to fall asleep.

But there was somebody who slept soundly that night. Lucius Malfoy was lying regally under virgin-white sheets, dreaming of the child he might have fathered, the heir that would bring him endless glory. And he still believed that he had had the best shag of his life that afternoon.

XIII: Snakes

Chapter 13 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XIII: Snakes

Draco flopped onto the battered old leather sofa in the Slytherin common room and crossed his arms over his chest with a scowl.

'I can't believe that Mudblood bitch has got me Saturday detentions and banned from Quidditch!' he spat, his eyes glittering with rage.

His faithful cronies, Crabbe and Goyle, made murmurs of agreement as they took a seat either side of him. Draco's humiliation in the Great Hall had been embarrassing and they had slunk down in their seats as Snape barked at him and dragged him to his office. Fortunately, Draco had not noticed his friends' cowardice, pinned as he had been by the intense and angry glare of his Head of House.

'She has to pay for this,' Draco continued, the steely look in his blue-grey eyes so much like his father's. 'First she jeopardises one of our own House by insisting on following her around constantly like a lost Crup and even getting Belakane to stick up for her, then she has the gall to declare undying love for our Head of House! And even he suddenly thinks she's as pure as the driven snow and punishes me instead, sending me to his office in front of the whole fucking school!'

Goyle sneered. 'There's no way that Mudblood is pure. And I'm not just talking about her blood.'

Crabbe and Goyle cackled evilly as Draco's mouth twisted into a cruel smile.

'Yeah, the little slut would need to be buried in a Y-shaped coffin.' He smirked at his own cleverness as Goyle snickered sycophantically.

Meanwhile, Crabbe looked confused. 'Uh? I don't get it.'

'It means she keeps her legs spread open constantly like the filthy whore she is, you idiot,' Malfoy hissed, as the light bulb slowly went off in Crabbe's head.

'Oh. That's clever, that is.'

Malfoy shot him a withering look. 'Shut up, dung-for-brains. I need to think of a way to get back at Byrne.'

Crabbe wisely shut his mouth and began occupying himself by picking the fluff off a Cockroach Cluster he had found in his pocket as Malfoy drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of the sofa.

After half a minute, Goyle piped up once more. 'Didn't Zabini once say she was quite cute, for a Mudblood?'

Draco scoffed. 'It would take more than cuteness for Zabini to touch a Mudblood.' Then his eyes opened wide as an idea dawned on him. 'That's it! Goyle, you're a ruddy genius!' And with that, he leapt off the sofa and made his way down to the boys' dormitory as fast as he could, leaving Crabbe and Goyle gaping like guppies.

* * *

'So let me get this straight, Draco: you want me to seduce Charis Byrne, have sex with her, dump her like a hot potato and bring back her knickers for you as proof?' Blaise Zabini raised his eyebrows in surprise. It was no secret that he had tons of admirers, but why the hell did Malfoy want him to seduce a Mudblood out of all the girls in the school? Sure, she was by no means ugly, but there was his reputation and the reputation of his House to think of. And as for bringing back the knickers as a trophy surely if Malfoy wanted to get his kicks from girls' underwear he could borrow some of Pansy's!

'You'll be rewarded for your efforts, Blaise,' Malfoy replied smoothly. 'Do this for me, and I'll get you VIP tickets to the next England Quidditch match, a new broom signed by the whole international squad and all the Butterbeer you can drink.'

Zabini's eyebrows couldn't have climbed any higher. Malfoy was going to pay him? Seducing the pretty blonde Ravenclaw would have been easy enough to do per se. He had perfect confidence in his own capability to get the girl and in his own good looks. It was the possible damage to his reputation that was the main issue here. The reward for going near this Mudblood was high, though, and Draco's offer was indeed sorely tempting. The Malfoy fortune was legendary, as was the influence in Wizarding society that Draco's father held, so Blaise did not doubt for one second Draco's ability to come up with the goods. His motives, however, were something else entirely.

'What's in it for you?' Blaise asked, suddenly suspicious. Malfoy didn't usually offer anything without wanting something in return, especially not something this sought after.

'All I want from you, Blaise, is to do as I've asked. Fuck her, and then dump her as cruelly as you can, and bring me the proof. Let's just call it settling a score for Slytherin, and no-one will think any worse of you for it.' Malfoy smirked. 'So, do we have a deal?' He held his hand out to the other boy to shake, who looked at it thoughtfully for a few moments. Malfoy's father was well-connected enough to get the best seats in the house for international Quidditch matches, along with VIP treatment and the chance to meet the team afterwards, not to mention the value and rarity of the signed broom, and these sealed the deal for Zabini.

'You're on,' he replied coolly, shaking Draco's hand firmly. 'But if you dare tell me I stink of Mudblood afterwards, I'll hex you so badly you'll be shitting slugs for a week!'

* * *

Towards the end of December, the school became noticeably more boisterous and excitable with the impending Christmas break looming ever closer. The Hogwarts Yule decorations were always impressive and festive enough to infect even the most hardened of Scrooges with a little Christmas cheer. However, this year there was more reason for end of term excitement: Professor Flitwick had arranged a New Year's party for fifth years and over at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, strictly dress robes only, and all the girls were already considering what dresses to wear.

It was just after dinner on the last Thursday of the term when Zabini saw his chance to begin the challenge laid out for him by Malfoy. Charis, unusually, was on her own, making her way back to Ravenclaw Tower. And seeing that she was, for once, not shadowed by her Slytherin counterpart, Zabini wasted no time in cornering her at the foot of the stairs.

'Well, hello, Charis,' he purred, flashing her a charming smile filled with white, perfect teeth.

Charis glanced at Zabini cautiously. For a fifth-year, he was tall and well-built and somewhat of a heart-throb around the school, and she would be lying if she said that she had never checked him out before. But he was also a Slytherin and good friends with Draco Malfoy, so Charis was immediately on her guard.

'Blaise,' she murmured, glancing at the stairs, subconsciously looking for an escape route.

'You know, I've always admired you, Charis,' he began, leaning nonchalantly on the banister.

'Me?' Charis was stunned. Whatever could a rich pureblood Slytherin like Zabini ever admire in her?

'Yes, you,' Blaise replied, fixing her with another smile and holding her gaze with his warm, chocolate eyes. 'You've had some stick in your time for hanging around with a Slytherin, and you don't let it put you off at all. Which means you're either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. And judging by your Sorting, I would choose the former.'

Charis blinked as she took in his words. Blaise Zabini, Hogwarts heart-throb, was complimenting her! She smiled shyly back, running her eyes over his smooth black skin, his imperious lips and his perfectly chiselled cheekbones. There was no doubt about it, the boy was hot, and he looked and indeed acted far older than his fifteen years.

Blaise noticed Charis' shy smile. He had recognised that look on girls' faces before when a compliment was offered and received gratefully. And he also noticed the way Charis' eyes darted across his face, resting on his mouth.

'So, I was wondering if you'd be brave enough to come to the New Year's party with me,' he continued smoothly. 'That's if you have no other plans?'

Charis swallowed and searched his eyes for any sign of a joke. Blaise was smiling down at her, a smile that extended to his deep, cocoa-brown eyes. There was no Malfoy about or any other Slytherins. He must be serious!

'I, um, I'd love to!' she gasped.

'Excellent!' He glanced at his watch quickly. 'I have to go. I'll catch up with you tomorrow, OK?'

'OK!' Charis replied, suddenly feeling like her feet were full of helium. What had just happened? Had Blaise Zabini, one of the most good-looking guys in the whole school, really just asked her out? Her?

She stood still on the stairs when Blaise had long since turned the corner and had disappeared from sight, and she never saw the smirk on Blaise's face as he sauntered down the corridor that led to the dungeons. This was going to be far too easy, he thought.

'Who has hit you with a Silly Grin Hex?'

Charis spun around and came face to with her best friend.

'Well?'

'Zabini ... Blaise,' Charis started, still smiling. 'He asked if I wanted to go to the New Year's party with him.'

'Zabini?' Morgana repeated. 'Blaise Zabini, fifth year, Slytherin pureblood? That Blaise Zabini?'

'Is there any other?' Charis asked, her smile faltering slightly. What was Morgana on about?

'Blaise Zabini asked you to go to the New Year's party?'

'Yes, he did,' Charis replied, her smile now all but gone. 'Do you have any problem with that?'

'No.' Morgana snorted. 'I just find it peculiar that he asked you.'

'Why on earth is that peculiar?' Charis now felt anger bubble in her chest. Could Morgana not just be happy for her? 'Why should he not ask me? Because I am Muggle-born?'

Now Morgana narrowed her eyes. 'No, but because he is a close friend of Draco Malfoy and normally one of the first to complain that I stink of Mudblood when I've spent time with you.'

'Well, maybe he has changed his mind!' Charis exclaimed. 'Maybe he is just saying those things in the common room so Malfoy won't get pissed at him.'

'Sure, believe what you want,' Morgana replied. 'But don't say that I didn't warn you.'

And with that, she began her descent to the dungeons, leaving an angry Charis behind.

Morgana was the one to talk, Charis thought. After all, she was the one mixing with Dark wizards on a regular basis. Who was she to give advice about being careful?

And feeling slightly disappointed, Charis started climbing the stairs that led to Ravenclaw Tower, wondering why not even her best friend could be happy for her when a Slytherin male finally showed genuine interest in her.

* * *

The last day of term flew by in a whirl of excitement, chatter and fun. Most of the teachers allowed games and tricks to help cheer in Yule, all, that is, apart from strict authoritarian Minerva McGonagall and unseasonal sourpuss Severus Snape, who made their classes work until the very last second. Snape even had the audacity to give his NEWT class a pop-quiz on healing potions.

All day, going to and from lessons and meals, Charis had looked out for Blaise, but there had been no sign of him. And by the time she walked Morgana back to the dungeons in the evening, she was beginning to think it had all been a joke and that she indeed should have taken Morgana's advice.

But Charis still lingered for a few moments after having said a quick goodbye to her friend; with any luck, Blaise would show up.

She was just about to turn to make her way back to her own dorm when she ran into none other than Zabini himself, grinning widely.

'Hello, my sweet little Ravenclaw! I've just been looking for you. What brings you to the dungeons? Fancied some snake-baiting? Or maybe some snake milking?' he asked with a naughty gleam in his eyes.

Charis giggled and looked at him through her eyelashes.

'Well, that would entirely depend on the type of snake I could find down here. Viper, boa or Basilisk? You tell me.' She bit her lip suggestively, eyes twinkling at her daring.

Zabini grinned in response. 'You'd like to find out, wouldn't you?'

'Damn right I would,' Charis whispered as Zabini stepped closer, surprised at her own daring. But something about that boy made her forget her good manners and ignore the little voice in the back of her head that told her to be careful.

'Well, well, well, and how are you going to do that?'

Charis looked up into his deep, dark eyes and ran a finger lightly down his chest. 'I find a spot of slow dancing often encourages a snake into action.'

Zabini exhaled with a little growl. 'Dancing, eh? Good thing that there will be plenty of that at the New Year's Party.'

'That's right. I've chosen a cute dress already.' She smirked, and Blaise smirked back in return.

'You have, eh?' he asked in a drawling voice, slowly backing Charis up against the wall. 'And how does it look?'

'You'll have to wait and see, won't you?'

Charis was right up against the wall now, and she could see his eyes glitter.

'What will you be wearing under it?' he asked, touching her arm lightly.

'What do you want me to wear?' Charis whispered in response. This was not really like her, but flirting with one of the best-looking guys in the school gave her confidence a boost, and she felt light-headed and bold.

'Black silk,' he murmured, his breath tickling her ear.

Charis shivered with pleasure at this as his hands came to rest at her waist. 'As you wish, Mr Zabini,' she replied breathlessly.

'What colour is your dress?' he murmured. 'So I can match the bouquet, you understand.'

Charis felt a bubble of pleasure rise up inside her. He was romantic as well as handsome! This was too good to be true.

'It's midnight blue.'

'Forget-me-nots it is, then.'

She gazed up at him with big green eyes. 'I think I would have a hard time forgetting you, Blaise.'

'I know you would,' he growled, leaning in for a kiss.

Charis grazed his mouth gently before pulling away with a smile. She was, after all, a modest girl. 'And what will you be wearing, Mr Zabini?'

'The finest dark green dress robes money can buy, Ms Byrne.'

'Mmmm. I bet you'll look fantastic,' she purred, tracing her finger back down his chest.

'I look even better without them.' He smirked once more before forcing his lips on hers.

Oh, it felt good! Zabini could kiss well, not like some of the other boys who drooled and lapped with their tongues like Hagrid's boarhound. They kissed eagerly for a few moments, but then Charis pulled away.

'Not here! If Snape catches us we'll be dead!'

'Oh, don't worry about him,' Zabini purred. 'He's gone to Hogsmeade for the Head of House's annual Christmas meal.'

Charis paused to imagine this for a second. She could almost see the glare on Snape's face as he was forced to pull a cracker with Professor Sprout, and she giggled.

'Even so, that man has a sixth sense when it comes to snogging teenagers.'

Zabini grinned once more, flashing his perfect, white teeth. 'We will have to find a way to keep him busy at the party then, since I intend on doing more than just snogging you.'

Gods! Charis' eyes widened with surprise and excitement. Blaise Zabini wanted to have sex with her! The very idea sent a shiver of delight down her spine. She had wanted her first time to be memorable, especially after having been treated like owl droppings by the one man she desired the most. And as far as she was concerned, losing her virginity at a New Year's party with the best looking boy in the school seemed like the perfect way to heal her broken heart.

Don't mess this up now, Charis, she thought. Be brave, be bold. Show him that you want it, too.

She grinned back at him and playfully raised her eyebrow. 'Well, Blaise, I fully intend to see if you were put in Slytherin for a reason,' she breathed.

He hummed happily before grazing her ear with his lips once more. 'Make sure that you really don't forget me,' he said softly.

'How could I?' she whispered in return.

Zabini reached in and softly bit her earlobe. And Charis shuddered with pleasure as he nibbled at the sensitive skin behind her ear.

'Yes, how could you?'

How could you indeed, he thought with a smirk.

* * *

Christmas came and went without much incident for either of the girls. Charis went back to Somerset to stay with her parents, and Morgana stayed at Hogwarts, using the time to read, sleep and mull over her thoughts.

She had a lot to think about, indeed. She had tried to stay away from Snape ever since the incident in the garden of Malfoy Manor, but it wasn't easy. Every time she looked at him, every time he looked at her, she felt a shiver go down her spine, and the memory of his lips on hers haunted her dreams every night. And she would wake up in the middle of the night, her heart racing and her body screaming out for his embrace.

Another thing that made it hard for her to get a full night's sleep was the incessant flow of owls. Lucius had developed the habit of sending her an owl exactly at midnight every second night. Sometimes, they carried just a note to wish her a good night. Other times, they would carry expensive chocolates, sweets or a long letter whose content made Morgana blush. She replied now and then to be polite, she tried to convince herself but her yearning for Lucius had mellowed. Maybe, Snape had been right then. Maybe, she had really only lusted for Lucius because he had drugged her. But then why did she stand by the window every second night, waiting for his owl to arrive?

Charis spent some sleepless nights as well, but for entirely different reasons. While she had been crying softly into her pillow during so many December nights, longing for Snape's embrace, she was now longing for Zabini's. The boy had actually sent her a rose for Christmas with a tiny note attached to it: I wish it were New Year's already. And Charis had tucked the note into the back pocket of her jeans and would read it every now and then, smiling happily. She found the pain in her heart from the humiliating incidents with Snape was greatly diminished by the anticipation of her new suitor. And so she spent most of the holiday dreaming of the party and how it would feel to lose her virginity at last.

Before the girls knew it, it was New Year's Eve already, and they like any other girl in the castle spent hours in their respective dorms, grooming and applying make-up for the big night.

The girls weren't alone in wanting to look good, however. In the Slytherin common room, the boys were putting finishing touches to their hair and making sure their boots were shiny. And they certainly looked dashing.

'You scrub up well, Zabini,' Montague noted. 'It's just a shame you're going with a Mudblood tonight. I don't know how you'll ever get the stench off your robes.' He smirked at his own joke.

The insult rolled off Zabini like water from a Hippogriff. 'I can always buy new ones, you know. My mother just buried another husband. We have enough gold to buy new robes every day,' he sniffed.

'Why are you going with her, anyway? Everyone knows she's a little slut.' Montague sneered as he tried to flatten a persistently wild piece of hair that was sticking up at the back of his head.

'That's why I am going with her. I am tired of having to tell girls how nice and lovely they are and buy them loads of presents before they let me into their knickers. Byrne is a sure thing. And besides, Malfoy told me he'd get me VIP tickets to the next England match and a signed broom once I've rammed her.'

Montague gave an unpleasant-sounding chuckle. 'Well, it might be worth soiling yourself for that. Just make sure you Scourgify your dick afterwards. You might catch something. God, what is Greengrass doing in there? Bloody girls and their make-up!'

Zabini grinned. 'Maybe she's shaving. You know, down there!'

Montague leered. 'I'll tell you in about ...' He checked his watch quickly. '... two hours.'

'Uh, confident! That's my bro!'

'That's Montague charm, Zabini.'

Their banter was interrupted by the sound of a door creaking open and Morgana standing in the doorway in her dressing gown. The look on her face couldn't have been darker.

'What's the matter, Belakane? No dress to wear to the party?' Montague sneered.

'I don't think that's any of your business, Montague!' she snapped in response. If she had her wand on her, she would hex him into the next century.

'Or is it because your ickle Mudblood friend got a date and you didn't?'

Morgana narrowed her eyes. She had warned Charis about Zabini, but her friend had not wanted to listen. Actually, she had been rather curt.

'Don't worry, Belakane,' Montague continued. 'Zabini here will show her a good time, won't you?'

Zabini gave Morgana a smile that would melt butter. It did, however, not affect her in the least.

'Maybe Zabini should be careful,' she growled, shooting both boys a look that could have made the Whomping Willow wither.

'By the time I've finished with her, she'll have a job standing upright,' Zabini quipped, and both boys chuckled lasciviously.

Morgana glared at Zabini. 'Just be careful. If I hear that you hurt her'

Zabini raised an eyebrow. 'Are you threatening me, Belakane?'

Before Morgana had a chance to respond to that, Daphne Greengrass appeared behind her in the doorway, like a vision in diamante and olive. Morgana personally thought she looked like a giant bogey, but kept her thoughts to herself as she made way for the girl, who strutted past her regally.

Zabini wolf whistled as Montague performed a comedic double take.

'You look hotter than a dragon's arse. Come here, witch,' he growled.

Daphne gave a silly giggle in response before strolling up to her beau, who gave her a peck on the cheek and handed her a single, white, long-stemmed rose. 'A rose for my rose,' he murmured.

'Aren't you the sweetest,' Daphne simpered, the blush on her cheeks now clashing violently with the olive green of her gown.

Montague grinned smugly, as if Don Juan himself could not have come up with a more romantic gesture.

Zabini picked up his forget-me-nots with a flourish. 'Time to get my own sweetheart.'

Daphne and Montague both chuckled at this comment.

'What?' he grinned, with an innocent expression plastered all over his extremely good-looking face.

'Make sure you scrub yourself afterwards. I don't want you coming back here contaminating the dorm with Muggle germs!' Montague joked.

'Would never dare,' he said imperiously, pretending to dust his robes off.

'You're an animal, Zabini,' Daphne laughed.

'That's right. A snake!' He hissed furiously as Daphne shrieked.

'Come on, petal,' said Montague, grabbing her elbow, 'Let's leave Zabini to his courting.'

Morgana stayed behind, fighting the urge to vomit all over the dungeon floor. The last five minutes had reminded her about why exactly she had turned down any invitation she had received for the party. Slytherin boys were, as a rule, foul creatures, skirt-chasers and show-offs. And she had no desire to go out with one of them and then be discussed in the dormitory. And besides, she had acquired better taste over the last couple of months. Boys were simply not worth the bother anymore.

* * *

Daphne and Montague left Zabini as they passed the entrance hall and stepped out to get a carriage to Hogsmeade. Zabini meanwhile made his way to the foot of the stair of Ravenclaw Tower, where Charis was awaiting him.

His eyes widened as he took in the girl's form. She certainly suited her house colour. The blue satin was elegant, and the dress accentuated her curves, but Zabini was almost unable to take his eyes off her cleavage.

After a few moments, he snapped out of it and bowed, holding out the flowers to Charis. 'My Lady.'

Charis smiled, a warm glow filling her belly. 'Why, thank you, kind gentleman,' she replied in mock-aristocratic tones and took the posy from him. 'They're beautiful.'

Zabini gave her a glittering look. 'They look like weeds compared to you.'

'You're looking particularly ravishing yourself,' Charis noted, admiring the way his expensive, ivy green robes accentuated his tall, athletic frame.

She leaned up and pecked him on the cheek, and as she did so, Zabini's hands slipped round her waist and he pulled her closer, his hand gliding over her satin-clad butt.

'Did you keep your promise?' he murmured, eyes twinkling.

'I always keep my promises,' Charis whispered, gazing deeply into his rich brown eyes.

Zabini let his hand glide over her butt once more, pushing his hips forwards. Already, Charis could feel the beginnings of a bulge, and it sent a shiver through her. She brushed past him a little, just enough to tease him. 'You'll find out for sure later,' she said in a low voice.

'I sure hope so,' he growled, squeezing her bottom gently.

Charis wrapped her arms around his neck in response and kissed him softly.

'Hm, you taste lovely,' Blaise told her when he'd come up for air. Once more, Charis felt like she could burst with happiness. This hot, sexy guy was all hers for the night!

'You know, for a Slytherin, you're as sexy as hell,' she mused.

'Aren't we all?' he replied, one eyebrow raised.

Charis giggled. 'Trust me, sexy Slytherins are few and far between!' There was one damn sexy Slytherin, of course, the Head of Slytherin House himself. But Charis tried not to think of him. Not tonight! Tonight, her heart belonged to the one Slytherin male who actually cared about her and who seemed willing to take down the moon for her.

'In that case, I feel honoured.' He licked his lips, looking at Charis through his lashes. 'Are you sure we must go dancing first?'

Charis gazed back at him smoulderingly. 'Just think how much I'll want to rip your robes off when you've been grinding up against me all night.'

Zabini smirked. 'Once our robes are off, you'll wish you'd ripped them off hours ago.'

He crushed Charis' lips with his quickly before holding out his arm. 'My Lady,' he said again in a deep voice.

Charis took his proffered arm. 'My good Sir,' she replied in her mock-posh voice.

'Let's go dancing.' He grinned.

And with that, they made their way out through the entrance hall and to the front of Hogwarts and slipped into the next carriage to Hogsmeade.

XIV: Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgotten

Chapter 14 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XIV: Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgotten

Charis and Blaise were met by the Heads of Houses standing by the door, welcoming the students as they arrived. Dumbledore was wearing deep purple robes trimmed with silver, looking very festive. McGonagall was in deep crimson tartan, her hands clasped together. Tiny Flitwick was in deep blue, bobbing excitedly. And Sprout was looking unusually resplendent in old gold and had even scrubbed the habitual soil from underneath her fingernails. Snape, meanwhile, was wearing the darkest of lustrous black velvets, scowling.

'Welcome, welcome, all you lovely young people,' Dumbledore greeted them with a crinkly smile and his arms open wide as the students flowed through into the pub.

'Miss Byrne, lovely as always,' he said kindly as he nodded at Zabini, who nodded back politely.

'Thank you, sir.' Charis smiled back warmly and then giggled as Zabini pinched her bum. She dared to cast a glance at Snape, whose scowl had reached new depths of blackness.

'Good evening, Professor,' she said politely, flashing him a sweet smile. Snape was not going to ruin her evening!

'Good is relative, Miss Byrne,' he growled. 'So, Slytherins are still acceptable company to you then, I see?'

Charis looked affronted for a moment, her smile faltering. *Any Slytherin who doesn't think I am dirt on their shoe will always be acceptable to me*, she thought, looking at him coldly.

'I advise you not to judge those in my House too quickly, Miss Byrne,' he continued, as if reading her mind.

Charis did not have chance to contemplate his words before Zabini dragged her onto the dance floor with cheerful, 'Come on, pussy cat!'

'Coming, big boy,' she replied, looking over her shoulder quickly at Snape as Blaise pulled her into the middle of the dance floor and wrapped his arms around her waist.

Snape stood for several minutes, watching them dance, laugh and kiss, and his black eyes burned fiercely. Yes, there were snakes of pure jealousy writhing in his belly. That girl was HIS! Even though he could not return her feelings and despite his better judgement, he did relish the girl's passion for him. In his private moments he had replayed the highly charged incidents that had happened between them, and he found that his body responded to them just as it had then. The girl, as much as he tried to deny it, aroused him, and he hated seeing a mere boy pawing her for all to see.

Snape saw Charis throw back her head and laugh once more and decided he had seen enough. Jaw clenched, he stalked off towards the bar for a glass of Firewhisky, where he was greeted by none other than the Headmaster, who was smiling serenely.

'Isn't it lovely how happy they all are?' the old man asked, tilting his hand in the direction of the dancing students.

'Thrilling,' Snape replied in a deadpan voice, plucking a tumbler of Firewhisky from the side.

'And there are even some inter-house pairings,' Dumbledore continued happily. 'Lovely. Lovely indeed.'

At this comment, Snape's expression looked as if it could turn milk sour.

The Headmaster turned to his Potions master, checking out his immaculate dress robes. 'And black is festive ... how again, Severus?' he asked jovially.

'Black is not the absence of colour as most people mistakenly seem to think. Rather, it is the amalgamation of all colours, Headmaster,' he replied tartly.

'Ah. Of course,' Dumbledore replied with twinkling eyes. 'You do stand out like a sore thumb, though,' he admonished gently.

Snape raised a sinister eyebrow, his voice heavy with irony. 'And what colour do you suggest I wear? A soft peach, maybe? A rose blush? A delicate lilac?'

'Peppermint green,' the old man replied in a dreamy voice.

Snape looked at the Headmaster as if he was in some way mentally impaired before shaking his head and taking a big swig of Firewhisky. Maybe Lucius was right. Maybe the old man was indeed losing his marbles.

A shriek, followed by a giggle, made both teachers look to the dance floor, where Zabini was happily sinking his teeth in Charis' neck.

'Ah, to be young again ...' mused Dumbledore, misty-eyed.

'Surely, such behaviour is vastly inappropriate, Headmaster!' Snape protested, almost spilling Firewhisky down his robes.

'I find it delightful. Just look how everybody is having fun!' Once more the old man smiled contentedly and stroked his beard.

Snape watched as Charis' hand slipped down and slowly brushed against Zabini's groin. The action sent a shock of arousal through him and a surge of jealousy and annoyance simultaneously.

'I do not think that such behaviour is appropriate for a school party, Headmaster,' he persisted through gritted teeth.

'I am sure you will be capable of keeping a lid on it, if it appears to get out of control, Severus,' Dumbledore replied calmly.

'Oh, I can assure you of that, Headmaster.' And with that, Snape stomped off towards the dance floor in a swirl of black velvet.

'Zabini, a word!' he growled, casting a scowl at Charis.

Charis flushed slightly and scowled back at her stern teacher for interrupting her snogging session.

'Yes, sir?' Zabini asked innocently, but Snape was already stalking off and the boy had no choice but to follow his Head of House.

'Fuck that old bat!' Zabini cursed as he squeezed Charis' bottom. 'Wait for me upstairs once the others have gone, alright?'

'I'll be there,' she breathed, giving him a last peck on the lips.

She watched as Zabini ran after Snape, making flapping movements with his arms to imitate Snape's billowing robes, and she giggled.

'Having fun, are we?'

Charis span around to find her best friend in a short black velvet dress with her best Snape imitation: eyebrow raised and her hands on her hips.

'Morgana! You look amazing!' Charis hugged her friend who, for once, accepted with a smile.

'And so do you, little Ravenclaw. I see your beau is getting you into trouble already,' she said lightly.

'I'm not letting Snape spoil my evening,' Charis replied through gritted teeth. 'The music is really good though! Apparently, the DJ is a distant cousin of the Weasleys.'

'Is there anyone they aren't related to?' Morgana replied, rolling her eyes. 'It's a shame the Weasley boys aren't here this evening though. Doesn't seem like a party without them.'

'True,' Charis agreed, 'Although not having Malfoy and his henchmen here is a blessed relief.'

'You can say that again, sis. There are already far too many odious Slytherin males here without that gruesome threesome. And don't you just love the idea that Malfoy is sitting in the library now, studying, when we are having fun? Say whatever you want about Malfoy senior, but that man knows how to dish out a decent punishment.'

Charis giggled. 'Well, seeing as my dancing partner is currently out of action, it looks as if you're going to be dancing with me tonight after all, Morgana!'

'I am so not dancing with ANYONE,' Morgana said firmly, jutting her chin out.

'Oh, don't be a prude!' Charis begged.

'I hate dancing,' her friend grumbled.

'If you can't even dance with your best friend ...' Charis pretended to look hurt and fixed Morgana with her big, sad, green eyes.

Morgana just gazed back coolly. 'I. Will. Not. Dance.'

'You're a complete killjoy,' Charis huffed.

'I don't dance, period,' Morgana sniffed, folding her arms across her chest.

'BORING!' Charis replied before bopping to the Human League.

Morgana merely raised an eyebrow, shaking her head.

Huge trays filled with delicious-looking canapés floated past, suspended by Madam Rosmerta, who was weaving in and out of the crowd, and Morgana grabbed a handful, watching her friend swinging her hips, eyes shut, having a whale of time.

'I do hope you can keep your tongue to yourself for the rest of the evening, Miss Byrne.' The low drawl of Severus Snape made Charis' eyes snap open, and she bit her lip nervously. 'One slip-up is forgivable; two is a sign of stupidity.'

Luckily, Madam Rosmerta heard this comment as she made her way past and came to Charis' rescue. 'Now, Severus, behave. Remember what it said on the invitation: 'Teachers are allowed if they play NICELY.'

Charis smiled at Rosmerta gratefully as Snape fixed her with his beetle-black eyes.

'Keep an eye on those two,' he muttered, out of earshot of the girls.

'As you wish, Severus,' Rosmerta replied as Snape turned on his heel and stalked to the bar.

'Don't worry about him, kids,' she said kindly. 'He'll be holding on to a bottle of Odgen's for the rest of the night.'

'Great food, Roz,' said Morgana, helping herself to more snacks.

Rosmerta beamed. 'Thanks, lovely. Help yourself. There's plenty for everyone.' And with that, the curvy landlady made her way back through the throng, plates suspended carefully over the crowds' heads.

It was hot on the dance floor, and Morgana suddenly wondered if wearing velvet had been a wise choice. She decided to retire to the bar and grab a Butterbeer to cool down.

As she was waiting to be served, she watched Charis happily dancing on her own to *Groove Is In The Heart* and she smiled. Her Ravenclaw friend must be the sweetest girl on the planet.

She was just contemplating joining her after all when, from out of absolutely nowhere, Albus Dumbledore appeared on the dance floor, throwing shapes like a man demented. And Morgana couldn't help but laugh as she saw Charis grinning and grooving away with the Headmaster.

'Aren't they cute?' she asked with a huge grin that made her blue eyes sparkle.

Snape, who was standing beside her at the bar, just sneered and shook his head. 'Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, Miss Belakane. They have not an ounce of shame in their bodies. And the Headmaster looks like he is having a fit.'

'I think,' Morgana said, her grin if possible growing even wider, 'that this was a common form of dancing back in the nineteenth century when our Headmaster was still the

king of the dance floor.'

Snape snorted. 'And what, Miss Belakane, would you know about the topic of dancing? I for one cannot recall having seen you on the dance floor.'

With a loud thud, Morgana put down her bottle on the counter. 'What is it with people today?' she snapped, every trace of a grin gone from her face. 'Is it that unusual for a girl not to dance?'

'It most certainly is,' Snape replied, raising an eyebrow at his student's little outburst. 'As is you drinking alcohol.'

Morgana sighed heavily and brought her hand to her neck to rub her aching muscles. 'I ... I haven't been myself lately,' she started. 'Ever since that afternoon at Malfoy Manor I feel ... mentally drained. I lose my patience very easily, I snap at people.'

Hell, Charis has accused me of turning into you, she thought.

Snape fixed her with a searching look. 'This has been a stressful term for you, Miss Belakane. You have been drugged, deceived and have had your mind invaded in a most despicable way. It is natural that you feel worn out. This is why it is crucial that you learn how to control your emotions and shield yourself from others. Are you familiar with Occlumency?'

Morgana shrugged. 'I have read books about it. But I find it hard to grasp.'

'Naturally.' Snape emptied his glass and turned his full attention onto Morgana. 'If you do not learn how to control your mind, you will end up mad. Therefore, I suggest that you make closing your mind your uttermost priority from now on.'

Once more, Morgana rubbed her neck. 'It is hard, sir. Ever since Lucius touched my mind, I have felt exposed. It is almost as if I am carrying around my mind in a glass jar and everyone can look at it. I am trying not to let myself feel, to lock away my emotions. But it still seems like they're right on the surface.'

'Again, this is natural, Miss Belakane.' Snape's voice was low and calm. This wasn't a topic he wanted to discuss in public, but the girl was obviously struggling. 'Tell me, when you are trying to shield off your emotions, what method do you choose? Do you see a door slam shut? A blind coming down, maybe?'

'There is mist,' Morgana replied, her voice somewhat shaky. 'Black mist.'

Snape frowned. He had seen that mist. The night he had driven Lucius from the girl's mind, he had been slashing through that mist, trying to reach her mind himself. So she had been trying to defend herself then.

'This might not be the right technique for you, Miss Belakane,' he went on. 'Try experimenting. Some people imagine snow, others the blackness of space, yet others a brick wall. Whatever method you choose, it will have to be your own, personal projection.'

'What if I cannot do it, sir?'

'Practice, Miss Belakane.' Snape didn't like the vulnerable look on the girl's face, but lending comfort had never been one of his talents. Therefore, he carried on in the same matter-of-fact tone he used in class. 'Practice and you will find your method. And once it clicks, you will be able to summon your Occlumency faster and easier until it is like second nature to you.'

Morgana nodded and seemed to contemplate his words for a few moments. Then Snape saw a smile flit over her lips. 'I still don't have to dance, do I, sir?'

'No one is forcing you, Miss Belakane. Well, maybe one person.'

And Morgana never stood a chance when Charis grabbed her hand and dragged her onto the dance floor.

Snape smirked and put his empty glass onto the counter, where it was promptly refilled by Rosmerta.

'Cute thing, that one,' she said, nodding into Morgana's direction. 'Your House, I suppose?'

Snape gave a non-committal grunt.

'Really sweet,' Rosmerta went on. 'Seems lonely, though. I have the feeling that her House mates are giving her a hard time.'

Snape scowled. 'What goes on in my House is none of your concern, Rosmerta.'

The landlady raised her hands in a defensive gesture. 'I'm just saying ... but you're right, it's none of my business.'

She pushed the glass of Odgen's in Snape's direction. 'You should relax, Severus. It's a party.'

Snape snorted. He would rather be at the Dark Lord's birthday celebration sucking Skrewt dung from his shoes than to be here watching hormonal teenagers snog and make fools out of themselves. It was a disgrace really. Now even Belakane was dancing! Although, she and her Ravenclaw friend were the only couple on the dance floor that did not make him want to vomit. And if Snape was completely honest with himself, he had to admit that he found the sight of the two girls moving gracefully with each other rather ... alluring.

His musings were unfortunately interrupted by the DJ. 'Now, all you wonderful people on the dance floor, there are going to be two more slow ones, and then we will have to say goodnight. Remember that you will have to be in bed by three o'clock. Each and everyone in their own bed, that is.'

Snape downed his Firewhisky and stalked out of the room. Slow songs implied slow dancing, and that implied more snogging. And that was really not something he wished to witness.

Outside in the dark corridor, he leant against the wall. He should have passed on that last Firewhisky. He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes for a moment, wishing he was in his bed already.

'Too much Firewhisky, sir?'

Snape's eyes snapped open, and he caught sight of Morgana, who was leaning against the wall opposite him. Had he not noticed her or had she managed to sneak up on him?

'Well observed, Miss Belakane,' he growled. 'Have five points for Slytherin.'

'Five points?' Morgana grinned. 'Are you alright, sir?'

'I will be once this infernal mush stops.'

Tears on My Pillow by Johnny Nash could be heard from the other room, and Snape groaned inwardly. He hated that song. He had danced to it just once. With Lily. She had loved it.

Morgana started to hum and tapped her foot. 'It's a cute song. Maybe one should take up dancing after all. I've been told that it is quite a normal pastime for girls my age.'

Snape looked at Morgana and found her smiling. Surely, the girl was not being flirty, now was she?

'Are you asking me to dance, Miss Belakane?' he murmured and saw her blush.

'Well, I, um ... Yes, sir. I am.'

The cheek! But then again, why not? And despite himself, Snape pushed himself off from the wall and held out his hand.

The girl's hand was clammy, but he grabbed it firmly and pulled her towards him in a fluid motion, wrapping his free arm around her.

'The secret, Miss Belakane, is to relax,' he told her as he started swaying slowly. 'Relax and let me take the lead.'

He leant her back into a little dip and chuckled as her fingers dug into his biceps. 'Really, Miss Belakane, do you think I would let you fall?'

'No, sir,' she breathed as he pulled her upright again. 'Of course not.'

She seemed to relax a little, and Snape remembered another time she had been in his arms, remembered how sweet her lips had tasted and what delicious little moans had escaped from them. And he did not know if it was the Firewhisky or those memories that made him lean in and softly brush her lips with his.

The girl did not pull away, and as her lips parted, Snape let his tongue flick over them, ever so lightly, ever so quickly.

Morgana felt a shiver go down her spine. Snape had not as much as looked at her since that incident at Malfoy Manor, but today he had talked to her, given her advice. And now she was lying in his arms. She yielded to his kiss and felt herself being pulled closer, felt his tongue in her mouth and his hand at the back of her neck. And before she knew it, she found herself being pushed up against the wall, her left leg wrapped around his waist and his teeth nibbling at her neck.

The girl smelled of honey, and despite his better judgement, Snape attacked her neck with feverish kisses, grabbed her leg and ground himself against her, his erection straining against the velvet of his robes. She was young, she was willing, and she wanted him. And he was ready to give in. Right there in the dark corridor of the Three Broomsticks.

Then the music stopped and was replaced by another sound: creaking bedsprings and moaning, a giggle that sounded all too familiar. And it brought Snape right back to reality.

He freed himself from Morgana's embrace and straightened his robes, not even able to bring himself to look at her. He should not have gone that far. He should not have touched her like that.

'Back to Hogwarts with you right away,' he hissed, cursing himself inwardly for drinking too much Firewhisky and for once more losing control.

But Morgana did not move. Surely, this could not be happening. Snape could not be sending her away once again. But he obviously was. In fact, he was already on his way to the stairs.

'I said, go!' he snapped at her once more. 'Are you incapable of following simple orders, Miss Belakane?'

And with that, he rushed up the stairs, moving swiftly and stealthily as a cat, never noticing that Morgana slunk into the shadows instead of following his directions and returning to Hogwarts. Somehow, she was hoping that Snape would change his mind and finish what he had started with her.

When Snape had reached the door from behind which those incriminating noises were coming, he paused and listened. Which of those hormonal dunderheads were dim enough not to put a Silencing Charm on the door when having sex in a pub full of teachers? He would take ten points for stupidity alone.

'That's right, Charis, spread yourself for me,' the recognisable sound of Zabini's voice purred as Charis' unmistakable delicious moans made Snape tighten his fist around his wand in cold fury. Byrne, he thought. That little slut! How dare she?!

'You have exactly ten seconds to dress before I hex this door off its hinges!' Snape barked. 'One, ...'

Zabini and Charis looked at each other, completely mortified for a second before springing in to action. It wasn't an easy task to find all their clothes that lay scattered on the floor, but they were dressed by the time Snape reached eight and looked at each other nervously as he finished the countdown.

On ten, Snape burst through the door, anger burning in his onyx eyes.

'Zabini! Couldn't leave the girl alone, could you? Fifty points from Slytherin. Yes, my own House! And you will see me after lunch tomorrow, where your punishment for your inability to control your hormones will be dealt with in full. Now get out of my sight!'

Zabini didn't need to be told twice and shot past his Head of House in a flurry of dishevelled green dress robes.

'You disappoint me, Miss Byrne,' Snape drawled in a low voice, stepping closer to Charis. 'Messing with boys is stupid enough. Messing with a Slytherin is downright idiotic.'

Morgana shrunk back into the shadows as Zabini raced down the stairs and out of the back door as fast as his legs could carry him, leaving Snape and Charis alone. And when she heard the door slam, she cautiously crept up the stairs. She could hear Snape's hushed voice and was desperate to know what trouble her friend was in now for her indiscretion. She was not, however, prepared for the sight that greeted her.

Snape had Charis by the waist, and she was now looking up at him with her big green eyes, her hands resting lightly on his chest.

'I appear to have a weakness for Slytherin males, sir,' she whispered.

'Yes, so it appears.'

Charis gasped as Snape's black eyes burned into hers. And as his grip tightened on her, she could smell the Odgen's on his breath.

'Why would you play with boys, Miss Byrne,' Snape snarled, 'when you have known a real man's touch?'

Morgana's eyes widened in shock. Charis and Snape? They had actually had sex? It certainly explained the abnormally large number of snarky comments Charis had received from him during the evening plus his anger at Zabini.

Morgana could not bear to hear more, so she turned and snuck down the stairs as quickly and quietly as she could. She needed to get outside. Suddenly, the stale air of the pub was too oppressive, and she felt nauseous.

But that nausea quickly turned to rage as the cold night air hit her. So Snape had been leading them both on a merry dance, had he? And her best friend had not even told her they had slept together!

Morgana ground her teeth as the urge to hex something welled up inside her. Snape had toyed with her like a plaything, yet he had already made his choice. He had chosen Charis, once again!

The thought made Morgana feel like there were talons ripping at her stomach. Snape had pushed her away. He had pushed her away in order to run to her best friend. And there he was now, surely already between Charis' thighs, fulfilling the promises he had been making to her less than half an hour ago.

Well, two could play that game. If Snape did not want her, she knew another wizard who would. And if Snape considered hurting and betraying people a sport, then she would beat him at his own game. And with a plan forming in her mind that would have made Salazar Slytherin himself shudder, Morgana turned on the spot and Apparated to Malfoy Manor.

XV: Descending into Darkness

Chapter 15 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XV: Descending into Darkness

With a soft pop, Morgana Apparated into the snow-covered garden of Malfoy Manor. She froze and looked around. The dogs seemed to be inside, otherwise they would have stirred by now, and all the windows were dark. The Malfoy New Year's party had obviously ended early.

When she started moving towards the back door, Morgana realised that she was shaking. From the cold, she tried to convince herself, and pulled her cloak tighter around her. But if she were honest with herself, she would admit that the cold had nothing to do with her shaking. What made her body shake was anger, pure, white-hot rage.

How dare they? How dare Snape push her away yet again? How dare he touch Charis? And how dare Charis keep quiet about it?!

When Snape had agreed to dance with her in the dark corridor, Morgana had almost been unable to believe her luck. She had been longing to be close to him for the last four weeks, and she would have been more than content with the dance. But then he had kissed her and had awakened the feelings she had carefully hidden away: desire, lust, longing. She had wanted him. And she had thought that he had wanted her, too. After all, *he* had initiated the kiss, *he* had pinned her up against the wall, and *he* had ground himself against her.

When they had been disturbed and he had pulled away, Morgana had been disappointed, but she had understood. Neither of them could afford to be caught. She would have been expelled, and Snape would have lost his job, had they been caught. But she had believed hoped that he would come back to her.

When she had seen Zabini and Charis, Morgana had known that Snape would not come back to her that night. He had a responsibility to his students. He had a job to do. And she had understood.

But then she had seen the look in Snape's eyes when he had looked at Charis, had heard the words he spoke to her. And the tone he had used had spoken of lust and desire. *They* had been intimate. Severus Snape and Charis Byrne, her teacher and her best friend. And Charis had not even told her.

They were surely shagging now in that shabby room at the Three Broomsticks, Morgana thought. On the very bed where she had wanted Snape to take her. And he had certainly forgotten all about her by now, had forgotten all the promises his body had made to her.

Morgana set her jaw. If Snape didn't play fair, neither would she. And if he didn't give her what she desired, what her heart and body craved for, she knew another wizard who would. And that wizard would not push her away. He would take her and everything she had to offer. And she would give himself willingly to him.

And with her mind clouded by jealousy and her body aching from unfulfilled desire, Morgana pushed open the door that led to the kitchen of Malfoy Manor.

Silvy awakened at once and scrambled from her cardboard box to greet Morgana. 'Good morning, Miss,' the elf said, bowing so deeply that her nose touched the floor. 'What can Silvy do for Miss Morgana?'

'Is your master home?' Morgana asked curtly. Normally, she always had a nice word to spare for the elf, but not today. Today, she had no nice words for anyone.

'Yes, Miss,' Silvy replied. 'Master Lucius is sleeping in his chamber.'

'His chamber?' A triumphant smile flitted over Morgana's lips. If Lucius was sleeping in his chamber, that meant that he was alone. But to be sure, she double-checked. 'Is your master alone?'

Silvy nodded. 'Does Miss Morgana want Silvy to bring her to Master's chamber?'

'No, Silvy. I will find the way.' And for the first time that night, Morgana smiled at the elf. 'Before you go back to sleep, Silvy, would you ward the door to your master's room to make sure we will not be disturbed?'

'Yes, Miss Morgana,' the elf replied, once more taking a deep bow. 'Anything for Miss Morgana.'

Morgana patted the elf on the head and then silently made her way up the stairs. She had been at Malfoy Manor often enough to know which steps creaked, and she avoided them carefully. And she also knew which door led to Lucius' private chamber. Narcissa never went there, Morgana knew this, too. And she was confident that Lucius did not bring his mistresses there either. This room was his kingdom, and tonight, she would be his queen.

She lit a single candle by the door that gave just enough light for her to make out Lucius' form. He was lying on his back, one arm over his head and his chest exposed. And the silken sheet that covered his legs and waist was sheer enough to make out that he was naked.

Morgana steadied herself against the bedpost and took in the delicious sight. The air in the room was filled with the scent of Lucius' aftershave, sandalwood and musk. And there was also the scent of wine, coming from a half-empty glass that was standing on the nightstand. Hopefully, he had not drunk too much, Morgana thought. It would be

a shame if he failed to rise to the challenge tonight.

Gingerly, she approached the bed. Her eyes never left the sleeping wizard, not even when she took the wine glass from the nightstand and emptied it with one big gulp, washing away the taste of Severus Snape that was still hanging on her lips. The wine was sweet and heavy and filled her with the confidence to carry out the task she had set herself.

She would be lying if she said that she was not scared. Like all girls, she wanted her first time to be special and romantic. And Lucius had shown her that he was capable of giving her anything she desired. But she could not have that tonight. Lucius mustn't know that he had never taken her maidenhood last time, and hence they would have to move quickly, without caresses and without any emotions.

She leant in, close enough to feel his breath on her cheek, close enough for her lips to almost touch his ear as she whispered: 'Wake up, Lucius, and I will show you heaven.'

He stirred but did not wake, and Morgana let her lips brush against his ear.

'Narcissa,' he mumbled in his sleep and turned his head, his lips seeking for those that had just touched his ear.

Morgana narrowed her eyes, anger bubbling in her chest once more. He did long for his wife then. Maybe she should forget about him and leave before he woke up? The last thing she needed was yet another man pushing her away for another woman. But she locked the feeling away in the deepest corner of her heart and leant in once more. She needed him tonight, and her Slytherin brain would make sure that she got what she wanted.

'I will make you forget all about Narcissa,' she murmured in a low voice.

To that, Lucius' eyes snapped open, and for a moment, he just stared at her. 'Morgana,' he gasped as he had found his voice again. 'How ...? What ...?'

Morgana sat up and quirked an eyebrow at the blond wizard. 'Disappointed?' she asked in a slightly mocking tone.

'Disappointed? No, no, my love.' Finally, Lucius seemed to be able to form coherent sentences. 'Is this a dream?' he asked, reaching out for her as if to check that he was indeed not dreaming. He could not believe his luck. The girl had kept away for almost a month, and he had already considered sending her another piece of jewellery to make her return to his bed. But there she was now, sitting right beside him in the middle of the night. And she had come to him of her own free will.

'Do you want it to be a dream?' Morgana asked as Lucius' fingers traced her face and then down over her shoulders and her sides. 'Because if you'd rather be dreaming, I will ask Silvy to make up the guestroom for me, and you can go back to sleep.'

Lucius chuckled and took hold of her hips. 'No chance, darling. You are getting out of that dress and in here under the sheets with me right this instant.'

He pulled her on top of him, and his hands had already started pulling up her dress when Morgana pinned him down playfully. If she wanted her plan to work, she could not let him take command. Not yet. She would have to be in charge. She would have to set the rules.

'Please, love,' Lucius begged. 'I want to hold you against me and feel your skin against mine. Please, take off that dress.'

Once more Morgana took hold of his roaming hands. 'There is no need to rush,' she whispered. 'Silvy has warded the door, and no one will disturb us. We have all night.' She bent down and teasingly brushed his lips with hers. 'And when the morning comes, I want us both to be hoarse from screaming each other's name and our bodies to ache after a night of passion.'

'Morgana,' Lucius gasped, bucking his hips up against her, his cock twitching in anticipation. What had happened to the shy virgin he had bedded a month ago? When and how had she turned into such vixen? Her words alone were enough to make him hard.

Once more, he let his hands trace up her thighs to squeeze her delicious butt cheeks. 'Let me make your body sing, my love,' he whispered.

'And how exactly are you planning to do that?'

The tone of Morgana's voice was cold as ice, and Lucius frowned. Something seemed amiss. 'Darling, you don't seem yourself tonight,' he started, his hands now making small circular movements on her back. 'What's wrong, dear heart?'

'I did not come here to talk, Lucius.'

Merlin's balls, the girl had really come just to shag him! Lucius smirked inwardly. He would certainly make sure that she got exactly what she had come for.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position and pulled her closer towards him, started nibbling at her neck. 'Then take off your dress, and let me make love to you, angel.'

He felt her stiffen in his arms, and her next words surprised him beyond reason.

'I do not want you to make love to me tonight, Lucius,' she said in a firm tone. 'I want you to take me as you have never taken a woman before. I want you to take me hard until I scream your name in ecstasy. I want you to explode inside me and tell me that I am the best shag you ever had.'

Lucius gasped in genuine surprise. 'You want to be ravished, my love?' He couldn't believe it. Was that girl really telling him that she wanted to be fucked, that there was no need for tender words and caresses, no need for lovemaking? Oh, he could live with that.

Morgana grabbed Lucius' face with both her hands and crushed his lips with hers, hoping he would take her feverish kiss as a yes. Of course, she did not want to be ravished. She wanted him to be as tender as he had been that afternoon in the white room on the bottom floor of the Manor. But if he made sweet love to her that night, if he entered her slowly and carefully, he would notice that she was still a virgin, and that would give him reason for far too many unwanted questions. So yes, she needed him to take her roughly. She needed him to break through her hymen quickly enough for him not to notice. And in case it hurt, she needed a reason for her tears. But to her surprise, the thought of him overpowering her turned her on beyond reason.

As she released his face, Lucius smirked. 'What the lady wants ...'

With the agility of a cat, he shifted round, and before Morgana knew it, she was lying on her back with Lucius on top of her. And she did not resist. He had indeed taken her kiss as a yes, and now she would have to play along.

'Now,' Lucius growled, 'to get rid of this ridiculous dress ...' He ripped it open with his bare hands before letting them run down all the way from her lips, over her neck and chest and past her belly just to hover over her core.

'I can feel your heat, Morgana,' he hissed. 'All that passion, just for me.'

He did not need his wand to remove her bra and knickers. To do that without a wand was one of his finest tricks. He drank in her physique for a moment before covering her petite, young body with his and kissing her feverishly, clamping her hands above her head. She had told him that she wanted to be ravished, and he intended to fulfil her wish.

Morgana could feel the tip of Lucius' cock rub against her entrance, and she willed herself not to stiffen or even flinch. She was ready, she told herself. She had to be.

She gasped with surprise and pain as he swiftly thrust into her up to the hilt. It hurt, but not as much as she had imagined. And as he thrust into her with rapid, hard

movements, Morgana felt her body adjust to him, respond to him in a manner she had not thought possible. And the pain gave way to a sensation for which she did not know a name.

As Lucius started biting her neck, she wrapped her legs around his hips. She wanted to feel him deeper inside her, wanted him to fill her completely. And as he asked her if she liked it, she could only moan.

She whimpered in disappointment as he withdrew from her, but Lucius ignored her protest. He, too, had a plan. If she wanted to be taken hard, if she wanted to scream his name in ecstasy, he would make her. The thought of dominating her gave him such a rush that he almost came just thinking of it. But he would make sure his seed flowed into her womb that night. What better way to father the Heir of Darkness than by raw, passionate sex?

He flipped Morgana over onto her knees and entered her from behind, one hand curled into her hair and the other on her hip as he slammed into her. Merlin, the girl was tight, he thought as he relentlessly drove into her, licking his lips and growling like an animal. This was a night he was not going to forget too soon.

Morgana felt her body tremble, but not with fear nor from pain. This was lust, pure, animalistic lust. She felt it wash over her in waves, imagined her whole body being on fire. And as Lucius guided his hand in between her legs to pinch her clit, she exploded, threw back her head and screamed out his name as she had promised she would.

'Yes, Goddess in heaven! Lucius! Yes! YES!'

The contracting of her muscles around his cock drove Lucius over the edge, and with a few short, powerful thrusts he spurted his seed into her womb, growling her name and gently caressing her back before collapsing and letting himself fall onto the bed beside her.

'Oh, love,' he gasped, pulling Morgana towards himself and covering her neck and shoulder blades with tender kisses. 'This was incredible.'

He was not even lying. He hadn't had a shag that good in years. And if the girl kept going on like that, he would gladly shag her for a couple of months before she fell pregnant. Not that he had any doubt that he would impregnate her as soon as the right time of the month arrived. But until then, he would happily shag her just for fun.

To her own surprise, Morgana slept peacefully that night. And when she woke up in Lucius' arms in the morning, she felt more rested than she had for months. And she was glad that she had stayed after all.

When she had heard Lucius' breathing become slow and regular, she had considered freeing herself from his embrace and sneaking out. She had received what she had come to the Manor for, and to be honest, she did not want to spend the night. But when Lucius had tightened his embrace and snuggled up against her back, she had changed her mind. And when he still half asleep had murmured that he wanted her to stay and that he wanted to make love to her in the morning, she had relaxed and let her tired eyes flutter shut and slept soundly until an hour before sunrise when she had felt Lucius shift behind her and leave the bed. Then her eyes had snapped open, and a feeling of panic had risen in her chest. Where was he going? Was he leaving her?

She had just been about to sit up and call for him when she had felt his weight on the mattress once more.

'Remembered that you are at home and don't need to sneak out?' she had murmured, trying to hide her insecurity with a snarky remark.

'Forgive an old man, dear heart,' Lucius had chuckled. 'Lack of sleep makes me feel cold.'

The delicate satin of Lucius' robe had brushed against her naked skin as Lucius had wrapped his arms around her once more, and with a happy sigh she had drifted off into the land of dreams again.

The sun was up when Morgana woke again. She could see the soft light of morning fall through the gap in the curtains. She knew that she should not be lying there, that she should hurry back to Hogwarts and sneak into the Great Hall for breakfast before anyone noticed that she had been gone all night. But she did not want to leave. Lucius' arm around her waist felt as if it belonged there, and so did his lips that were still lingering at her neck. And suddenly, Lucius' embrace was all that mattered. Hogwarts didn't matter, Charis did not matter, and sure as hell Severus Snape did not matter.

The first thing Lucius did when he woke up was pull the young witch who was lying in his arms closer towards him. He didn't wake up with company too often. Normally, he would disappear in the dead of the night, not caring about the woman he left behind. Most of the time, he would have forgotten her name by the time he came home. And the nights he spent with his wife seldom made either of them long for a cuddle in the morning. But he had to admit to himself now that it felt rather nice having a young, warm body pressed up against his own. And still he could not believe his luck: the girl had actually come to him of her own free will; she had spread her legs wide for him and had welcomed him into her flesh with a passion that had burnt his very skin. And she had stayed the night. Lucius smirked. He had succeeded. The girl was his now, his alone.

She was awake, he could tell by the way her body was shifting in his arms, and he decided to woo her a little more, just for the fun of it.

'I had a horrible nightmare, my love,' he whispered into her ear. 'I dreamt you had left and I woke up alone. And it filled my heart with sorrow. But you are here, my angel. And I couldn't be happier about it.'

He nuzzled into her neck, relishing the soft moan that escaped her lips, and he felt his own body react immediately.

'You have surprised me, love,' he murmured as he thrust his hips forward so his semi-hard cock came to rub against her backside. 'Your eagerness to be dominated excited me beyond words, Morgana.'

He turned her around and claimed her lips, and Morgana kissed him back, feverishly, trying to put all her feelings into that kiss. And as Lucius rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him, she once more did not resist.

Yes, she had enjoyed being dominated last night, had enjoyed being taken and had even enjoyed the pain. But the look in Lucius eyes as she lowered herself onto his cock now gave her a rush she could not have imagined before. Lucius Malfoy wanted her, desired her, and now she was the one to decide whether to fulfil his wishes or not. She was in charge over the wizard who was lying beneath her, and the surge of power alone made Morgana almost tumble over the edge, and she pulled Lucius up, wanting to look into those hungry eyes while she rode him to his climax.

'When will you come back, love?' Lucius asked her with a sad expression on his face as Morgana put on her dress half an hour later. 'Make it soon, because I will be yearning for you from the very second you leave this room.'

Morgana shrugged. 'If anyone finds out that I have spent the night here instead of the Slytherin dormitory, I am most likely to receive enough detentions to last until the term ends. I'll be lucky if I get to see sunlight before June.'

'Then I will come to you rescue, dear heart,' Lucius promised with a smile. 'I will storm into the dungeons of the castle and slay any foul beast that is keeping you away from me.'

'Even the Bat of the Dungeon?'

Lucius sneered. 'Snape,' he spat. 'Yes, that dried-up old bat would certainly enjoy standing in the way of our love. He wouldn't know what love was if hit him over the head with a Bludger.'

Morgana's mouth fell open, and Lucius embraced her, smiling triumphantly and stroking her hair. From the moment the girl had shown up by his bedside, he had known

that he had her heart in his hand. And the confession of his love would now make sure that she would not even try to escape.

XVI: Heartache and Tears

Chapter 16 of 41

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Chapter XVI: Heartache and Tears

There was far less noise in the Great Hall than usual on the morning of January first. Not surprising, really, as there were fewer students present than usual. Many had decided to have a lie-in after the New Year's party, and those who had actually possessed the strength to go to breakfast were either very tired or very hung-over, or both. But there were also students who felt positively cheerful that New Year's morning, if not elated, and Charis Byrne was one of those.

She was sitting in her usual seat from which she could see all the way to the Slytherin table. But that morning, she was not trying to catch the eye of her friend. In fact, she had not even noticed that Morgana had not arrived yet. No, Charis' eyes were on somebody else that morning, namely on a rather handsome looking Slytherin boy with chocolate-brown eyes.

'Earth to Charis Byrne, earth to Charis Byrne. Charis Byrne, come in, please.'

Charis turned her head slowly towards her House mate, but she had to blink a couple of times to tear her eyes from Blaise. And what a shame it was to take her eyes off him.

'Well, aren't we looking all happy and dreamy-eyed? But you really should stop drooling, Charis. No one will want to eat soggy toast.'

Charis blushed and giggled. 'I am sorry, Cathy,' she said and playfully wiped her chin with the napkin her House mate was offering her. 'It's just ... oh, isn't he just gorgeous?'

Cathy craned her neck to get a better look at Zabini. 'Yeah,' she said and shrugged. 'Not bad for a Slytherin.'

'Not bad?' Charis' eyes darted back to the Slytherin table. 'Cathy, you need to get your eyes checked. Look at that body, that face, those lips ...' Her voice trailed off, and she started having flashbacks: Blaise's face close to hers, his lips on hers, his taut body tightly pressed against hers ...

Once more, Cathy had to raise her voice to make Charis snap out of her trance. 'I said,' she repeated as Charis' eyes were finally focused on her, 'that it is weird to see you making eye-contact with another Slytherin other than Morgana. Where is she anyway? She's a rather early bird normally.'

Charis frowned. 'Yes, it seems rather odd. But then again, she had two Butterbeers last night. Can't hold her liquor, the dear one. She's probably hung-over.'

'Now that seems to be a Slytherin trait,' Cathy concluded. 'Judging from the sour look on Snape's face, he's hung-over, too. Thank goodness we are not having any lessons today. I don't think anyone would survive even the tiniest mistake in Potions.'

Charis cast a glance towards the staff table. Snape indeed looked like thunder. And although she was deeply embarrassed because he had caught her and Blaise in flagrante, Charis now felt sorry for the Potions master. She had seen him down half a bottle of Odgen's last night, standing all alone by the bar while everyone else had been having fun. All alone, except for the few moments he had been talking to Dumbledore, Rosmerta and Morgana. And even then, he had almost seemed lonely.

And the way he held on to her after he'd sent Blaise away, the intense look in his eyes, the way he spoke to her ... it was almost as if Snape had wanted her for himself. The thought made a shiver go down Charis' spine. Snape had reminded her of the incident in the Room of Requirement. Surely, if he regretted it, he would not have mentioned it? And for a split second, she had seen that look in his eyes again, that look that told her that he wanted her. And she had wanted him, too, no matter how he had treated her before. She had wanted him to hold her in his strong arms, kiss her, make love to her ... But then he had once more turned cold in a blink of an eye, sent her back to the castle and told her to think very carefully about what she had done. He had almost seemed ... disappointed at her behaviour.

As if Snape had noticed Charis looking at him, he snapped his head up and scowled at her, and she lowered her gaze. And when he got up and started to walk towards the Ravenclaw table, she felt like running away. But she was rooted to the bench and had no choice but to watch him approach, his robes billowing behind him and jaw set.

Before Charis even got the chance to bid him good morning, Snape dropped a tiny parcel on her plate. 'I believe this is yours.'

Charis frowned. She had no idea what the parcel might contain.

'You will find that it has been returned to its original state,' Snape went on. 'I suggest you use it to locate that little friend of yours.' His voice was cold like a Siberian wind, and finally Charis understood. He was returning her necklace.

She looked after him, frowning, as he returned back to the staff table. Why ever would he return her necklace to her in the Great Hall where everyone could see that they were talking? And why would he want her to find Morgana? Surely, she was still in bed.

'What was that all about?' Cathy piped up as Snape was out of earshot.

'My necklace,' Charis explained, opening the parcel. 'I had lost it. Turns out it was in Snape's classroom the whole time.'

'And he bothered to bring it to you?' Cathy sounded gobsmacked. 'He must still be drunk. Could you smell the alcohol coming off him? Pathetic, I tell you.'

Charis didn't listen to her House mate abusing Snape; her thoughts had long since trailed off. Why would Snape want her to find out where Morgana was? Could it be that she was not in her dormitory after all?

Charis was just about to put on the necklace as Snape's yelling made her flinch.

'Miss Belakane, my office. RIGHT NOW!'

Charis and all the other students swirled around just in time to see Snape storm out of the Great Hall, with a rather dishevelled Morgana following in his wake.

'Is that how he treats people with a hangover?' Cathy asked as they had exited the Hall. 'God forbid he ever catches me. I swear, I am laying off Butterbeer! Starting today!'

'I would say Belakane being hung-over is not the reason for Snape's outburst.'

At the sound of the drawling voice, Charis turned around and came face to face with Draco Malfoy, who was sneering at her. 'Want me to share a secret with you, Byrne?'

'I am not interested in anything you have to say, Malfoy,' Charis declared and tried to get up. But Draco pushed her back onto her seat.

'Your best friend,' Draco started, his words dipped in acid. 'You know, she never returned to the castle after the party. She's been gone all night. And Snape did not return before five. Interesting, wouldn't you say?'

'You are pathetic, Malfoy,' Charis spat. 'Gossiping about your own Head of House and one of your own House mates? Have you seriously nothing better to do?'

Once more, Draco smirked. 'Oh, yes, dear Mudblood. I have thousands of things to do. Returning these, for instance.' With a flick of his wrist, he made a pair of black silken knickers land on her breakfast plate. 'Zabini sends his regards, by the way.'

And then he turned on his heel and returned to the Slytherin table, leaving Charis with her mouth open and her eyes on her knickers.

* * *

'Where were you last night, Miss Belakane?'

Morgana stared straight ahead, her mind racing. How the hell had Snape found out that she had not slept in the Slytherin dormitory? No one had seen her return to the castle, she was sure of that. Disillusionment Charms were one of her specialities. She had changed her robes, hurried to the Great Hall for breakfast and had certainly not been the last one to arrive. And still, Snape knew! Some of her dorm mates must have tattled. Those evil, horrid snakes! Something like that would never have happened in Gryffindor Tower!

'I will ask you just once more, Miss Belakane: where were you last night?'

It was a desperate attempt, Morgana knew that: desperate, foolish and outright dangerous, but she offered Snape a lie: 'In bed, sir.'

'Certainly not your own!' Snape spat. 'I happen to know that you did not return to your dormitory after the party.'

Who? Who had tattled?

'I am waiting, Miss Belakane!'

Snape was standing so close to her now that Morgana could literally feel him breathing down her neck.

What the hell had she been thinking? Why, why in the name of all the Furies had she gone to Lucius? Yes, she had been angry with Snape last night and had wanted to get back at him, but was her petty revenge really worth all the trouble she was in now?

'I will count to five, Miss Belakane,' Snape hissed. 'If I haven't heard the truth when I reach five, I swear I will force Veritaserum down your throat. One ...'

Morgana spun around to voice her protest and had just put out her chin defiantly when she saw cold wrath in Snape's eyes. And she also saw that he was glaring at her neck.

'Love bites?' he growled. 'Are you telling me that you have risked several months' worth of detention for some *snogging*?'

Morgana felt her stomach clench, and just before she cast down her glance, she saw something other than anger in Snape's eyes. Shock? Disappointment?

'Tell me that you did not go to Malfoy Manor, Miss Belakane.' The anger had gone from his voice as well. But his tone was cold, so cold. And Morgana dared neither to speak nor look up at him.

'Did you sleep with Lucius Malfoy, Miss Belakane?'

Still, Morgana did not answer. Not even when Snape grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

'Did you?'

As she nodded, Snape let go of her as if burnt. 'You stupid girl,' he spat. 'You stupid little slut! Is this how you thank me? I have been trying to protect you from danger, and on the first opportunity you run off to fuck the man who has been drugging you for over a month, the man who is responsible for your parents' deaths?! Where do you keep your brain, Miss Belakane? In your damp knickers?'

Morgana barely heard him. What had she done? She knew all this! She knew that Lucius had tried to make her parents join the Dark Lord, and that he most probably was responsible for their deaths. She knew that he had been slipping her Blackroot for over a month. And still she had run to him last night. Out of jealousy and spite. Had anyone ever done anything more stupid?

But then Lucius had told her that he loved her. He could not have been lying, now could he? She had looked into his eyes when he had said it. He could not have lied.

'Tell me that you were at least smart enough to use protection, Miss Belakane!'

Morgana snapped up her head and stared at her Head of House. Something about what he had just said made her heart ache, but she could not say if it was his words or the concerned tone in his voice.

'Have you?' Snape repeated.

Morgana just nodded. Why was this so important to him?

'Good.'

He swirled around and plucked a blue phial of the shelf behind his desk. 'Essence of Dittany,' he explained as he held out the phial towards Morgana. 'Use it on your neck. There is no need to thrust your questionable reputation even further into the spotlight. And now get out of my sight!'

As Morgana fled the dungeon, Snape let himself fall onto a chair, burying his face in his hands. How could the girl have been so bloody stupid? After what Malfoy had done to her, the possession, the Blackroot? How in Hades could she throw herself into his arms and let him shag her? Did she not know what this meant?

But of course, she did not know. She had no idea why Lucius Malfoy was after her. Surely, her girlish, adolescent, hormone-befuddled brain believed the nonsense Lucius had been writing in his letters, that she was the loveliest creature on earth and that he loved her. She had no idea how much danger she was now in that she had given herself to him.

Dumbledore would have to be informed about this development. He had to be informed right away. But Snape did not even get to the door before a searing pain in his left forearm made him sink to his knees.

* * *

Charis stared at the pair of black silk knickers that were strewn across her breakfast plate, still unable to comprehend. The chuckles of a few Ravenclaws on her table snapped her out of her reverie, and, blushing furiously, she crammed the knickers into her robe and left the table before anyone had a chance to ask questions or make smart comments.

What the hell was going on? Blaise had told her he wanted to take her underwear as a reminder of a perfect evening and because the thought of her returning to Hogwarts knickerless excited him. Of course, she had believed him. So how the hell had that little inbred prick Malfoy got hold of them? She looked over at the Slytherin table, where Blaise was now sat between Pansy Parkinson and Montague, smiling and laughing as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Charis was reluctant to approach him whilst he was surrounded by his less than hospitable housemates, but she needed to know what was going on. Slowly, she stepped towards the table.

'Blaise, can I have a word?' she asked quietly, hoping to get him away from his unsavoury friends.

Blaise either didn't hear, or ignored her. Draco Malfoy, however, did.

'Did you hear that, Blaise? Some kind of annoying buzzing sound? Sounded like a Mudblood.'

Draco, Pansy and Montague glared at Charis, but still Blaise didn't look at her.

'Blaise?' she pleaded, not knowing what was going on.

Finally, Blaise turned towards her. The warmth from his chocolate brown eyes was gone; instead he fixed her with a look that could only be described as pure disgust.

'Looks like I proved that the rumours about you are true. You really are a filthy little slut,' he said slowly as Charis paled. 'But thanks to Draco here, he made the whole degrading experience worthwhile.'

Charis looked from Blaise to Malfoy with alarm, the latter of which now had a sickening smirk on his face.

'VIP tickets to the next Quidditch match and a signed broom in return for your knickers. Sounded like a good deal to me, and far too easy,' Zabini continued smoothly.

Charis was desperately trying not to cry as Montague, Pansy and the other Slytherins started snickering. She would not give them the satisfaction!

But Blaise twisted the knife further and dealt the most crushing blow of all. 'Now, if you know what's good for you, I'd get away from our table before Montague's fist accidentally connects with your repulsive Mudblood face.'

Charis could contain her grief no more. With her eyesight blurring with emotion and her throat burning with shame, she turned and stumbled towards the doors of the Great Hall as the hot, fat tears began to fall down her cheeks.

* * *

The tears were still flowing freely as Charis stood on top of the Astronomy Tower five minutes later, watching her breath mist in the cold January air. She felt stupid. Stupid and used. Used all over again, just like she had felt with Snape.

How could this have happened? How could the gentle lover she had known the night before turn into a cold-hearted bastard? How could he have deceived her so?

Why did all Slytherin males only seem to want one thing from her? And why could she not resist them and see them for what they really were? Evil, lying snakes!

Another sob shook her body, and Charis felt like the loneliest person on Earth. But then her necklace started to glow. And she hung on to it, squeezed it until the metal cut into her palm. *Morgana, I need you*, she thought. *Please, come and find me*. She needed some advice now, some level-headed, sensible advice from the only Slytherin she could depend on.

When the door opened, Charis rushed forwards into her friend's open arms. 'I should have listened to you, Morgana,' she pressed forth between sobs. 'I should have listened to you.'

Morgana awkwardly patted her friend on the back. She knew why Charis was crying. She had returned to the Great Hall and the Slytherin table just in time to overhear Zabini bragging about how he had laid the little Ravenclaw slut. And despite the anger Morgana had felt towards Charis only twelve hours ago, she had immediately gone to look for her friend. What Zabini had done was brutal, and no one deserved such treatment.

'Charis,' Morgana whispered. 'Did Zabini hurt you last night?' From what she had overheard, anything could be possible.

Charis shook her head. 'He ... he was a perfect gentlemen,' she sobbed. 'And I thought ... I thought he liked me.'

Morgana oppressed the urge to say *I told you so*. She had indeed warned Charis about Slytherin boys, especially Zabini, but that did not matter now.

'I really, really thought he liked me,' Charis went on. 'He was so tender and sweet. It was exactly how I had imagined my first time to be. Romantic and special. I would never have let him touch me if I had known that he was such a pig. Oh, I am so stupid, Morgana!'

Her first time? Morgana swallowed dryly. Did that mean that Charis had *not* slept with Snape? Did that mean that she, Morgana, had jumped to the wrong conclusions and taken revenge for something that didn't need to be avenged? But if they had not slept together, then why the hell had Snape looked at Charis like that? Why had he said those things?

Morgana held her friend at an arm's length and looked into her blood-shot green eyes. 'You are not stupid, little Ravenclaw. Just hopelessly romantic. Don't blame yourself for believing that love still exists in this world.'

Love. Without her even noticing it, Morgana's thoughts drifted off. Lucius had been talking of love that morning. And she had believed him. But now, some hours later and back at Hogwarts, away from him, his words seemed ridiculous. He was responsible for her parents' deaths. He had drugged her, even tried to possess her mind. But still, she dearly hoped that his words had been true. Why? Why was she so desperate to believe him? Why did she feel that she needed his love?

Charis sniffed. She, too, was thinking about love. She knew she wasn't in love with Zabini, but she had certainly had the potential to be. In her mind, the two of them would have been the romance of the century. He had indeed swept her off her feet, and she had given her virginity to him willingly. He had been a welcome relief, a balm to soothe her heart after the embarrassing scenes with Snape. How was she to know he was going to crush her heart even more fiercely than the stern Potions master had? But then again, had Snape really meant to hurt her?

Her mind flitted briefly back to the scene at Hogsmeade. There was definitely something in Snape's tone that spoke of jealousy and disappointment. But she had no time to analyse that right now, since the thought of Snape suddenly reminded Charis of Morgana's scolding earlier in the Great Hall. 'Why was Snape so pissed with you at breakfast?' she asked.

Snape's name made Morgana snap out of her own thoughts and focus on her friend again, who had dried off her tears and obviously decided to change topics.

'He was pissed at me because I spent the night at Malfoy Manor,' she said straight out. Why lie?

'You WHAT?' Charis looked shocked. 'Malfoy ... WHY?'

Because I thought that the man whom I actually wanted to spend the night with was spending it with you Morgana thought, irrational snakes of jealousy once more wriggling in the pit of her stomach. But she did not say anything.

Charis either did not notice her friend's silence or mistook it for a sign of embarrassment. And when she thought about her friend's reason for going to Malfoy Manor, her eyes widened in shock. 'Morgana!' she exclaimed. 'Did you go there in the middle of the night? Did you ... ' Charis' eyes widened. 'Did you *do* anything?'

Morgana just nodded. 'And I know I shouldn't have,' she said, the confusion growing inside her. 'I am supposed to hate that man!'

Once she had started talking, she couldn't stop herself. All the thoughts she had had about Lucius Malfoy over the last months came flowing out of her mouth, and Charis' eyes became wider and wider. She seemed to understand just as little as Morgana did.

'I know that it was wrong to go to Lucius. And I know that he is dangerous,' Morgana said, a terrifying conclusion forming in her mind. 'But if he asks me to come back ... then I probably will.'

Charis gasped. 'Do you love him?'

And Morgana just shook her head. She had no idea what she felt.

* * *

Malfoy Manor, but of course. Snape sneered as he realised where he had been summoned to. He was really starting to hate that place! But then again, he could see why the Dark Lord would prefer it as meeting place. Riddle Manor was literally falling apart, and Lucius could provide his Lord with all the luxury money could buy.

Snape didn't need to ask the elf in which room the meeting was held, just like he hadn't needed to ask where to Apparate to. When the Dark Mark burnt, he always knew exactly where to go. Such were the powers of the Dark Lord.

Despite it being in the middle of the day, it was dark in the drawing room. The thick, dark green velvet curtains were closed, and the candles that were lit all around the room cast eerie shadows onto the walls. And the room seemed cold, dreadfully cold.

The Dark Lord was standing in front of the empty fireplace. His pearly white skin seemed almost transparent in the candle light, and the long, bony fingers of the hand he was now extending looked like the hand of a skeleton.

Snape suppressed a shudder and fell to his knees to first kiss the hem of the Dark Lord's robe, then that appalling hand. It was icy cold, and Snape wondered if it was the Dark Lord's presence that had made the room turn cold as well.

'Severus, my loyal servant!' the Dark Lord exclaimed and gestured for Snape to get up. 'You are late.'

'I had to make arrangements first, my Lord,' Snape explained, resisting the urge to grit his teeth. He was growing tired of this game. Every time he arrived, the Dark Lord told him that he was late. He should know by now that he could not just leave the castle in a blink of an eye. He had to leave the grounds to Disapparate.

'Surely dear Severus had some students to yell at first, my Lord,' came Lucius' drawling out of the shadows. 'Or had to dish out some detentions. Did you not, Severus? I do, however, hope that you did not put any student in detention that needs to be allowed to ... roam freely, as it were.'

Snape felt the muscles in his neck tense. Was that what this meeting was about? The Belakane girl?

'If you are referring to Miss Belakane, Lucius, then I can assure you that the girl will indeed receive detention for not sleeping in her own bed last night.'

'Now, Severus, we cannot have that, can we?' Lucius' voice was as sweet as honey, and it made Snape nauseous.

'She most certainly will serve detention, Lucius. The girl is a student of my House, and it is my responsibility to make sure that she follows the school rules.'

'School rules? Now that is ridiculous!' Lucius spun around to face Voldemort. 'My Lord, it seems that Severus here is trying to interfere with my forgive me with our plans,' he corrected himself with a deep bow. 'I suspect that he himself has cast an eye on the girl and hence is trying to keep her from me.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Lucius,' Snape snapped. 'I have already told you that I am not the least bit interested in Miss Belakane.'

'And still you are doing a damn good job keeping her away from me!'

'My Lord,' Snape started, his eyes resolutely on Voldemort, 'I am very much aware of the fact that Lucius wishes me to present the girl to him on a silver platter. I am, however, a Hogwarts teacher. I do not think Dumbledore would like it very much if I started pushing students into the arms of suspected Death Eaters.'

The Dark Lord gave a horrible chuckle. 'Unlike Lucius, dear Severus, I am aware of the delicate tightrope you walk daily on my behalf. And you have played your role as protector of the girl brilliantly and have offered me your unwavering loyalty faultlessly.'

'However, Lucius here has offered me a birthday present which surpasses even this: the plan to provide me with an heir!'

Voldemort bared his teeth in a sickly smile that made Severus feel as if he had been drenched in icy water. So Lucius had waited until the Dark Lord's birthday to share his little plan? His sycophancy knew no bounds.

'The girl has now twice come to Lucius of her own free will,' he continued in his cold, high voice. 'The third time as you are certainly aware of holds a special charm, a kind of magic older than the family of the Belakanes themselves. And you will both do your best to ensure that the Heir will be conceived that time.'

'I have already made the necessary preparations, my Lord,' Lucius said quickly, his chest puffed up. 'When the girl stayed at the Manor last summer, I had one of my elves monitor her and her ... cycle. I am confident that I know the best time to invite her the next time.'

Voldemort nodded appreciatively. 'Very good, Lucius. Very good indeed.' Then he turned towards Snape again. 'Severus, I need your specific area of expertise to ensure that the girl will conceive the next time Lucius invites her.'

'A fertility potion, My Lord?' Snape asked, a feeling of dread seeping into his stomach.

'Yes, Severus,' Voldemort affirmed. 'And not just any fertility potion. I want you to give the girl *Ingravesco*.'

Snape felt the breath catch in his throat. That potion would ensure impregnation during the girl's next sexual encounter, no matter how strong a contraceptive she was using. Surely, there must be a way to talk himself out of this. He would not have any part in this sinister plan!

'My Lord,' he began, 'this potion needs four weeks to mature and after that another two weeks to reach its full effect.'

He was interrupted by Lucius' triumphant gloating. 'Six weeks in total! My Lord, this must be a sign! According to my calculations, the girl will be ovulating by the end of the second week of February. Looks like I will have a witch to bed on Valentine's Day and shall provide you with an heir before the end of November.'

Snape wasted no time in reporting back to Dumbledore once he returned to the castle. There was so much to tell from the last twenty-four hours! Firstly, that the plan for an heir for the Dark Lord had well and truly been put into motion as well as his involvement therein, and secondly, the more disturbing development: that Morgana had visited Malfoy Manor after the New Year's party of her own volition.

'She went to him of her own accord last night, Headmaster,' Snape sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. He still could not understand how the girl could be so incredibly stupid!

'Did you see any reason why she went to Malfoy last night?' Dumbledore asked calmly. 'Did you see her leave?'

Snape looked at him coldly. 'Unless it has escaped your notice, Headmaster, I had a whole pub full of students I was watching over last night. I cannot protect her twenty-four hours a day!'

'I'm not asking you to either, Severus,' Dumbledore replied, still annoyingly calm. 'I am just trying to get to the bottom of Morgana's motivations towards Lucius. It seems to me that she is beginning to be drawn to him, even without the Blackroot.'

'Lesser witches have crumbled under his charm,' Snape agreed reluctantly.

'Yes, they have.' Dumbledore peered characteristically over his half-moon glasses, his blue eyes keen and sharp.

'Severus, did you observe Miss Belakane at all during the New Year's party?'

Snape stared back suspiciously, wondering where the old man was going with this particular train of thought.

'She turned down any boy that came close to her,' Dumbledore continued. 'Why was this? Why did she not even dance?'

'She didn't like the music? Merlin knows there was some dross playing.'

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to fix his Potions master with a firm stare. 'Do not be obtuse, Severus. I am talking about the way she keeps away from any male student lately. You and I both know that this is not her typical behaviour.'

'Perhaps, Headmaster,' Snape began lightly, 'she has worked her way through them all and they no longer pose a challenge?'

Dumbledore had the good grace to ignore this comment. 'Or, as I rather suspect, her affections lie elsewhere ...'

Snape put his hands to his temples, rubbing them lightly. This was NOT what he needed to hear right now. 'I hardly see what I am supposed to do about that, Headmaster,' he snapped in annoyance.

'You really don't see it, do you, Severus?' Dumbledore persisted. 'Who was the only male person she even talked to for more than ten seconds during the party?'

'The DJ?'

'Oh, Severus, please!' Dumbledore banged his fist lightly on the table with exasperation. He knew Snape had been under a lot of pressure lately but his snarky comments were not helping the situation one bit.

'With whom did Morgana actually TALK? Have a conversation with?'

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'Headmaster, you cannot be insinuating ...' he replied in a low voice.

Dumbledore merely twinkled back in response.

'Great. This is all I need.'

'Severus, can you blame her? You two have shared a lot lately! But I am sure, as her teacher, you have not encouraged her in any way.' Dumbledore smiled at Snape serenely.

'It is no concern of mine if the girl cannot control her emotions, or her knicker elastic!' Snape snapped. He was fed up with everything falling on his shoulders. And now the old man was blaming HIM for Morgana's stupidity, as if her stupid crush on him and him turning her down had made her run to Malfoy!

'Tsk, tsk, Severus, such a harsh tone,' the Headmaster admonished. 'I hardly think a crush on her teacher is anything to be concerned about. However, when it comes to Lucius Malfoy, I am afraid this might be more than a crush, Severus. I believe Miss Belakane is falling in love.'

'Love?' Snape didn't know if he should laugh or vomit. 'Headmaster, I doubt that a seventeen-year-old girl knows anything about love.'

'Call it whatever you want, Severus: love, infatuation. It does not matter,' Dumbledore continued. 'What matters, however, is that the girl is in danger. We cannot have her run off to Lucius without us knowing. As a matter of fact, seeing that Lucius' master plan seems to be working out far too nicely for him, we cannot have Morgana run to him at all.'

'And what do you suggest, Headmaster. Putting her in chains in the dungeon?'

'I suggest we tell her about Lucius' plan.'

Snape stared at Dumbledore in utter bewilderment. 'You must be joking!'

'This situation is too serious to be making jokes, Severus,' Dumbledore replied, a deep frown forming between his kind blue eyes. 'I am afraid it is our only option. Maybe hopefully the girl will stay away from Lucius when she knows about the horrible plan he has in store for her.'

'Very well then,' Snape snapped. 'You tell her then.'

The first night of the new year brought an icy storm and heavy snowfall, and everyone in the castle was tightly wrapped up in their blankets, dreaming of sunshine and warmth. Everyone except two confused seventh-years and a Potions master, whose mind seemed so full of thoughts that he seriously doubted that he would ever be able

to sleep again.

How had he gotten himself into this mess, Snape wondered. Four months ago, he had watched the girls with an amused smirk, had seen Morgana act all cocky to get his attention and Charis blush every time he had looked at her. And he had enjoyed playing with them and had rolled his eyes when he had realised that they both had a crush on him. And now Morgana was slipping through his fingers, and Charis was coming far too close.

He slowed down his steps as he passed the stairs to Ravenclaw Tower, wondering if the girl was lying in her bed, dreaming, and if she still dreamt of him? He had seen the look in her eyes last night. Those big, green eyes had once more been filled with a longing that he so rarely got to see. The girl would have done anything for him last night, Snape knew that. And as hard as it had been to resist the temptation, he had sent her back to the castle, cursing himself for letting her get under his skin. He was not even sure why she affected him in such a manner. He was a grown man and one of the best Occlumens in the country. He, if anyone, should be able to restrain himself. But still, Snape found himself lusting for that girl, found himself longing to see that look in her eyes again.

Charis was indeed lying in her bed, but she was not dreaming. In fact, she was wide awake. She had drawn the curtains, cast a Silencing Charm around her bed and spent the better part of the last hour crying: for herself, her broken heart and for Severus Snape. Zabini had hurt her deeply, just as deeply as Snape had hurt her when he had pushed her away.

But Zabini had hurt her out of cruelty, and Snape *Severus* had pushed her away because he was not allowed to have her close. Yes, that must be the reason. She had seen the demanding look in his eyes, and she had heard the seductive sound of his voice. He did want her. Charis was sure of that. But he was not allowed to. And the thought of Severus having to be all alone pained Charis almost as much as the thought of being alone herself.

Snape felt himself grow even more tense with every step he took towards the dungeons, and the further away he got from Ravenclaw Tower, the quicker his thoughts transferred from Charis to Morgana. Why? Why in the name of Merlin had the girl gone to Malfoy last night? Why had she given herself to that foul creature? Had Lucius lured her with tender words and promises of love? And had she listened to him because he *Severus Snape* had pushed her away? Twice?

Snape clenched his jaw and strode by the hidden door that led to the Slytherin common room. He refused to believe that any of this was his fault. To hell with Dumbledore and his insinuations! But still, he doubted that he would be able to get the girl out of his head that night. Not after what he had heard at Malfoy Manor. The girl was in so much danger, and so far, she had no idea what kind of mess she had gotten herself into. Dumbledore would soon tell her. And then Dumbledore would expect him, her Head of House, to protect her. But for the time being, Snape doubted that the girl would let him.

Meanwhile, in the Slytherin common room, Morgana sat curled up in a chair by the empty grate, systematically ripping the parchment in her hands into pieces without really knowing why she was tearing up the note Lucius had sent her. After all, it had made her smile. Lucius had told her that he would never forget last night, and that she would forever be in his heart. And she wanted to believe him.

Last night had changed everything. She had gone to Malfoy Manor out of spite, in order to take revenge on Snape. And she had left the Manor in the early hours of morning, leaving a piece of her heart behind. The piece of her heart that she had meant to give to Severus Snape. Now, she sneered at the very name of her Head of House. There was no point in trying to win his affection anymore. He had made his choice, and he had chosen Charis.

Sure, Morgana had to admit that she had jumped to conclusions when she had assumed that Snape and Charis had been intimate last night. But that did not matter anymore. She had seen the way Snape had looked at Charis, and she had heard the tone in his voice. And she was certain that Snape and Charis had spent a night as passionate as she and Lucius had, even if Charis hadn't said anything or they hadn't had full sex. Morgana's Slytherin instincts told her that there was definitely something going on. Charis had seemed truly upset about the way Zabini had treated her, though. But then again, she seemed to be very secretive when it came to Severus Snape, and that alone aroused Morgana's suspicions.

And as much as it went against her nature, Morgana decided to lay low and see how things between Charis and Snape developed. Maybe, he would grow tired of the little Ravenclaw soon, and that would be the day Morgana would make her move. But for the time being, she would stay away from both of them.

XVII: The Greater Good

Chapter 17 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XVII: The Greater Good

'Brrr, on a cold day like this, Dumbledore should let us Apparate to Hogsmeade.'

Charis laughed. 'Oh, come on, Jack. It's not that cold. And I'll buy you a cup of hot chocolate at Madam Puddifoot's later.'

'You better buy me a tub full so I can soak in it and defrost.'

Charis smiled as she watched her House mate pull his cloak tighter around himself. Jack was such a sweetheart: he was kind, smart, a great study partner and always had time for a chat. And most of all, he had never made a pass on her. He was just a really good friend. And that was what Charis needed right now: a boy who wanted nothing more than to be friends with her. If it wasn't for him, Charis probably would have avoided male company altogether, so fragile was she after the incidents with Snape and Zabini. But Jack showed Charis that not all boys were out for whatever they could get from girls, and for that she was incredibly grateful.

'Seriously, this must be the coldest day of the year,' Jack continued complaining, shivering theatrically. 'No wonder Morgana said she wasn't coming.'

'I think that's just an excuse,' Charis said. 'Fact is that she hates animals.'

Jack rolled his eyes. 'So Slytherin of her.'

Charis knelt and pretended tying her shoelaces. She didn't feel like talking about Morgana at the moment. To be honest, she had not even asked her best friend to come along to Hogsmeade. Simply because she had known instinctively that Morgana would turn her down.

Morgana had changed. Ever since that night Lucius Malfoy had invaded her mind, she had become quieter every day, secretive even. Sure, she still made her ironic comments and grinned when her victim squirmed in embarrassment, but Charis had noticed the change. The mischievous glint in Morgana's eyes had gone, and she seemed cold and unapproachable. And no matter how many times Charis had warned her about Malfoy, Morgana seemed to brush her off with annoyance. It was almost as if she enjoyed the attention she was receiving from the Dark wizard.

Charis had tried to find out exactly what was going on in her friend's head, and up until the New Year's party, Morgana had actually let her come close. But since January first, when Morgana had revealed that she had slept with Malfoy, she had been turning the cold shoulder to her best friend. During Potions lessons, she had even teamed up with another Slytherin. Could it be that Morgana had finally caved from the pressure from the rest of her House? Had they threatened her, maybe? This wouldn't surprise Charis. After all, she had now first-hand experience of Slytherin cruelty. And as much as she missed her best friend, she did not dare approach her out of fear that she might to get her into trouble.

'I bet Slytherins only use cats as snake food,' Jack pointed out, and Charis laughed with him, glad to have something other than Morgana to think about.

'I had no idea that there was an animal rescue centre in Hogsmeade,' Jack continued with chattering teeth as they finally arrived at Madam Meow's. 'And I really hope they have the heating on in there!'

Charis' heart literally started to ache as she saw all the abandoned cats that were sitting in their cages, all longing for a nice home and someone who loved them.

'You can't adopt them all, you know,' Jack said, correctly interpreting the look in Charis' eyes. 'You can only have one.'

Charis sighed. 'I know, Jack. It's just so sad. Look at them. They are all so adorable. Why would nobody want them?'

They stepped into one of the big cages where about fifteen cats were living. Jack busied himself by coaxing as many cats as he could to him to pet. Charis meanwhile sat down on the floor, right in the middle of the room, and waited for one of the cats to approach her. She did not just want to pick one that looked cute. She wanted the cat to choose her.

The first to approach her was a snowy white kitten with big green eyes. It looked timid, scared even, and craned its neck to sniff Charis' robes. And Charis didn't move a muscle but just let the kitten sniff and waited for it to come closer.

When the kitten started playing with her shoelaces, Charis giggled. And when it started rubbing its tiny head against her leg, she was lost. Gingerly, she extended her hand and lifted the kitten into her lap.

'I think it likes you,' Jack pointed out from behind her.

Charis sniffed. 'It's so cute it makes my eyes well up. I think I'll call it Lily.'

'Lily?' Jack frowned as he knelt down beside Charis to pet the little kitten. 'That's a strange name for a cat.'

'Why?' Charis asked. 'Lilies are white, so is the kitten. I think it fits perfectly.'

'I wasn't criticising you,' Jack apologised. 'And it's not me who needs to like the name, but the kitten.'

'Well, do you like your new name then, kitten?' Charis asked, but received no response. The little fur ball was fast asleep in her lap.

Carefully, Charis picked up her new pet and placed it in a basket close to the door. 'I'll come and pick you up soon,' she whispered before planting a tiny kiss on its tiny white head.

'You can take her as soon as we've received the confirmation from Dumbledore and your character reference,' Madam Meow explained. 'Shouldn't take more than a day or two, love. For now, it is twenty Galleons. And that includes all her jabs, collar and flea medicine. We'll owl you as soon as we've heard from the Headmaster.'

Once more, Charis popped her head into the cage on her way to the front door, but Lily was still fast asleep, purring. And with a happy smile on her face, Charis left the rescue centre, Jack by her side.

'How about that hot chocolate now?' Jack asked once they were outside. 'If I don't get something warm inside my system soon, my nuts will freeze, and you can use them as conkers.'

'Come on then.' Charis laughed. 'Let's take a shortcut down Spattergroit Alley, shall we? We'll be at Madam Puddifoot's in no time.'

But they never arrived at the tea shop. Suddenly, they heard two pops and found their way obstructed by two hooded, masked figures. Charis' heart started racing. Surely, she must be dreaming. There couldn't be Death Eaters in Hogsmeade, not in broad daylight! Two more pops made her and Jack twirl around. They were trapped.

'Now look what we've got here,' one of the figures said in a low, menacing voice. 'Two Hogwarts students. Talk about being at the wrong place at the wrong time. And Ravenclaws, too. Don't you know that it is dangerous to be wandering around in dark alleys?'

One of the Death Eaters shouted, '*Incarcerous*,' and out of thin air, thick ropes appeared and wrapped themselves around Jack, who lost his balance and fell to the ground. Charis suppressed a shriek.

'What did you do that for?' one of the others barked.

'What?' replied the one who had cast the spell. 'I prefer playing with girls.'

As he moved towards her, Charis reacted instinctively and drew her wand.

'*Stupefy!*'

To her surprise, the Death Eater went down like a wet sack.

The two Death Eaters behind her chuckled, but the one in front of her came closer, wand pointed directly at Charis' chest. 'Aren't we brave, little Ravenclaw?' he drawled. 'But do you really think you can take on all of us?'

With a flick of his wand, he disarmed Charis, and the girl stood there, helpless, her mind racing. She could try and run. But even if she did get past that huge Death Eater in front of her, the other two would certainly shoot a Stunner at her. And her wand lay on the ground three metres away from her. Sure, she could perform basic wandless magic, like Summoning her glasses from her bedside, but what good was that now? What was she to do? And most of all, what did the Death Eaters want from her in the first place?

She started backing away from the man in front of her when a loud '*Confringo!*' and the words 'Run, Charis!' made her spin around. The Death Eater was blasted off his feet, and Charis ran as fast as she could towards Morgana, who was standing at the end of the alley, her wand raised and the star at her neck glowing crimson.

But she never reached her friend. Halfway down the alley, Charis felt a sharp pain in her back and fell flat onto her face, losing her glasses. One of the Death Eaters had hit her with a hex, and another one zoomed over her head, missing Morgana by mere inches.

'Careful,' a female voice shouted. 'Don't harm Malfoy's little princess!' But the other Death Eaters didn't seem to be listening. Instinctively, Charis protected her head with her arms as hexes continued being thrown across the alley, desperately hoping that Morgana had taken cover.

There were two more pops, and two men appeared. Charis couldn't make out more than their contours, but they were both tall, one dressed in purple robes, the other in black ones.

The first thing Dumbledore did was cast a protective spell around Charis, and Snape sent a Stunner towards the two Death Eaters who were still standing. Unfortunately, he missed, and the two Disapparated, leaving their two knocked-out companions behind.

Dumbledore handed Charis her glasses and helped her get up while Snape bundled up the two Death Eaters like Christmas presents and then freed Jack from his bonds. The boy looked shaken, but he was alright.

'What in Merlin's name happened here, Miss Byrne?' the Headmaster asked, brushing dirt off Charis' robes.

'I ... I have no idea, sir,' she stammered. 'Jack and I were taking a shortcut to Madam Puddifoot's when they suddenly Apparated, saying something about us being at the wrong place at the wrong time.'

She saw Dumbledore cast a knowing look into Snape's direction, but neither of the men said anything more.

'Did you single-handedly knock out two of them, Miss Byrne?' Dumbledore inquired instead.

'No, I just got one before they disarmed me,' Charis explained. 'Morgana cast *Confringo* at the other one.'

'Morgana?' Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up, and they all turned to the place where Morgana had been standing only a few moments earlier. But she was not there anymore.

Charis felt panic rise in her chest once more. 'She was standing right there,' she exclaimed. 'She cast a spell; she came to help me when the necklace ... Oh, God, they must have taken her.' Her eyes welled up with tears, and she fell into Jack's open arms, sobbing.

She never saw Dumbledore look at Snape, who nodded silently.

* * *

'Let go of me!' Morgana demanded, her voice almost cracking as she struggled against her captor.

But Lucius held her firmly against his chest. 'Struggling makes it harder for both of us, darling.'

'I am not your darling!' she hissed.

'You were a couple of nights ago.'

Lucius' voice was tender, but Morgana did not want to listen. 'A couple of nights ago, you were not wearing Death Eater robes!'

'It is natural that this should shock you, love.'

Shock her? No, shock was not what Morgana was feeling. She felt disappointed, betrayed and incredibly stupid! Everyone had been warning her about Lucius. Everyone! And she had not listened. And even worse, she had ignored the signs she had had right in front of her nose. She should have realised that Lucius was hiding the Dark Mark when he never took off his shirt, or when he even got up in the middle of the night to put a robe on. How bloody dense could one get?

'Don't. Call. Me. Love!' she spat.

Lucius let go of her and took a step backwards, looking like a lost puppy. 'Morgana, please,' he begged. 'Let me explain.'

Morgana stared at him. She knew that she should take her chance and make an escape. Every cell in her brain told her to run. But her heart against any common sense told her to stay and listen. And when she didn't move at once, Lucius knew that she would stay.

'Morgana,' he started, his voice filled with regret. 'As the heir of one of the oldest pureblood families in Britain, the Dark Lord approached me many years ago to help him run his little campaign. A campaign that went on to become the reign of terror in which hundreds of people, including the Potters, died. And when the Dark Lord was vanquished, I breathed a sigh of relief. I could live my life again, see my son grow up. No one had any idea that he would return.' He sighed deeply and rubbed his forehead. 'Morgana, one does not simply turn away from the Dark Lord. It is impossible. My allegiance does not lie with him, never has, and yet I am forced act, to pretend that it does. And if I do not play my part, I and my family will be killed. I am nothing but a pawn, Morgana. A powerless pawn. And this is why you find me in Death Eater robes.'

He noticed that the girl's expression had softened somewhat, but her jaw was still clenched. And he decided appeal to her vanity once more.

'I had to get you out of there, my love,' he continued. 'They may have taken you to the Dark Lord himself had you continued fighting.'

'Me?' Morgana snorted. 'What interest would they have in me?'

'Do not underestimate these people, Morgana. They are savage and cruel, with no sophistication. If one of them knew who you were, the last of the Belakanes, they would have taken you, dragged you to the Dark Lord and offered you to him as a present, hoping they would be richly rewarded.'

He brought his hand to his face once more and feigned wiping off his tears. 'I had to protect you, Morgana. The thought that you could have been harmed in any way ...' He inhaled and looked at the girl, his silvery-grey eyes glittering. 'It was too much, Morgana. I could not stand by and let it happen. I am yours, darling. And I cannot lose you. Not now.'

He held out his hand towards the girl, and as she took it, he triumphed. She had bought every single word he had said. He had won. She was his! His alone!

He pulled her gently towards his chest and gingerly wrapped his arms around her, waiting for her to relax. 'Oh, love,' he whispered. 'I would have never forgiven myself if you had been injured.'

'You scared me, Lucius.' His hand felt warm in hers, and the pain in his eyes looked genuine. And Morgana wanted to believe him. She needed him to be telling the truth.

'I am sorry, darling,' he whispered and placed a tender kiss on her forehead. 'I am very, very sorry.'

He held her close for some minutes, let his fingers run through her hair and nuzzled into her neck. And he felt her relax in his arms, found her turning her head to give him access to her neck.

'They will come looking for me,' Morgana whispered after a while. She had seen Dumbledore and Snape Apparate to the alley mere seconds before Lucius had snatched

her, saved her. They would certainly wonder where she was. Certainly, Snape would put two and two together and figure out that Lucius had been the one who had taken her and not just any Death Eater.

'Let them, love.'

'I don't want to be found.' Not by Snape, anyway. Snape had pushed her away once too often. But Lucius had opened his arms and embraced her.

Lucius smiled before he cupped Morgana's chin to place a slow, gentle kiss on her lips. Oh, yes, he had convinced her. She believed him, and nothing would ever make her turn from him.

'Have I told you how beautiful you are, Morgana?' he murmured, dragging his fingertips down her neck and to her cleavage. 'Exceptionally beautiful.'

He heard her gasp as he gently caressed her breast and felt the nipple harden through the fabric of her robes. And he also felt himself get aroused. But he could not take her today. He would have to wait until the next new moon, until the night when the girl was at her most fertile, the night when she would conceive his child.

'I should not be here, Lucius,' Morgana breathed, knowing perfectly well that her statement was true. But the tremor in her voice betrayed her true feelings. There wasn't a place in the world where she would rather be.

'Then you should go, my love,' Lucius whispered before once more tasting her sweet lips. 'But I will miss you.'

'I will miss you, too, Lucius,' Morgana replied before claiming his lips for a kiss goodbye. And she closed her eyes, desperately trying to ignore the little voice in her head that told her that believing Lucius Malfoy was a terrible mistake.

* * *

Dumbledore was pacing his study, every now and then casting a glance out of the window from which he could oversee the grounds. He was confident that Snape was right. Surely, no Death Eater would dare lay hands on the girl. Surely, Lucius had taken her to his Manor. Surely, he would not harm her nor touch her before the next new moon. But still, Dumbledore did not like the thought of Morgana being at Malfoy Manor where Lucius could fill her mind with false promises and lies. She was just a girl, after all, young and naive and despite her Slytherin attitude only too easily wooed by sweet words and promises of love.

When he saw Morgana run towards the castle, Dumbledore sighed in relief and returned to his desk. He had instructed the elves to intercept the girl on her way to the dungeons and bring her to his office. He expected her in less than five minutes. And indeed she arrived shortly afterwards with her hair slightly ruffled but otherwise unharmed.

Dumbledore thanked the elf and bade the girl sit down. 'Sherbet lemon?'

'You did not ask me to come here to eat sweets, did you, Headmaster?' What could Dumbledore want, she wondered. How much did he know?

'No, indeed, I did not,' Dumbledore replied, slightly startled by the girl's cold tone. She looked shaken, but her voice didn't give anything away. Those Slytherins, he thought. *Always so scared of showing their emotions.*

'I am pleased to be able to inform you that Miss Byrne and Mr Morrissey have returned to the castle undamaged, Miss Belakane,' he went on. 'The two Death Eaters that were knocked out are on their way back to Azkaban.'

Morgana's eyes widened. Charis! How could she have forgotten about her best friend? Yes, she had seen Dumbledore and Snape Apparate, but she had not known if they had managed to defeat the remaining Death Eaters. How could she have forgotten? How self-absorbed could one get?

'You will no doubt be relieved to hear that extra wards have been placed around Hogwarts since the attack,' Dumbledore went on. 'I believe that those Death Eaters showed up at Hogsmeade to gloat about the mass breakout from Azkaban. It was a clear sign to let us know that they are not in hiding anymore. I fear that they will try to access Hogwarts before too long.'

Morgana fixed Dumbledore with a cool, calculating gaze. 'And why, Headmaster, would you tell me this?'

Good, Dumbledore thought. He had her attention now.

'Miss Belakane ... Morgana,' he started. 'What happened at Malfoy Manor today? What did Lucius tell you?'

Morgana swallowed. She did not even question how Dumbledore knew that she had been at the Manor. Dumbledore always seemed to know everything. 'Lucius ... he told me that he was there to protect me,' she mumbled.

'And do you know why he wanted to protect you?'

Because he loves me! The thought came immediately to Morgana's mind, but she could not make herself say it out loud. Back at the Manor, she had believed every word that had come from Lucius' lips. But now, back at Hogwarts, away from his silvery-grey eyes, everything felt wrong. So terribly wrong. And still, Morgana wished for nothing more than that Lucius had been honest and true.

'Morgana,' Dumbledore continued, his blue eyes locked onto the girl's. He had decided to use a direct approach. Sugar-coating things would only be a waste of time. 'Lucius is trying to protect you from damage because he wants you to carry his heir.'

'He what?' Morgana stared at the old man in front of her in utter disbelief. Surely, she must have misheard!

'I wish there was a better way to tell you this, Morgana,' Dumbledore went on. 'In fact, I wish I did not have to tell you this at all. But you must know.'

He pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Morgana, still looking into her eyes. 'The Belakanes and the Malfoys are two of the oldest Wizarding families in the country. And whatever he has told you, Lucius Malfoy has always been a true follower of Voldemort. And now, as Voldemort is on the rise again, Lucius wants to ensure his place in the sun. He wants to present Voldemort with a child that can grow up to be the Heir of Darkness, a child that has sprung from two ancient pureblood lines. His child. And yours.'

Morgana paled. This couldn't be. Lucius would never ... He had spoken of love. He would never use her like that! Or would he?

'How do you know this, Headmaster?' she asked, her voice trembling. Surely, the old man must hold a grudge against Lucius after having been suspended a couple of years ago. He must be lying.

'It is sufficient for you to know that my source is of the most reliable kind,' Dumbledore assured her. 'Voldemort and his followers are growing impatient. The attack in Hogsmeade proved this today.'

Morgana shook her head. Lucius had had nothing to do with those Death Eaters who had attacked Charis and Jack. He had come to protect her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Dumbledore taking her hands into his.

'Morgana, I am very much aware that you are confused now. I know that Lucius Malfoy as your patron has always been kind to you. I know that you are always welcome

at the Manor. I know that Lucius has been showering you with gifts lately. And I assume that you feel flattered, overwhelmed. And it would not surprise me if you were developing certain feelings for Lucius. But you must not forget what you know about the man. Your parents ...'

Morgana flinched. How did Dumbledore know? How did Dumbledore know about Lucius' involvement in her parents' disappearance? And how could she have forgotten?!

'Do not blame yourself, child,' Dumbledore went on as if he had been reading her mind. 'Older and smarter witches than you have been charmed by the likes of Lucius Malfoy. And he has certainly done everything in his powers to enchant you.'

The stress Dumbledore put on the word *enchant* sent a shiver down Morgana's spine. Lucius had drugged her, possessed her mind. How could he have made her forget? How had he managed to make her believe in his words?

'Headmaster,' she whispered, her throat tight with fear, 'today ... Lucius told me that he was not a true follower of Voldemort, that he never has been. Did he lie to me?'

Dumbledore nodded gravely. He knew that the girl was struggling to understand, and he prayed that she would succeed.

'I believed him.'

The girl sounded terrified and confused. And Dumbledore tightened his grip around her hands. 'This is understandable, Morgana.'

'You said he wants to have a baby with me. A baby he wants to present to the Dark Lord.'

Again, Dumbledore nodded, relieved that the girl had been listening, relieved that she started doubting. He could feel her hands starting to get clammy.

'Lucius always gets what he wants,' she whispered.

'I fear that you are right, my child,' Dumbledore started. 'Lucius has so far chosen the easiest way, the path of least resistance: the way of seduction. But if you do not fall pregnant soon, they might make you. They might abduct you, incarcerate you, even ...'

He broke off, but he did not need say any more. He saw the fear in the girl's eyes. And he knew that she was starting to believe him.

'Morgana,' he went on, still holding on to her hands and looking deep into her eyes. 'How would you feel if you were to carry that child?'

'WHAT?!' Morgana stared at Dumbledore in shock. 'Headmaster, if that is your idea of a joke ...'

'I am afraid that I am quite serious, Morgana.'

'Headmaster, you just said that Lucius intends this child to be a gift for Voldemort. How can you ask me if I want to be the mother of that child?'

'Morgana, I said *carry* that child, not give birth to it.'

There wasn't a trace of the familiar friendly twinkle left in the Headmaster's eyes. They were almost cold now, and Morgana tried to free her hands from his. But Dumbledore held on to her, trying to give her strength.

'My child, if you had the chance to spare many by sacrificing one, what would you do?'

He did not want this. He found it hard enough to raise Harry like a pig for slaughter, and now he had to endanger yet another of his students to ensure the safety of the others, for the greater good.

'As I have told you, Morgana, it is only a matter of time until the Death Eaters march towards Hogwarts. If you carry the heir ... They will not attack the castle and risk the baby.'

Now Morgana did withdraw her hands. In fact, she got up from her chair so fast that it fell to the floor. How could he ask this of her? He was a powerful wizard. There must be other ways to protect the castle!

'I know that I am asking much of you, Morgana,' Dumbledore went on, a pained expression on his face. 'Do not think that I haven't examined this from every angle. I feel disgusted with myself for having to ask this of you. But not only will it protect Hogwarts, but it will also protect you.'

'Me?'

'Yes, dear child. Voldemort will want that heir. And as you have pointed out yourself, Lucius will stop at nothing to reach his goal. He will find a way to make you carry this child. He will use force if he has to.'

How he hated himself for lying to the girl. He knew that Lucius would never hurt her. For his plan to work, Lucius needed Morgana to come to him willingly. But if he wanted his plan to work, then he needed the girl just as much as Malfoy did. And he needed her to be aware of what she was doing, yet do it anyway. But Morgana was no Gryffindor who would bravely and willingly sacrifice herself to protect others. She was Slytherin, and Slytherins had always been known for their strong sense of self-preservation. She would not do this unless she feared for her own welfare or knew the danger was so great that there was no way out but to follow his plan.

Fear had indeed taken its cold grasp around Morgana, and in her mind she saw Lucius towering over her, taking her with raw force, slamming into her just as he had done on the first night of January. Only that time, she had allowed him to dominate her. The next time, he might be the one to decide.

But he said he loved me.

Nothing made sense anymore.

'You said that I would not have to give birth ...' she finally murmured, looking at Dumbledore who once again nodded.

'How will that work?' Morgana asked. 'Surely, Voldemort and Lucius will want to see results.'

'We will administer a potion after your first trimester,' Dumbledore explained. 'This will induce an abortion. But it will look like nature's doing. Many women miscarry their first baby.'

He hated himself for suggesting this. How could he ask this of a seventeen-year-old girl? She was still a child herself.

'By that time, the resistance will be in a position to halt Voldemort,' he continued. 'Those three months are all we need.'

Morgana chewed her lip. She could not believe that she had even considered agreeing to this.

'Who would know?' she asked quietly.

'Myself and Professor Snape,' Dumbledore explained. 'He will be the one to administer the potion at the correct time, and he will look after your welfare. Poppy, naturally, will know, too.'

Snape. Morgana felt her shoulders slump. She could just imagine Snape sneering at her, telling her that he had warned her about Lucius and that he had been right all along.

'Professor Snape will also administer a potion to ensure you will conceive,' Dumbledore carried on.

'And when, Headmaster, is all this supposed to be happening?' Morgana enquired, trying to ignore the nagging suspicion that the plan was already under way.

'The potion will be ready by the next full moon. It will then take another two weeks to reach its full potency. And I believe Lucius will want to invite you for dinner on Valentine's Day.'

'Valentine's? Now isn't that just charming!' Morgana's voice was dripping with irony, and Dumbledore smiled sadly at her.

'You are a brave young woman, Morgana,' he said. 'The outcome of this war might rely on the time you are buying us.'

Whenever had she agreed to do this, Morgana wondered. And had she ever had a choice? Had Dumbledore expected her to say yes? But how could she say no? If her life was at risk, surely it was better to have Dumbledore's protection and go along with the plan than to struggle against Lucius and the Death Eaters?

'It pains me deeply to ask this of you, Morgana,' Dumbledore repeated. 'But I know that you are a capable, talented, brave young witch. I do have faith in you.'

'Brave?' Morgana asked with a bitter tone. 'If you required bravery, you should have asked a Gryffindor to carry out this task, Headmaster.'

'Trust me, Morgana,' Dumbledore replied. 'I know that bravery does indeed lie in the heart of Slytherin House.'

But he knew that it was not bravery the girl needed the most. To get through this whole ordeal unharmed, with her soul undamaged, the things she needed the most were Slytherin ruthlessness and self-preservation.

* * *

Snape sealed the phial and sneered. 'The deed is done, my Lord.'

Whom he was talking to, he did not really know. But wasn't it ironic that both his masters, the Dark Lord and Dumbledore, had asked him to do the same thing?

The Dark Lord, as usual, was fascinated by the idea of ancient magic helping him achieve his goal. Blood, the new moon and the Power of Three. It all fitted perfectly, and the Dark Lord was very keen that his heir, the heir to two ancient bloodlines, the child that he hoped would expand his glory, was conceived during the night of the next new moon, the night when the girl gave herself to Lucius for the third time, willingly. The girl must fall pregnant that night. Such was the Dark Lord's wish. And Snape had promised him that the potion would be ready in time.

Dumbledore had asked for the same potion, but for what seemed more noble reasons. He knew that neither Lucius nor the Dark Lord would rest before the heir was conceived, and he wanted to make it easy on the girl. 'She must fall pregnant on Valentine's,' he had said. 'I cannot bear sending her to Lucius more than that one time.'

Oh, the noble heart of Gryffindor, Snape thought bitterly, looking at the light from the torches reflecting through the pale green liquid of the potion.

The girl would come soon. He had let her know that he expected her in his study at eight o'clock sharp. He was not looking forward to their meeting.

Ever since the day Dumbledore had informed Morgana about the plan, she had seemed cold, distant. She worked well in Potions, as usual, just as she did in her other subjects. Not even Umbridge had found anything to criticise. But outside the classroom, Morgana didn't behave as usual. No smiles, not even sneers, no snide remarks during the weekly Slytherin House meeting. She seemed withdrawn, deeply absorbed in her own thoughts.

But what bothered Snape the most was the fact that she and her Ravenclaw friend could rarely be seen together nowadays. They had even split up in Potions, and that annoyed Snape immensely. For strictly professional reasons, of course. Those two girls were the best Potions team he had had in years. But the fact that they kept away from each other even outside his classroom was disturbing. Morgana shouldn't be alone right now, and surely she needed her best friend more than ever?

Quite what had caused this sudden fracture, Snape had no idea. Dumbledore had of course told Morgana that she was not supposed to tell her friend about the plan, but that did not explain why Morgana seemed to have distanced herself from her friend. Because that was the one thing Snape was certain of: it was Morgana who was keeping away from her friend. Not the other way around.

Typical Slytherin behaviour, Snape thought with a sneer. *Too proud to ask for help, too scared to let anyone lend a hand*

He knew this behaviour all too well himself. Many years ago, when he had commenced his own descent into the Darkness, he had had a friend who could have held him back and saved him. But instead of letting her, he had pushed her away. And he had stumbled, fallen, and then the world around him had turned black. And he desperately hoped that Morgana would reach out for *her* friend in time.

She knocked at his door exactly as the clock struck eight.

'You are late, Miss Belakane,' he greeted her with a snarl, trying to provoke a reaction. But he received nothing.

So he swept around his desk and held out the phial. 'You will need to drink the whole contents of this phial before midnight tonight,' he instructed. 'The effect will be immediate, but the best result will be achieved in two weeks. Remember that you will fall pregnant the next time you have full intercourse and any seed enters your womb.' He paused and sneered. 'I hope you can manage to keep your knickers on until Lucius asks you to visit him in two weeks' time.'

He saw a flash of anger in her blue eyes, but if he had expected an outburst or the phial being thrown at him, Snape was disappointed.

'The whole thing?' Morgana asked instead, and he nodded curtly.

She broke the seal and emptied the phial right there in front of him before handing it back to him.

'Happy?' she asked, and once more, Snape nodded, although happy was the very last word he would use to describe how he was feeling.

Do not hate me for having to do this he thought as he watched Morgana walk through the door.

Maybe he should call her back and talk to her? But what would he say? That he knew that she was doing this for the greater good, to help the Light defeat the Dark? Surely, Dumbledore had already drawn that line for her. What else was there to say? And somehow, Snape doubted that the girl would want to listen to him anyway.

* * *

Morgana just managed to leave the Potions master's study before the tears started running down her face. *I hope you can manage to keep your knickers on.* Did he have to be that cruel? Yes, she had made a mistake at New Year's. Yes, she had gone to Lucius and let him fuck her. But that did not mean that she was a slut. She had gone to Lucius because Snape had pushed her away. And in her anger, she had messed up everything. And now Snape the one whose affection she had been trying to gain and for whom she was still longing at night was angry with her for having acted stupidly. And once she was pregnant with Lucius' baby, Snape would certainly not even want to look at her anymore. He wouldn't want to anyway. He had chosen Charis. And Morgana felt disappointed, ashamed and hurt.

She sighed. She knew that she should not think it, but she was hoping that Lucius had sent her an owl. She needed some comfort now, some affection.

Lucius had been charming over the last couple of weeks. He had sent her gifts again, small notes, roses. At first, she had thrown all of it right into the bin. The mere thought of accepting anything from that man had made her skin crawl. But he had been persistent, and after a couple of days, she had opened his letter, read his sweet words and remembered his tender caresses. And her heart had melted. Surely, not even Lucius Malfoy could lie like that. He must care for her. A little, at least.

And then he had invited her to dinner on Valentine's Day, just as Dumbledore had said that he would. He wanted her to come to him on Valentine's, on the night of the new moon, and he wanted her to leave the Mansion the next day, carrying his heir.

Was it true then? Was Lucius only being kind to her because he wanted to present her child to the Dark Lord? Had he really lied to her?

Was anyone telling the truth?

And did it matter now? She had drunk the potion, she had accepted Lucius' invitation and in two weeks' time, she would be carrying the heir of the Dark Lord, the child that would keep Hogwarts safe, the child that would never be born. No one had told her what would happen once the baby was gone, and Morgana didn't dare ask.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes quickly on her sleeve. There was no point in feeling sorry for herself. She had agreed to the plan, and she would carry it out. And whatever would happen in three months' time did not matter at the moment. Nothing mattered.

And with her head bowed, she made her way back down the stone staircase that led to the Slytherin common room, the sharp tang of Snape's potion still hanging on her lips.

XVIII: Date with Destiny

Chapter 18 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XVIII: Date with Destiny

'Oi, Belakane, no date today? After the humiliation of showing up alone at the New Year's party? One might think you've got something nasty.'

Morgana cast Draco a condescending look. 'I do not play with boys anymore, Malfoy,' she replied in a tone that could make water freeze to ice in a matter of seconds.

'Yeah, I have heard you play with girls instead.'

Draco started laughing and with him all the other Slytherins who were about to leave the common room. But Morgana did not care. Malfoy junior was not worth getting wound up about. The little twit would get what he deserved soon enough.

Ignoring the laughs and the brainless comments from her House mates, Morgana returned to her dormitory and warded the door. Not that she expected any of the girls she shared the room with to come bursting in. Over the last couple of weeks, they had learnt that it was best to keep out of Morgana's way. And besides, they all had dates and were on their way to the Great Hall by now.

Morgana took off her bathrobe and looked at the clothes she had put out on her bed: a velvet dress with long sleeves, black of course, but bewitched so it would shimmer green when she moved, and black leather boots that almost reached her knees. Those were the clothes she had chosen since she felt comfortable in them. The underwear, however, had been chosen by Lucius: black satin and emerald green lace, delicate, sexy, expensive looking. The man had taste.

Once more she admired the jewellery he had given her, which was now glinting in the torchlight on her nightstand. Of course, he would expect her to wear it. And of course, what Lucius wanted, he got.

Morgana let her fingers caress the exquisite metal and sighed. It had meant so much to her only a couple of weeks ago. She had enjoyed the envious looks from her housemates whenever she wore the gems, and also the feeling of being elite. She was not used to wealth, but wearing the exquisite pieces made her feel like a lady. If she were honest, the gems represented everything to which she aspired: wealth, luxury, and the love and adoration of a powerful, handsome wizard who had more Galleons than he could ever spend. But all that changed of course once Dumbledore had told her about the plan.

Morgana sighed once more as she started to get dressed. *Like a Christmas present*, she thought. Carefully wrapped just to be ripped open and then discarded some months later.

She sank onto her bed and buried her face in her hands, tried to make the buzzing in her head stop. She had been unable to think any coherent thoughts for weeks now. Ever since the day Dumbledore had presented the plan to her, nothing made sense anymore.

Back in the Headmaster's office, everything had seemed crystal clear. He had told her that he needed her to protect Hogwarts, and like a credulous Gryffindor she had agreed to his proposition. He had told her that Lucius was an evil man, and she had agreed. By Merlin's beard, she knew that he was evil.

But as soon as she had left Dumbledore's office, doubts had crept into her mind. Lucius had said that he loved her, and she had seen the look in his eyes when he had said it. He could not have lied. She wanted him to have told the truth. She wanted it so desperately.

After a day or two, she had convinced herself that Dumbledore must have been misinformed. Lucius could not have such evil plans for her. He would not have sent her roses and poems if he only wanted her to carry a child for the Dark Lord. He would not have to. He could just make her. But he would not, of course. He had said that he loved her.

Then the invitation for dinner at Valentine's had arrived, just as Dumbledore had said. And once more, everything Morgana had been so certain of was turned upside down.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Snape tried to concentrate on the stack of parchment that was lying on his desk, but he kept being interrupted by giggles and laughter from the corridor outside his study. Merlin, he hated Valentine's! As if the decorations of winged cherubs shooting arrows that exploded into heart-shaped confetti which Flitwick had put up in the Great Hall weren't sickening enough, now the students suddenly considered the dark dungeon corridors the perfect place to make out, since those were the only corridors Umbridge didn't patrol. They were Snape's territory. But the thought that the students would rather be caught and yelled at by their Potions master than be hexed by Professor Umbridge was truly disturbing.

Snape groaned as he heard yet another giggle and pushed the essays to the far end of his desk. They would have to wait. He just could not concentrate. And the snogging couples outside his door were not the main reason for it.

In less than an hour, he would be on his way to Malfoy Manor with Morgana. Lucius had sent an invitation for drinks and dinner about two weeks ago and requested that Snape escort the girl to the Manor. How very much like Lucius, to cover his back and make everything look like a social visit.

Surely Lucius wanted to lull the girl into false security. He did not, of course, know that she had been informed about his evil plan. And inviting her Head of House as well would certainly make her feel secure.

However, Morgana did know of the plan, and about half an hour after Snape had received his invitation, she had knocked at his door, clutching her own invitation.

Snape had been surprised that she had come to him. He had expected her to go straight to Dumbledore. After all, the Headmaster had been the one to involve her in this wicked game.

'Lucius says you will be escorting me to the Manor on Valentine's,' she had said, and Snape had nodded.

'Why does he want you to come?'

'It appears, Miss Belakane,' he had explained, 'that Lucius wants everything to look as normal as possible. He is your patron, and you have dined at the Manor before. Inviting your Head of House along with you will make anyone believe that he is truly interested in your wellbeing and your academic progress. But do not fret, Miss Belakane.' He sneered. 'I will not destroy your romantic evening. I will leave before dinner.'

To that, the girl had given him a sad smile. 'I am glad that you're coming along,' she had whispered, quietly enough for him to pretend that he had not heard.

Soon, she would knock at his door again. Lucius expected them at six o'clock, and Snape had told the girl to come to his study fifteen minutes earlier. That would leave enough time to give her some last minute instructions, but not enough for an actual conversation.

As if on cue, there was a crisp knock on his door.

'Enter,' he answered in his velvety tones.

A pale-looking Morgana gingerly entered the room, closing the door behind her. 'Good evening, sir,' she said, her voice not even wavering.

'Good evening,' Snape responded, his eyes skimming over the girl briefly. She was evidently trying to put a brave face on, but she could not fool her Head of House. Snape didn't need to use Legilimency to see that she was terrified. And he could not blame her.

'Are you ready?' he enquired, one eyebrow raised.

Morgana nodded quickly. 'I just have one question, sir.'

She bit her lip as she watched Snape's eyebrow quirk higher.

'Yes?'

'Am I supposed to play eager or hard to get?'

She looked straight at him, and Snape felt a bubble of annoyance welling in his stomach.

'Let's see,' he ground out through gritted teeth. 'How have you acted with Malfoy before? Eager, I seem to recall.' He gave her an icy stare, but to her credit, the girl did not flinch. 'It would probably do you a favour to remain that way, so as not to arouse suspicions.'

From the tone in Snape's voice, it was clear he found this necessary behaviour completely distasteful. And once more, Morgana bit her lip. Did he think badly of her now, she wondered. Did he think that she was enjoying this in any way?

'I'm about to be ... inseminated!' she pleaded. Did Snape not know how scared she was? How much she did not want to go through with this? The last thing she needed was him sniping at her and making her feel like it was all her fault.

Her hands began to tremble, and she hid them in her robes, but not before Snape noticed. 'Unfortunately, I cannot administer a calming draught as it may interfere with the fertility potion,' he murmured, his tone softer.

He could indeed see the girl was scared, but it was not her he was angry with it was everyone else. Dumbledore and Lucius especially. And yet Morgana and he were both just toy soldiers for Dumbledore's Army, going along with whatever he said and blindly trusting him as he pulled their strings on his incessant march against Voldemort and for the greater good, hoping against hope that their actions could stop the megalomaniac from destroying their world.

'Is there anything I am not allowed to eat or drink tonight?' Morgana asked quietly, trying to occupy her mind by asking questions she did not even care about.

'Food and drink can be consumed as usual. I would recommend not rolling home tomorrow with a hangover, however. I am sure Lucius will want to ply you with the very best champagne.' Once again, Snape could not keep the bitter edge from his voice. The man's techniques of wooing the girl were crude, clichéd and blindingly obvious. But the girl was young, and she didn't stand a chance.

'I don't drink,' Morgana murmured, now feverishly chewing at her nails. Why did Snape have to make everything even harder by snapping at her all the time?

'Miss Belakane, please do not make me put an anti-bite charm on your nails,' Snape snapped with disapproval.

And she lowered her hand, only to start fidgeting with her cuticles instead, afraid she would start crying if she didn't occupy herself somehow.

Snape sighed. 'I know this is difficult, but you must pretend this is an ordinary night. Use your Occlumency. If Lucius suspects you are afraid of him, he will suspect that I have told you of the plan.'

Morgana looked up at Snape, taking deep breaths, clenching and unclenching fists and trying to will the ball of panic that was rising in her chest down. 'Control your emotions,' she mumbled to herself. 'Discipline your mind.'

'Reach into yourself. You will be having sex tonight for pleasure only. I know you can do this. You are a Slytherin.'

Snape looked at the girl with hard black eyes, and the girl gazed back stoically.

'Any means to achieve our ends, right?' she asked, never taking her eyes from his.

'Regrettably, yes. Come, let us hope that the fresh air may help to steady your nerves.'

And before Morgana had a chance to change her mind, she was following her Head of House down through the corridors and beyond into the Hogwarts grounds as he swished out in a swirl of black robes.

* * *

The first thing they heard when they Apparated into the magnificent garden of Malfoy Manor was the barking of the hounds, and Snape saw the girl flinch.

'Surely you are not afraid of Lucius' little pets, Miss Belakane,' he enquired. 'Trust me when I tell you that they will not bite. Their inbred little brains are not capable of carrying out even such a basic task.'

Something they might have in common with their owner he thought with a sneer, but held his peace.

Morgana shrugged. It was not the dogs she feared. It was the whole situation. She was being brought to Lucius Malfoy, the man for whom she no longer knew what she felt, to carry out a task which would save many and sacrifice one, a concept so unfamiliar to a Slytherin; she was being brought to Lucius by Severus Snape, the man she had lusted for and still did, the man she had feared and even hated, the man who stood by her side now, tall and imposing, the only one she could cling to for support, like a rock in the stormy sea.

She looked at her teacher now and felt confused. Two weeks ago, when she had gone to his office to drink the fertility potion, his words had actually made her cry. She had tried to convince herself that she hated him because of the way he had treated her. But she had failed. His words had hurt her, and she did not want him to think anything bad of her. Instead, she wanted him to care for her, look out for her. And that sudden need for affection confused her even more. She did not know what to feel for Snape anymore. Over the last couple of months, she had learnt how it was to fear him, to hate him and to desire him. The fear had been planted in her mind by Lucius, Morgana knew that now. And her hatred had been nothing other than hurt pride when she had understood that he had chosen Charis over her. But that didn't matter anymore, Morgana tried to convince herself. Her desire for Snape's body had cooled and had been replaced by some strange need of closeness. But that was ridiculous. After all the feelings she had gone through, she could not be falling for Severus Snape, now could she?

He had been kind to her today. He had assured her that she was strong enough to go through all of this. And his words had made her feel safe. That was a feeling she had not experienced for a long time.

The last couple of weeks had been filled with worried and sleepless nights. And Morgana had kept mostly to herself, trying to figure out when everything had started to go wrong. All the plans she had had back in September, the seduction of Severus Snape and the destruction of Lucius Malfoy, none of it had turned out as she had wanted it to. She now desired the man she was supposed to hate. And from the man she had desired, all she craved now was a kind word, some sign of affection.

Get a grip on yourself, Morgana she thought and closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating on the fortification of her mental barriers. She would try to hide her emotions tonight. She had neither the time nor the energy to care about them. She did not know what to feel anyway. Maybe it would be best not to feel anything at all?

'Miss Belakane?'

Snape's voice made Morgana open her eyes, and she found him looking at her with orbs of beetle-black, those eyes that seemed to see right into her soul.

'Why did you agree to this, Morgana?'

Morgana.

She swallowed dryly. Snape rarely called any students by their first name, and that he did it now meant the world to the girl.

'I have done many stupid things this year, professor,' she said. 'I have broken the rules, I have lied, and I got tied up in my own web. I am trying to make things right again.'

'There is still time to turn around,' Snape said in a calm voice. He hated the way Dumbledore was using the girl. He hated that he was the one to bring her to Lucius. And he hated the fact that she had agreed to all this. 'There is still time to come up with some excuse. I will tell Lucius that you have been hit by a Bludger or poisoned by one of the Weasley twins. And Dumbledore will simply have to accept the fact that he cannot ask this of you.'

The girl seemed to contemplate her options, and for a moment, the tiniest of moments, Snape hoped that she would let him take her back to Hogwarts. But then she shook her head, and with a sad smile on her lips, she turned around and marched towards the front door of Malfoy Manor.

* * *

Snape banged on the glossy black front door of Malfoy Manor using the huge, heavy brass knocker, which was fashioned into the shape of a coiled snake. His timing, as ever, was perfect; a quick check of his fob watch showed he was exactly a minute early.

It was barely ten seconds before Silvy opened the door to the dark wizard and the pale girl beside him.

'Welcome Master Snape and Miss Morgana,' the elf squeaked, bowing her head repeatedly in such a way that made her ears flap from side to side.

Snape answered brusquely, and Morgana offered a weak smile. Now she was here; her stomach was churning with nerves. She did not trust herself to speak.

'Master Lucius is awaiting you in the drawing room,' the elf piped, holding the door open wide and standing aside.

Snape was no stranger to Malfoy Manor, and he strode through the hallway imperiously, the girl at his heels. He could almost feel her eyes on the back of his head. But he could not turn around and comfort her now.

Snape stopped in the doorway of the drawing room, the girl hanging back shyly behind him. 'Good evening, Lucius,' he announced their arrival. 'Your guest of honour has arrived.'

Lucius turned towards the door, brandy in hand, a fake smile plastered all over his aristocratic features. 'Severus! Welcome.'

A sweep of Lucius' hand gestured Snape to come through, and he obliged, noticing the change in Lucius' gaze as his eyes fell upon the girl. It was a gaze filled with lust and something Snape could not quite define. But it made his stomach turn.

'Morgana,' Lucius murmured, looking the girl up and down before stepping towards her. He made a big show of bowing to kiss her hand, glancing up at her with his glittering grey-blue eyes. He looked resplendent in his dove-grey robes, of course, and Morgana couldn't help but smile at his attentions, despite almost being able to feel the animosity radiating off her Head of House.

After spending a few moments gazing into Morgana's eyes, Lucius turned to his other guest. 'Well, your timing is impeccable, Severus,' he announced, holding out the

empty crystal glass. 'I do believe it is time for drinks. Elf!' he barked, and Silvy Apparated obediently next to her master with a crisp pop.

'Severus, what can I offer you?'

'Firewhisky would be acceptable,' Snape muttered, standing by the window. He had actually no desire whatsoever to stay, but he did not want to leave the girl just yet either.

'One Firewhisky, one brandy, and a pumpkin juice for the lovely Miss Belakane,' Lucius ordered, and the elf nodded and Disapparated again, only to appear moments later with the drinks.

Once everyone had a glass in hand, Lucius snaked an arm around Morgana's waist and held his glass aloft. 'A toast! To the future!' he exclaimed, looking straight at Snape with his icy, silvery eyes.

Snape raised an eyebrow and clinked glasses with Malfoy, but did not repeat the toast.

To the future indeed! The next few months were surely going to be hell. The girl's insemination was bad enough, but three months down the line, he would have to brew the potion by which to claim another innocent life. Not to mention the ceaseless crowing and self-promotion Lucius would surely embark on once the girl was pregnant. And Potter on top of all that ...

Snape took a sip from his Firewhisky. 'Well, Lucius, I must say it is MOST unusual to invite a student for dinner on Valentine's night, of all nights,' he said with a smirk. If he had to go along with this charade, there was no harm in making Malfoy squirm. 'One would have thought you would be safely curled up with that darling wife of yours.'

Snape saw a flicker of annoyance flash over Lucius' features before he arranged his face into a curious expression. 'Oh, is it Valentine's? Must have slipped my mind. And Narcissa is on a shopping spree in Milan.' Lucius was smiling now, but the smile did not extend to his eyes.

'Good to see romance isn't dead,' Snape muttered, returning the stony stare.

'I see you are not courting anyone tonight, Severus,' Lucius said lightly, the poisonous smile still fixed on his face.

'I have no need to pander to such whimsy,' Snape replied bitterly.

'So I've heard. Say, Morgana, is Severus always this grumpy at Hogwarts?'

Morgana cleared her throat, feeling awkward about the mounting tension between Lucius and her Head of House. Draco had always maintained that Snape was a close friend of the Malfoy family, but from what she had seen, it looked as if they despised each other. She did not want to exacerbate the situation further, and so she chose her words carefully.

'Professor Snape is a demanding teacher. And he teaches a dangerous subject. He is supposed to be strict.'

Lucius threw his head back and laughed. 'Good answer, pet. Good answer indeed.'

He glanced at Snape's glass and noticed it was now empty.

'Thirsty, I see, Severus. Care for another?'

Snape's glass magically refilled, and he watched Lucius intently over the brim. It was sickening how Lucius was nuzzling into the girl's neck, pretending that he did not notice that Snape was looking. And now he even had the audacity to nibble at her ear.

Snape's jaw clenched with frustration, and he downed the Firewhisky in one, only to have it once again magically refill seconds later.

'Draco tells me that Dumbledore has re-arranged the Great Hall for tonight,' Lucius started, his eyes on Snape but his lips still close to Morgana's neck. 'No House Tables, just tables for two. Very intimate.'

Snape could see Lucius' hand slide over Morgana's waist to her butt, resting there protectively.

'The Headmaster does like to indulge his sense of frivolity,' he replied with a sneer.

'I think it's sweet.' Lucius smiled, and from the way Morgana jumped, Snape concluded that he had squeezed her butt. How dare he?

'So, will you be chasing snogging students tonight, Severus?' Lucius continued, pretending that nothing had happened.

'Thankfully, I am relieved of that particular duty,' Snape replied, curtly, trying to keep his anger in check.

'Oh! I rather thought you'd enjoy it.' Lucius was smirking now, and his hand was resting lightly on the back of Morgana's neck.

'Watching hormone-addled, inexperienced teenagers slobbering over each other like werewolves?' Snape spat. 'My tastes are more refined than that, Lucius.'

He swigged down yet more whisky, trying to drown out the bubble of anger rising inside him as he saw Lucius grind up against Morgana and quickly kiss her neck.

Snape's knuckles whitened as he gripped his glass tighter. Trust Lucius to make a display out of this whole situation! Not only was it disgusting, but it obviously made the girl uncomfortable as well. Snape could see the muscles in her jaw twitch. But he had to hand it to her, she knew how to play along.

'Draco and Pansy looked very comfortable when I left,' Snape said, attempting to quell his anger by steering the conversation in a different direction. The alternative was to hex Lucius into the next century. 'I often think how well suited they are to each other.' He gave Lucius a wan smile. *Both are back-stabbing, spoilt little brats*, he thought with a sneer.

'Oh, they are,' Lucius hummed. 'Pansy is a delightful young woman. Isn't she, Morgana?'

Morgana shuddered as Lucius' hand slid down her back again. What could she say? She loathed Pansy and wouldn't piss on her if she were on fire. But she could not say that, could she?

'Draco does seem rather smitten,' she agreed, skilfully avoiding the question.

'The boy has taste.'

Snape could not help but notice that Lucius was now actually trying to pull up Morgana's skirt at the back. The man had absolutely no shame at all. Morgana, to her credit, squirmed uncomfortably.

'Let's hope he inherits his mother's sense of dignity, shall we?' Snape replied caustically.

Lucius smirked lazily. 'Severus, do tell why you can only stay for drinks this evening?'

Snape downed the rest of his whisky to wash away the bitter taste in his mouth. Once again, the glass refilled by magic.

'Three is very much a crowd, Lucius,' he answered pointedly.

'Oh, I don't know about that. Three can be fun, can't it, Morgana?'

Snape gritted his teeth at the reminder of the afternoon with Bella as Morgana looked to the floor with shame.

'It would be inappropriate to dine with a student on this night of all nights,' Snape answered, intensely annoyed now at Malfoy's faux hospitality. All three of them knew Malfoy could not wait to see the back of him, but here he was, maintaining the social pretence. The man set his teeth on edge with his insincerity.

'What a shame though. Silvy has been slaving all day in the kitchen.'

'That is her job, is it not?' Snape hissed back.

'Of course. But on occasions like this, she tends to put in some extra effort. She is rather fond of Morgana here.' With that, Malfoy stepped behind the girl and pulled her closer to him.

Snape watched as Lucius hands sneaked up Morgana's sides and lightly brushed her breasts. He could also see the girl was apologetic with her eyes, she did not want him to see this. Not this time. But Lucius obviously did. He wanted to rub his nose in it as much as possible.

He glared at Lucius with disgust as the man began nibbling at the girl's neck, now without even the pretence of hiding. And he saw Morgana bite her lip. Her cheeks were flushed, from excitement or embarrassment, Snape did not know.

'I can see you are fond of Morgana also, Lucius,' he spat sarcastically.

'Only a blind man wouldn't be, Severus. Or a celibate one,' Lucius sneered as he ran his hands over the girl's belly, making his way slowly downwards.

Snape ground his teeth, watching Lucius bend his head and place delicate kisses on her cleavage. As loath as he was to leave the girl alone in Lucius' company, he had seen enough. Soon, Lucius would surely start his seduction in all seriousness, and Snape had no desire whatsoever to witness him seduce the girl once more. He had seen enough the last time, and the mere memory of that afternoon made him wish that the girl would be spending the night with *him* instead of Lucius.

He placed the glass forcibly down on a side table. 'It seems I have overstayed my welcome,' he noted, controlling the anger in his voice and the feeling of arousal that was creeping towards his groin.

'Going so soon?' Lucius asked with fake protest. 'What a shame. Tell me, Severus, does dear Morgana have a curfew?'

Lucius looked like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth as his hands now cupped Morgana's breasts.

'Miss Belakane needs to be back in time for lessons tomorrow morning,' Snape hissed, already striding towards the door. 'Preferably well-rested.'

'Good,' Lucius exclaimed. 'I'll make sure she eats breakfast. Silvy, show Professor Snape out, will you?'

'Enjoy your evening.' Snape looked pointedly at Morgana, who gave him an apologetic look in return. She had not wanted her Head of House to see all this. It was bad enough that he knew that she was going to sleep with Lucius tonight. He did not need to witness the foreplay as well. And she hoped that Snape understood. But he was already out the door and did not even turn around when Lucius confirmed that they were indeed going to enjoy their evening.

Lucius affectionately squeezing her bottom ripped Morgana out of her thoughts. 'Your dear professor is such a strange fruit, isn't he?' he asked, and Morgana nodded.

'Hm. I pity the first student that crosses his path tonight. And I am afraid you got me into trouble, Lucius,' she replied, smiling up at the blond wizard.

'Me?' Once again, Lucius put on his best innocent expression, his silver-blue eyes twinkling.

'Yes, you. Did you have to feel me up in front of that bat?' she asked playfully. She did not like to call Snape names, but she had a role to play now. She had to humour Lucius.

'Oh, I couldn't resist showing him what he's missing,' Lucius replied with a smirk, once more fondling her breasts. 'Especially as I know what you're wearing just for me underneath.'

Morgana blushed slightly. Obviously, Lucius expected her to thank him for his gift now. 'Yes, thank you for the underwear, Lucius,' she murmured. 'It fits beautifully.'

'Hmm, well I shall be the judge of that later, won't I?'

Lucius smiled, and Morgana lowered her head. What was it about Lucius that made her knees go weak and turned her into a blushing, trembling girl?

'Poor Severus,' Lucius lamented, his hands now at Morgana's waist again. 'He just doesn't have much luck with the ladies. Can't think why.'

'He has neither your charms nor your looks,' Morgana answered as she caressed his long blond hair with a gentle hand *Play along now*, she repeated to herself.

'And he doesn't have you, my sweet,' Lucius murmured before kissing her deeply. And Morgana melted into his kiss and felt her self-defence crumble. She could not have resisted him even if she wanted to. And she was not even sure if she wanted to resist.

XIX: A Lesson In Lust

Chapter 19 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XIX: A Lesson In Lust

Music and laughter could be heard coming from the Great Hall as all the students celebrated Valentine's Day with a feast. The Hall was decorated with sweet smelling flowers, all white and pink, and everyone both students and staff alike was looking forward to a harmonious and frivolous evening. Everyone, that was, apart from Charis Byrne, who was sitting in the deserted Hogwarts library, hunched over a book of Arithmancy, trying to concentrate. She had no date, no reason to smile and no desire whatsoever to watch others being happy. She had even turned down Jack's company, who was dateless as well, but who was going to the feast anyway. As sweet and caring as Jack was, the mere thought of sitting in the Great Hall surrounded by kissing couples made Charis' stomach turn. Staying in the common room had not been an option either. Even there, people had nothing better to do than hugging, kissing and being overly sweet to each other. And so Charis had fled to the library, the only place she was certain that no one would be snogging. And she had been right, the library was indeed deserted. Not even Madam Pince was around this evening. Even she had got a date.

Charis blinked, her green eyes a little pink from crying. As much as she tried to study, she could not stop her mind from thinking. Who was she kidding? She wanted to be in the Great Hall too, of course. She too wanted to have a good time and laugh and dance. But how could she? How could she be there and watch everyone else being happy? Zabini had chosen to take Portia Avery, a beautiful and snobbish Slytherin, to the feast. As if to rub salt into her wounds, Portia and Charis could not be more different. Portia was, of course, a pureblood; a striking brunette, tall and slender, her pretty face only marred by the fact that she usually looked as if she had something unpleasant under her nose. They were perfect together, she and Zabini, and even though Charis knew that she should not shed a single tear for that backstabbing Slytherin, she had no stomach to sit and watch them cavort in front of her.

And then, of course, Severus would be in the Great Hall as well. He would be scowling at the decorations and deducting points for snogging, but he would be there, wearing his dress robes and looking stunning. Charis blinked and tried to get the picture of her Potions master out of her head, but as much as she tried, she could not forget his eyes, the way he had looked at her at New Year's Eve, or the way he seemed to look at her now and then at meal times or when they met in the corridor. In lessons, he was his usual nasty self, of course, dishing out spiteful comments and doing his best to make her feel insecure. But when they caught each other's gaze it was as if something were shared between them, something unspoken. Charis shook her head. It sounded preposterous to even vocalise it, but there was something there. And if she had thought the events with Zabini would have weakened her feelings for Severus, she was sorely mistaken. The more glances they shared, the more she convinced herself that he did want her, and the more she longed for him, too.

The light was dim at the back of the library where Charis was sitting, but that was just how she liked it. Being amongst all those books provided comfort somehow. And she did not really care that she had read the same page three times now without taking anything in. Sitting there with her nose in a book was almost like a kind of meditation.

The sound of rustling robes made Charis look up from her book, but there was no-one to be seen, and Charis lowered her head again. Some of the books in this library seemed to have lives of their own and made noises at times. Hopefully, there was nobody pathetic enough to spend their Valentine's here, Charis thought. She was not in the mood for company.

A noise from the Restricted Section made her glance up again, and the sound of footsteps and more rustling of robes filled her stomach with dread. That was no book making noises. There was indeed someone else there in the library with her. She craned her neck to see who the shadowy figure approaching was and wished that she could Disillusion herself when she realised that it was none other than Severus Snape himself. She didn't feel confident enough to face him tonight, so she swiftly lowered her head back down to her book to avoid being seen. But it was too late. Snape had already spotted her. He never missed anything. And without taking his eyes off the book he was holding, he muttered in a low, silky voice, 'Such typically Ravenclaw behaviour to be spending Valentine's in the library.'

He casually perused the book, noticing that Charis was blushing, and he grinned inwardly. As if he were really surprised to see her there.

He had dutifully made an appearance in the Great Hall after his return from Malfoy Manor, but had scowled enough for Dumbledore to excuse him after only a few minutes. But those minutes had been enough time for him to notice that the little Ravenclaw was absent. And he had decided to go looking for her.

He snapped the book shut crisply, replaced it back on the shelf and let his long finger trace the spines as he searched for another, his back to Charis.

'No date, Miss Byrne?' he wondered softly. 'I was under the impression you might have at least two.'

He plucked another book from the shelf swiftly, opening it and scanning his eyes down the page, not missing a single movement or reaction from the girl.

Charis swallowed. *At least two dates? What the heck was he insinuating now? That she would go out with just about any guy?* 'No, sir,' she replied quietly, not wanting to go down that road.

'And why is that?' Snape asked, his nose still in the book.

Charis took a steadying breath. She could just as well tell him the truth. 'No one asked me, sir.'

'Ah.' Snape snapped book shut triumphantly. 'I am very pleased to hear it.'

Charis could not help but look shocked. Whatever did he mean by that? But before she could make sense of his words, Snape swirled around, his face sour, glaring at her accusingly.

'Do not give me that look, Miss Byrne.'

Charis did not know what to make of that, so instead she cast her eyes back down at her book, one part of her hoping that he would leave her alone and another part hoping that he would stay.

She heard the click of his boots as he stalked across the room towards her, but did not dare to look around as he swished up behind her, looking over her shoulder.

'I sincerely hope you are not reading up on Love Charms, Miss Byrne,' he growled.

'Arithmancy, sir,' she replied quietly, completely aware of his physical presence looming behind her. She could almost feel the warmth of his body against her back, and she did not know if she wanted to flinch away or lean back into him.

'Much better,' Snape murmured. 'Because Love Charms, Miss Byrne, are for Hufflepuffs.' And with that, he placed his hands either side of her, trapping Charis between his body and the table, leaning in to peer into her book.

Charis realised she had been holding her breath unconsciously; her hands were beginning to feel clammy and her pulse starting to race. What was happening? What was Snape doing?

'Don't you agree, Miss Byrne?'

Snape's head was now right beside hers, and Charis could smell Firewhisky on his breath as it tickled her neck. And was she just imagining things, or were his words slightly slurry?

'Love charms flout one of the three basic laws of witchcraft, sir,' she answered breathlessly whilst staring resolutely ahead. She did not even try to move. Part of her wanted to make her excuses and get the hell out of the library. But she also wanted his proximity, wanted him to lean in even closer. But he would not do that, surely? This was the library, for Merlin's sake.

'Excellent answer, Miss Byrne,' Snape agreed smoothly, nudging against her, and Charis stiffened. Was that the tip of his wand pressing up against the small of her back, or...? Her eyes opened wide as she realised that the wand was actually a heavy, urgent bulge, and she bit her lip to stop herself gasping.

But then Snape surprised her once more with his next question.

'What is your opinion of love, Miss Byrne?' he asked in his low, velvety baritone.

Charis was momentarily stunned. Surely, Severus Snape was not asking her this, not after her little confession back in his office a couple of months ago. He had asked her then to forget about him and to keep her feelings for him under lock and key. And so far, she thought she had managed well.

'Which kind of love, sir?' Charis asked cautiously.

'THE love, Miss Byrne,' Snape whispered, his breath tickling against her ear.

Charis could hear her blood rushing in her ears. 'I ... think that those who find love are the luckiest people of all,' she started. 'But I think that this particular gift is not for everyone. And it comes with a high price: the price of love is also opening yourself up to be hurt ...'

She broke off and closed her mouth, afraid to say any more, afraid that she once more would confess her love for him. She desperately tried to control her heart rate. It was now pounding so hard, she was afraid Severus might be able to hear it.

'Quite so. And it only brings trouble,' Snape mumbled, his lips grazing her earlobe, making ripples of pleasure shoot down her spine. 'You offer your very soul and get thrown away like a used glove.'

Then he stepped away abruptly, drawing his robes around him, and Charis finally dared to look up. His dark eyes were glittering.

He looked down at her calmly for a few moments and Charis returned his gaze, not knowing what he wanted her to say or do.

'Come with me,' he suddenly commanded. 'I want to show you something.'

Charis followed the dark wizard as he stalked back towards the Restricted Section, admiring the ripple of his robes. He was a magnificent sight.

It took him mere seconds to find the tome he was looking for. 'Do you know this book?' he asked, holding up a heavy-looking, leather-bound copy of *Bewitching the Senses*.

'No, sir, I don't,' Charis replied, confusion welling up inside her. Why would he ask her this? What did he want?

'There is an interesting chapter in here about *love*,' he continued, pronouncing the word *love* as if it were covered in something that tasted highly unpleasant. With a wave of his index finger, the book fell open on the correct page, and he put it in on the reading table with a soft thud.

'Your little friend seemed to be very interested in this passage a couple of months ago. Care to see?'

Charis nodded and stepped forwards gingerly, leaning over the table.

That was when Snape took his chance. Swiftly, he moved behind Charis, placing his hands once more on the table either side of her. Once again, Charis was trapped, and her breath hitched in her throat as his low voice muttered in her ear.

'It says here that love is more dangerous a weapon than any potion ever brewed.'

His breath tickled the back of her neck, and when she finally managed to breathe again, Charis found her breathing had become shallow.

'It is like a poison,' Snape went on. 'Spreading through your veins ...'

The vibration of his voice made goosebumps erupt on Charis' arms.

'It makes you incapable of any logical thought, makes you dance like a puppet. Wouldn't you agree, Miss Byrne?'

Charis felt him press his chest against her back, and she let out a little gasp. How many times had she dreamt of being this close to him again?

'The heart can often rule the mind,' she stammered, 'but those who manipulate the hearts of others for their own gain are the danger ... that is akin to the Dark Arts.'

Snape was now standing so close she could feel his breath in her ear. 'Has your heart ever been manipulated, Miss Byrne?' he asked, inhaling deeply. He could smell her scent, the delicate hint of roses, coming from the soft, sensitive skin behind her ears.

To this, Charis said absolutely nothing. They both knew full well that her heart indeed had been manipulated, twice. And that Snape himself was one of the perpetrators.

'Have you ever manipulated anyone?' he drawled in his rich baritone, his voice loaded with euphemism.

Charis swallowed dryly. 'It depends in what context, sir.'

'Have you ever promised anyone love and then used them solely for your own purposes?'

Snape's lips almost brushed against Charis' ear, and she shivered.

'I-I would hope not, sir,' she stammered. 'I have never set out to hurt anyone.'

'And that is why you are not in Slytherin House,' Snape growled in response.

He knew that what he was about to do was wrong. He knew that the girl had genuine, pure feelings for him. And he knew that those feelings would make it impossible for her to resist him. But still, he pushed his hips forwards and began to grind against her buttocks. He, unlike her, was in Slytherin House.

Charis' eyes opened wide as she once more felt the thick, heavy bulge pressing urgently against her. And when his lips brushed her ear, oh so slowly, she started to tremble.

'But you have been hurt by a Slytherin, have you not?' Snape whispered. 'Heartthrob of Hogwarts ... Oh, I heard all about that. Suffice to say, a young woman of your potential should not have been sullied by a BOY of his age.'

His hands slid up over Charis' hips, feeling their contours. He was indeed angry at Zabini, for taking what was rightfully his. Tonight, he was going to claim her as his own. Tonight, he would take what he should have taken months ago. Tonight, they would finally get what they both wanted. The looks she had cast in his direction when she

had thought that he had not been looking had not escaped him. He knew she still wanted him. And, inexplicably, he still wanted her, too.

He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her towards him and found her pushing her bottom back in response.

'Don't you agree, Miss Byrne?'

Charis moaned a little at the twin sensations of his whispered voice in her ear and the bulge now nestled into the curve of her buttocks, and Snape tightened his grip around her waist.

'I take that as a yes,' he murmured, voice now heavy with arousal, before he latched on to her neck, sucking and biting at the delicate flesh.

Charis whimpered as shivers of pure pleasure shot down her spine. And as he began to grind once more, she instinctively began grinding her hips, too. It was just like that evening in the Room of Requirement, except this time there was no music and the only rhythm was the sound of their frantic heartbeats and their ragged breaths.

'I have not forgotten our conversation in my office or the events that led to it,' Snape growled. 'Do you remember how I told you that those events were triggered by nothing more than lust?'

He squeezed her hips and pulled her even closer towards his crotch. Charis let out a little moan.

'You do know the difference between love and lust, don't you, Miss Byrne?'

His large hands moved up her body to cup her breasts. They were so sweet and full, and Snape's erection was becoming uncomfortable now, straining through his robes.

'Yes, sir,' Charis replied hoarsely. 'Neither are easily controlled...' Quite how she managed to find her voice was beyond her as she now felt quite dizzy.

'No, they are not,' Snape agreed, his hands still cupping her breasts. 'Look at me.'

Charis moved her head to the side and locked eyes with Snape. Once again she had the feeling he was boring in to her very soul. And Snape found the look he had been hoping for: desire, need, pure lust.

A surge of power shot through him, and he could contain himself no more. He claimed Charis' mouth with his own at the same time as he began to stroke her nipples between fingers and thumbs.

Charis moaned into his mouth as they kissed. Oh, gods, she had been imagining his kiss for so long, and this was everything she had imagined and more. He was very much in the lead, and his kisses were hungry and passionate yet skilful and sensuous.

After some time, Snape moved his kisses down her jaw line and towards her neck, and Charis rolled her head back to give him better access. And he sank his teeth into her neck and started pulling up her robes.

Charis gasped, half wanting this, half panicking at the same time. They were in the library! What if they got caught? But the sound of Snape's voice once more sent all rational thoughts out of her head.

'Lust can be just as powerful as love,' he growled, his hands sliding up her soft, pale thighs. 'The good thing with lust, however, is that it can be over in a blink of an eye,' he continued. And before Charis knew it, his hand had slipped into her knickers.

She mewled softly as he felt her, clean-shaven and hot under his hand. Two deft fingers part her lips, and her sex betrayed her arousal as he found them coated in slick wetness.

Her mouth, however, was very dry. She still did not know if she should let this carry on or if she should push him away and run. But every nerve end was on fire and her knees were feeling weak. Yes, gods, she wanted this. She wanted it so much!

Snape latched onto her neck again, two fingers deftly stroking her clit, spreading the moisture around her sensitive nub as his erection still pressed at her behind. And Charis let her head roll back on to his shoulder and moaned. Oh, gods, right now she didn't care if Madam Pince, Draco Malfoy or anyone else walked in. All she could concentrate on was the sublime pleasure the dark wizard was giving her.

Snape softly whispered '*Evanesco*', and Charis' knickers disappeared instantly. He paused his ministrations between her legs and put his free hand between her shoulders.

'This is your one chance to say no, Miss Byrne,' he muttered, voice thick with lust. 'Do you want this?'

Charis looked shyly over her shoulder and nodded slowly, green eyes meeting black. How could she say no?

Without warning, he pushed her upper body down onto the desk and spread her legs slightly, making her exhale with shock.

'THIS, Miss Byrne, is lust,' he growled, entering her with one swift motion.

He moaned deeply. Merlin, the girl was so hot and tight, her flesh so slick for him.

Charis' back arched as she moaned loudly, too. She thought Zabini was big, but he was nothing compared to Severus. He filled her completely, stretched her. And she had no words for the sensation.

Snape kept his hand right between her shoulders, pinning her to the table, whilst he stood pounding into her with slow but forceful strokes. ~~He~~ *He* was the one in control. *He* held the power.

Charis gripped on to the edge of the table for support, her face to one side, whimpering with each thrust. The pages of the book in front of her were crumpled and torn from the force. Madam Pince would have a fit when she saw it, but neither Charis nor Snape cared, so lost were they in the moment.

'Tell me you do not like it, and I will stop.'

Charis made a mewling sound of frustration and pushed back on to him as a response. How could he think that she did not like this?

Snape smirked. Of course she liked it. Of course she wanted him. She wanted him just like this in control, firm and commanding. And he was going to take his pleasure from her tonight and have her helpless in her desire for him.

He shifted slightly, changing his angle so that he precisely hit her G-spot. And Charis could not help but howl at the sensation, having never felt such exquisite pleasure. Snape's fingers were still working at her clit as he ploughed into her, and it was too much to contain.

'Keep your mouth shut, you silly girl,' he hissed, secretly pleased at her response.

Charis' whole body was tingling, and she clamped a hand over her mouth, desperately trying not to make a noise. But Snape heard her muffled whimpers and if anything they aroused him even more. The girl just could not control herself, and he was making her feel like that, so strong was her desire.

He thrust into her hard, hitting that magical spot again and again and again. And Charis once more cried out, and her knuckles whitened as she gripped on to the side of the table for support.

Snape pinned her down even harder. 'Silence,' he snapped, his free hand pinching her clit.

Charis bit down on a finger to stop her moaning, and Snape felt another rush of power from the control he had over the girl.

'Yes, you like this, don't you?' he asked roughly, picking up pace.

Charis could only offer a muffled whimper in response.

His fingers rubbed deftly against the girl's clit, faster than ever, and he enjoyed the hushed moans escaping from her.

'You are close, aren't you?' he hissed, his desire-soaked baritone husky and coarse.

'Yes, Severus,' Charis answered breathlessly, her body tensing as her climax began to build.

'Then come for me,' he moaned, thrusting into her so hard she gasped.

It only took a few more quick thrusts and she cried out again, muscles contracting like crazy as her orgasm hit her.

'Now THIS is how a man fucks, Miss Byrne,' he muttered, slowly withdrawing and pushing in again, softly rubbing her clit as she came down from her peak.

Charis could barely see, panting on the desk, still gripping on to it. Her pulse was thudding like a drum in her ears and her sex felt swollen and tender. But she clenched her muscles as best as she could, desperately wanting Severus to reach his climax, too. Oh how she wanted to feel his warm seed flowing into her.

Snape noticed. By Merlin, he did. And he wanted to release himself into her tight, hot flesh, but he knew better than to lose all of his control. He must not let himself. Letting go would mean that she had made him, and he was not ready to hand the girl that kind of power over him.

'Lust, Miss Byrne, is a powerful weapon,' he growled. 'Remember this.'

Then he withdrew, still keeping Charis pinned down on the table with his left hand. Her bum was still bare and exposed, she looked vulnerable and submissive on the desk in front of him, and he exhaled raggedly, closing his eyes to memorise the delicious sight in front of him. Oh, this was an evening he would not forget in a hurry.

Why had he withdrawn? Feeling somewhat confused, Charis looked over her shoulder to see Snape's face: his eyes had closed, his mouth was slightly parted. *Was he withholding for her sake?* Charis wondered with a sudden rush of affection.

Then his eyes snapped open. 'Don't move,' he growled, releasing his hand from her neck and leaning in to whisper in her ear. 'Lust, Miss Byrne,' he repeated. 'Never forget how powerful a weapon it is.'

Charis shivered as she felt him place a gentle kiss behind her ear before standing. And then all she heard was the rustle of robes and then the click of his boots across the stone floor as he walked away.

She could not move even if she wanted to. She could feel the cool library air against her legs and behind, and her mouth was dry. And she felt dazed and in awe as Severus slammed the door and left her alone and shaking in the dimness of the library.

* * *

Snape carefully closed the door of his private bathroom behind him, the blood still rushing in his ears. He was so aroused that he was shaking. He needed release, and he needed it now.

He turned on the shower and did not even take the time to take off his robes manually. A murmur and some wandless magic, and he stood naked, with his right hand firmly wrapped around his cock. He was still hard, not having reached his peak, and as he stood there now, in the privacy of his own bathroom, he felt his member swell once more.

... Charis on the desk spread wide for him ... Morgana being lapped into ecstasy by Lucius ... Bella's wet mouth, lips parted slightly in pleasure ...

All those pictures invaded his mind unbidden, and Snape began to stroke his impressive manhood with a firm hand. It would have taken a eunuch to fight those pictures.

... Morgana's fevered kiss and the tingle of his lips ... Morgana's mouth at Bella's nipples, suckling greedily ... himself grinding against Charis as she let him explore the outline of her body and touch her in the most intimate way imaginable ... Charis muffling her ecstatic outcries with her hands, outcries for which he was responsible ...

Snape tightened his grip around his length. Morgana had tasted so sweet. And Charis had been so tight around him. And he did not know whose touch he was imagining when he stroked himself now, harder and faster, grabbing on to the tiled wall for support.

He knew that those thoughts were wrong, but he could not help himself. Both girls aroused him, each in their own, unique way. And he imagined Charis' rosy scent and the taste of honey on Morgana's lips, heard the blood rush in his ears and felt his cock throb in his hand.

He felt as if he had been hit by a Stunner when he peaked, and he shuddered as he released jet after jet of his seed onto the white tiles. And if he had been shouting out Charis' name or Morgana's, he did not know. All he knew was that it felt good, so indescribably good!

Breathing raggedly, he let himself fall against the wall and sank to his knees, too drained to keep standing upright. He kneeled down, warm water tricking onto his back he continued stroking his swollen sex, gently easing himself down from the intensity of his climax, imagining the touch of two small, warm hands.

When his breathing had slowed down and his heartbeat had returned to normal, Snape growled and slammed his fist against the cool tiled wall.

Great Merlin, what had he done?! Charis was his student, for fuck's sake!

He had never had sex with a student before. Never! Until tonight. He had taken advantage of a girl who was in no position to say no. And he hated himself for it.

He scrambled up and turned off the warm water, leaving the cold pouring down him, hoping that the icy drops would help him to think clearly.

What had he done?

The evening had started with anger and spite. How he had hated to take Morgana to Malfoy Manor. How he had hated to see Lucius' glee and the lusty look in his eyes when he had touched the girl. And how he had wished that it were *him* who was touching her.

When he had left the Manor, he had tried to collect himself, had tried to concentrate on other things. But over and over again, his mind had slipped and he had found himself flooded by memories: Morgana's soft whimpers when Lucius had kissed her back in autumn, the soft moans that had escaped her lips when he Severus had pressed her up against the wall at the Three Broomsticks, the sweet taste of her lips ...

By the time he had returned to Hogwarts, he had almost been mad with desire and had tried to get to the dungeons without being seen. He had even contemplated Flooing to Knockturn Alley to seek out the services of one of the ladies at Persephone's Palace. But Dumbledore, that twinkly-eyed fucker, had made him attend the feast in the Great Hall. There he had noticed that Charis was missing, and a plan for which he hated himself now had formed in his mind.

He knew that Charis desired him. She would have given herself to him already that night in the Room of Requirement, but they had been interrupted. And when he had left the Great Hall, he had been certain that she would not say no to him.

He had found her in the library, alone and vulnerable, and he had taken advantage of her. He had known perfectly well that she would not turn him down, and he had taken her, right there on a table in the Restricted Section. She had let him, and he had relished her moans just as much as he had relished the power he held over her. But most of all he had relished the look in her green eyes, the look that had told him that he, Severus Snape, was the most desirable wizard in the world.

He had almost lost control. He had been so close to spilling himself into her warm flesh. And he had been sure that she would have enjoyed it, relished it, even. But he had snapped out of his trance in the very last moment, had withdrawn and run away like a coward, leaving the girl behind, naked and exposed.

Snape turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, shivering.

He had made a mistake, a terrible mistake. And how he was going to look into Charis' eyes from now on was beyond him. Nor did he know how he was going to treat Morgana once she returned from Malfoy Manor. He had been there to protect her, and instead he had found himself lusting for her.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and padded towards his bedroom. And when he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror, he winced, and a non-verbal spell was all it took to make the glass shatter into a million pieces.

XX: Mine Is Your Heart

Chapter 20 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XX: Mine Is Your Heart

Part of Morgana felt elated. Lucius' kisses were so sincere, and his hands on her body felt so warm and tender. He made her believe that he really, truly wanted her. She felt proud and desirable. And she relished the feeling. What seventeen-year-old girl would not?

But another part of her felt terrified and wanted nothing more than to run after Snape and beg him to take her back to Hogwarts. He had made it very clear earlier that he would not blame her if she backed out. He would support her. And Morgana was endlessly grateful for this.

But it was also Snape's behaviour that had made it hard for her to keep smiling. She had seen the look in his eyes when Lucius had started touching her. And she had seen him drink too much too quickly and seen his eyes get darker, and she had wished that he would not have to see any of this. He had called her a slut before, and he would surely see this as a confirmation.

But Morgana had no time to ponder what her Head of House was thinking of her. He was gone, and she was lying in Lucius' arms, enjoying it and at the same time hoping that Snape would forgive her. That she, one day, would forgive herself.

The massive mahogany banqueting table in the dining room of Malfoy Manor had been transformed in an oval table, draped with a white tablecloth and laid with the best china money could buy, silver cutlery and crystal glasses. Two chairs stood beside each other, both upholstered with dark red velvet cushions. The curtains were drawn, and the room was filled with the soft light of countless candles, which emitted a sweet, intoxicating scent.

Lucius gallantly guided Morgana to her seat and pulled out the chair for her, and as she sat, he brushed her neck ever so lightly with his lips.

'Silvy has been slaving in the kitchen all day,' he whispered. 'You know how much she likes to please you. Do you see anything you like, my love?'

What was there not to like? On the table appeared oysters in their shells, tiny savoury pastries, vol-au-vents with shavings of truffle and miniature asparagus dripping with butter.

Morgana swallowed and smiled shyly, once more overwhelmed by the Malfoy luxury as well as the Malfoy charm. She knew very well that all this was just for show, but she could not help but be impressed.

'I thought it would be fun to start of the dinner with some finger food,' Lucius spoke softly, his lips still tickling her neck. 'I hope you have a healthy appetite, darling. You will need to keep your strength up.'

With a fluid motion, he moved his chair close to Morgana's and took a seat, his left hand still resting on her shoulder. And she smiled at him, her blue eyes glittering in the candle light. She had felt genuinely uncomfortable as she and Snape had arrived at the Manor, but now against her better judgment she began to relax. Lucius was kind to her; no one could claim the opposite. He was so charming, so adorable. He *must* care for her.

'Now, what to start with?' Lucius chose a pastry, picked it up with his long, slender fingers and smiled. 'Open up, love.'

He let Morgana take a bite and then gingerly brushed the crumbs from her lips with his free finger.

'And now some vegetables. Greens are good for young women like you, my sweet.'

He picked up a sprig of asparagus and offered it to her, the rich butter melting down his fingers. And his pupils dilated as he watched Morgana lick it off his fingers with the tip of her tongue before closing her lips delicately around the head of the asparagus. It was a sensuous sight, and Lucius couldn't help but groan as he pushed the

asparagus into the girl's mouth along with the tips of his fingers.

'Oh, love,' he breathed as he felt her tongue softly flick against his fingertips. 'The night has not yet begun, and I already don't want it to end.'

He picked up another sprig of asparagus, this time playfully dripping some butter on Morgana's lips before plopping the vegetable into her mouth with a grin, just to lean in and lick the butter off seconds later.

Morgana giggled, deeply amused by Lucius' playfulness. 'Didn't your mother teach you not to play with food, Lucius Malfoy?'

'Forgive me, love,' Lucius laughed. 'But I am feeling mischievous tonight.'

He reached for an oyster and sensuously drank it from the shell, and Morgana couldn't help but let her fingers trail down his throat. He looked dashing, so manly. And he did all of this just for her.

'As if you needed oysters, Lucius,' she murmured, and Lucius smiled at her, licking his lips seductively.

'You are the only aphrodisiac I need, my beautiful Morgana.'

He reached for her hand to kiss it but paused. 'I am glad you are wearing the jewellery I sent you tonight,' he said, holding up her hand so the snakes' emerald eyes sparkled in the candlelight. 'Do you like it?'

Morgana smiled. 'Of course I do, Lucius.'

'Then let me finish the set, my love.' He pulled a square box from his robes and slowly, slowly opened it to reveal a silver snake pendant. Once more, the snake had emeralds for eyes.

Morgana couldn't help but gasp. 'There are women who would kill for jewellery like this, Lucius.'

'And then there are women who truly deserve it,' Lucius replied, graciously getting up from his chair to stand behind Morgana in order to drape the necklace around her neck and place yet another row of kisses on the sensitive skin.

Morgana sighed contently, letting her head fall to the side. Why was Lucius being so nice to her? Why was Lucius showering her with such beautiful gifts? She was there, at the Manor, unable to get away, completely in his powers. He could just take her, ravish her and complete his plan, and no-one would ever hear her scream. He did not need to be nice to her. But still, he was adorable, loving and caring. He was taking her by storm, and her young heart had no chance to resist his charms. And slowly but surely, Morgana started to forget why she was at the Manor that night and instead started to believe that Lucius truly cared for her.

'You're spoiling me, Lucius,' she stated as he took his seat beside her again. 'How can I ever thank you?'

'You do not need to thank me, my love. A beautiful woman like you deserves luxury, the best money can buy. And I want us both to have a very special night tonight.'

He called for the elf to clear the table for the next course and let her bring more champagne for himself and pomegranate juice for his young belle.

'Do you like game, my love?'

Morgana shrugged. How would she know? As if she had ever had the opportunity to try.

'We are having roast pheasant with dauphinoise potatoes and green beans,' Lucius went on. 'I shot the pheasant myself this afternoon.'

Morgana raised an eyebrow, and Lucius smiled kindly at her. 'It's a sport, dear heart. And it wasn't as if the beast gave its life in vain. In fact, when you taste what Silvy has done with it, I'm sure you'll agree that the pheasant should have lain in front of me and begged to be shot.'

Morgana laughed. 'Just thinking that they are serving spaghetti and meatballs at Hogwarts tonight ...'

'How utterly unromantic!' Lucius exclaimed. 'What's for dessert? One of Severus' dreadful indigestion potions?'

'I don't think Professor Snape would allow dessert,' Morgana replied with a forced smile. Somehow, joking about her Head of House did not feel right that evening.

'Yes,' Lucius sneered. 'Severus is far too bitter to allow any sweetness into his life.'

'Has he always been like that?' Morgana enquired, suddenly realising that she knew virtually nothing about her Head of House.

'Severus has always been much more comfortable in his own company, shall we say,' Lucius started, smiling. 'He has always been defensive and prickly as a cactus. And just as unpopular with the ladies. Some things never change.'

Snape being unpopular with the ladies? Now that must be the joke of the century! Morgana couldn't help but grin. If Lucius only knew how she and Charis had been lusting for their Potions master.

Fortunately, Lucius took it as sign to continue. 'He had a rather unfortunate nickname, too,' he revealed. 'Snivellus.'

'Snivellus?' Morgana laughed. 'Why Snivellus?'

'I guess it had something to do with his large nose and his greasy hair.' Lucius chuckled. 'There was a gang of Gryffindors that teased Severus mercilessly.'

'And they survived?' Morgana enquired.

Lucius laughed again. 'Funnily enough, they did. But Severus soon turned into one of the best duellers in school. The Gryffindors left him alone, and we all respected him for his skills. But I think he never forgot nor forgave.'

No, certainly not. Suddenly Morgana found herself wondering if her stern Potions master had ever had any friends at school, or if he had been lonely all his life. And the thought pained her immensely.

Her musings were interrupted by the main course appearing on the table: rich and creamy potatoes, crisp beans, and the pheasant, which was tender and succulent and melted like butter on Morgana's tongue.

'Hm, Lucius,' she moaned. 'This truly is delicious.'

Lucius raised his eyebrow and smirked. 'Making such delightful noises already, my sweet? How will you sound when you have tasted this?' he asked, grasping her hand and placing it on the bulge between his legs.

Morgana smiled and played indignant. 'Tsk, tsk, Mr Malfoy.'

Once more, Lucius laughed. 'Why, Miss Belakane, could it be that you are becoming modest?' he asked in a shocked tone. 'What has Silvy put in that pheasant?'

Morgana giggled at his show of pretending to hunt around the plate, and Lucius smiled contently. He liked the girl's laugh and had to admit that he was enjoying her company. Narcissa had stopped laughing at his jokes years ago. And those tarts he normally courted at Persephone's Palace in Knockturn Alley were undeniably pretty but in most cases also undeniably daft and did not appreciate a good joke. Morgana did. She was pretty and smart. But not smart enough to see through him, not smart enough to escape. Too naive to even try.

Morgana excused herself after the meal, pretending to have to use the little witches' room. But in fact, she needed to be alone for a few moments to gather her thoughts. Her mind was in turmoil. Lucius was ever so charming and courteous, but she knew why he was acting that way. Or had he changed his mind? Did he do all this because he cared for her?

After having splashed some cold water on her face, Morgana went to find Silvy. Snape's warning words were suddenly echoing in her ears, and however hard she tried, she could not stop thinking of him after all that Lucius had told her.

She found the elf slaving away in the kitchen, of course.

'Silvy, can you do me a favour?' she asked. 'When Master Lucius is occupied later tonight, can you get to Hogwarts and find Professor Snape?'

Silvy nodded.

'Tell him that everything is going alright,' Morgana went on. 'And tell him ... tell him that I am sorry.'

'Anything for Miss Morgana,' the elf replied.

Despite herself, Morgana sank to her knees and pulled the surprised elf into a hug. And as the elf awkwardly patted her back, she almost started to cry. She did not deserve Silvy's compassion.

'Is Miss happy with the dinner?' Silvy piped after some moments, and Morgana smiled at her.

'You have outdone yourself once more, Silvy. It was excellent. What is for dessert?'

'White chocolate gu and passionfruit sorbet, miss,' the elf declared, beaming.

'Did you choose that?'

'No, miss. Master Lucius chose it all.'

Morgana smiled. 'The man has taste, undeniably.'

She patted Silvy on the head and then got up, straightening her dress. 'Looking good?' she asked.

'Beautiful, miss,' the elf replied.

And after taking some deep breaths, Morgana made her way back to the dining room. She could not make Lucius wait any longer and possibly get angry at her. She had a mission to complete that night.

'Did you miss me?' she asked as she re-entered the room, and Lucius promptly opened his arms.

'I did indeed,' he replied, looking at her like a sad puppy.

Oh, he looked dashing. Lucius knew how to set off his pale colouring well, and dove-grey looked particularly resplendent on him. Morgana loved the way he dressed in such expensive, luxurious and tactile materials. The man was simply begging to be touched. And she did not resist when he pulled her on to his lap and kissed her deeply. 'I have missed you terribly,' he murmured as he came up for air. 'And I am not letting you out of my sight again tonight.'

Morgana smiled as Lucius sneaked one arm around her waist and gestured towards the table with his free hand. 'I couldn't decide between my two favourite desserts,' he explained. 'So I had Silvy make both. Something cold and something hot. Something fruity and something chocolaty.'

He picked up a ramekin of white chocolate gu and spooned a little in Morgana's mouth. And she couldn't help but gasp. That was by far the best gu she had ever eaten, and suddenly she was reminded of Bella and how the witch had moaned over a bit of Tiffin.

'Delicious, isn't it?' Lucius enquired innocently before he took a mouthful himself and moaned. 'Like sex in chocolate form.'

Morgana gave a little laugh, and Lucius picked up the glass dish that contained the sorbet.

'Now try this, love,' he murmured seductively. 'Vibrant, fruity, yet very refreshing to the palate. See why I couldn't decide between them?'

Morgana licked her lips and nodded. Although, if it were up to her, she would choose the chocolate.

As if Lucius had read her mind, he dipped the spoon into the ramekin once more. 'More gu, I think.'

That time, a soft moan escaped Morgana's lips as a shudder of pleasure went down her spine. What the hell was in that gu?

'Isn't it amazing?' Lucius asked, grinning mischievously, 'That such a little dish can contain so much pleasure?'

He pulled Morgana closer, and she could feel that the bulge between his legs had become considerably bigger. Obviously, the gu had a similar effect on him as it had on her. Playfully, she took the spoon from his hand.

'Tongue, Mr Malfoy,' she instructed, her voice not much more than a whisper.

She put a spoonful of gu onto her own tongue and then latched onto his, and they shared a deep, chocolaty kiss, both shivering with pleasure.

Lucius' hands felt hot on her back, and as he skilfully unzipped her dress, Morgana shifted her weight to grind herself up against his now very impressive bulge. Every nerve ending in her body seemed to be on fire, and she found that she wanted more of Lucius than just his kisses. She wanted all of him. With swift fingers, she unbuttoned his trousers and left her hand glide into his silken boxers.

'Yes,' Lucius hissed and let his own hands wander up Morgana's thighs, gathering up her skirts to lift the dress over her head. 'You look incredible.'

His complimenting was interrupted by his moan as Morgana wrapped her hand firmly around his erection, and he instinctively bucked his hips.

'I see you have truly missed me,' Morgana whispered, busy freeing Lucius' manhood. She wanted him, needed him. And she needed him now.

'I truly have, my love,' he breathed and moved her knickers to the side, and Morgana slid onto him, whimpering softly as he filled her. And he held her firmly by the hips, thrusting upwards.

He grabbed her face with both his hands and kissed her furiously while driving up into her like a madman. She was so tight, and it felt so incredibly good. And he had been

waiting for so long, so many years for his plan to reach fruition. Now he desperately wanted to spill his seed into her hot flesh.

'Gods, Morgana,' he cried out. 'I'm not sure I can hold out ...'

'Then come for me, Lucius,' he heard her whisper, and he continued slamming into her, crying out her name as he filled her with spurt after spurt of his seed, holding himself inside her to the hilt.

'Oh, love,' he breathed after his heartbeat had returned to normal. 'You are incredible.'

He kissed her tenderly now, stroking her back with feather light fingers, and Morgana melted into his kiss, closing her eyes and suddenly wondering how long his kisses and his caresses would last.

The deed was done, she thought. The heir was conceived. Surely, Lucius would send her back to Hogwarts now. But he surprised her. And before she knew it, he had Apparated them to the white room where he had made love to her before.

He laid her gently on the bed and started unbuttoning his shirt, his eyes locked onto hers and a smile on his lips.

'What are you smiling at, Mr Malfoy?' Morgana asked, surprised at how steady her voice was.

'I am smiling,' Lucius replied, 'at how beautiful you look in those jewels and that underwear in my bed, Miss Belakane.' And he did not even lie. The girl was indeed a lovely sight.

Morgana purred like a cat as she watched Lucius hooking his fingers into his trousers just to pull them agonisingly slowly down over his delicious butt, along with his silken pants. She drank in the sight of the magnificent wizard in front of her: his smooth, hairless chest, his flat stomach and his magnificent cock that was already stiffening again.

Lucius smiled and let a tantalising finger run down his chest, his belly, looking at the young witch in front of him the whole time, his silver-grey eyes glittering. Obviously, she enjoyed what she saw just as much as he enjoyed what he saw.

He wrapped his hand around his semi-erect cock and started stroking it slowly. And Morgana licked her lips as she saw it swell in arousal. She wanted to taste him. She got onto her knees and crawled towards the edge of the bed, her eyes never leaving his.

Lucius moaned with delight as her tongue flicked over the glistening top of his cock. And when she licked him from base to top, he closed his eyes, relishing the feeling of her warm tongue against his flesh.

'Can you taste yourself?' he growled as she closed his lips around his head and slowly took him inside her mouth.

'Hm,' she breathed.

'And how do you taste?'

'Sweet as white chocolate.'

Lucius eyes snapped open, and he took hold of Morgana's shoulders, gently manoeuvring her onto all fours, her head facing away from him.

'Let me taste you, love.'

He removed her knickers and sank onto his knees behind her, burying his tongue inside her lips and massaging her clit. He heard her gasp and felt her push back against his face, and he held on to her thighs, flicking and lapping until she started to moan.

'Please, don't stop, Lucius,' she begged. 'Please, don't stop.'

He suckled her gently, probing her entrance with his finger. She tasted sweet indeed. And he teased her insistently, suckling her clit until he felt her shudder just to stop seconds before she tumbled over the edge.

'Lucius, please,' Morgana whimpered, the sound of her voice almost desperate. 'Please, Lucius. Take me!'

He swiftly stood and entered her with a fluid movement all the way up to the hilt, feeling her muscles contract around him.

'Oh, yes, Lucius. Yes. YES!'

He ploughed relentlessly into her as she climaxed, ignoring her whimpers. 'Oh, yes, Morgana,' he hissed. 'You are mine now.'

He pounded her yet harder, reaching around her belly to stroke her clit with deft fingers.

'MINE!' he roared as her second orgasm brought forth his own, and he collapsed on top of her, his heart racing.

Yes, she was truly his now. For the third time, she had come to him of her own free will. Each time, she had let him enter her warm flesh. Each time, he had planted his seed inside her. And tonight, he was certain that he had fathered the Heir of Darkness. And the girl had no idea.

'Oh, love, what are you doing to me?' he gasped breathlessly as he slumped onto the bed and pulled Morgana towards him.

But she was too short of breath to speak, and her whole body was shaking. And she let Lucius kiss her hair and cradle her, despite her better judgment, feeling thoroughly safe in his strong arms.

'Yours, Lucius,' she whispered before her eyelids fluttered shut. 'Yours ...'

And he caressed her cheek with his long, tender fingers and kissed her hair once more, smiling triumphantly. 'Truly, love,' he whispered back. 'Truly ...'

* * *

It was still early when Morgana woke up, so early that the whole Manor was silent. Even the elves were probably still asleep. And Lucius lay on his stomach beside her, his hair sprawled out on the pillow and his right arm possessively wrapped around her waist.

He grunted as she freed herself from his grip but didn't wake, and Morgana slipped out of the bed and tip-toed towards the en suite bathroom. She moved as silently as she could. She did not want Lucius to wake up. She needed to be alone for a while.

Once she had closed the door behind her, she made her way to the basin to wash her face and gasped as she caught sight of her reflection in the gilded mirror. 'You look like owl droppings, Ms Belakane,' she murmured and sneered at the memory of Snape telling her not to come back to the castle with a hangover. Surely, he would not be all too pleased to see her in this state either: she was pale as a ghost, there were dark shadows under her eyes, and her neck had started to bruise from Lucius' love bites. There were also other bruises, and Morgana tried to remember when he had throttled her. But it was in vain.

Actually, there were quite a few things she didn't remember clearly about last night. Lucius had literally fucked her senseless. He had done things to her that she had had no idea were doable, things that were certainly illegal in certain countries. He had made her moan and scream in ecstasy for the better part of the night, and she had let him, always hungry for more. And she wondered if Lucius really had the stamina of a twenty-five-year old or if he had been using magic.

For a moment, Morgana considered calling Silvy but decided against it. It was still early, and she was perfectly able to run her own bath. She found a bottle of Love Dream Bubble Bath and filled up the tub, curious about which scent that would develop, knowing that Love Dream contained a few drops of Amortentia which made it smell differently to different people according to what attracted them.

Roses? Morgana frowned as she relaxed in the warm water. Why would her Amortentia smell of roses? She did not even like flowers. *Must be the roses Lucius sent*, she thought. Certainly, the musky back note reminded her of him. But there was another scent, a faint whiff of dark chocolate and peppermint. Once more Morgana scowled. But her mind was too tired to figure out whom the scent reminded her of.

She closed her eyes for some moments before she started massaging her aching muscles. Her legs felt stiff, so did her back and arms, and as she let her hand run over her belly, she froze, suddenly remembering the reason why she had been brought to Malfoy Manor last night. Oh, how she wished that Snape had screwed up his potion. But he was the best potioneer in the country. Of course, the potion had been perfect.

'You're pregnant, Morgana,' whispered a tiny voice in the back of her head. 'You're carrying the spawn of the devil.'

She knew this. Lucius had made sure that not a drop of his seed had gone to waste. And Snape's potion just could not have failed.

Before her inner eye, Morgana saw a sperm fusing with an ovum, saw the cell split and split again, saw an embryo develop and slowly turn into what could be recognised as a human baby. It was like reading one of the medical books Poppy had made all students read in their fourth year. And Morgana felt nothing, nothing at all.

She would never see this baby as her child. It was just a pawn on a giant Wizard chessboard, to be carried for three months and then to be disposed of when it had fulfilled its purpose. And for the time being, Morgana couldn't make herself think of the life that was growing inside her at all. Somehow, she was unable to grasp the concept of herself being pregnant with Lucius Malfoy's child, the heir of the Dark Lord. Slytherin self-preservation, she told herself. If she didn't think about it, she could pretend that it did not exist.

Suddenly feeling lonely and in dire need of company, Morgana called out for Silvy, and the elf appeared within seconds, looking sleepy and wearing a pillow case with the Malfoy crest.

'Did I wake you, sweetie?'

'No, Miss,' the elf replied, stifling a yawn. And Morgana smiled.

'You're a bad liar, Silvy,' she pointed out, immediately regretting it as the elf flinched. She knew how easily scared the little thing was.

'Master Lucius says Silvy should not lie,' the elf squeaked, her eyes wide with fear.

'Master Lucius says a lot of things. And right now, he is fast asleep, and we don't need to bother about him.' Morgana tried to calm the shaking elf. 'I never got around to thanking you for dinner, Silvy.'

Her words had the desired effect, and the elf's lips turned into a smile. 'Silvy is pleased she made Miss happy, Miss.'

'I should make Lucius give you to me as a present,' Morgana said, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the affection she felt for the elf. The little creature deserved so much better than to be slaving away at Malfoy Manor.

'Silvy would like that, Miss,' Silvy replied, her eyes wide. 'But Master Lucius would not, I think.'

Morgana propped up her chin on the edge of the tub. 'Leave that to me, Silvy. Say, did you manage to get to Hogwarts last night?'

The elf's face fell. 'Silvy was trying to find the dark professor everywhere,' she explained. 'Not in the dungeons, Miss, or in his quarters. Silvy could not find him, Miss. Silvy is sorry.'

'Don't you dare,' Morgana hissed as Silvy picked up the toilet brush to hit herself with it, and the elf dropped it in fright.

'It was not your fault, Silvy,' Morgana went on with a soft tone. 'If Professor Snape does not want to be found, even the Dark Lord himself cannot find him. You did what you could, Silvy. And you do not need to punish yourself just because you could not carry out your task.'

She patted the elf gingerly on the cheek, and Silvy's big eyes welled up with tears. 'Miss is too kind,' she sniffed. 'Miss is too good for Master Lucius.'

Morgana did not even have time to react before Silvy had picked up the toilet brush again and started to hit herself on the head with it. Talking bad of their master was one of the biggest crimes a house-elf could commit.

'Silvy, don't!' Morgana commanded. 'You will wake your master. And we don't want that, do we?'

Silvy put down the toilet brush, and Morgana decided that it was time to occupy the elf lest she come up with yet another way to punish herself.

'Silvy, I didn't bring any clothes other than the dress I came in last night. Could you manage to find something more comfortable?'

'Of course, Miss.' Silvy beamed up at Morgana. 'What colour would Miss prefer?'

Morgana smirked. She could ask for something in bubblegum pink and give the elf and the whole Wizarding world a heart attack. But she did not feel that mischievous today. 'What colours have you seen me in, Silvy?' she asked instead.

'Black and green, Miss.'

'Then pick one.'

Silvy returned within a few minutes, carrying a dark green robe in crushed velvet. 'Silvy hopes this is to Miss' liking.'

'It is lovely, Silvy.' Once more, Morgana patted the elf on the cheek. 'And now I want you to go back to sleep until Master Lucius wants his breakfast.'

And with a huge smile on her lips, Silvy Disappeared.

It was almost seven o'clock when Lucius rolled to his side to pull the young witch beside into a sleepy hug, but all his hands could grab were empty bed sheets. He opened his eyes with a growl. Surely, the little chit would not have dared to sneak out on him once again.

He Accio'd his silver satin dressing gown and swung his legs out off the bed, looking around the room. Morgana's underwear was still lying on the floor. And as much as the thought of her leaving her knickers behind for him excited him, somehow Lucius doubted that she would do that.

Then he noticed that that the en suite door was shut, and he padded across the room to knock.

'Morgana?'

He received no answer and knocked again, harder this time. 'Beloved?'

When there was still no answer, he pushed the door open. This was his house, after all. He did not need to ask permission to enter any room.

'There you are, my love,' he exclaimed as he caught sight of the girl. She looked sleepy, and Lucius wondered if she had been asleep in the tub when he had knocked the first time.

'Are you alright?' he enquired, his voice soft and sweet. 'Couldn't you sleep?'

He grabbed a fluffy bath towel and held it open, beckoning Morgana to step out of the bath. She was a lovely sight with her skin and cheeks slightly flushed. And she smelled of roses.

'I feared that you had gone without saying goodbye, my love,' Lucius whispered as he wrapped the towel around Morgana's body. 'And you know how much I like to say goodbye to you.'

He kissed her forehead and started to gently dry her off, every now and then placing a kiss on her warm, soft skin.

'Yours?' he asked, pointing at the dark green robe that was lying beside the tub.

'Silvy brought it,' Morgana explained. 'I hope you don't mind me using your elf, Lucius.'

'Why would I mind, darling?'

'Because she is yours.'

'Yes, she is,' Lucius replied, cupping Morgana's chin with his long fingers. 'And so are you.'

And so am I, Morgana thought as she melted into his kiss. His. And she couldn't decide if this was good or bad.

'We may have to put some concealment charm on your throat before you return to Hogwarts, my love,' Lucius whispered as he nuzzled into her neck. 'I seem to have got carried away. But I couldn't help myself. You bring out the animal in me, Morgana.'

The girl giggled softly. 'Which animal?'

'The tiger,' Lucius growled. 'And the snake.'

And as he pulled her into a tight embrace, grinding his hips against her, Morgana noticed that the snake had most certainly awoken.

He led her back into the bedroom and slipped under the covers, patting the space next to him. 'Come here, my love,' he whispered. 'I need your warmth to drive away the chill of the morning.'

He was gentle with her. His hands and lips explored every inch of her body, and as he rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him, Morgana lowered herself slowly onto his impressive member and started rocking, steadied by the firm grip Lucius had on her hips.

He gave a delicious moan every time she clenched her muscles around him. 'Morgana,' he breathed. 'Beautiful Morgana.'

When his hand found its way in between their bodies and his fingers started circling her most sensitive spot, Morgana closed her eyes to concentrate on the pleasure the wizard was giving her. He was so damn good at this, and her orgasm hit her with a force that made her gasp for breath.

Then Lucius flipped her around and positioned himself between her thighs, his face only inches from her own. And Morgana was so captured by his gaze that she did not even dare blink out of fear that everything would disappear when she did.

He made sweet love to her that morning, moving his hips slowly and whispering words of love into her ear. And he peaked with her name on his lips.

'Why me?' Morgana whispered as she lay curled up in Lucius' arms a while later. 'Why did you choose me?'

'I have already told you,' Lucius started, running his hand through her dishevelled hair. 'You are beautiful, talented, intelligent ...'

'There are many witches of that kind.'

'But you are not just any witch, my love. And you are mine.' He pulled her close and kissed her in a way that sent a shiver down Morgana's spine. 'Mine,' he whispered. 'All mine.'

'Yes, I am yours,' she breathed as he released her, gazing into his eyes. 'And I am afraid that I am hopelessly falling for you, Lucius Malfoy.'

Lucius smiled and traced her lips with his fingertips. 'The feeling is entirely mutual, Morgana Belakane.'

And when he wrapped his arm around her, all Morgana could think of was how much she wished that he was telling the truth.

XXI: Immaculate Deception

Chapter 21 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the

impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXI: Immaculate Deception

'Miss Charis?'

Charis pulled the blanket over her head. It was way too early for anyone to be talking to her. Surely, she must be dreaming.

'Miss Charis?'

The voice was high-pitched and squeaky, and now there was somebody pulling at her blanket.

'What?' she slurred, the word turning into a yawn. 'Winky?'

'No, Miss Charis, not Winky. It's Silvy. Winky is Silvy's cousin twice removed.'

Charis Accio'd her glasses and was suddenly wide awake. What the hell was Lucius Malfoy's elf doing in her dormitory at such an early hour?

'What are you doing here, Silvy?'

'Silvy brings greetings from Miss Morgana,' the elf explained, a broad smile on her face.

'Morgana?' Charis frowned. If Morgana had sent Malfoy's elf, then that must mean ... 'Silvy, you're not telling me that Morgana has been at Malfoy Manor, are you?'

Still, the elf was beaming. 'Miss Morgana has indeed had dinner with Master Lucius. And now she sends Miss Charis breakfast.'

'Breakfast?' Charis started to feel really stupid as she seemed to be repeating everything the elf said. But she had just woken up, and Morgana sending her something was definitely unusual. She and Morgana had barely spoken over the last couple of weeks.

Charis' thoughts were interrupted by Silvy holding up a little pink box from which emitted a heavenly scent.

'It is a chocolate croissant,' the elf explained. 'Miss Morgana said you would like it. And Miss Morgana sent a note as well.'

Charis sneered at the Malfoy crest that adorned the parchment, but her lips turned into a smile when she read Morgana's words:

Enjoy the croissant, Star Sister. Silvy has made it herself. Trust me when I tell you that it is delicious!

Miss you,

Morgana

'Morgana praises your baking skills very highly,' Charis said, surprised to see the elf's eyes fill with tears.

'Miss Morgana is being very kind to Silvy. Even though Silvy failed to carry out her task last night.'

'What task?'

'Miss Morgana sent Silvy to find the dark professor, and Silvy could not find him.'

'Professor Snape?' Charis enquired as the elf blew her nose in the bedcover, her heart suddenly beating at least twice as fast as it was supposed to. 'Why did Morgana want you to find Professor Snape?'

'Miss Morgana had a message,' Silvy sobbed.

'What message?'

'Miss Morgana said she was sorry,' Silvy explained, looking up at Charis with big, watery eyes.

Charis frowned. 'Sorry for what?'

'Silvy does not know, Miss Charis,' the elf replied, sobbing even more than before. 'Miss Morgana said the dark professor would know.'

Then the clock chimed seven, and Silvy flinched. 'Silvy must return home at once. Master Lucius will be angry if he has to wait for his breakfast.'

And before Charis could even utter another word, the elf had disappeared, leaving behind the chocolate croissant and a huge wet spot where she had dried her tears on Charis' bedcover.

Charis scrambled out of bed and made her way to the shower, trying to make sense of everything she had just heard. Morgana had had dinner with Malfoy then. Well, that had happened before. But since she had sent Silvy with a freshly baked chocolate croissant, she must have spent the night as well. Was that what she was sorry for? Was that why she had wanted the elf to find Snape?

Snape. Charis felt the breath catch in her throat as she turned on the hot water. Last night's events were still fresh in her mind, and she had replayed them over and over. She had felt dazed for hours afterwards at the pleasure he had taken from her. The raw passion between them had been so hot and exceeded Charis' expectations by miles. The man was incredible. He knew exactly where to touch, exactly how to fuck ... she shivered at the memory.

So her suspicions had been correct after all: he did want her. And those glances did allude to something more between them. And yet Charis was confused. Why did he walk away? Why did he not succumb to his own peak? And why the lesson on lust?

But at the same time, she reasoned, it was Valentine's Day. The day love was universally celebrated. Surely, the fact he came to her on that day of all days was his way of revealing his feelings for her? And as for the lesson in lust, well, he was acknowledging their shared desires in the open once and for all. Charis could not wait for her next lesson the lesson in love, for the gentle side of Severus, for his tender embraces, for his sweet words.

Severus must like her very much to have taken her so passionately in the library, in such a public place where they could have got caught. And the library was symbolic, too: it was an acknowledgement of her academic efforts, of her house.

The more Charis thought about it, the more she thought Severus was struggling with the concept of her still being a student, and that was what had caused him to hold back his own desire and why he had left the library so quickly. She smiled to herself. In a few short months, she would graduate and then they would be able to be open about their relationship.

Images of strolling with him arm in arm, and kissing tenderly, and shopping together in Diagon Alley all flitted through her mind, then. Soon, they could be together. Soon, they would have all the time in the world to truly get to know each other.

She smiled as she lathered up her hair. *Charis Snape. It had quite a nice ring to it, she thought.*

* * *

Snape's eyes snapped open, and he shot off his pillow. He did not know what had woken him up, but it felt as if he had had a horrible nightmare. His nightshirt was drenched with cold sweat and his heart was racing.

He let himself fall back onto the pillow and closed his eyes. What a night it had been! Once more, he saw everything before his inner eye: Lucius, Morgana, Charis; hot kisses and fingers on naked skin; laboured breathing and eyes full of need. Everything came rushing down over him like a tidal wave: the memories, the fantasies; real, hard sex and an orgasm that had shaken his very core.

Snape growled. Damned be the weak flesh! He should not have given in!

Charis had been only too willing. He had given her a chance to say no, but he knew perfectly well that it had just been for show, a way for himself to tune out his conscience. He knew perfectly well that the girl would never say no.

He knew what kind of feelings she harboured for him. He knew that those feelings clouded her judgement and made it impossible for her to say no to him. And although he had spoken to her about lust and love, he doubted that Charis was able to separate the two. And he had taken advantage of it.

He would meet her soon. She would be in the Great Hall for breakfast and then in his classroom for Potions. And she would certainly give him one or two of those shy, longing glances. How should he react? Should he pretend that he didn't see and with that pretend that last night had not happened? Should he talk to her and thus acknowledge that something had happened? Or should he do what he did best: scowl and snap at her and hope that she would turn away?

With yet another angry growl, Snape swung his legs out of the bed and padded towards the bathroom. There was no point lying in bed contemplating his deeds. When he met the girl, he would know what to do. Besides, he had other things to worry about as well.

He knew that Morgana had not returned from Malfoy Manor yet. He had instructed an elf to inform him of the girl's return but so far he had not heard anything.

He sneered. He did not like the idea of Morgana having spent the night in Lucius' arms. Heaven knew how much nonsense the man had been filling her mind with and her heart. And as much as Snape hoped that the girl had been keeping a cool head, he was afraid that she might have succumbed to Lucius' charms.

Who could blame her? Older and smarter witches had been tangled up in Lucius' web of lies. And smarter wizards. Snape himself had been one of them. He, too, had believed in Lucius' promises of riches and power, and he had paid dearly for it.

Now he hoped that Morgana would not come to share his fate.

* * *

Five minutes to eight, Charis was queuing outside the Potions classroom, munching on her chocolate croissant, butterflies in her stomach. She had never made it to the Great Hall for breakfast. All the thoughts that were running through her head had made her stay in the shower for over half an hour, and she had had to get dressed very hastily to make it to the dungeons in time. Quite how she would be able to act normal in front of Severus after the momentous events of last night she had no idea, but for both of their sakes she would try.

She was just about to take some steps in the direction of the Slytherin common room to see if Morgana was on her way, when she found herself being pulled into a hug. And she almost dropped her croissant when she found that the person hugging her was Morgana.

'Um, are you alright?' she asked as Morgana released her, giving her friend a curious look.

'Yeah, I'm fine,' Morgana replied. 'Why would I not be?'

Because you haven't talked properly with me for over a month and now you're hugging me in public, and to top it all you've just spent the night at Malfoy Manor with a suspected Death Eater, Charis thought, but knew better than to say it out loud. Who knew how her Slytherin friend would react to a comment like that?

And before either of them had the chance to say anything more, the classroom door flew open with a bang, and there stood Severus Snape, glaring down at his students like a Dementor.

Not a single student dared to look up at him, let alone say Good Morning as they filed into the classroom. And Charis was overjoyed to see Morgana take her old place beside her at the desk in the front.

'I am amazed so many of you showed up here today,' Snape said in his most silky tone once he had taken his place behind his desk. 'Although some of you look like they have had a rough night.'

'So does he,' Morgana whispered, and Charis bit her lip and chanced to look up at Snape for a fraction of a second. He certainly did look like he had been overrun by a Hippogriff. And she could not help but wonder if he had slept at all. Maybe he had been lying awake, thinking about how unfair it was that he had to wait for such long months until they could be together at last. Charis sighed happily.

'You will be stewing dragon liver today,' Snape declared, his eyes glittering menacingly. 'Anyone who is unable to control their stomach will receive a T and serve detention with Mr Filch until the end of term. And you will also fail your next task since you will be brewing a potion with that liver later this week.'

He flicked his wand and a huge piece of sickly green, bloody dragon liver appeared on every table, followed by groans and retching noises from the students.

'The liver is to be cut into cubes, two by two inches each. Every idiot can do this. Waste as little as possible. Dragon liver is expensive. Begin.'

'This is grim,' Charis pointed out as she sank her knife into her piece of liver, from which emitted a disgusting smell. 'I think I prefer Flobberworms.'

'Look at Smythe.' Morgana grinned. 'His face is actually turning green. Think he drank too much last night?'

'I hear he got so drunk he was snogging Millicent Bulstrode. No wonder he's green.'

Morgana giggled, and Charis smiled. This felt just like old times, she and Morgana sharing a desk, chatting and laughing.

But Morgana's giggling stopped abruptly and Charis' smile faltered when Snape stopped his round in front of their desk. He had had a devastating comment for every student in the classroom so far, and the girls braced themselves to get theirs. But Snape just turned without a word and went to stand behind his desk once more.

'Everyone,' he bellowed, 'I recommend you have a look at Miss Byrne's cutting board. Now this, ladies and gentlemen, is what your liver should look like. Five points to Ravenclaw.'

Then he swiped past the girl's table again. 'Good work, Miss Byrne.'

'Thank you, sir,' Charis stammered, trying not to look too shocked. His kind words in front of the whole class were the equivalent of him confessing his love for her in public. Her heart swelled with affection.

And she almost missed it when Snape muttered: 'Do not thank me, Miss Byrne.'

Slowly, the classroom started to fill with the nauseating smell of stewed dragon liver, and Charis and Morgana were just discussing using a Bubble-Head Charm to keep them from suffocating, when Snape's voice rang out once more.

'Miss Belakane, my office. Now.'

Charis gave her friend a worried look. Maybe Snape, too, was aware that Morgana had not spent the night in the castle? Was she in for yet another lecture, like the one he had given her after New Year's? What if she was expelled for breaking the school rules yet again? But Morgana just shrugged and followed Snape into his office.

He bade her to take a seat and closed the door, locking out both the noises from the classroom and the disgusting smell.

'I trust your evening at Malfoy Manor was a success, Miss Belakane.'

Morgana cleared her throat and nodded. 'Yes, sir.' Although success was not the word she would have chosen. Sure, the plan had been executed, and she was certainly pregnant. But the evening had also left her utterly confused.

'Good,' Snape stated, although the expression on his face suggested otherwise. And once more, Morgana felt uneasy. She did not want Snape to think badly of her. And she could not figure out why she cared so much.

'In that case, Miss Belakane,' Snape went on in a cold tone, 'your Potions classes will be severely disrupted. You will from now on no longer take part in my lessons, since many of the fumes and ingredients are dangerous to the unborn foetus.'

'But, sir,' Morgana blurted out. 'My NEWT ...'

'This is not up for discussion, Miss Belakane,' Snape retorted. 'You taking part in my lessons is far too dangerous for the baby.'

'What does it matter?' Morgana enquired in a slightly annoyed tone. No one had said anything about her having to give up her favourite subject. 'That baby is not meant to be born anyway. What does it ma...'

'What matters to me, Miss Belakane,' Snape interrupted her, 'is your health! I find it appalling enough that you have been dragged into this mess in the first place. And I refuse to put your welfare at risk any further.'

Morgana had to concentrate hard to keep her jaw from dropping to the floor. Had Snape just said that he cared? About her and her well-being?

'You will study the theory,' Snape went on, either not noticing or ignoring the flabbergasted look on his student's face. 'Then you will watch me make each week's potion behind the safety of a charmed glass screen in order to familiarise yourself with the methodology. Once your first trimester has passed, you will spend the weekends with me making vials of all the potions you have missed. Regretfully, your observations will have to be after hours, and you will be missing lessons. But there is no way around this.'

'But, sir,' Morgana piped up. 'My classmates might wonder why I am missing classes.'

'The Headmaster had already taken care of that,' Snape sneered. 'He has suggested that you use the time to take an extra credit in Ancient Runes, an additional project for three months.'

Morgana raised an eyebrow. 'Runes, sir?'

'Yes, Miss Belakane. Runes. A favourite of yours, I believe.'

The ironic tone in Snape's voice made Morgana grin. 'Haven't you always said that Runes were a waste of time, sir?'

Snape snorted. 'And since when, Miss Belakane, have you listened to my advice?'

Not often enough, Morgana thought but held her peace. 'When am I to report to you office then, sir?' she asked instead.

'Tuesday evenings at seven,' Snape replied. 'You will revise the theory in advance, and I expect you to be thoroughly prepared. I will not have you wasting my time.'

Once more, Morgana bit back a comment. He knew perfectly well that she was always prepared for Potions. He had no right to accuse her of anything else.

'You will sit in the rest of this lesson, seeing as it is almost over,' Snape went on. 'But from the next lesson onwards, you are excused. The Headmaster will enlighten you as to your additional project. Now, if you do not have any further questions, I have some dunderheads to supervise.'

He was already at the door, and Morgana took this as a sign not to ask any questions. Not that she had any. She had not expected any of this.

'If you have been working properly which I seriously doubt you have finished by now,' Snape addressed the class. 'Put your liver in the container in front of you, seal and label it and leave it on your desk for collection. When you have finished, you are dismissed. And those of you who have not managed to stew their liver properly can start mentally preparing for their T.'

Morgana was one of the first to leave the classroom since she had no stewed liver to box, but she lingered at the door, waiting for Charis. She desperately wanted to talk to her friend.

'You do have a free period now, don't you?' she asked tentatively as her friend left the classroom. 'Would you mind coming along to the Astronomy Tower?'

And to her relief, Charis nodded.

* * *

It was a very bright but also very chilly day, and the girls transformed their handkerchiefs into woolly blankets and wrapped them tightly around themselves.

'We need a new hideout,' Morgana stated, her teeth clattering, and Charis couldn't do anything else but agree.

'Why did we choose this place again?'

'Because we wanted to get away from my housemates, and they fear the Astronomy Tower since it is a place of knowledge?'

Charis collapsed in a fit of laughter. That was the Morgana she knew and loved. The Morgana that always had a biting comment ready and could deliver it without even batting an eyelid. She had missed her. And she deemed it the right moment to tell her.

She looked at her friend with her big green eyes and took a deep breath. It was now or never. 'I've missed you, Morgana,' she started. 'You have been so distant over the

last couple of weeks. I thought ... I was afraid that all that blood stuff from you housemates had finally sunk in.'

'Don't you ever say that again!'

The tone in Morgana's voice reflected the cold look in her eyes, and Charis lowered her gaze. She had, of course, no idea why her friend reacted that way. She did not know in what kind of mess Morgana was in due to her blood status.

'You know that I don't care about what those brainless twits in my House say,' Morgana went on, her tone somewhat softer. 'But things have become complicated lately.'

Charis looked up. The cool look had gone from Morgana's eyes. And she looked tired now.

'Are you OK?' Charis asked.

'Yeah, I'm fine,' Morgana assured her friend with a fake smile. 'I just have to watch my steps nowadays. But this is not why I asked you to come up here today.'

Charis looked intently at her friend, waiting for her to go on. But instead, an uncomfortable silence settled over the Astronomy Tower. Charis did not want to pressure her friend out of fear that she might turn away. And Morgana was torn between her need to share her secrets and the promise she had given Dumbledore. She could not tell Charis. It was too dangerous.

'Did you like the croissant?' she asked instead, desperately hoping that Charis would not ask any more questions.

'It was delicious!' Charis exclaimed overenthusiastically. She knew Morgana well enough to know that there was no point in pushing her. 'Made by Silvy, wasn't it?'

'The little elf is a genius in the kitchen. You should try her desserts.'

Now Charis saw her chance. 'Did you stay at Malfoy Manor last night?' she asked quietly.

Morgana nodded slowly, her eyes on her hands and her teeth gnawing at her lip.

'Um ... how was it?' Charis went on. She was not judging her friend. She just wanted to know.

'It was nice,' Morgana replied with a quiet tone that was so uncharacteristic for her. 'Lucius was nice. He gave me another gift.'

She pulled up the pendant from under her school robes and held it up so the emeralds sparkled in the sunlight. 'Gorgeous, isn't it?'

Charis gasped. 'It's beautiful. One must hand it to the man, he has taste.' But she couldn't help but wonder why Lucius Malfoy, one of the most influential wizards in the country, a known philanderer, was showering her friend with such expensive gifts. He must want something.

'Did you ... I mean, did you two ...' she broke off and blushed, not sure if Morgana would want her to ask such an intimate question. Lucius Malfoy seemed to be a touchy subject.

But Morgana smiled. 'There is a reason why I did not make it back for breakfast in time,' she said and lifted the spell that revealed the love bites and bruises on her neck.

Charis' jaw dropped open. 'Did he hurt you?'

'No! No, Charis, no. Lucius would not hurt me. He's passionate. But he would never hurt me.'

'Did you enjoy it?' Charis wondered, thinking of the sexual encounter she herself had had the night before. It had not exactly been tender lovemaking either.

Morgana nodded. 'There is something about having a man overpower you. It's animalistic. It's erotic.'

'Yes,' Charis murmured. 'A man in control is very sexy.'

'So much for us being emancipated women,' Morgana stated dryly, and Charis giggled.

'We are independent women who know what we like. And by the looks of things, we like rough sex.'

'We?' Morgana's eyebrow shot up. 'What were you up to last night?'

She saw Charis bite her lip and pushed further. 'Spill it, sister. Who was your Valentine? Jack? One of the Weasley twins?'

Charis blushed. 'This is really difficult to say ...'

'Don't tell me you went for another Slytherin,' Morgana groaned, and had her suspicion confirmed as Charis blushed even more.

'You know,' Charis started, 'ever since New Year's, I've been noticing Snape has been giving me looks, meaningful looks. And I thought I was going mad or imagining things, but ...'

Morgana felt the muscles in her jaw tighten. This just could not be!

'And last night, I couldn't face going to the Valentine's Feast on my own, so I went to the library.'

'So Ravenclaw of you,' Morgana interrupted, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

'That's what he said, too,' Charis murmured.

'Who? Snape?' Morgana was now struggling to make her voice sound steady. 'Was Snape at the library last night?'

Charis nodded and swallowed. 'He ... we ... He bent me over the desk and fucked me in the library.'

She said all this very fast and then squeezed her eyes tightly shut. And she never saw the flash of anger in Morgana's eyes.

'He did what?' Morgana exclaimed, her voice now trembling. 'He fucked YOU in the library? A student? And you let him? After what he did to you in his office?'

'That was different,' Charis blurted. 'He was in denial about our attraction back then. But last night ... Morgana, it was exquisite. I thought Zabini was big, but oh boy! I have never cum so hard!'

Charis seemed to drift off into her memories, and Morgana had to fight back the urge to start throwing hexes.

How fucking convenient, she thought. First Snape brings me to Malfoy Manor, gets his kick from watching Lucius feel me up, and then he goes and shags my best friend in the library!

But the strange thing was that she was not angry at Snape. She was angry at Charis.

'Congratulations,' she said, trying to sound indifferent. 'It looks like you have won our little challenge, Charis. You seduced the Potions master.'

'This is not about winning, Morgana.'

'Come on, Charis,' Morgana interrupted her. 'We have been competing for Snape's attention since September. It looks like I overdid it. He preferred the shy type. He chose you. I take my hat off.'

'No, really ...' Charis started but broke off as Morgana got up and Transfigured her blanket back into a handkerchief. Slytherins were bad losers, Charis knew that. And it did not seem to be a good moment to tell Morgana what she really thought: that Severus had chosen her because he loved her.

XXII: A Show Of Loyalty

Chapter 22 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXII: A Show Of Loyalty

Charis sat in a window seat in the Ravenclaw common room, waiting for Jack to arrive so they could run through an old Charms paper for their mock NEWT exam together. It was a grey and cloudy day, and the rain was trickling down the window pane like tears and drumming like impatient fingers.

Charis looked out of the window and shivered, noticing the thin curl of smoke coming from Hagrid's hut in the distance. It looked cold and miserable out there. Thankfully, there was a roaring fire in the hearth and enough soft throws to keep her warm and cosy as she studied. But the weather seemed to match her mood somehow. She was feeling lonely nowadays. And once more, she missed her best friend.

For a few blessed hours on the day after Valentine's, it had felt like old times with Morgana. Morgana had reached out for her by sending an olive branch in the form of a chocolate croissant. They had giggled together in Potions, and it had felt as if the distance that had grown between them had gone away. But as soon as Charis had confessed to her friend about the library incident with Severus, Morgana had become cold, almost hostile, once more. Charis knew hurt pride had something to do with it as well as a smattering of envy. But as far as she was concerned, Morgana had no right to be jealous, not when she was supposedly having a torrid affair with Lucius Malfoy, which she was clearly enjoying. All Charis wanted was her friend to be happy for her, especially as it surely wouldn't be long before Severus declared his love for her. But something seemed amiss, and Morgana seemed to be slipping away again, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

'How are my two favourite kittens?'

Charis' thoughts were interrupted by Jack's cheeky smile as he took a seat beside her at the window.

'Hey, Jack. Just daydreaming, don't mind me,' Charis answered with a smile of her own.

'It looks like you're not the only one dreaming, eh?' he asked, beaming down at the mass of white fur asleep inside Charis' robes. Lily was indeed happily curled up inside the top pocket, purring away gently. And Charis could not help but grin as she glanced down at the tiny ball of white fluff. The kitten seemed to enjoy studying as much as she did.

After chatting briefly about Gryffindor's shocking narrow loss to Hufflepuff on Saturday, Jack and Charis began studying in earnest. They had barely begun, however, when their revision session was interrupted by their housemate, Luna Lovegood, who was merrily distributing the latest copy of the Quibbler around the common room to all and sundry, claiming to reveal the truth about Cedric Diggory's death at last.

Not wanting to miss out on the gossip, Charis hastily paid Luna a few Knuts and settled down with Jack for a read. As much as she thought Luna was a little eccentric, Charis was well aware of the *Prophet* withholding information and not telling the whole story in regards to the events at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament last year. The fact Harry Potter desperately wanted his side of the tale to be told, even in a paper which usually published such odd theories, immediately grabbed her attention.

They both devoured the article in minutes, and once they had finished, Jack looked up sombrely.

'It's really true then,' Charis gasped, noticing her friend's expression. 'You-Know-Who was the one who killed Cedric. He's back.'

Jack sighed. 'Yes. Yes, he is.'

Charis gave him an odd look. 'You don't sound at all surprised? Aren't you shocked?'

Jack looked straight at her. 'I won't lie to you, Charis. Since the start of term, I've known for sure.'

Charis couldn't help but look surprised at this. 'But how could you have known?'

Jack looked around quickly, to check if they were being overheard. The common room was filled with excited chatter of people discussing The Quibbler, but Jack lowered his voice anyway.

'Harry told me in person. He has started a resistance movement, right here in the castle, and I'm a member. We're all in danger, Charis. Blood status is irrelevant now.'

Charis searched Jack's eyes. Jack was a half-blood wizard from his father's side and was proud of his heritage, both Muggle and magical alike. To Charis, he always seemed like he had the best of both worlds. He had been brought up with knowledge of the wizarding world's secrets, yet he embraced Muggle culture wholeheartedly as well. Jack was very interested in blood status, but not for bigoted, Slytherin reasons. He had a keen interest in genealogy, and for his NEWT in History of Magic he was researching his family tree and writing a thesis on magical genes and magical transference within the Muggle community. He had even gone so far to ask Charis if she would like him to help her research her own family tree, to see if they could locate one of her magical ancestors.

'Part of the reason Harry did this interview is because he wants more recruits,' Jack continued quietly.

'Recruits?' Charis asked, her eyebrows raised.

'Recruits for an army. Dumbledore's Army. To fight against You-Know-Who.'

Charis gasped. The whole thing sounded so serious, like they were at war. An army? Could they really have the strength to fight against Voldemort and his followers?

'There was a reason those Death Eaters had escaped from Azkaban. They were joining their leader! And we have to stand up and fight!' Jack went on. 'I know what you're thinking, Charis. "What good is a group of kids?" But you were with me in Hogsmeade, and you and I came face-to-face with those Death Eaters. And you managed to Stun one of them! You see, kids can fight!'

Charis' heart was thumping loudly as Jack spoke. She knew what he was saying was true, and yet she desperately wished it wasn't.

'Harry was impressed with your performance that day. You're brave and you know your defensive spells. That's what the DA does: training in defensive and offensive spells for use in case of attack. Harry wants you to join the resistance. And so do I.'

'Of course I will!' Charis did not hesitate. Now they knew Voldemort was back and that Harry was telling the truth, she was absolutely going to support him one hundred per cent.

Jack smiled with relief. 'I'm so pleased. We wanted to ask you ages ago, but when you started dating Zabini we had to be careful ...'

Charis flushed at the mention of her indiscretion with the handsome yet poisonous Slytherin. This was nothing she was proud of.

'But I always knew you were on the right side, Charis,' Jack continued softly. He had obviously noticed her discomfort. 'And Harry can't wait to meet you. Our next meeting is this afternoon at three. Come to the Room of Requirement then, and I'll introduce you to the whole gang.'

He smiled again at Charis, who smiled back and listened with fascination as Jack explained more about the DA, how Harry had managed to recruit more and more members since the first meeting back in October, and also the other organisation forming the resistance, the Order of the Phoenix. And the more he said, the more excited she became.

'There is just one thing, though,' Jack said after his explanations and looked down awkwardly.

'What is it?'

'Well, the group thinks ... Harry thinks ... that you should not tell Morgana about the DA.'

'What?!' Charis was outraged. Sure, she and Morgana had not been particularly close lately, but there was no need to keep her in the dark about the DA when she could be a useful member, too.

'Well, sorry, Charis, but she IS Slytherin,' Jack offered by way of explanation.

'What the what has THAT got to do with anything?' Charis spluttered in disbelief. She and Morgana had been friends since their first year. Hell, Jack and Morgana got on like a house on fire! And now he didn't want her to join because she was Slytherin?

'Please, don't get upset,' Jack pleaded. 'It's just there isn't a single Slytherin in the DA.'

Charis' mouth dropped open. 'Morgana isn't like other Slytherins. You know that!'

'Charis, please! Of course I know that! But Harry thinks it's a risk letting her join.'

'A risk? Morgana helped us out in Hogsmeade, unless you've conveniently forgotten! Doesn't that show you her loyalty?' Charis protested.

'Yes, HER loyalty.' Jack was clearly uncomfortable. 'But we have no idea what is going on in Slytherin common room. They might make her talk.'

Charis had no answer for this. She knew first hand just how cruel Slytherins could be, and she didn't doubt for a second that if they got a whiff of the DA they would make Morgana's life even more of a misery, let alone try and stamp it out. But still, Charis trusted her friend and knew she would not betray any of their secrets.

'Sweetie, you know I like Morgana ...' Jack persisted.

'But you don't trust her?' Charis shot back.

'We don't trust her House. That's all.'

Charis thought for a few moments before sighing. 'This feels really wrong.'

'I know it seems unfair. Just come along this afternoon for a session. See if you like it. Let's talk to Harry and the others about it. Please? Charis?'

Charis looked into her friend's pleading blue eyes and could not help but relent.

'Alright. I'll come along. But I think you are making a mistake not trusting Morgana, and I'll tell Harry that, too.'

'Oi, Belakane! I want to talk to you.'

Morgana groaned inwardly. Listening to Draco Malfoy's drivel was so low on her priority list at the moment that she would have preferred making out with Filch. Actually, she did not want to talk to anyone. Her head was aching, and she was feeling nauseous and tired. All she wanted was to lie down for a while.

'Unfortunately for you, Malfoy, I do not want to talk to you right now,' she replied without even looking in Draco's direction. 'Send an owl.'

But if she had hoped that Draco would just let her go, Morgana was sadly mistaken.

'Do not make me cast a Body-Bind at you, Belakane,' Draco snarled. 'I want to talk to you, and you will listen.'

Morgana exhaled and turned around to face the boy. To her surprise, he was alone. But then again, it was lunchtime. Crabbe and Goyle were certainly stuffing their faces in the Great Hall.

'Do make it quick, Malfoy,' she said, her hand tightening around the wand in her pocket. She did not trust Draco as far as she could throw him, with or without magic.

'I want to make you an offer,' Draco explained, pulling himself up to his full height in front of Morgana.

Morgana just raised an eyebrow at him. Whatever did the little twit have to offer her when she could get all she had ever wished for from his father?

'I am offering you a way to redeem yourself, Belakane,' Draco started. 'Join the Inquisitorial Squad, and we will forget about your so-called friendship with a Mudblood.'

'Redeem myself? Dear Draco, I do not need to redeem myself in any way.'

'That is where you are wrong, Belakane,' Draco spat. 'You want to be careful. Times are changing. So far, you have been able to hide behind your blood status. But soon, this will not be enough, and blood traitor is right next to Mudblood in my book.'

'You need to brush up on your spelling skills, Malfoy. There are nine letters between B and M.'

'Don't get cheeky with me, Belakane,' Draco hissed, raising his wand. But Morgana just stared at it as if it were a common wooden stick.

'Are you threatening me, little boy?' she asked. She was not scared of Draco. His friends were in the Great Hall, and the wand in her pocket was pointing right at the boy's crotch. All it took was a flick of the wrist. 'Have your parents not taught you that certain people cannot be touched?' she continued calmly. 'Not even by a Malfoy?'

'That is where you are wrong, Belakane.' Draco's cheeks were slightly flushed now, and his eyes were glittering angrily. 'If you keep up with that attitude, me and my friends will give you a taste of how blood traitors will be treated in the future. The time has come for you to choose what side you are on, Belakane. Make sure you choose the right side, or I won't be held responsible for my actions, Slytherin or not.' He stepped back and lowered his wand. 'I give you until nightfall to make a decision, Belakane. Choose wisely.'

And before Morgana could tell him that she had chosen sides a long time ago, Draco Malfoy had already left the common room.

* * *

At three o'clock, Charis entered the Room of Requirement with Jack and was surprised to see not only how the room had changed into a vast training area, but also how many students of all ages formed part of the group.

Harry greeted her warmly and suggested that she pair up with Hermione for this lesson, just to go through what she already knew and see if there were any gaps in her knowledge or if any of her defensive charms required more work. Charis took an instant liking to Hermione. She was friendly and bright and put her at her ease immediately. They practiced Disarming and Stunning, and Charis was having such fun that the two hours seemed to fly by in no time at all. It was only the loud roar of Ron's grumbling stomach which, to the amusement of the whole group, made Harry draw things to a close.

'Right, I think that's about all for today. If Ron doesn't get some food soon he'll start munching on some of you first years! Good work, everyone. We'll probably be meeting next week, same time, but check your coins, alright?'

Charis squeezed the Galleon in her pocket. *What a brilliant idea*, she thought and wondered why Hermione had not been sorted into Ravenclaw.

Everyone started packing up and making their way out the door as Harry, Ron and Jack made their way over to Charis and Hermione.

'Charis, your Disarming Spell rocks!' Harry said with a grin.

'Thanks, Harry,' Charis replied, green eyes looking back into green. It was unusual to meet other people with the same colour eyes as her, and Harry must have thought so, too, as he gave her a curious expression for a moment.

'Do you like the idea of the DA then?' Harry finally asked. 'Are you coming back next week?'

Yes, of course, she would love to, but there was something gnawing at Charis. 'Uh, Harry? Can I have a word?' she asked cautiously.

'Sure, Charis.'

He beckoned her to one side as Jack, Ron and Hermione busied themselves with packing up books and tidying the room.

Charis took a deep breath, not knowing where to start. From what she saw, Harry looked like a really nice boy. Maybe she could change his mind about her friend.

'Um ... I heard you didn't think it would be a good idea for Morgana to join the DA,' she blurted.

Harry looked uncomfortable. 'Well, um, not just me ...'

'It's because she's Slytherin, isn't it?' Charis asked quietly.

'Well, frankly, yes.' Jack had already told Harry that Charis was firm friends with a Slytherin, but Harry had not quite been prepared to have this conversation so soon.

'That's really hypocritical though!' Charis stated, looking up at Harry pleadingly. 'By excluding her on that basis, you're being like the worst Slytherin.'

'It's not so much about HER as a person,' Harry started, not wanting to alienate Charis. She was indeed skilful at charms and would be a useful addition to the DA. But he had to think about what was best for the group.

'Morgana is the coolest person; her House shouldn't matter,' Charis continued. 'I mean, you let Hufflepuffs in!'

'Charis, please, this is not about Morgana per se,' Harry explained. 'It's about the people around her.'

'She doesn't even hang around with any Slytherins!' Charis protested a little louder than she had meant to. And she noticed that Ron, Jack and Hermione were now looking over and listening to this conversation with great interest.

'It's enough that they share a dorm,' Harry retorted.

'Morgana fought by my side when that Death Eater attack happened in Hogsmeade,' Charis exclaimed. 'Surely she has just as much a right to be here?'

Jack, Ron and Hermione had made their way over now, concerned at the direction the conversation was taking.

'Charis, listen, this is not about Morgana,' Hermione said gently, trying to calm down the situation.

'We cannot risk this group,' Harry answered firmly. 'Who knows what the other Slytherins would do to her to make her talk? And if they found out about the DA, Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad would have a field day, and we'd all be in solitary detentions for the rest of the year. Bang! No more DA.'

'She should be fighting with us, though,' Charis murmured. Harry's point was valid to say the least, but it still felt rotten.

'Charis, I just cannot take that risk. I'm sorry. No Slytherins.' Harry glanced at her apologetically as Charis shifted her gaze to Jack.

'Surely you can see how hypocritical this is?'

Now it was Jack's turn to look awkward. 'You have to admit that Morgana has ... um, changed lately.'

'Changed how?' Charis asked, knowing full well her friend had indeed changed, and with it, their friendship. And she, too, had been wondering if Morgana was finally cracking under the pressure the other Slytherins were putting on her.

'She's become, well, edgy,' Jack went on.

'Morgana has things on her mind,' Charis explained, trying to make a stand for her best friend. 'But that has not stopped her being anti-Voldemort!'

'Charis, we do not doubt Morgana's loyalties,' Harry started, but he was cut off by Charis.

'I'm sorry, guys. I think what you are doing is great, and I had a lot of fun today, but if you won't let Morgana in just because of her House, then I don't think I can be part of this group.'

Hermione looked hurt, and Ron's mouth gaped open. Jack shook his head.

'Charis, please,' Harry tried again.

'It's too hypocritical. I'm sorry, I just can't exclude her from this. She's my best friend. You have my word I won't reveal anything about the DA. And if it comes to fight, I will fight alongside you gladly. But I hope you understand why I can't do this.'

Charis looked at them sadly as the rest of the group cast each other disappointed looks.

'We understand that you can vouch for Morgana,' Hermione conceded, taking a different approach. 'But what about the people around her?'

'She spends an awful lot of time in Snape's office lately,' Jack pointed out.

'He's her Head of House, Jack! She takes Potions NEWT!'

'How often are you in Flitwick's office?' Jack fired back.

'We have a weekly catch up, fifteen minutes on a Monday. You know that!'

'She seems to be seeing Snape all the time.'

'Not ALL the time,' Charis bristled with indignation and... what was that other feeling? Jealousy? Was Morgana really spending more and more time with Severus?

'Anyway, she's having issues with Potions at the moment,' she went on, trying to quash the pang of jealousy in her stomach. 'It's her favourite subject, and she really wants to get an O. You know how hard Snape is to please.'

Jack looked at Charis incredulously. 'Morgana? Issues with Potions? Do you believe that yourself? Something's fishy, Charis. You have to admit that.'

'Morgana has stuff on her mind! You can't blame her for that. Don't any of YOU have stuff on your mind?' Charis looked around the room, her eyes pleading with them once more.

'Of course we do,' Harry said quietly. 'There is a war coming. And it does not look like anyone in Slytherin House is on our side. And as for Snape ...'

'I know you might not trust Snape, but I do,' Charis said defiantly as everyone looked at her in shock.

'You trust Snape?' Ron piped up as she nodded firmly. 'Are you insane?'

'You might not believe it, but he would fight tooth and nail for this school and its pupils. Dumbledore trusts him, and so do I.' Charis' jaw was set as Ron looked at her like she had an Erumpent horn growing out of her head.

'Dumbledore gives people very little explanation for why he trusts Snape,' Harry started.

'Is Dumbledore ever wrong?' Charis shot back.

'Snape is a highly trained Occlumens,' Harry replied, avoiding the question.

'And Dumbledore is a highly trained Legilimens,' Charis countered.

'My godfather says Snape cannot be trusted,' Harry answered bullishly. He was beginning to get frustrated. He hated Snape, and he had no desire to have someone in the DA who seemed to like the greasy git.

'Harry, leave Sirius out of this,' Hermione stepped in, her voice calm. 'People didn't trust him either, but they were wrong weren't they?'

'Yeah, but ...'

'And Snape is part of the Order,' Hermione pressed on. 'And if he weren't good, he couldn't cast a Patronus, because a Patronus is light magic. Therefore, I trust Snape. And you should, too.'

'Have you actually seen his Patronus?' Harry asked incredulously around the room. Why did Hermione insist on taking the bat's side all the time?

'No,' Ron admitted reluctantly. 'But he must be able to cast it. All Order members do, don't they?'

'Does HE?' Harry persisted.

'I dunno. That's what dad said, anyway,' Ron continued. 'Dad said that the members of the Order communicate with their Patronuses. But there might be other ways as well.'

'Fact is, we do not know if Snape can produce a Patronus,' Harry said, folding his arms over his chest.

'I reckon he can,' Charis said stubbornly.

'I still don't trust him,' Harry answered through narrowed eyes. 'I know quite a bit about him, you know,' he murmured in a low voice.

'Do you?' Charis replied, genuinely intrigued.

'My godfather told me, as a matter of fact,' Harry continued, ignoring Hermione widening her eyes and shaking her head disapprovingly.

'And what exactly did he say?'

Harry paused, and took a deep breath. 'That Snape is a Death Eater.'

Charis felt a shudder go all the way down her spine. Severus? A lackey of the Dark Lord? That was ridiculous!

'Snape would never ...'

'And why not?' Harry cut her off. 'My godfather went to school with Snape, and he says that Snape knew more about the Dark Arts when they first started than anyone.'

Charis gazed back at him, looking as hurt as if he had called her a Mudblood.

'See why we cannot trust Slytherins?' Harry asked, hoping he had at last proved his point. But the next thing he knew, Charis had thrust her enchanted coin into his hand and was stomping out of the Room of Requirement. And not even Hermione could say anything to change the Ravenclaw's mind.

How dare Potter?!

Charis was fuming with rage as she ran down the stairs. How dare he say those horrid things about Severus? Severus Snape a Death Eater! Pha! This was more than ridiculous! Surely, Potter's godfather was holding some kind of grudge against Severus, and that was why he was trying to malign him. Surely, Severus had snatched some good-looking girl away from under his nose or something.

Charis was so busy with mentally trash talking Sirius Black that she barely noticed when she bumped into Morgana.

'Hey, steady, Ravenclaw. You know that running in the corridors is forbidden according to Educational Decree Number 7843 or something.'

Charis grinned up at her friend. It had been a while that Morgana had made a joke. She had missed it.

'So is sitting on the stairs, but I don't give a flying fart in space,' she said and sat down, patting the space next to her. And to her utter joy, Morgana actually took a seat.

'How are you doing?' Charis wondered. 'We haven't spoken much this week.'

'I know,' Morgana sighed. 'It's a hectic time. I do not even want to imagine how it will be when the NEWTs actually start.'

'You look pale,' Charis pointed out. 'Are you studying too much?'

'I live in the dungeon, Charis,' Morgana joked. She did not want to tell her friend about her headache, nor the reason for it. 'We're all pale down there.'

'Yes, you are,' Charis confirmed, the thought of pale skin making her think of another Slytherin who resided in the dungeons one with raven black hair and penetrating, onyx eyes.

'Morgana, what do you know about Snape?' Charis bit her lips as soon as she had asked the question out loud. Was asking Morgana about Snape really such a wise move?

'What do you mean?' Morgana inquired, raising an eyebrow.

'What do you know about Snape, the private man Snape?' Charis went on, trying to sound casual. 'Does he have family, where does he come from, what did he do before he became a teacher? Stuff like that.'

Morgana narrowed her eyes. 'Why would you want to know?'

Once more, Charis bit her lip. 'It's just ... it's something I heard. About Snape being a Death ...'

'FOR FUCK'S SAKE, BELAKANE!'

Both girls jumped up as Draco Malfoy came flying up the stairs towards them.

'Did you not listen to anything I told you today, Belakane?' Draco roared. 'How dare you sit here with that Mudblood?'

It was now that Morgana realised that they had been sitting on the stairs that led to the dungeon. Instinctively, she pushed Charis behind her back.

'You should not be here, Charis,' she hissed so Draco would not hear. 'The dungeons are not a safe place for your kind at the moment.'

Your kind? Charis swallowed dryly. Morgana had not just used those words, had she?

But there was no time to ask. Morgana was standing with her back towards her, and the look in Draco Malfoy's eyes made it very clear to Charis that the dungeons were indeed off limits for her kind from now on.

XXIII: Fractured Friendships

Chapter 23 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

It was a disgrace. A seventh-year! Poppy had a good mind to tell the girl off for having been careless and thinking with her crotch, but she held her tongue. Morgana wasn't the first girl to get pregnant while still at school, and she would definitely not be the last one either. And like all the others, she seemed confused and scared. The last thing she needed now was a lecture.

'I will give you a potion for your morning sickness, dear,' Poppy explained instead. 'It is perfectly safe for the baby and will stop the nausea and enable you to eat. And this draught here should counteract any dizziness or headache.'

Morgana tried not to sneer. *Safe for the baby*. As if it mattered. In three months' time that baby would be gone. But she mustn't tell Poppy, of course. She had even wholeheartedly said yes when the mediwitch had asked her if she were planning on keeping the baby.

Oh, if Poppy knew. She would hex Dumbledore into the next century for coming up with such a cruel plan. And the more Morgana thought about it, the more she disliked the plan herself. This was her child, after all. Hers and Lucius'.

'It is important that you drink lots of fluids so you don't get dehydrated,' Poppy went on, and her words ripped Morgana out of her thoughts.

Get a grip on yourself, Morgana she thought.

She must not think about this baby as *her child*. It would never be born. She was to carry it to give Dumbledore and his people time to strengthen their defences against the Dark Lord. Then she would drink a potion to rid herself of it. She must not get attached to this baby. As for Lucius, she knew that she must not get attached to him either.

But he said he loved me ...

'I would like to see you every second week, dear, to check your progress,' Poppy declared. 'But in the meantime, if there is anything you want to know or if you just want to talk, you come and find me, alright? And if there are any irregular symptoms, if you start to feel unwell or if you are hurting, you come to see me straight away. Day or night.'

Morgana nodded. It felt strange having someone fussing over her like this, and she almost flinched away as Poppy put her hand on her shoulder.

'I am obliged to inform your Head of House of your condition, Morgana,' the mediwitch declared with a firm yet kind tone, and once more Morgana nodded silently. Snape knew already, of course. But yet again, she mustn't tell Poppy about that.

Five minutes after Poppy had contacted him from the fireplace in her office, Snape came striding into the ward like a black tempest.

'There better be a good reason for asking me to come here before eight o'clock, Poppy,' he snarled, and Poppy instinctively placed herself between him and the curtain behind which Morgana was waiting.

'Severus,' she started. 'I have to inform you that a student of your House is with child.'

'Miss Belakane, I assume.'

Poppy's eyebrow shot up, and she looked at Snape as if someone had just hit her over the head with a Bludger. She was not often lost for words, but now she had to concentrate so her jaw would not drop all the way to the floor. The girl had told Snape already? Now that must have taken some guts!

'I am happy to inform you that the girl is doing fine,' Poppy said once she had found her voice again. 'She is suffering from morning sickness, but that is quite normal. Nothing some potion cannot take care of. But there are some things that need to be discussed. Come, Severus.'

Poppy pulled open the curtain, and Snape hesitated for the fraction of a second. He had been mentally preparing for this moment for three weeks now. He had never doubted that his potion would work and hence been convinced that the girl would fall pregnant on Valentine's. But being here in the hospital wing, and Poppy telling him that Morgana was indeed with child, made the whole thing official. And Snape hated himself for having had a hand in the girl's insemination. Just as much as he hated the fact that he would be the one to brew the potion that would terminate the pregnancy as well.

'Good morning, sir,' Morgana mumbled, and Snape nodded curtly in her direction. Was he imagining things or was the girl unusually pale?

'Have you taken your potion, dear?' Poppy inquired. 'Is it staying down?'

Morgana nodded.

'Now, you may get some other side effects, too, love,' Poppy went on. 'You will probably feel very tired. And you may start becoming hyper-tidy and wanting to clean things. That's the nesting instinct.'

'Did you make me come here to listen to this, Poppy?' Snape interrupted her. 'Because I can assure you that I have better things to do.'

'I do indeed think it prudent for you to listen to this, Severus,' Poppy declared, a slight hint of anger in her voice. 'Since you are Morgana's Head of House, I assume that you have her best interest at heart. Her schedule needs to be adjusted. No Potions, for example.'

'This had already been taken care of, Poppy,' Snape snapped. 'Now if you will excuse me, the Headmaster has to be informed of the girl's condition. Miss Belakane, you are coming with me.'

And before either Poppy or Morgana could protest, Snape was already billowing out of the ward.

* * *

She had thrown up the little breakfast she had been able to eat, and jogging along after Snape on an empty stomach demanded more strength than Morgana had at the moment. And half way up the spiral staircase that led to Dumbledore's office, she stopped dead in her tracks and grabbed on to the wall, breathing heavily. She could literally feel the blood leave her face and had to close her eyes to keep the world around her from spinning.

'Miss Belakane, the Headmaster is waiting. And I have classes to teach.'

Snape sounded angry, and the sound of his voice made Morgana flinch just as much his hand on her upper arm as he clutched it.

'I am not doing this on purpose,' she brought out between gritted teeth. How dare he make her feel as if all of this were her fault? It was not as if she had got herself knocked up due to being careless. She was not to blame here!

Snape inhaled sharply. 'I never said you were,' he growled and continued his way up the stairs, guiding the girl firmly but not roughly ahead of him, glad that she did not turn around to look at him.

He should have protected her. He should have told Dumbledore that he would not let a student of his become a pawn in this giant game of Wizard chess. He should have told the Dark Lord that he could not get the girl out of the castle. He should have refused to give the girl the potion and told Lucius that she was infertile or something. Should have. But had not. And now it was too late.

Dumbledore was sitting at his desk as they entered and was now looking up at them, his blue eyes twinkling behind his spectacles. 'Ah, Severus, Morgana!' he exclaimed.

'Poppy informed me that you might be on your way.'

He got up and made his way towards Morgana. 'Do not take this the wrong way, dear child, but you look terrible. And all out of breath.'

He guided her towards a fluffy armchair and made her sit down before fixing Snape with an accusing stare. 'Really, Severus, there was no need to run all the way up here.'

'I was not running, Headmaster,' Snape snapped.

'Of course you weren't, Severus.'

Dumbledore turned back to Morgana and offered her a glass of water. 'How are you feeling, child?'

'Headmaster, this *child* is three weeks pregnant, not an invalid,' Snape interrupted Dumbledore's cooing. The old man had no right to be playing the good uncle now. He was one of the perpetrators here!

'Have you ever been pregnant, Severus?' Dumbledore asked casually, his eyes still on Morgana.

'You do not seriously expect me to answer that question, do you, Headmaster?'

'Well, have you, Severus?'

Dumbledore was now looking straight at him, and Snape seriously considered throwing Avada Kedavra at the man just to close those ever-so-twinkling eyes for good.

'Women all over the world have managed to cope doing basic things whilst pregnant since the beginning of time,' he pointed out instead, clenching his fists behind his back. 'I will not have Miss Belakane's pregnancy as an excuse for sympathy.'

'This has nothing to do with sympathy, Severus,' Dumbledore replied in a calm tone. 'Now I would like you to stop scowling and have a seat instead.' Then he turned back to Morgana. 'Feeling better, Morgana?'

Morgana nodded quickly but kept her eyes cast down. She was certain that looking up and catching Snape's eyes would reduce her to a puddle of tears. She did not expect sympathy from him, as he had put it so nicely. But he could at least stop snapping at her. This was not her fault!

Dumbledore took a seat between his still scowling Potions master and the pale girl. 'Seeing as the first part of the plan is underway, we now have to discuss where we are going from here,' he started. 'Naturally, Mr Malfoy will have to be informed.'

Morgana raised her head to look at Dumbledore and could not avoid seeing Snape's face. He looked like thunder.

'Headmaster,' she began after having swallowed dryly a couple of times. 'How ... how am I supposed to act when I tell Lucius? Am I supposed to be happy?'

'You will be surprised, of course,' Dumbledore explained. 'And you will go to him thinking that he will want you to terminate. After all, you are seventeen, and he is a married man. You will tell him that you do not want to bring shame on his family name.'

Lucius is doing a pretty good job bringing shame on his family name himself, isn't he? Snape thought bitterly, but knew better than to say it out loud.

'Lucius will tell you that he will take care of everything, Miss Belakane,' he pointed out instead. 'He will want you to keep the child, and he will shower you with gifts and pretend that you are the most important witch in the universe. And whatever you do, Miss Belakane, you must not believe him.'

Ignoring Snape's last comment, Morgana turned back to Dumbledore, who was nodding gravely. 'You will be overjoyed that you will be having a child together. Can you do this, Morgana?'

'I am convinced that Miss Belakane is more than capable of continuing this ruse,' Snape butted in. 'The hard part, surely, was the insemination. Anything else will be a piece of cake. After all, Miss Belakane is a student of *my* House.'

Morgana glanced furtively at her Head of House, unsure of whether this was a compliment or a thinly-veiled insult. Was there any good soul in Slytherin House, she suddenly wondered. Or did they all live up to their reputation?

There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin.

She knew what people in general thought of Slytherins, that they all supported the Dark Lord, that they were all dark and evil themselves. Was she going there as well? After all, she had agreed to carry a child that would never be born.

Dumbledore meanwhile nodded once more and turned back to Morgana. 'When will you be meeting Mr Malfoy again?' he inquired.

'Soon, I suppose,' Morgana answered quietly. 'If Lucius is as calculating as Professor Snape says, then he will know that, by now, I have noticed that I am pregnant.'

'Do inform us when he contacts you, Morgana,' Dumbledore instructed. 'Both Professor Snape and I will want to know when you are leaving the castle. We will also want to be informed about the outcome of your meeting. Now, I think you have Transfiguration now, don't you? Professor McGonagall won't like it if you are late. If you do not have any further questions, you are dismissed.'

Morgana nodded and murmured her goodbyes. She had no desire to ask any questions, and Poppy's potion was slowly making its way up from her stomach again. With her eyes cast down, she made her way out of Dumbledore's office, never once looking at either of the men sitting there.

As soon as the door had fallen shut behind Morgana, Dumbledore turned to his Potions master.

'Severus, we need that girl! Do not alienate her!'

Snape shot off from his chair as if he had been stung by a Blast-Ended Skrewt. 'I am not alienating anyone, Headmaster,' he snapped. 'But I refuse to treat pregnancy as if it were some kind of terminal illness. And I will not fuss over the girl!'

'No one is asking you to fuss, Severus,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'Poppy will do that more than happily. But do not snap at the girl. We need her to trust you. And she needs to feel that she can come to you with anything.'

'If Miss Belakane does not trust me by now, then I am loath to suggest how I can possibly change her estimation of me,' Snape pointed out.

But then again, could he blame the girl if she did not trust him? He had seen her at her worst, exposed both physically and mentally. He was part of an evil plan that might just come to break her, no matter how much anyone believed in her Slytherin abilities. And he seemed unable to protect her.

'What I am trying to say, Severus,' Dumbledore went on, 'is that the girl is vulnerable and emotionally unstable right now. She will suck up affection like a sponge, no matter where it comes from. And we do not want her to run to Lucius for it, do we?'

'I am her Head of House, Headmaster, her guardian,' Snape reminded the older wizard, his voice colder than an arctic storm. 'That job description does not include girl talk

and cuddles.'

'I seriously doubt Morgana would come to you for cuddles,' Dumbledore chuckled. 'But she might turn to you for ... let's call it a pep talk.'

Snape opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore shushed him. 'She will feel down. She will feel worthless and confused. And all I am asking of you is to be there and listen when she comes to talk to you. Do not chide her. Do not turn her down.'

'I will treat Miss Belakane as I have always treated her, Headmaster,' Snape declared. 'I will not let her pregnancy be an excuse for sloppy behaviour and insubordination.'

'As far as I am informed, Morgana has never been sloppy.'

'But she has been insubordinate.'

'Now that, dear Severus, seems to be a Slytherin trait.' Once more, the Headmaster's eyes were twinkling, and once more Snape felt the urge to stab them out.

'I have classes to teach, Headmaster,' he said coolly. 'If there is nothing else ...'

He was already halfway out the door when Dumbledore's voice made him turn around once more.

'Severus, there is actually just one more thing. Be nice.'

'Nice?' Snape felt his blood pressure go through the roof. 'That word does not exist in my vocabulary. You know that, Headmaster.'

The Potions master slammed the door shut behind him, and he never saw Dumbledore smile knowingly and stroke his beard.

'We both know that it does, dear boy.'

* * *

The next morning, Charis was clutching a big cup of coffee in the Great Hall. She had to wake up! Snape had given them fifteen pages to read as homework, and she would not put it past him to give them a pop quiz at eight in the morning. Being sleepy would not do. Yet Charis was not a natural early bird, at least not when woken up by a shrill alarm.

She let her eyes wander across the Great Hall as she stifled a yawn and noticed that she was not the only one looking tired. Snape, for one, looked as if he would just love to kill someone. And he did not brighten up one bit when caught sight of a gang of Slytherins striding into the hall, Morgana amongst them.

Charis swallowed and resisted the urge to wave at her friend. Ever since that incident with Draco Malfoy on the stairs, Morgana had seemed edgy when other Slytherins were around. And Charis could not help but wonder what was going on.

'If you don't drink your coffee soon, it will evaporate.'

Charis blinked and turned her head towards her House mate. Jack was smiling at her and holding out a piece of buttered toast. He had been such a sweetheart ever since the DA meeting. He had told Charis that he admired her for her loyalties and had even offered to leave the DA himself. But Charis had told him not to, not on her account anyway.

'Have you spoken to Morgana lately?' Jack asked now, casting a furtive glance towards the Slytherin table. 'Is she alright? I've heard that there is trouble brewing in Slytherin House.'

Charis shrugged. She seriously did not know what was going on in Slytherin House. And she did not know how Morgana was doing. She dared not approach her, not after Morgana had told her not to come to the dungeons anymore. And although she tried to convince herself that Morgana had her best interests in mind, Charis could not help but wonder if her friend had changed her mind about Muggle-borns after all.

She was absentmindedly nibbling at her toast when she saw a sudden movement in the corner of her eye, and she turned her head towards the Slytherin table just in time to see Morgana run out of the Great Hall in a flutter of black robes. The students who had been sitting close to her looked confused, and no one seemed to know why Morgana was fleeing the breakfast table. But to Charis, it did not matter. Slytherin or not, there was something wrong with her best friend, and even if it meant having her head bitten off, Charis would go after Morgana and see if she was alright. She was up and running out of the Great Hall in a matter of seconds and did not even notice that she had spilled her cold coffee all over Jack's robes.

Out in the corridor, Charis feared for a moment that she had been too slow, that she had lost Morgana, but then she heard the door of the girls' bathroom slam shut. And without hesitating, she directed her steps towards that door.

At first, the bathroom seemed deserted, and Charis considered the possibility that she had heard another door slam shut and that Morgana had run to the dungeon. And she had already turned to leave when a retching noise made her turn around once more.

'Morgana?'

Any noise died away, and Charis rolled her eyes. It was just so typical of Morgana to hide and conceal her weakness. And it came therefore as a great surprise as the door to the fourth cubicle opened.

'Sweetie?'

Morgana sat with her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest and her face ashen.

'Honey, are you alright?' Charis asked, sitting down beside her friend and softly nudging her shoulder.

Morgana closed her eyes and took some deep breaths, fighting yet another wave of nausea. Poppy's potion was not helping at all. If anything, the morning sickness seemed to have become worse.

She looked up at her friend as Charis carefully patted her cheek. 'You look terrible, Morgana. You should go to the hospital wing.'

'I've been there,' Morgana replied. Oh how much she wanted to share her burden with her friend. 'Poppy says this is perfectly normal.'

Charis frowned, and Morgana took a deep breath. 'I am pregnant.'

If it were physically possible, Charis' chin would have hit the floor. 'Preg... what? With whom? With MALFOY?'

Morgana just nodded. Of course, Charis would have come to that conclusion immediately. She was a Ravenclaw, after all.

'Did you forget your potion or something?'

Despite feeling miserable, Morgana couldn't help but smirk at that question. She had taken her potion alright, but not the one Charis was talking about.

'Does Malfoy know yet?'

Morgana shook her head. 'I just found out,' she lied. 'But I am quite confident that Lucius will be happy about this.'

'Happy?' Charis stared at her friend. Did Morgana really believe this? 'Fuck, Morgana! How could you be so stupid and get yourself knocked up?! Malfoy's married. He is over twenty years older than you. Hell, he has a son who is almost your age. How can you think he will be happy?!

Morgana let her head fall back against the wall once more. 'Why would he not be happy?' she asked, wishing that she were allowed to tell Charis the whole truth. Instead, she decided to tell only half of it. She had no idea what mess it would create.

'Malfoy and Belakane, Charis. Two of the oldest Wizard families in Britain. This baby is practically royal. Of course, Lucius will be happy.'

'Since when have you become obsessed with bloodlines?' Charis exclaimed. There was a bad feeling growing in her stomach. Had she been right then? Had Morgana indeed crumbled under the pressure of her House? Or had she maybe always furtively believed in the superiority of purebloods? 'You cannot be serious, Morgana! Practically royal?'

Morgana nodded tiredly, and Charis got up, her arms crossed in front of her chest.

'So that is what you meant the other day when you told me that my kind was not welcome in the dungeons.'

Now Morgana got onto her feet, too, her resignation quickly turning into anger. What the hell was Charis accusing her of?

'The mood is dark in the dungeon, Charis,' she started, trying to keep her voice calm. 'I cannot protect you there anymore.'

'Is that a threat?' The word protect implied danger and harm to Charis. Maybe Morgana was saying that she would stand aside if any of her Housemates decided to pick on her. The thought made Charis feel sick. Had she been misled all those years? Was Morgana just like the rest of her House after all?

With her stomach turning and her head spinning, Morgana did not have the energy to think straight. 'I cannot help being in Slytherin, Charis. And I have been through quite a bit of trouble since our first day of school since my best friend was a Ravenclaw. I cannot stand it anymore. I don't have the energy for it.'

'So what is it you are saying, Morgana? That you cannot be friends with me anymore? Or that you do not want to?'

'As you take it up, I think you don't want to be friends with me anymore,' Morgana snapped despite herself. She was fed up now. This whole situation was not her fault. 'You've done a pretty good job avoiding me lately, Charis Byrne. Looks like only certain Slytherins are good enough for you nowadays. Those with a cock!'

Charis opened her mouth in disbelief. 'Is that what it is all about? You're jealous. You're jealous of me and Severus.'

'Severus?' Morgana laughed. 'Tell me, has *Severus* proposed yet? No? And you are calling me stupid? You're ridiculous, Charis.'

'How dare you?' Charis was backing away from Morgana now, a hurt expression on her face. Morgana had never been supportive of her choice in Slytherin males, but now she was being right-out cruel. As if she could comment on poor choice in men! 'And I thought you were different, Morgana. But no! You get knocked up by Malfoy, and suddenly you think you're better than everyone else. I bet you can't wait to give birth to a pureblood, can you? And here I was all these years, telling people that you were not like the other Slytherins.'

Morgana's jaws tightened. Charis' last sentence had hurt her more than anything else she could have said. But she would not let Charis know. She was a Slytherin, after all. And Slytherins never showed their weakness.

'Seems like we've been both lying to ourselves for almost seven years then,' she pointed out in a cold voice instead. 'Maybe, the gaps between our Houses cannot be bridged after all.'

It was just as well to make a clean cut. There was no point in procrastinating something that was unavoidable. With shaking hands, Morgana unclasped her necklace and held it towards Charis.

'Stay away from the dungeons, Charis.'

And without another word, Morgana brushed by her former best friend and left the bathroom, leaving Charis staring at the necklace in her hand with tear-filled eyes.

Morgana was shaking as she walked towards the stairs that led down to the dungeon. She was beyond angry. But she was not angry with Charis, only with herself. She was angry for having lost her temper, angry for being jealous and most of all for not being able to control either of them. She had not meant to push Charis away, and already she longed for her best friend. But she was too proud to turn around, too scared that Charis would push her away in return now.

Halfway down the stairs, Morgana's stomach turned once more. But it was empty, and her mouth filled with the bitter taste of bile. This was ridiculous. She had taken her potion according to Poppy's instructions, and still she had not kept down a single meal for two days. She had tried to be brave, but now she had had enough. She was not going to suffer through another day of classes. And gritting her teeth, she turned around and made her way up the stairs to the hospital wing.

It took her about double the amount of time to climb the stairs, and by the time she pushed open the door to the ward, she was too exhausted to even have a chance to dodge the Potions master, who was on his way out.

'Sorry, sir,' Morgana mumbled, her eyes cast down and hoping that he would not make any foul comment now. She wasn't sure if she could handle it.

To her surprise, Snape held her steadily by her left elbow. 'Are you alright, Miss Belakane?' he inquired.

'Morning sickness, sir,' Morgana replied, her gaze still cast down although she could feel Snape's eyes burning on the top of her head. 'I'm about to ask Poppy for more potion.'

'I suggest a thorough check-up, Ms Belakane,' Snape said. He was not blind. The girl looked like owl droppings and had done so for a couple of days. But he was not going to point that out. If she was too stubborn to take care of herself or ask for help, then so be it. 'In case you are unable to attend your Potions lesson tonight, I want to be informed before lunch,' he went on, trying to sound professional and detached. 'I have better things to do than wait for you all evening.'

Morgana nodded and turned as soon as Snape let go of her elbow. The last thing she needed was Snape scolding her and telling her that she was wasting his precious time. It was not like she was missing his lessons on purpose.

'Dear child, you look dreadful,' Poppy exclaimed as Morgana entered the ward. 'Is it morning sickness? Is the potion not working? When was the last time you ate?'

Morgana felt as if she were drowning in the sea of questions Poppy was bombarding her with, and she did not resist when she was guided towards a bed and dutifully drank the potion Poppy thrust into her hands. And when Poppy prescribed bed rest for two days, Morgana did not argue either. Being alone and not having to talk to anyone was probably the best thing. At least she would not be able to hurt anyone else during that time.

XXIV: Lost

Chapter 24 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXIV: Lost

By the time pudding was served that evening, Charis wished that she had skipped dinner and stayed in her dorm instead. She wasn't hungry, and all the laughing, chattering people around her made her feel even worse. The argument with Morgana was still laying heavy on her heart and filled her stomach with a dull kind of nausea. A part of her had gone through the day hoping that she would see Morgana and realise that their fight had only been a bad dream. But the Slytherin had not been seen anywhere all day, and by late afternoon, Charis had started to believe that Morgana was avoiding her.

She stabbed at her pudding with her fork. It was her favourite, treacle sponge pudding, but she had no appetite whatsoever. And with a pang she realised that it was Morgana's favourite, too. How many times had they hidden in some quiet corner of the castle and shared some delicious pudding?

'I think that pudding is dead already, Charis,' Jack muttered quietly at his housemate.

'Sorry, Jack, I'm not hungry,' Charis replied, letting her fork fall into the bowl with a tinkle, not sure if she would ever want to eat treacle sponge pudding again.

'I can see that.' Jack moved closer and nudged her elbow with his, a concerned look on his face. 'You okay?'

Charis sighed. There was no point in hiding it from Jack. He would find out sooner or later. 'Morgana and I had a fight,' she mumbled.

'About what?' asked Jack, eyebrows raised.

'A few things.' Charis chewed her lip. She couldn't tell Jack about Morgana being pregnant. 'It seems,' she started instead, 'Morgana is more interested in blood status than she let on.'

'Morgana? OUR Morgana?' Jack looked absolutely scandalised. 'No, come on, that can't be true. I talked to her the other day, you know, about my project. She seemed very intrigued by the idea.'

Jack broke off as he noted his friend's sorrowful look. 'But you are clearly upset. What did Morgana say?'

'She was ... comparing her family name and the Malfoy name to royalty.'

'Wow, that's a big word,' Jack conceded. 'But you know, um, it's kind of right. They are two of the oldest Wizarding families in the country.'

Charis frowned. 'So? It doesn't make them better than everyone else, does it?'

She knew she was sounding petulant, but the blood issue had touched a raw nerve with her. As much as she was proud to be Muggle-born, and as much as she tried to ignore the slurs of 'Mudblood' that were frequently passed her way, that word hurt her greatly, and Morgana's comment was like pouring salt on her wounds.

'I never said that,' Jack replied calmly, not wishing to upset his friend further. 'Did Morgana?'

'No, but she implied it.'

'Morgana?' Jack's eyebrows shot up again. He had always liked and respected Morgana and found her behaviour difficult to believe. But then again, why would Charis lie?

'She said she wants me to stay away from the dungeons,' Charis began, swallowing hard to remove the white hot lump of grief that was now forming there.

'Stay away from the dungeons? For what reason?'

'She said she couldn't protect me anymore.'

Jack looked at Charis with a serious expression. 'There are rumours that the mood in Slytherin House has changed for the worse. There are plenty of Death Eater wannabes down there. It might be a dangerous place for ... well ... anyone who is not from an old, pureblood line.'

'I know that, Jack,' Charis said quietly. 'I just never thought Morgana would be so hung up about her own blood status. After all I said! I defended her, Jack! I defended her to Harry, to the DA ...'

Charis could not stop the burning tears from falling now, and Jack put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

'There, there, kitten,' he consoled, squeezing her gently. 'Couldn't it be that you guys just misunderstood each other?'

Charis shook her head sadly and raised her eyes to meet his. 'She even gave me back my necklace, Jack.'

Jack stared back at Charis in disbelief. 'The necklace?'

Charis was choked and could not reply. Her bottom lip wobbled from the effort of controlling her sadness. And for the umpteenth time that day, she squeezed the small star that was still in her pocket.

'Oh, honey,' Jack murmured, pulling her closer. 'Shall we go outside?'

Charis hugged her friend back gratefully. 'Yes, please,' she whispered. She had no desire for the whole school to witness her tears.

With his arm around her shoulder, the two friends left the Great Hall and made their way out into the grounds. It was a mild evening, with clear blue skies and golden sunlight peeping over the mountaintops.

'Shall we sit over there?' Jack suggested, pointing to a bench by the rose hedges at the back of the Herbology greenhouses. And Charis gave him a squeeze as they made their way over to the rose garden.

'I still can't believe it,' Jack said after they had been sitting on the bench a minute or two. 'You and Morgana have been best friends forever.'

Charis took a deep breath through her nose, inhaling the comforting scent from the rosebushes. 'People change, I guess,' she said in a small voice.

'Change? That sounds like a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn to me.'

'Perhaps all the rubbish the other Slytherins like to spout finally wore her down after all,' Charis replied, trying not to sound bitter but knowing she had not succeeded. She was hurt by what Morgana had said. But most of all, she was disappointed.

'And made her turn on her best friend?' Jack frowned. 'There must be another reason.'

He fished in his pocket and handed Charis a hankie. 'It's clean,' he assured her with a smile.

'Thanks, Jack,' Charis replied gratefully and wiped her damp eyes.

'It'll be alright, you'll see,' Jack said, once more wrapping his arm around his friend and giving her a squeeze.

'Can we talk about something else?' Charis asked, needing the distraction. 'How is your History of Magic assignment going?'

'Oh, it's going alright,' Jack replied, beaming. This project was his pet concern at the moment, and he loved talking about it, especially to someone who was actually showing their interest. 'It's harder to find information than I thought, though. Pure blood families don't seem to like it when one gets too nosy about their family trees. I had hoped Morgana would help ...'

Jack broke off as he saw Charis flinch at the Slytherin's name.

'Sorry,' he offered sheepishly.

'Have you not had any luck with your own ancestors then?' Charis asked quickly. She did not want Jack to feel awkward. He was too sweet for that.

'My family proves to be uber boring!' Jack exclaimed. 'A straight line of Muggles on one side and a straight line of Wizards on the other. No surprises anywhere.'

Then he looked at Charis as if a light bulb had gone off in his head. 'Hey, would you let me look at YOUR family tree?'

'Er, if you want,' Charis replied uncertainly. 'I don't think you will find anything exciting there though! I am a Muggle-born, remember?'

'Oh, you never know! What if your great-great-great-grandfather was a wizard?' Jack asked enthusiastically.

'It's doubtful,' Charis answered, 'but I guess my magical genes had to come from somewhere ...'

'You don't know your great-great-great-grandfather, do you?' Jack asked, looking suddenly as excited as a little Crup that had just caught sight of its favourite toy.

'Imagine, you could be related to ... what do I know ... Dumbledore!'

Charis grinned back at Jack, his enthusiasm becoming too infectious to resist. 'That would be so cool!'

Jack's eyes were alight with excitement now. 'Come on, Madam Pince has shown me how to access all kinds of genealogy records, Muggle and Magical. We can find your family tree in no time!'

Charis giggled as Jack dragged her by the hand. Just like her, her housemate had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and could not wait to find out answers once his mind was set on a task.

'To the library!' he cried, before stopping dead in his tracks. 'Oh, forgot something!'

'Hmm?' Charis looked at him with a puzzled expression.

'This!' And with that, Jack pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. And once again Charis giggled.

'Oh, Jack. You're so sweet.'

'Like Bertie Botts!' He grinned. 'Come on now!'

The two Ravenclaws fled towards the library, too excited to even notice the black figure of Severus Snape, who was standing behind the bushes, a scowl of jealousy on his face.

* * *

Jack's enthusiasm was more than infectious, and soon Charis was rummaging through stacks of copies of birth certificates, obituaries and wedding certificates, finding out more about her family than she had ever dreamt of. She was, for instance, not the first female to carry a Greek first name. And the name of her great-great-grandmother's cousin had even been Charis as well.

But as interesting the papers were, something was distracting Charis, and more than once she looked up, feeling as if somebody was observing her. But she never saw anyone looking at her. As a matter of fact, the library was all but deserted. Once, she could have sworn that she had heard the rustle of robes in the Restricted Section. But it might just have been a mouse or one of the enchanted books that had made the noise. She shook her head to clear her mind from the flashbacks to Valentines THAT night when the sound of the rustle of robes had led to the most explosive sex of her life.

But she could not shake off the feeling of being watched, and when Jack eventually suggested going back to the common room, she told him to go ahead.

'Just let me have a look at that last copy,' she said. 'I'll be finished in five minutes tops.'

But she never looked at any copy. As soon as Jack had bid her goodnight, Charis abandoned her work and silently walked towards the Restricted Section, hoping there would be another rustle of robes, hoping that it would be *him*.

She and Severus had not spoken since their night together. He had not even written a comment on her last Potions essay, although it had been one of the best she had ever written. But she could not blame him. Snape was her teacher, after all. He had to be discreet. But Charis had not missed the way he was looking at her in the Great Hall or in the Potions classroom.

But there was no one in the Restricted Section, neither a wizard or a mouse, and feeling slightly disappointed Charis left the library.

When she reached the landing between the staircase that led towards Ravenclaw Tower and the one that would eventually lead to the dungeons, Charis fell dead in her tracks, staring down the steps that seemed to lead into nothing but darkness.

'Your kind should not be down here.'

Both Morgana and Severus had said that. Both her best friend and the man she loved had made it very clear that they considered her unworthy. But then why had Severus had sex with her? Why was he still giving her those looks?

'I very much hope that you have no intentions of descending to the dungeons tonight, Miss Byrne.'

Snape's rich baritone made Charis spin around just in time to see him step out of the shadows. Just how he had managed to approach her without her hearing him was beyond Charis. But then again, the Potions master was known to appear out of thin air.

'No, sir. I, er, just said goodnight to Morgana,' Charis lied, avoiding his eyes. Once more, he had more or less told her that she had no business whatsoever in the dungeons. So maybe he did consider her and unworthy Mudblood then.

'Morgana, eh?' Snape sneered with disbelief.

'Yes, sir,' Charis confirmed, surprised at how steady her voice was. 'I'll just be off then.'

She was disappointed by Snape's less than friendly reaction and decided to flee before she made a fool of herself. She tried to swerve around the imposing figure of the Head of Slytherin, but he stopped her dead in her tracks.

'Freeze!' he growled sternly. 'You are exactly three and a half minutes after curfew, Miss Byrne.'

His cold, black eyes fixed Charis with a glare that made her physically recoil.

'I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realise the time,' she mumbled, hoping that he would just let her go now. She did not want him to be angry with her.

'And I do not appreciate being lied to, Miss Byrne,' Snape continued silkily. 'I know for a fact that you have not spoken to your Slytherin friend all day. Your ability to lie convincingly is as pathetic as your choice of suitable places for romantic hideaways. The library, Miss Byrne? How disappointing.'

Charis' eyes widened. Romantic hideaways? What the hell was he talking about? Then it hit her. She *had* heard the rustle of robes then. Severus *had* been in the library, observing her and Jack. He had probably seen them hug before Jack had gone to bed. Had he interpreted that friendly gesture as something else? Did Severus, too, think like the majority of the male Slytherins? That she was a slut?

She almost flinched away as Snape stepped closer towards her.

'Did I not tell you not to mess with boys, Miss Byrne?' he asked in a low voice.

'Yes, sir,' Charis whispered in response. 'And I have heeded your advice.'

'Have you now?' Snape stepped even closer, and Charis willed her heart not to race so fast. And only when her back hit the door of classroom eleven, did she realise that she had been backing away from her Potions master.

Snape opened the door with a lazy flick of his wand and caught Charis around her waist as she stumbled, pulling her close him.

'Do you not think that this classroom, for example, would be a much more suitable place, Miss Byrne?' he asked and kicked the door closed with his foot.

Charis looked over her shoulder and gasped in surprise. The classroom had been transfigured to look like a forest clearing, and she could even see the starry sky. It was beautiful.

Snape couldn't help but smile. Who would have thought that the Centaur's classroom would make such an impression on the little Ravenclaw? She was so gentle, so sweet. And as much as he tried, he could not understand why she was drawn to him.

'Now, tell me the real reason why you were lingering at the entrance to the dungeons, Charis,' he insisted.

Once more, Charis gasped, this time at the use of her first name and the gentleness of Severus' voice.

'I ... I was hoping to ... to run into you,' she stammered.

Snape tightened his grip around her waist and leant in. 'And what are you going to do now that you have run into me?'

Oh, he knew what the girl wanted. More or less the same thing he did. He had tasted her, and it had opened up a tidal wave of passion inside him. And now he wanted more. He wanted her to welcome him into her utterly, to show him just how full of desire she was for him. This time, he wanted her to take the lead. He wanted her to show him just how much she wanted him.

Charis gazed up into Severus' onyx eyes, totally taken aback by this question. She had wanted to *run into him* for weeks. She had wanted him to touch her, kiss her, make love to her. And now that they were alone, she felt her knees go soft.

Gingerly, she lifted a hand to his face and caressed his cheek, and Snape could once more not help but smile at the sweetness of the gesture.

He watched her intently as her hands then traced his chest and shoulders through his robes, squeezing his masculine arms, before coming to rest on his stomach. She looked up at him as if seeking approval, but he merely stared calmly back at the girl, wondering if she would be brave enough to claim him just as he had claimed her in the library.

As if in answer to his question, Charis' hand ran down over his stomach and came to rest on his crotch, finding an already very insistent bulge with her hand. And Snape groaned and pushed his hips forwards, never once breaking eye contact.

Charis' heart was thudding madly and she felt dizzy. And later on, she would not remember how she ever dared ease the buttons of Snape's robes open and carefully release his impressive erection.

His shaft was thick and long, the head large and sculpted. To Charis, it felt like warm velvet stretched over iron. His magnificent cock was dusky pink in colour, in contrast to the usual paleness of his skin. And as she slowly and carefully began to stroke him, she noticed moisture had already appeared on the head.

Charis craned her neck up, her lips parted, and to her surprise, Snape let her kiss him. Why would he not? Her lips were soft and warm, and her kisses were sweet and gentle. And she gave them so willingly.

Snape growled. The girl's soft, small hand stroking him felt just as he had imagined it. He knew that he would be unable to hold back his orgasm much longer if she carried on like that. And as much as he enjoyed Charis taking a more active role this time, he would not give her that power over him.

A soft pressure towards her shoulders was all it took for Charis to move back until her legs made impact with a tree stump. And before she knew it, Snape had magically opened her robes and lifted her onto the stump with his strong arms.

With her free hand, Charis took Severus' hand and placed it on the damp white cotton at her core. And without warning he swiftly Vanished her knickers, finding her exposed pink flesh hot and moist for him.

His thumb came to rest on her clit, while he gently probed her entrance with the tip of his index finger.

Charis whimpered as he flicked his thumb delicately against her nub, in such an unsteady rhythm that every touch was a surprise. And she whimpered once more as he slowly, oh, so agonisingly slowly let his finger glide inside her.

She moaned delicately as her mouth searched for his. Oh, he was so gentle and tender. This was just what she wanted. The combined sensation of his gentle teasing and his wonderful cock in her hand as they kissed was just pure bliss.

Snape began to kiss her passionately, his tongue moving in her mouth in the same rhythm as his finger was fucking her. And Charis ran her fingers through his surprisingly soft raven hair with her free hand and moaned into his mouth, hips thrusting in rhythm. Oh he felt so good! Once more he had found that special spot deep inside her and his thumb on her clit was driving her insane. And from Severus' moans, she could tell that he relished her touch just as she relished his.

Charis' body began to tense as her orgasm built. She was close, so very close to release. And she wanted to explode from Severus' touch and scream out his name in ecstasy.

'Yes, little witch,' Snape growled as he saw her skin flush and her breathing become more laboured. 'Cum for me. Cum.'

His thumb was now resting steadily on her clit, applying constant pressure as his index finger stimulated that special spot. And Charis cried out as the first wave of her orgasm hit, muscles clenching around his finger sharply as her hand tightened around his cock.

She heard him growl and felt him shift position. His cock was now rubbing against her swollen clit. She shifted her hips so the head just grazed her entrance and looked deep into his eyes.

Snape gazed back, black into green. Last time, he had taken her. This time, she was giving herself to him. She was ready, oh, gods, she was ready. One thrust, one tiny thrust would be enough for him to enter her ... just one tiny movement ...

'I love you, Severus,' Charis whispered, and Snape's head snapped up as if someone had hit him unexpectedly with *Expelliarmus*.

The girl had not just said this! She mustn't have!

He stumbled backwards, closing his robes around him. No, no! The girl had been lusting for him for the better part of the last year. She had a crush on him. But she could not love him! She must not love him!

He grabbed on to a tree and buried his face in his hand. 'Cover yourself,' he growled. 'Cover yourself now.'

'Severus?' Charis asked timidly. She was utterly confused. Had she done something wrong? Why had he withdrawn so suddenly? But despite her confusion, she did as she had been told and closed her robes.

'Why do you let me keep doing this, Charis?'

Charis frowned and turned her head towards her Potions master. 'Let you keep doing what?' she asked, getting more confused by the second. Whatever did he mean?

'Why do you let me use you like this?'

Snape sounded angry, and Charis did not understand.

'Using me?' she asked. 'No. Severus, no. I wanted this. I wanted you.'

Snape made a strange sound and started pacing the enchanted classroom.

What kind of evil, hairy-hearted monster was he, he wondered. How could he toy in such a way with an innocent girl? An innocent girl whose heart was in the right place and who would give this heart to him if he asked her to? An innocent girl who happened to have the same green eyes as ...

He breathed deeply through his nose, not wanting to go down that particular road. Yes, she wanted him but for all the wrong reasons. She was looking for love, and that was the one thing he was incapable of giving her. And despite him knowing that, he had still played with her affections.

'I advise you to stay away from me, Charis,' he snarled. 'Far, far away from me.'

'But ... Severus ... I do not understand ...'

Of course she would not. She was a little girl, still innocent, still believing in love. And he had used her just because he could. Just because he bloody well knew that she would never say no to him.

For the first time since he had withdrawn from her, Snape now looked at Charis. And she was looking at him with her big green eyes, looking frightened and confused.

'You deserve better, Charis,' he said, looking deeply into those green eyes, hoping that they would never look at him with the same kind of disgust another pair, so very similar to hers, had all those many years ago.

'You deserve love, Charis. And I cannot give you that,' he went on. 'And despite you knowing this, you have let me use you.'

He saw a tear slide down her cheek and regretted his harsh words. He had not meant to make her cry. But she needed to know the truth. She needed to understand.

'You are young, Charis,' he stated, surprised how familiar her name sounded now, how sweet it felt on his tongue. 'The only thing you are guilty of is confusing lust with love. And until you learn how to separate the two, I advise you to keep far away from me.'

He resisted the urge to step towards her and wipe the tear off her cheek. Instead, he turned and walked towards the door. There he paused and once more looked back at the girl.

'Did I make myself quite clear, Miss Byrne?' he asked, pronouncing her last name very clearly. He would not call her by her given name any time soon again.

'Yes, sir,' Charis replied, furtively wiping away the treacherous tears that were now running down her cheek.

Snape left the girl alone, his stomach tight as his heels clicked on the stone floor of the castle. And as Charis listened to him recede, she let herself cry harder now, for Morgana, for Severus, for all she had lost that day.

So Severus Professor Snape didn't love her then. He had admitted having toyed with her, and Charis felt stupid. She had let him. If she were honest, she had known all

along that he could not love her. But she had not listened to the sensible voice inside her head. She had listened to the voice of her heart, the voice that had told her that he did have feelings for her.

Why was it that Slytherins could take hold of her heart and smash it into pieces moments later, Charis wondered.

Zabini had taken her virginity and then tossed her aside in the most despicable way. Morgana had feigned friendship for years and now that she was carrying Malfoy's child, she suddenly seemed to consider Charis below her standards. And now Snape, too, had turned from her, scolding her like a little girl.

'You deserve better,' he had said. And for a moment, Charis had believed that he cared for her after all.

But who was he to decide what she deserved? What did he know about the big love she held for him in the depths of her heart and the sorrow it now contained?

XXV: The Future of Slytherin

Chapter 25 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXV: The Future of Slytherin

'Mark my words: if anyone else loses Slytherin House points, that person will join Lancaster and Mordrin in detention for the rest of the school year. And if you have the misfortune to be in your sixth year or lower, you will continue your detention when you return after the summer.'

Snape let his gaze wander over the students of his House. The younger ones sat huddled together on the sofas and armchairs right in front of him, with terrified expressions on their faces. Some of the older students who stood behind them had adopted the same fearful look, while others had put on a brave face and even tried to look completely unmoved. But Snape saw right through the latter. He was very much aware that each and every student in the common room wished they were somewhere else right then.

They had certainly not expected him to come bursting through their door at seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning. They had most probably not expected him to show up at all, seeing as he usually held the House Meeting on Monday morning. But last night's events had dictated his presence. How on earth could Lancaster and Mordrin have been so stupid to hex those Gryffindors at the dinner table, right under McGonagall's nose? Those two nitwits had received their punishment already last night and had since five-thirty been helping Hagrid to scatter dragon dung on the pumpkin patch. Snape had deemed it necessary to make an example of the two boys and ensure the other Slytherins wouldn't get any stupid ideas.

'There will be no more hexing students from other Houses,' he continued in a voice that sounded like thunder. 'I demand that you co-exist peacefully with them. Yes, Mr Malfoy, even with students of Gryffindor House.'

No one could afford to be making enemies in these times. The Sorting Hat had warned the students already back in September: 'For our Hogwarts is in danger from external, deadly foes, and we must unite inside her or we'll crumble from within.' But Snape doubted that any of his students had listened to the old hat. Most of them found the rumours of the Dark Lord's return exciting. And those who had grown up in Death Eater families dreamt of a future that held fame and glory. Snape desperately hoped that he would be able to save at least some of them.

'I repeat: no more hexing. In fact, no rule breaking at all. Do I make myself clear?'

The 'Yes, sir' echoed from the cold stone walls of the Slytherin common room, and since Snape did not say anything else, the students considered themselves dismissed. Some fled to their dormitories, others to the Great Hall, but flee they did. All except a certain seventh-year with blazing red hair.

'Yes, Miss Belakane?' Snape simply said with his arms crossed in front of his chest and an eyebrow raised.

The girl looked dreadful. She was pale, and there were dark shadows under her eyes. And while she once had carried herself tall and met his gaze with a confidence that had both annoyed and amused Snape at the same time, she now seemed to avoid looking at him and was feverishly chewing her lip.

'Yes? What is it?' Snape repeated impatiently.

'At the risk of losing House points and earning detention, I ask permission to leave the castle this evening, sir.' Morgana's voice was surprisingly steady, but still she did not look at him.

'And why would you need to leave the castle, Miss Belakane?'

'I have been invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor.'

Snape's eyes narrowed. But of course. Lucius would want to make sure that his plan had succeeded and that the girl was indeed carrying his child.

'You are permitted to leave the castle after your last lesson this afternoon,' Snape growled. 'But make sure you are back before seven, Miss Belakane. You have already missed last week's lesson due to your so-called illness. If you miss today's lesson as well, I will withdraw my offer to tutor you, and you will have to forget about your NEWTs in Potions.'

And without another word, he turned on his heel and billowed out of the common room, not once looking back at the girl. Had he looked back, he would have seen that she was now biting her lips even harder than before and that there were tears glittering in her eyes.

'Miss Morgana is looking tired. Silvy will make a cup of tea before Miss goes to see Master Lucius.'

Morgana sank onto the stool by the stove in the kitchen of Malfoy Manor and gratefully accepted the steaming cup Silvy put into her hands. She knew that there was no point resisting the elf's fussing, and she did not want to either. She not only looked incredibly tired, but also felt tired, both in body and mind. And having some minutes to collect her thoughts before facing Lucius and telling him that she was pregnant was, at that moment, worth more than all the Galleons at Gringotts.

According to Dumbledore, she was supposed to pretend that she was scared and ashamed and that she did not even dare hope that Lucius would in any way be pleased about her carrying his child. And she was also supposed to pretend that she was hopelessly in love with him.

None of this should be a problem. Morgana was scared and ashamed: scared that something in Dumbledore's brilliant plan would go amiss and ashamed that she had agreed to it. And she knew that Lucius did not care about either her or the child. All he cared about was his position in the ranks of the Dark Lord. As for her being in love with him ...

Morgana's thoughts were interrupted by Silvy tugging urgently at her robes.

'Master Lucius is wanting to see you now, Miss Morgana,' the elf squeaked, and Morgana carefully patted the creature's cheek.

What Master Lucius wants, he gets, she thought and made her way to the drawing room.

Lucius was reclining on a chaise longue by the window, looking so elegant and sexy that Morgana's breath hitched in her throat. And when he got up and opened his arms for her, not even a herd of Hippogriffs could have held her back.

'I am so pleased that you could make it, my love!' Lucius exclaimed as he embraced her. 'I have missed you.'

His kiss sent shivers down Morgana's spine, and had Lucius not held on to her, she would certainly have lost her balance, so weak were her knees.

'It is amazing,' he breathed as he abandoned her lips just to attack her neck a moment later. 'Even in your school robes, you look like a dream come true, Morgana.'

He grabbed her butt and pulled her towards him, and Morgana could already feel his erection strain against the fabric of his dove grey trousers.

'See what you are doing to me, my beautiful witch?' he growled and ground his hips against her.

Morgana let her head fall back and granted the magnificent wizard in front of her access to her neck. She felt her chest swell with pride. Lucius Malfoy, one of the most important and influential wizards in Britain, truly desired her. This couldn't just be an act. He did not need to woo her anymore. The deed was done. The heir was conceived. He could just sit back and wait eight more months. But still, he was suckling at her neck and massaging her breasts through the fabric of her school robes, not because it was part of his plan to seduce her, but because he wanted to.

Slowly, Lucius unbuttoned the girl's blouse, placing tantalizing kisses on every inch of exposed flesh. He inhaled her scent as his mouth filled with her flavour, and he sank his teeth into the soft skin of her breasts, savouring the delicate moans that escaped her lips. She was giving herself so willingly to him, and he enjoyed fucking her, even now when she was already carrying his child. Now he was going to shag her for pleasure alone.

He sank onto his knees in front of her, unzipping her skirt and pulling it down together with her knickers. And once he caught the alluring scent of her arousal, he grabbed her hips and held them steady as he buried his face in her crotch, the tip of his tongue teasing apart her lips and finding her swollen clit. Oh, she tasted sweet and was ready to be taken.

He stood upright in a blink of an eye, kissing her feverishly and relishing the idea of her tasting herself as she greedily suckled his tongue.

'Do you want me, Morgana?' he growled as they broke their kiss to breathe. 'Do you want me right here and now?'

He did not even wait for an answer. He did not need any. The girl was his, and she would not refuse him his pleasure. So unlike Narcissa, who had been feigning migraines for so many years now.

He pushed Morgana up against the wall and entered her with a swift movement, looking into her eyes. Oh, yes, she was his. His and his alone. And he would fuck her so well that she would never want another man again.

Morgana moaned deeply as Lucius slid up into her to the hilt. He filled her completely, and him taking her against the wall made his cock rub against so far unknown places, and soon Morgana felt herself tremble and wished that she had some other way of supporting herself than by clinging to his shoulders and entwining her hand in his silky, soft platinum hair.

As if he had read her thoughts, Lucius wrapped his strong arms around her waist and pulled her from the wall, just to slam her onto an antique bureau, sending parchments and quills flying to the floor. But neither of them cared.

Lucius was rough and possessive as he thrust into her with all his might, and Morgana responded by clenching her muscles around him and calling out his name.

'Yes, Lucius. Yes, YES!'

'I love it when you call my name, Morgana,' Lucius hissed as he once more plunged forward to claim her mouth.

He felt her wrap her legs around his waist and her nails clawing at the back of his robes. And he continued slamming into her, harder and faster, wanting her to reach her climax just so she would scream out his name once more.

As he slid his hand between their bodies and his finger made contact with her clit, Morgana arched up against him just to fall back onto the desk seconds later, her body shaking and quivering.

'Lucius,' she whimpered, too wrapped up in the sensation of her orgasm to control her vocal cords properly. Every little movement of his hand or cock sent new jolts of pleasure through her body. And she both hoped that he would stop and go on forever at the same time.

He sneaked his hands under her back and pulled her upper body up against him, breathing heavily into her ear and relentlessly slamming into her with short, powerful thrusts. And once more he drove her over the edge, and this time she screamed out his name as if it were the most beautiful word in the world.

'Lucius!'

The blond wizard smiled triumphantly as he felt his own orgasm approach and buried himself deep inside her with a low growl, once more filling her womb with his seed.

'My angel,' he murmured moments later as her took her face in both his hands and looked into her blue eyes. 'I wish you would never have to leave. I wish I could always have you close to me. I wish you were mine.'

'But I am yours, Lucius,' Morgana whispered and did not resist as he once more claimed her lips.

And as Lucius gently caressed her back and shoulders with his smooth hands, he triumphed. The girl was lost. She was truly his and his alone. And she had no idea that she had practically promised him her soul.

* * *

Once they had got their breath back and rearranged their robes, Lucius led his guest in to the dining room for dinner, much to Morgana's delight. The ~~en~~orning sickness, as Poppy insisted on calling it, prevented her from eating anything for the better part of the day. Hence, she was often ravenous in the evening. And tonight was no exception.

'What has Silvy got in store for us today?' she asked as Lucius pulled back her chair for her, looking forward to the elf's usually exceptional cooking. Whatever Silvy had prepared, it must go down better than the rice and chicken she had had for lunch. Or *tried* to have.

'I must admit, love, it's a bit eclectic,' Lucius began, seating himself opposite her.

'Eclectic?'

'Yes,' Lucius affirmed, smiling mysteriously. 'The elf is certainly showing her creativity. We have Eggs Benedict to start, followed by fresh lobster, and to finish, a cheese platter with fresh fruit.'

'I see ...'

Lucius noticed Morgana pale slightly, and watched her carefully. The meal was not Silvy's idea at all; it had been his, as a way to test the girl and see if she were indeed carrying the heir yet. He had been more than annoyed by Narcissa's diet during her pregnancy and had now made Silvy prepare the exact dishes his wife had refused to eat from the very day she had found out that she had been pregnant.

He saw Morgana squirm and smiled inwardly. By the looks of things, she clearly had something important to say. But he kept his face neutral, although he wanted to triumph. There was no doubt. She was indeed pregnant. Snape's potion would not have failed.

'Love? What is it?' he asked in a concerned tone.

'I ... um ...' Morgana started. She had been building up to this point for weeks, but still she genuinely felt nervous. Lucius didn't want this child for him, but for the Dark Lord. And she was merely a pawn.

But had Dumbledore or anyone else even considered how Lucius would react once she told him that she was pregnant? What if he wanted her to stay at the Manor to be able to keep an eye on her? Or, even worse, what if he dragged her off to the Dark Lord in order to show her off?

'I think you should take a deep breath, Lucius,' she said, inhaling deeply herself. She had to get herself together. There was no point in worrying. She was important to Lucius, she told herself. He would certainly never harm her in any way.

But how does a seventeen-year-old tell her married lover that she's carrying his child? She contemplated, fidgeting with the thick, expensive, Malfoy-monogrammed napkin. Surely, if she wanted to play her role well, she was supposed to assume that the father-to-be would not take her confession well.

Lucius looked over at the girl, concern showing in his silver-blue eyes. But on the inside, he was anxiously awaiting the news that would take him one step closer to being the Dark Lord's right hand man.

'Promise me something, Lucius,' Morgana begged, now fully engaged in the role of the timid girl.

'What is it, love?' Lucius sounded truly apprehensive now. He, too, was playing his role well. The girl believed that he loved her. And he needed her to go on believing it. He needed her to trust him, so he would in the end be the one to decide how their child was brought up. If he played his cards right, she would allow their child to be gifted with the Dark Mark before the little one could walk. And who knew, maybe she would join the ranks of the Death Eaters, too.

'Whatever I tell you now,' Morgana continued. 'Please, do not yell.'

Lucius looked hurt at the very idea. 'Morgana! I would never yell at you. You know that.'

She leant forwards and gripped his hand, taking yet another deep breath. 'I ... '

Lucius raised his eyebrows, silently willing her to go on and secretly amused at her nervousness. What a darling she was, so scared that he would scold her for having been careless with her contraceptive potion. So sweet, so naive, so unsuspecting.

'I am pregnant.'

Morgana blurted the words so quickly, she was unsure if Lucius had heard or not. And as he merely blinked in response, she cast him a nervous look.

'Pregnant?' Lucius, to his credit, looked shocked for about three seconds as the girl had said the words he had been desperate to hear for such a long time.

'Please don't yell,' Morgana whispered.

'Pregnant?' Lucius was smiling now, and Morgana merely nodded in response. Everything was going as planned.

'Oh, love, I ... I don't know what to say,' Lucius murmured. 'After Draco, I never thought ... '

'I can take care of this,' Morgana interrupted. 'I can take a potion ... I ... '

Lucius stared back at the girl with wide eyes. 'You don't want to get rid of it, do you?'

Ah, he was buying her act, Morgana thought, her Slytherin mind triumphing. There was no way that he'd ever suspect that she was very well aware of just how much he wanted that child and for what reasons.

'Lucius,' she pleaded. 'I'm seventeen, you're married ... I don't want to be a burden.'

'Love ... that's the last thing you would be,' Lucius said kindly, squeezing her hand.

'What?' Morgana asked, trying to sound as surprised as possible.

'I don't want you to get rid of it, Morgana.'

This time it was Morgana, also to her credit, who looked genuinely shocked. 'You don't?'

'No, love! Why would I?' Lucius smiled one of his most charming smiles as he clutched both her hands.

'Because you're married ...' Morgana began.

But Lucius cut her off. 'I've always wanted more children. Regrettably, Narcissa had complications when having Draco ...'

He seemed lost in his thoughts for a moment, gazing at their entwined hands. Then his eyes snapped up and met hers.

'Darling, I will support you one hundred percent,' he declared firmly. 'I will get you a flat near Diagon Alley. You can have a nanny so you can continue with your career ...'

And I will make sure that this child is taught proper values from the very start.

Morgana could almost see the plans running through Lucius' mind. He looked absolutely ecstatic and radiant, his eyes misted up with joy.

'Oh, I can't believe we're having a baby!'

Morgana meanwhile looked completely flabbergasted. 'WE are having a baby?'

'Yes, me and you, love. I will support you every step of the way.'

Morgana just gaped at him. For someone who had just spawned the heir of Darkness, Lucius seemed genuinely thrilled to be a father.

'Aren't you happy?' Lucius asked when seeing her open-mouthed, a little crestfallen.

'I ... I don't know yet.'

To be honest, Morgana found his reaction totally endearing. She wasn't sure what she was expecting maybe not peals of malicious-sounding laughter, but certainly not the dewy-eyed radiance she saw in front of her. Had he changed his mind? Did he truly care that much for her that he considered this baby *their child*?

Lucius stood, walked around the table and pulled Morgana her up into a gentle embrace, his hand snaking to her belly.

'This little one is going to be a powerful little child. It will be loved and have the best money can buy,' he cooed as he softly rubbed her stomach.

Morgana shivered at the use of the word *powerful*. 'This is scary, Lucius,' she replied, not really sure anymore exactly what part of the whole situation she was supposed to find the most scary.

Lucius looked deeply into her eyes. 'Love, do not be afraid about what people say. I am proud you are carrying my child.'

It was true, he was. In the eyes of the other Death Eaters, it would make him a hero. And the Dark Lord would see him as his most devoted servant.

He stroked the girl's belly again, a silly grin on his face. 'Just think: it may be a girl. I've always wanted a daughter.'

Morgana couldn't help but laugh. 'You really ARE happy about this!'

Lucius gave her a quizzical look. 'Why would you think otherwise, my love? What can be more natural than two people who love each other, creating a child?'

'It's just ... Well, you are a man of high status, Lucius. People will talk. Narcissa will know.'

Morgana genuinely liked Narcissa and did not want to hurt the woman, not after everything she had done for her. But then again, Narcissa might just never know. In about two months' time, this child would be gone. Or would it?

'Narcissa will have to find out, yes,' Lucius conceded. 'But you know our marriage is one of status and not love. She will accept the fact, because she will not want to lose her status.'

Morgana chewed her lip. Status or no status, finding out your husband had sired a child with a girl barely older than his own son was going to smart.

If she decided to keep this baby, what would happen? Would Lucius leave Narcissa for her sake? Would she want him to?

'And Draco?' she continued, her mind buzzing with the possibilities.

'Draco will be of age soon, my love.' Lucius tried to calm her. 'He will be his own man. He will not fear the competition.'

Morgana nodded and made a noise of agreement, even though the idea of giving birth to Draco's step-sibling suddenly made her blood turn to ice. Wanting to leave that thought alone, she decided to turn to a more practical issue.

'I am taking my NEWTS in four months. I will have to tell Snape.'

Morgana saw the muscle in Lucius' jaw flex at the name of her Head of House.

'Yes, that is unavoidable,' he stated. 'But believe me when I say it is within Severus' interests to make sure your life is comfortable, because there will be hell to pay otherwise.'

Morgana raised her eyebrow at the steely look in Lucius' eyes, a look that soon turned to tenderness as he reached down and kissed her.

'Precious darling,' he drawled.

And Morgana sighed heavily, draping her arms around his waist. 'This is overwhelming, Lucius. I'm only seventeen.'

And only two years older than your son, she thought to herself.

'I know, love. But having a child won't stop you having a future.' He looked down and saw the girl looked torn.

'I know this is overwhelming for you,' he said softly, kissing her forehead. 'But I know a place that could help you get as excited about our child as I am. Bonnie's Bouncing Babies in Diagon Alley is the oldest Wizarding baby shop in existence. My own mother used to buy me toys and clothes from there. Plus there are plenty of books and advice for new mothers.'

'Are you sending me on a shopping trip, Lucius?' Morgana asked, looking up at the fair wizard. Trust Lucius to think that throwing money at the issue would somehow magically resolve it.

'Yes, love. I think it would be good for you. Why don't you go and explore, get some literature, get a feel for it. The expectant mothers' section is supposed to be very informative.'

'Don't you think it's a little ... early?' She was barely one month in. So much could happen.

'It's never too early to be prepared.' Lucius sounded so enthusiastic, so sincere. 'Besides, I personally can't walk past a pair of miniature boots without feeling broody.'

Once again, his face lit up like a child's at Yule. 'Wait until you see the miniature flying broomsticks. They are just adorable. I still have Draco's somewhere.'

Morgana could not help but smile as she brushed a strand of white-blond hair from his face. 'You're too sweet, Lucius. I can't believe this. You ARE happy!'

'Happy? I'm over the MOON, my love!'

He smiled indulgently as his young lover threw her arms around him and laughed.

'Then I guess I am happy too,' she conceded whilst Lucius placed soft little kisses all over her face. There was no denying it, Lucius was ecstatic, and his talk of baby things had planted the seed that maybe, just maybe, Lucius would love this child as he loved her and would not use it as a tool for power. She gazed up at him once more only to see his silver-blue eyes sparkling with happiness.

'We're having a baby, darling. I'm so excited I could burst!' Then his radiant smile turned into a serious expression. 'You will need to get lots of rest, my love. I want you in bed by eight o'clock.'

Morgana looked at him as if he'd just announced that he enjoyed wearing women's underwear.

'Eight? Are you serious?'

'I have never been more serious. Pregnancy is very draining.'

'I'm a few weeks pregnant, not an invalid!' Morgana protested, using the very same words Snape had hurt her with only about a week ago. Suddenly, it didn't seem to matter anymore.

But Lucius shook his mane of fine, golden hair firmly in response. 'I want you taking care of yourself.' And the steely look in his eyes told Morgana there were to be no more arguments as far as bedtime was concerned.

'I will, Lucius, I will,' she murmured.

Lucius effortlessly summoned his money pouch from the inside of one of the bureaus, and it fell into his open hand with a satisfying chink.

'Lucius ...' Morgana began as she watched him take out a big fistful of Galleons.

'Go and have a nose in Diagon Alley, and buy YOURSELF something nice, too, love.'

He noted Morgana's pleading look and continued, 'This is my baby too, and if I want to spoil it, and you, then I will!'

Morgana sighed in defeat. 'Lucius ...'

But before she could protest too much, he was kissing her again, and she could not help but yield to his embrace.

The sound of chiming clock from the mantelpiece interrupted their clinch.

'Bedtime, then?' Morgana asked with a smile. She had just remembered that Snape expected her to be back in time for her Potions session. If she arrived late, he might just give her detention. And who knew when she would be able to see Lucius again in that case.

'Yes, love, you should really be getting some rest.' Lucius stroked her face tenderly before grabbing both of her hands in his and looking deep into her eyes.

'You have made me truly happy, Morgana,' he murmured. 'I am excited beyond words.'

'Maybe YOU should get some rest, too,' Morgana noted.

Lucius gave her one of his trademark smirks. 'Well you do seem to tire me out, you incorrigible witch!'

And with that, he kissed her deeply once more, driving away every single doubt the girl still might have had on her mind.

* * *

She had not wanted to leave Malfoy Manor. When Lucius had kissed her goodbye, Morgana had clung to him as if they were taking farewell forever. And when she had turned on the spot to Apparate to Hogwarts and Lucius had blown her another kiss, her heart had ached. But now, as she was walking down the dark corridor that led to Professor Snape's study, that feeling was fading at the same speed as the taste of Lucius' lips on hers.

She had already knocked at Snape's door when the big clock in the Entrance Hall started to chime seven, and she was sure that Snape would tell her off for being late although she was exactly on time. To her surprise, he did not.

'Good evening, Miss Belakane,' he said, looking up from his workstation. His knife and chopping board were lying next to his cauldron, and he had arranged all the ingredients methodically in front of him.

'You will be sitting behind this charmed glass screen for the demonstration,' he instructed her. 'To protect you from the fumes. Tonight I shall be making Wolfsbane.'

Morgana nodded and took her seat on the stool that had been placed behind the protective glass screen, putting her notebook onto her lap. She felt privileged. Everybody knew that Snape was indeed a master when it came to potion making, but he was rarely seen actually making any potions. And Wolfsbane was a difficult potion, taxing even to the most capable NEWT student. And still, Snape deemed it worthwhile to show it to her.

'Wolfsbane is fiddly to prepare,' Snape declared. 'It needs to be made under the right circumstances, at the right stage in the moon's cycle. Hence, it is said that females are better suited to concocting this potion. I myself, however, have never had any troubles.' He waved his wand lazily, and his spiky handwriting appeared on the blackboard behind him. 'Although I can make this off by heart, it will benefit you to see both the ingredients and the methodology. I will not talk you through, so I would like you to follow the method with me. Do try to keep up.'

He reached for a root and crushed it skilfully under his blade, then shredded it into stringy segments. And Morgana watched him intently, fascinated by his skills as well as his fluent movements. Even when he poured water into his cauldron and conjured a flame underneath, he did it gracefully and with an attentiveness that suggested that this simple task was just as important as chopping the most powerful and precious ingredient.

'I trust your nausea has now passed?'

Morgana tore her eyes off her teacher's smooth hands and took to staring at his face in surprise instead. Had Snape just asked how she was feeling?

'I asked you a question, Miss Belakane.'

Morgana cleared her throat. She knew that Snape was the one preparing the potion for her morning sickness. She did not want to tell him that it wasn't working.

'I know that there was liver stew for dinner, sir,' she said instead. 'The smell was still lingering in the air when I returned to the castle. It would make anyone nauseous.'

Snape wrinkled his imperious nose. 'The stew was served with herb dumplings and gravy. Those on their own were adequate. But I assume that you have dined royally at Malfoy Manor.'

Morgana shook her head. 'There was no time, sir.'

'No time? Is that how much Lucius cares for the mother of his child?'

He stomped to his desk. From the top drawer, he produced a couple of Chocolate Frogs.

'We still have some minutes until the water boils and the root can be added,' he declared and extended the Frogs towards Morgana. 'I suggest you eat some of those. Once the potion is underway, I will not have the time to scoop you up should you faint due to low blood sugar.'

Morgana swallowed drily. As much as she had always loved chocolate, it nowadays made her queasy. But she was hungry. And who knew how angry Snape would get if she did indeed faint.

Morgana couldn't help but smile as she carefully nibbled at a Frog. Who would have guessed that Severus Snape had a sweet tooth? Most probably, the Frogs had been confiscated during lessons. But Morgana preferred to think of them as Snape's own private stash, a treat he would reward himself with after grading a stack of parchments. She could just imagine him huffing at the card before savouring the Frog. Her whimsical thoughts were interrupted however by Snape's rich baritone.

'Madam Pomfrey informs me that you are still requiring the Morning Sickness Potion,' he mentioned incidentally as he one by one dropped little pieces of the shredded root into the now boiling water. 'She also says that morning sickness rarely lasts more than six weeks. You should be out of the woods shortly, as it were.'

He probably didn't expect any answer, as he opened a large leather bound book with lots of technical drawings and charts in it. And Morgana's eyes followed his long, slender finger down one of the charts. And when he took to stirring the cauldron, whispering inaudible incantations, she lifted her eyes to his sumptuous lips, suddenly remembering the way he had kissed her in the garden of Malfoy Manor and the dark corridor in the Three Broomsticks. If she thought about it, he had certainly tasted of chocolate.

She watched him grab some powdered Aconite and measure out an amount in a pair of little brass scales. And she saw his eyes glitter with excitement as he bent to judge the scales by eye before lifting the little bowl and pouring it into the cauldron. He looked so content, as if he had not a worry in the world.

Morgana flinched as the potion hissed loudly and hoped that Snape had not noticed her daydreaming. But he was watching the cauldron intently, running his fingers through the steam as if he could feel the vapours and extract meaning from them. Then he picked up his wand and waved it over the cauldron in complicated sequences, all the while muttering incantations under his breath. He looked like an artist, a painter or a dancer or both at once. Morgana could not decide which, but one thing was for sure, when it came to his craft, Snape was a true artisan.

'Once the potion has cooled, it will have to bask in the moonlight to absorb its powers for two weeks before the second part of the brewing process can begin,' he explained. 'The drinker, the lycanthrope, will absorb those lunar powers and therefore gain immunity. Do you have any questions?'

Morgana shook her head, and Snape picked up the cauldron. 'Follow me.'

They climbed the stairs to the Astronomy Tower, where Snape placed the cauldron in a niche in the south wall. 'We will leave the cauldron here for a fortnight,' he declared and once more withdrew his wand.

Morgana watched her Head of House intently as he cast protective spells around the cauldron. His pale face looked like polished marble in the moonlight, and his dark hair framed his features like curtains of black velvet. And his eyes were like bottomless dark oceans, and Morgana had to look away lest she drowned in them.

When they returned to the dungeons, Morgana expected to be dismissed and sent to bed. But Snape wordlessly passed the door that led to the Slytherin common room, and Morgana followed him back to his study where he allowed her to help him clean his work station.

'How did Lucius react to you telling him that you are with child?'

The question had come out of the blue, and Morgana stared at her teacher, slightly taken aback. How strange, she had not once thought about Lucius since she had entered Snape's study almost two hours ago.

'He was ... overjoyed,' she started tentatively. 'He told me how much he is looking forward to becoming a father and that he will look after me.'

'You are of course aware that he is lying, are you not, Miss Belakane?' Snape interrupted, his black eyes boring into hers.

Morgana swallowed. Of course she was aware of that. Lucius was responsible for the deaths of her parents, and he only cared for her because he needed her to provide him with a child that combined two ancient bloodlines. Her rational brain told her that he was talking out of his perfectly-sculpted buttocks.

But Lucius had also told her that he loved her and had started to plan a future for her and the baby, their baby. And her heart swelled at the very thought.

'Are you, Miss Belakane?'

Snape's voice sounded like thunder, and Morgana nodded, too scared and too confused to admit the truth.

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'And how, Miss Belakane, do you feel about Lucius?'

Once more, Morgana did not answer, and Snape felt as if someone had hit him with a Stunner. This must not have happened! Lucius must not have succeeded! He must not have won over the girl!

He closed the gap between him and the girl in a blink of an eye and grabbed her firmly by the arms. 'I sincerely hope that you are not telling me that you have feelings for Lucius Malfoy, Miss Belakane.'

'I don't know, sir.'

'You do not know?' Snape had to fight the urge to yell. 'What do you mean, you do not know? Do you or do you not have feelings for Lucius Malfoy?'

'I do not know,' Morgana repeated, a pleading tone in her voice. 'When I am away from him, everything is crystal clear. I know that he does not care for me. I know that he wants this baby to gain power. I know that he is a Death Eater and one of the Dark Lord's most loyal supporters. But when I am with him, when he holds me in his arms ...'

She broke off and lowered her gaze. She felt so stupid, so utterly stupid. But she could not help it. Lucius had promised her the moon, and she had believed him. He had told her he loved her. And she had believed that, too.

'You silly little girl,' Snape hissed, tightening his grip around her arms and shaking her lightly. 'A kiss is not a promise! A caress is not a contract!'

'I know that, sir.'

'Do you? Do you really?' Snape was angry, but not at the girl. Who could blame her? She was young and naïve, and Lucius was a master of deceit. But she mustn't fall for the blond wizard.

'You must resist him, Miss Belakane,' Snape commanded. 'Practice your Occlumency.'

'I can't. When I am with him, I can't.'

'You MUST! Your feelings for Lucius Malfoy will lead you into nothing but despair. He will take you. He will consume you. And he will sit, laughing in your ashes. If you do not use your Occlumency against him, he will ruin you.'

Morgana was looking up at her teacher now, treacherous tears glittering in her eyes. 'I can't,' she whispered. 'I cannot resist him. What am I doing wrong?'

'You are needy, Miss Belakane,' Snape growled. 'You need his love, and so you let yourself fall open to him.'

Morgana's eyes widened. She had run to Lucius on New Year's night, after Snape had turned away from her. Had she made a fatal mistake that night? Had she sold her soul?

'You MUST resist him,' Snape repeated. 'If you cannot employ your Occlumency, then you will have to use a memory in order to shield yourself.'

It was a long shot, Snape knew that. But he had to try. He was not going to sit back and watch the girl become another of Lucius' victims. He knew that the man was almost vampiric in the way he sucked desire and love from a woman. And he had seen him leave them, empty husks, drained and desperate, time and time again. But Snape would do all in his power to make sure that Lucius did not destroy Morgana.

Not so long ago, she had desired him, Snape knew that. She had even competed with her best friend to gain his attention. So far, he had turned her away, not because he had wanted to, but because it had been the right thing to do. If he could now rekindle her desire for him, if he could remind her of the moments they had shared, if he gave her something to hold onto, she would possess a weapon against Lucius, a shield to protect herself, a mental Patronus. It was a long shot indeed, but he had to try.

He cupped her chin with his long finger and made her look at him. And once his eyes had caught hers, he was sure that she was not going to look away.

Morgana gasped as her mind was flooded with memories. She found herself in the garden of Malfoy Manor with her hand at Snape's crotch and her lips tightly pressed against his. And at the same time, she was being pushed up against the wall in a dark corridor at the Three Broomsticks, and Snape was grinding himself up against her, eliciting soft moans from her lips as he caressed her breasts through the fabric of her robes.

'When you are with Lucius, you need to focus on those memories,' Snape whispered, running his fingers lightly down her arms. 'His touch must be my touch. His kiss must be my kiss.'

With that, Snape reached down and brushed her lips with his own. He kissed her tenderly at first until he felt her lips part under his. And he deepened his kiss, tasting the sweetness of her mouth until he felt her respond with passion. Then he pulled away.

'Do you understand now, Morgana?' he asked, his hands still resting on her shoulders.

The girl nodded, her blue eyes still locked onto his, and Snape desperately hoped that she wasn't lying, and that she was going to use those memories to protect herself. And he watched her leave with her head held high and her back straight, but he didn't need to use Legilimency to know that her posture was nothing but a facade.

He had meant it when he had called her needy. But who could blame her? Her headstrongness and her morals had made her more enemies than friends in her own House; she had no family to turn to, and from the looks of things she had for some reason lost her best friend. She felt alone, and now Lucius was telling her that he loved her and that she was the most desirable witch in the country. Of course she would fall for it. Even Slytherins needed to feel loved and appreciated. But Snape hoped that he had done enough to show the girl that Lucius was not the only one she could turn to for affection. Little did he know how much his actions had confused her.

Lucius had awoken feelings in her which Morgana did not know how to handle. And when she was lying in his arms, when she was captured by his steely gaze, she could not resist him, and her brain switched off all the alarm bells as soon as they started ringing. And she forgot about the dangers, Lucius' wickedness and even the Dark Lord.

She knew it was wrong. She knew that Lucius did not love her for herself. She knew that their child was just a pawn. But still she did not want to lose Lucius. She did not want to miss his touch and the taste of his lips on hers.

But now Snape had touched her. Snape had kissed her. And her body as well as her heart had responded at once. She had wanted him first. And then she had gone to Lucius because she had been unable to get what she had wanted. She had made a terrible mistake.

'Practice your Occlumency,' Snape had said as if it were the only way to keep her safe. Most probably, he was right. And with every step Morgana took towards the Slytherin common room, she added a brick to the mental wall that protected her mind, hoping that it would also protect her heart.

XXVI: Keep It in the Family

Chapter 26 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXVI: Keep It in the Family

Charis stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, watching the sky changing into shades of deep blue as the sun disappeared over the mountain tops and the stars gradually appeared, twinkling like jewels, as the darkness fell.

It had surprised her no end when she had first found out that Astronomy was taught as a subject at Hogwarts, being as it was a popular science within the Muggle world. But the more she studied, the more she realised that here in the Wizarding world Astronomy was deeply linked with divination, Astrology and symbolism. The Wizarding version of Astronomy tapped in to the divinatory aspects Charis enjoyed and also complemented her Arithmancy lessons. Plus, Professor Sinistra was kind and beautiful, and Charis very much looked up to her graceful teacher. And Professor Flitwick had agreed that she could take Astronomy as an additional NEWT due to her high grade at OWL level and her natural ability and love for the subject.

She let her eyes flit across the sky. There was Ursa Major, and just beside it, she noticed with a shudder, Draco. She gazed at the constellation's brightest star, Eltanin,

wondering how such a foul creature as Malfoy had come to share a name with one of the oldest constellations ever to have been defined.

When the Ancient Egyptians first cast their eyes to the heavens and noted the stars of Eltanin, Rastaban and Thuban and placed them within the constellation, little had they known that thousands of years later, a jumped up, inbred little shit would irrevocably tarnish the name, she thought with a snort.

Charis felt her stomach grow tight at the very thought of that particular Slytherin. There was no denying that he was one of the kingpins behind all the poison that was being spread within his House at the moment.

But as much as his incessant name-calling and jeering hurt Charis, he could not shake her pride in being Muggle-born. It seemed to her as if Draco was threatened somehow, as if all that he placed as being so important meant nothing if a mere Mudblood such as herself could also possess the same powers that he did. This would certainly explain his hostility. Still, his way of walking around like he was better than everyone else and like he owned the place angered Charis no end. If only he knew that daddy dearest had been fucking her best no, she reminded herself her *former* best friend and was now the father of her unborn child.

At that thought, Charis' stomach clenched yet further. She missed her best friend, and her absence still felt raw and sharp, especially now Severus had dumped her like a broken quill. It was difficult to believe that, just six short months ago, life had been so different. Oh, if only she had a Time-Turner! Charis would have done anything to be able to go back and never get involved with Severus. Maybe, she would have never hooked up with Zabini. Maybe, she and Morgana would still be friends. And certainly, her heart would not be broken.

Charis felt hot tears sting her cheeks as she blinked up at Venus. *The goddess of love*, she thought with a sob. That was all she wanted, to be loved. And yet, all she got was sex.

'You deserve more,' Severus had said.

But that had felt so hollow when he had left her, alone and crying, in Firenze's classroom. Charis thought that what he had really been saying was, 'You are good enough for sex, but I will never love you, because you are a slut and not worthy of such love.'

She squeezed her eyes shut and gripped on tightly to the handrail as yet more tears began to fall. She felt so stupid. She was supposed to be a Ravenclaw! Chosen for her keen mind. Her keen mind, it seemed, however, could not control her pathetic heart, no matter how many O's she achieved.

She swallowed dryly, trying to get rid of the burning lump of sorrow lodged in her throat. It was all such a mess the situation with Snape, her continued humiliation from the Slytherins, the fight with Morgana, Morgana's baby. It all seemed so overwhelming, like a nightmare she could not wake up from. And no amount of Ravenclaw logic could solve these problems or make them better.

And for the first time since she had come to Hogwarts, Charis realised with a shudder that she did not want to be there. She wished she could run far, far away, to a place where there was no Morgana Belakane, no Draco Malfoy and no Severus Snape. Maybe her life would be easier if she stayed where she belonged: with Muggles. With *Mudbloods*.

* * *

The following evening, Jack had managed to coax Charis to the library for more research into her family history. She found Jack's project a welcome distraction from dwelling on thoughts of Morgana and Snape. It felt good to be able concentrate on something other than what a mess her life was in at the moment. And Jack was fun company and helped to keep her spirits up.

Explorations on her mother's side had yielded no surprises, much to Charis' disappointment. She had hoped to find some link to the Wizarding world through her maternal lineage because that side of her family had resided in and around what was formerly known as the Vale of Avalon, and logically she supposed there could have been some connection there. She was excited by the idea that her ancestors could have been traced to the times of Merlin.

However, the investigations seemed to stop at her great-great grandparents on her mother's side, as the trail went dead. Charis remembered her mother once telling her that they had Welsh ancestry on her side of the family, and Charis supposed that was why they had reached a dead end. But Jack had also told her that he had expected to find a magical link within four generations anyway, and the fact they had yielded nothing so far meant they were barking up the wrong tree.

'Don't be down-hearted,' Jack told her, noticing her sigh of frustration as he returned yet another record back on the shelf. 'We still have your father's line to trace.'

Charis looked at him forlornly. 'What if we don't find anything there either? What will that mean?'

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But I am ninety-nine percent sure something will come up on your father's side, Charis.'

He sat down next to her, a gentle smile on his face.

'Think of it like this. Your pretty green eyes are a bit of a lottery in terms of genetics. The gene for green eyes is recessive, and the gene for brown is dominant. You need two sets of genes, one from each parent, to determine your eye colour. So, both of your parents carried the recessive gene for green eyes but they only had a one in four chance of having a baby with green eyes. You got lucky, Charis.'

He smiled at her again, and Charis could not help but smile back at her friend. He really was a sweetheart.

'So what I am trying to say is, because the gene for green eyes is recessive, it might not have appeared in your family for generations. And I think the same might be true for magic. If my theory is right, it looks like you got lucky on both counts, kitten.'

'I hope so, Jack, I really do. My dad's parents died before I was born, and Dad doesn't like talking about them much, so I really don't know what we'll be able to find on his side.'

'Well, that makes it even more exciting, doesn't it?' Jack replied, his eyes twinkling in response.

And so, with a renewed sense of vigour, the two friends began poring through more parchments, finding a huge stack of wedding and birth certificates to wade through.

They had been working for only twenty minutes or so, when a familiar drawl interrupted them and made their heads snap up from the table.

'Well, well, Byrne,' Draco Malfoy sneered, his steely blue eyes glittering menacingly. 'Looking into your family tree, are you? Or should I say family weeds. I don't know what you are expecting to find. There's nothing but filth and Muggle scum in there, Mudblood.'

Charis flinched, but Jack instinctively stood up for his friend.

'Is there something you wanted, Malfoy? Or are you just going to bore us to death again with how great you purebloods are, despite all the evidence to the contrary?'

Charis felt a flash of affection for her friend for sticking up for her as Draco merely raised his eyebrow in response.

'I have no idea why you are hanging around with this filthy Mudblood, Morrissey, unless it's to get into those loose knickers of hers. I wouldn't touch her with somebody else's broomstick, personally, but there is no accounting for taste after all.'

'Watch it, Malfoy,' Jack growled, but Draco was on a roll now.

'Surely you've noticed that even Belakane has finally come to her senses and decided to stick to those of her own kind instead of hanging around with scum like her. You should follow her example, Morrissey, unless you want to be branded a blood traitor.'

Jack was about to launch himself at Malfoy in anger, but before he could, Charis was already fleeing the library in tears, her hands clasped over her mouth. So Jack stood slowly, looking Malfoy straight in the eyes.

'You don't scare me, Malfoy. As far as I'm concerned, there's only one person around here with bad blood, and that's you, you inbred little shit.' Jack was shaking, but his voice was surprisingly calm, not betraying the white-hot rage that was bubbling inside him. 'If you ever speak to Charis like that again, you will find that the precious Malfoy line might just be ending sooner than you think.'

And with that, Jack flew out of the library after his housemate, leaving Draco feeling rather amused.

Ah, so they're definitely shagging, then, he thought to himself. Little slut must be good in bed to provoke such a reaction from him

He slowly walked around the desk, poking at the parchments that were littered across it with his wand. Birth certificates, marriage certificates, and articles from newspapers were piled up high. Draco snorted to himself. What Byrne was expecting to find was anyone's guess. It was pretty obvious she was a Muggle-born and of no notable stock.

Draco was about to shove all of the parchments gracelessly on to the floor and leave, when something caught his eye: a newspaper article, poking out from the pile. And the name he saw turned his insides to ice.

... are proud to announce the marriage of Callista Black, 28, to George Byrne, 31, on 26th June 1950.

Black? Draco felt a rush of panic swelling in his chest. His mother's maiden name was Black. They were one of the oldest, most respected families in Wizarding society. Surely, they could not be related ...

With the rush of adrenaline only blind panic can bring, Draco feverishly pored over the stack of birth certificates until he found what he was looking for.

Name: Black, Callista

Sex: Female

Date of birth: 2nd May, 1932

Place of birth: Holland Park, London

Mother: Black, Eleanor

Father: Black, Marius

Marius Black? Now that name rang a bell. Draco thought hard. Where had he heard that name before? It was familiar but he couldn't place it. He rapped his fingers impatiently on the desk as he thought back to any conversations his mother or Aunt Bella may have had. But he couldn't think of anything. In fact, there was no time to think at all. It was ten minutes to curfew.

Draco stood, grabbing both the newspaper article and birth certificate and stuffed them inside his robes, planning on taking them straight to his mother and father as soon as possible. If the Mudblood really was related to the ancient House of Black, it would stir up a hornet's nest of unimaginable magnitude. He could not have his family's position jeopardised by such a revelation.

The nosey Ravenclaws would need to be silenced once and for all.

'You are not going to hide in your dormitory,' Jack said in a firm voice as he caught up with Charis in the empty Ravenclaw common room.

'Please, Jack,' Charis sobbed. 'I don't want ... I can't ...'

'You don't want me to see you cry but you cannot stop?' Jack asked. 'Well, tough luck, Charis Byrne. You are my best friend, and I am not going to let you cry your eyes out behind the closed curtains of your bed.'

Charis wiped her eyes with her sleeve, and before she knew it, Jack had taken her into his arms and was cradling her head against his chest, making soft hushing noises. And she wrapped her arms around his waist and let the tears run freely.

'You should not listen to Malfoy, you know,' Jack pointed out, stroking Charis' hair. 'He is dumb even for someone whose parents are probably related. He has no idea what he is talking about.'

'But he is right, Jack. I am a Mudblood. I ...'

'We do not know that yet,' Jack stated firmly. 'And even if you are, if you are one hundred percent Muggle, what does it matter? You are smart. You are funny, charming, cute. And you are one of the best witches in your year. And what has that pureblood Malfoy to show for? An ugly haircut and bad grades that kept him from getting a new broom for Christmas.'

Jack's comment made Charis giggle, and Jack cupped her chin and made her look up at him. 'Never ever let that inbred little shithead badmouth you again, Charis. His blood status does not make him a good person. Quite the contrary, actually. He is foul and cruel, and frankly I think that he is jealous.'

'Jealous?' Charis frowned. 'Jealous of what?'

'Oh, there are many things,' Jack started. 'But most of all, I think it bugs the hell out of him that Muggle-borns like you can succeed in the Wizarding world, the world which he thinks that he owns due to his blood status. But even he will one day have to accept the fact that he isn't worth slug slime without his daddy's name and money. You, on the other hand, Charis, you will forge your own career. And I bet you ten Galleons here and now, that you will have your own Chocolate Frog card in fifty years.'

Now Charis laughed. 'My own Chocolate Frog card? You are delirious, Jack.'

'Ten Galleons,' he said and reached out his hand. 'Dare you take the bet?'

They shook hands on it, and Jack smiled. 'And next time Malfoy opens his big mouth, I will personally see to that he closes it again.'

Once more, Charis smiled. And in her head formed a plan on just how she would show Draco Malfoy that his comments could not hurt her anymore.

Morgana swore under her breath as she caught sight of Charis in the Great Hall. The rumours she had heard in the Slytherin common room had been true then: Charis was really wearing a Muggle t-shirt with the word MUDBLOOD written over her chest in flashing gold letters. What by Merlin's crotch was she trying to achieve?

Morgana took a deep breath and started walking. She had not talked to Charis in weeks, and their last words had been spoken in anger, but she still cared deeply for the Ravenclaw girl. She could not let her walk with that t-shirt through the Great Hall for everyone to see, especially not certain Slytherins. Flashing that word for Draco Malfoy, for example, would be nothing short of a suicide attempt.

She caught up with Charis only a few meters from the entrance door. 'What, by Hades, do you think you're doing, Charis?' she hissed. She had thought of grabbing Charis by the arm and marching her out of the Hall again, but withdrew her hand as Charis defiantly put out her chin.

'Do you have any problems with my outfit?' she replied, looking down at her clothes: pretty strappy heels, a short pleated skirt. 'Too challenging for your taste? Or too Muggle?'

Morgana narrowed her eyes. 'For a Ravenclaw, you are incredibly daft at times. I am talking about THAT,' she said, and pointed at Charis' chest.

'Mudblood?' Charis asked innocently. 'That's what I am, Morgana. I refuse to be hurt by that term anymore.'

'Can't you just write *Muggle-born*'?

'No, I cannot. *Mudblood* has more impact. I want to throw it back in people's faces. Especially Malfoy's.'

Morgana's eyes darted towards her House table. And as if Charis had jinxed it, young Malfoy had risen from his seat and was now walking towards them, his cronies Crabbe and Goyle by his side.

'How thick can one get, Byrne?' he sneered. 'Are you seriously advertising your low status?'

'I happen to be proud of my heritage, Malfoy,' Charis replied in a steady voice. 'Just like you are.'

Draco did not even dignify Charis' statement with a reaction but turned towards Morgana. 'Belakane, go sit down!'

Morgana bit her lip. Part of her wanted to tell the little ferret to shove his broom up his arse, but another part told her to keep her mouth shut. She was in enough trouble already. Today, Charis would have to sort out her mess herself. And she never looked back at her Star Sister as Draco grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the Slytherin table.

What had Morgana wanted? Charis wondered. At first, she had thought that the Slytherin was insulted by the word *Mudblood* and that she was telling her off. But then she had seen how Morgana had flinched when Malfoy had approached. Since when did the little inbred twit have such power over her best friend?

'If it were not Saturday, I would deduct fifty points from your House for that outfit, Miss Byrne.'

Charis spun around and almost bumped into Snape, who was standing right behind her. She had not even heard him approach. Nobody ever did.

'That word, Miss Byrne, is not something to be shown off within these walls,' Snape continued. 'Especially not in times like these.' He raised his wand, and it took only one flick to change the word *Mudblood* to *Muggle-born*.

'I ... I was just trying to show that this word will never hurt me again, sir,' Charis tried to explain. 'I was trying to reclaim it and show that I am proud of what I am.'

'There are better ways to do that, Miss Byrne. You do not want to get yourself in trouble like that.'

Snape's voice was low and calm, and Charis looked up at her Potions master in awe. His obsidian eyes were boring into hers, and for a moment, Charis found it hard to breathe. He cared. He really cared!

Their eye contact broke as loud yelling from the Slytherin table made Snape spin around. Morgana and Draco were both standing, glaring at each other from their respective sides of the table.

'Say that again, Malfoy. If you dare!'

'I think you heard me clearly, Belakane. But I can repeat it for the rest of the school to hear, if you wish. You're a BLOOD TRAITOR!'

The students and teachers in the Great Hall had barely time to gasp. Morgana was over the table in a blink of an eye, and Draco went down like a sack of pumpkins as her fist made impact with his nose. And she would have punched him a second time had Snape not swooped down on her and grabbed her by her wrist.

'That is quite enough, Miss Belakane.' He didn't yell. He did not even sound angry. Instead, his voice was cold as ice, and Morgana did not know what made her shiver more, his voice or the realisation of what she had just done. She had physically assaulted Draco Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy's son!

'Draco, go see the nurse,' Snape continued. 'Miss Belakane, you are coming with me.' And without letting go of her wrist, Snape dragged Morgana out of the Great Hall.

'Everyone, the show is over.' McGonagall's voice echoed through the hall and made the students take off their eyes from the Slytherin table. 'Finish your breakfast and then return to your common rooms.'

Everyone did as they were told. Everyone except Charis. She was still rooted to the very spot where Morgana had stopped her less than ten minutes ago.

'Are you alright, sweetie?'

Charis blinked and looked up at Jack who had approached her from the Ravenclaw table. 'I think I just caused that argument,' she whispered, a terrible feeling growing in her stomach. Morgana had tried to warn her, she had not listened, and now her Star Sister was in serious trouble.

Although he had not showed it in the Great Hall, Snape felt apoplectic with rage. The last thing Belakane should be doing is drawing more attention to herself and putting herself and her unborn child in danger. Especially with that unborn child's step-sibling! Did the girl have absolutely no common sense?

He dragged Morgana through into his office, slamming the door behind him.

'Explain yourself!' he barked, his black eyes glittering with anger.

Morgana stared at the floor, shaking, unable to meet his gaze. On their way down to his office, she had silently awaited Snape's outburst. But she had not been prepared for anything like this. She had never seen her Head of House so angry at her before.

'He deserved it,' she muttered, feeling vilified.

'Miss Belakane, you do not use physical violence on someone just because their views do not correspond with your own!'

Morgana kept her eyes on the ground. Of course, Snape was right. And although feisty, Morgana was not someone to ordinarily use violence. But the little shit Malfoy had first insulted Charis by using words that were so foul that his tongue was surely going to rot. And when she had stood up for her friend, he had had the guts to call her a

blood traitor. Her! The girl who was carrying his father's child, the heir of the Dark Lord! And she had lost her composure.

'Furthermore,' Snape continued, 'you have succeeded in elevating the danger posed to yourself and Miss Byrne, not to mention your unborn baby!'

Morgana felt like she had been slapped. How dare he? She raised her head and gave him a glare worthy of Minerva McGonagall. 'That baby is not supposed to live anyway!'

'Miss Belakane, need I remind you that the baby needs to be kept safe until the time is right?' Snape was beside himself with rage. Did the girl seriously not realise what kind of danger she was in?

'Miss Byrne was very foolish in her choice of clothing today,' he went on, 'but you should not let yourself be dragged into her battles.'

Morgana closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She had told Charis that she would be unable to look out for her any more, but despite everything despite returning her necklace and walking away from their friendship Morgana cared deeply for Charis. She could not just sit there and let Lucius' spiteful git of a son insult her.

'Lucius will be angry with you,' Snape stated in a low voice, slowly pacing the office. 'Draco will go crying to him like the spoiled brat he is. It is foolish to test his loyalties like that.'

Morgana brought her hand up to her face. Lucius had been far from her mind when she punched Draco. But Snape was right. The incident would not go unheard of. How was she going to explain her way out of that?

'I'm afraid you and Dumbledore chose the wrong girl for this task,' she murmured. 'I'm just not strong enough for this.'

Snape stopped pacing and fixed the girl with a hard stare. 'Nonsense. If you had continued practicing your Occlumency, none of this would have happened. Control your emotions! How many more times do I need to tell you? It is even more important now you are hormonal!'

'Thanks for rubbing that in!' Morgana spat before she could stop herself but regretted it immediately. 'I'm sorry, sir,' she added quietly, biting her lip. Her emotions were riding a roller coaster, and she had indeed no control of them whatsoever.

Snape breathed deeply through his nose, trying to remain calm. 'This is a testing time for all of us, Miss Belakane. I ask you not to make your situation any worse with carelessness. Employ your Occlumency. Discipline your mind. This mental control is the only thing that will help stop these kinds of ridiculous and potentially dangerous incidents.'

'I can't, sir.' Morgana was desperate. She had told him before that she didn't have the strength. Why wouldn't he listen?

'Can't or WON'T?' Snape asked roughly.

Morgana looked up and saw the stony look in his eyes. 'I cannot, sir!' she pleaded. 'I have tried ... I have failed ...'

By now, Morgana was trying not to cry. The heated confrontation with Draco and Snape's yelling and stubborn goading about Occlumency was pushing her nerves to breaking point.

'Then you try again,' Snape replied calmly.

He took several steps towards her, until he was standing right in front of the girl.

'You were once the most capable witch in your House and the most determined. What has happened to that witch?' he asked quietly. 'That witch who would have once busted a gut to show me how good she was, how she could achieve anything I set her? That witch that now tells me she can't?'

'That witch is carrying the spawn of the devil! And it is breaking her down!' Morgana was feverishly blinking back the tears now. 'I can't sleep, I can't eat, my head feels like it is being attacked by Beaters ...'

Then she broke. The tears came running down her cheeks, and she did not even try to stop them. She did not care anymore.

Snape watched the girl, pale and shaking before him. He had never seen her so defeated. 'Miss Belakane, you need to be strong,' he answered softly, his anger slowly running off of him. 'You can do this.'

Morgana merely squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head as the tears continued to fall down her cheeks. She would not play strong anymore. She wouldn't have had the strength if she had wanted to.

Snape took another step closer to the girl, looking down at her until she was ready to lift her head. And when she met his gaze, she found a look in his eyes she had not seen before.

'You were sorted into Slytherin for a reason, Miss Belakane. Do you know why?'

'No, sir,' Morgana answered, wiping her tears away with the heel of her hand.

'I will tell you why, Miss Belakane. Because Slytherins are capable of feats of bravery that would shame a Gryffindor. Yes, we all know about the House traits of cunning and ambition. But at the heart of a true Slytherin lies the ability to carry out acts that others could not. Acts that require enormous courage and personal sacrifice. Acts that others may often judge as immoral. Acts that only a Slytherin could do.'

Snape looked deep into the girl's widened blue eyes now, eyes that were filled with admiration.

'You are a Slytherin, Morgana. You can do this.'

'I am failing, sir,' Morgana replied in a weak voice. 'I cannot trust myself at the moment. You know that hitting people is beneath me. I have other means to make them understand, even Draco.'

'This is why your Occlumency is so important,' Snape stressed. 'I KNOW you are capable. You just have not mastered the right technique for you.'

'I can't do this by myself...' Morgana mumbled, her gaze once again returning to the floor.

Snape took the chance to study the girl, then. She indeed looked tired and drained, and she was clearly feeling alone. He had noticed both of the self-titled Star Sisters had been avoiding each other for weeks now. Had they fought? Or were they just too busy with their own lives? Either way, something had come between them, and he had noticed the girls glancing sadly at each other's House table at mealtimes when the other wasn't looking. They obviously both missed each other. And the fact that Morgana was still sticking up for Charis even against the likes of Draco Malfoy showed that their loyalty to each other still ran deep.

He sighed. 'Believe me, Miss Belakane, you are not alone.'

Morgana rubbed her temples, her face ashen. 'I know, sir,' she whispered. Snape had offered her his help before, but never before had she been so grateful for a kind word from her Head of House.

'Have you seen the nurse lately?' Snape enquired. The girl looked like owl droppings, and if she was genuinely having a rough pregnancy, as her Head of House, he needed to know.

'I've been to the Hospital Wing this morning,' Morgana confirmed.

'And what did the nurse say?'

Morgana took a deep breath. 'She said she doesn't know why I am feeling as bad as I am. She says the potion I've been taking should be working, that I should be able to eat ...'

'And yet you are not?' Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

Morgana shook her head sombrely. Over the last couple of days, she had been living on herbal tea and Poppy's potions.

'I made that potion myself,' Snape muttered a little indignantly. 'I have had no complaints before.'

'I'm sure it would work if I could keep it down,' Morgana added hastily, sensing annoyance from the proud Potions master. He was the best potioneer the Wizarding world had seen in decades. The last thing she needed now was him being pissed at her because she reacted badly to one of his potions. 'Do you always give it a chocolate flavour?' she added with a small smile.

Snape's mouth twitched in response. 'Usually it tastes of seaweed, Miss Belakane. I thought chocolate would be more ... appealing.'

'Well, thank you, sir. It is quite tasty on its way DOWN. Not that tasty on its way up though.'

Snape frowned, mumbling to himself. 'If the liquid form is the issue, the answer could be to transform the potion into lozenges. Maybe even ...'

He strode towards his desk as if possessed by an idea, and Morgana watched as he rifled around in his drawer. After a few moments, he triumphantly dropped a packet of boiled mints on to the desktop.

'I am not sure this will work, but it has to be worth a try,' he told her, striding past her only to take down a bottle of potion from one of the shelves at the back.

As he returned to the desk he pulled out his wand from beneath his robes. And Morgana watched in fascination as he carefully hollowed out a sweet with his wand before pouring a little of the potion in and sealing it again.

'Try that,' he told her, handing her the sweet.

Morgana eyed the mint suspiciously. 'You might want to have a bucket ready.'

Snape raised his eyebrow in annoyance and pointed to the wastepaper bin, and Morgana looked at him balefully as she gingerly put the sweet in her mouth. She had tried to eat a piece of toast earlier, but her stomach had protested already after the first careful nibble. It seemed to be one of those days when nothing stayed down, and the last thing she wanted to do was to vomit in front of Snape. To her surprise, the candy tasted nice. No wonder, it was one of Honeydukes' finest, and once again Morgana wondered if her Head of House had a secret sweet tooth.

Snape watched the girl expectantly as she ate the sweet carefully. She looked nervous and seemed to be listening to her body for the first sign of nausea. But nothing happened. After a few moments, she swallowed and opened her mouth for Snape to see. 'Gone,' she added, unnecessarily.

Snape did a good job of wrinkling his not inconsiderable nose. 'Good,' he answered curtly. 'And how are you feeling?'

'Not like I'm about to throw up anyway. But saying that I am fine would be a lie.'

'Very well.' Snape seemed to take this to be acceptable and began to make more mints with potions inside.

'I want you to think very carefully about today's events, Miss Belakane,' he said in his smooth baritone as he worked. 'As I mentioned, Lucius will not be happy about this incident one little bit. Be prepared for some fall-out from your performance earlier.'

Morgana merely nodded, watching her professor skillfully making potion sweets with his nimble hands.

'Due to your symptoms, I am prepared to overlook the incident for punishment,' he stressed sternly. 'On this occasion only.'

'Thank you, sir,' Morgana whispered gratefully. But Snape seemed to ignore her.

'I am telling you to practice Occlumency for your own safety. I want you to make this your priority from now on,' he continued, placing the sweets back into the Honeydukes packet. 'And if you are still unable to eat by tomorrow evening, I want you to go straight to the mediwitch. Understood?' And with that, Snape handed over the packet of mints to the girl, who took them with shaking hands.

'Yes, sir,' she mumbled, stashing them inside her robes.

'Very well. Then you may leave.'

Snape watched as the girl walked slowly towards the door only to pause, turning on her way out.

'Thank you, sir. For everything.'

Snape merely nodded curtly in response.

'Have a nice weekend, sir.' It felt stupid to say such a thing, and promptly, Snape raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

'I hardly think *nice* will come into it, Miss Belakane.'

'No, I know, sir,' Morgana conceded. 'It's just a thing people say.'

And with that, she gave a sad smile and closed the door behind her.

XXVII: Balance of Allegiance

Chapter 27 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXVII: Balance of Allegiance

'You wished to see me, Headmaster?'

Snape closed the heavy oak door behind himself and approached Dumbledore's desk, wondering what had happened to his plans of having a nice and quiet weekend.

'Actually, Severus, it is Poppy who wished to speak to you.'

The mediwitch looked like thunder, and Snape groaned inwardly. If she was going to tell him that Draco had made a scene in the hospital wing and demanded to talk to his daddy because his oh-so-pretty face had been mangled, he would have to visit Malfoy Manor and soothe a furious father. And that was the very last thing Snape had the desire to do that Saturday.

'It seems,' the Headmaster continued, 'that our mother-to-be is experiencing difficulties.'

Snape frowned. Morgana had seemed quite alright when she had left his office earlier. The sweets he had made for her had seemed to be working.

'The poor girl is a mess,' Poppy explained. 'Miss Parkinson found her in the dormitory, close to fainting. By the time they arrived at the hospital wing, Morgana's blood pressure was so low that I considered taking her to St. Mungo's.'

'But you did not?' Dumbledore enquired.

'No, I did not, Albus.' Poppy looked insulted. 'I managed to make her lie down and take some potions. And that was quite a task. The girl is more stubborn than a Hippogriff.'

'Classical Slytherin behaviour,' Dumbledore noted, and Snape narrowed his eyes. Why the hell had the girl not said anything? Was she really so proud that she would not admit that she was unwell? Or would she just not tell HIM? What more would he have to do to make her trust him?

'Albus,' Poppy continued, 'I have never seen a pregnancy like this. It is normal to feel queasy during the first trimester. Even headaches and nosebleeds are quite common. But Morgana is genuinely ill. She doesn't respond to any potions, and she is losing weight. It seems almost as if her body is fighting that baby.'

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged a quick look over the mediwitch's head, and Snape felt a shudder go down his spine. The girl was carrying the spawn of the devil, and she knew it. It wouldn't surprise him if her subconscious was fighting against it. And he was at a loss as to how to help her. She needed to control her emotions, to discipline her mind. He had told her how important that was. If she didn't succeed, the whole situation might just break her.

Poppy left after having declared that she would keep Morgana in the hospital for at least another day, and Dumbledore took to pacing the office.

'Of all the Slytherin traits, the girl chooses to excel in stubbornness,' he mumbled. 'She will not ask for help and is too stubborn to accept any when it is offered.'

'Did we overestimate her abilities, Headmaster?' The girl had said that she doubted her strength. Perhaps she was right.

'No, no, Severus, I don't think so. But we have to remember that Morgana is young. She is putting up a brave face, but underneath that tough shell, there is a scared little girl. A scared little girl who needs a mother figure, someone to talk to.'

'A mother figure?' Snape raised an eyebrow. 'And who, may I ask, do you have in mind, Headmaster? The girl's mother is dead.'

'Well, I was hoping you could put on a dress and go down there ...' Dumbledore chuckled at Snape's scandalized expression. 'Poppy, of course, dear boy. But the girl does need our support as well. She needs to feel that she can turn to us in any matter. I do hope that you were not too hard on her today.'

Not too hard? Snape almost snorted. When he had dragged Morgana to his study, he had seriously considered giving her a good spanking. Instead, he had ended up making sweets for her.

'Pregnancy cannot be underestimated as an easy ride, Severus,' Dumbledore continued. 'Your lenience when dealing with Morgana would be appreciated.'

'Lenience? MY lenience?!' Snape couldn't believe it. 'I sincerely hope that you do not expect me to tuck her in at night and read her a bedtime story!'

Dumbledore chuckled softly. 'My dear boy, I think Morgana is too old for that now.' Then he became serious. 'You and I both know that Lucius will not be happy about the altercation at breakfast. And whereas I am sure he will not harm Morgana, physically that is, I am also sure that she will not get away with it.'

'He will try to break her spirit. He will humiliate her.'

Dumbledore nodded gravely. 'And when the girl returns to the castle, I need you to keep your door unlocked.'

'What does my door have to do with anything?'

'I want you to listen to her, Severus. I want you to show some sympathy.'

'I am not the Samaritans, Headmaster,' Snape spat. 'She has friends to talk to.'

'Severus, please! Even you must have noticed that the girl is all alone. For some reason, she and her Ravenclaw friend have not spoken for weeks. And as we have seen at breakfast, she is hardly making friends in her own House either. And when she breaks, Severus, we cannot have her run back to Malfoy!'

Of course, they could not. And Snape knew all too well what Dumbledore was talking about. Lucius Malfoy had the ability to tear the girl to pieces with one hand and then heal her wounds with the other. And the poor thing would not even notice that he was toying with her like a Kneazle with a Pygmy Puff.

'Morgana may not show it, but she trusts you, Severus,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'Do not turn her away when she shows up at your doorstep. We need her. And we need the child she is carrying.'

Snape clenched his teeth. What more was he supposed to do?

'I do not expect you to solve any problems, Severus,' Dumbledore continued. 'Just listen. Now, do sit down. I have some Hogwarts business to discuss with you. May I offer you a drink?'

Snape cocked an eyebrow at the old man. 'It is ten thirty in the morning, Headmaster.'

'And I have lemonade.' Dumbledore poured himself a huge glass of the pink liquid. 'Are you quite sure that you don't want any, Severus?'

Snape resolutely shook his head, and Dumbledore took a seat behind his desk, sipping his sickeningly pink lemonade. 'I have been informed that the Ministry has plans for inspecting Hogwarts, Severus. It seems as if Dolores wants a second opinion on matters.' He took another gulp of lemonade and then carefully put the glass down. 'As flavoursome as this lemonade is, I think it will take more than that to appease the governors, especially Mr Malfoy.'

'Seeing as his son was punched on the nose today, you mean?' Snape enquired in a sour tone. As much as Lucius needed Morgana, he was not going to let her forget her little faux pas. 'When do you anticipate the visit by the governors?' he enquired.

'Within a week,' Dumbledore replied. 'They will want to surprise us. And I have no doubt that this inspection will give them the excuse they need to usurp me. Some of them have been looking for a way to get me out of Hogwarts for a long time. I hoped it would be later rather than sooner.'

'I assume you have made plans.' Snape fixed the Headmaster with an intense stare. This was not a time to play games, and he expected Dumbledore to tell him the truth.

The Headmaster nodded gravely. 'When the time comes, Severus, I need you to be my eyes and ears. I need you to protect the students, especially Harry and Morgana.'

'I can only do so much, Headmaster,' Snape replied. 'They are safe within these walls, but I cannot guarantee that they will stay put, especially not Potter.'

'You are the only one I would trust with that task, Severus,' Dumbledore said in a kind tone. 'I know that you are not perfect, but I also know that you will do your best. And that is more than good enough for me.'

Snape crossed his arms in front of his chest. 'I do not need your praise, Headmaster.'

Dumbledore smiled. 'I am well aware of that. But it must be said.'

Snape huffed indignantly and decided to change topics. 'I assume you will be at Grimmauld Place once the Ministry has gotten rid of you.'

'Unless they send me to Azkaban.'

'Surely, you do not intend to be captured?'

'I intend ... not to arouse suspicions. If that means following their plans for a while, then so be it.' Dumbledore's eyes twinkled mischievously. 'You and I both know that I could escape easily, but that would be too dramatic and draw too much attention. It will be far better to let them think that we are playing along.'

'My suggestion would be to disappear into thin air.'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'Too suspicious.'

Snape couldn't help but grin. 'Dumbledore, you are suspicious already.'

'Me?' He sounded genuinely surprised. 'But, Severus, I am just a doddering, old man.'

'Yes, Headmaster,' Snape replied. 'I am very much aware of that.'

Dumbledore raised his lemonade glass as if to announce a toast and took a healthy gulp. 'Tell me, Severus,' he started. 'Have you ever wanted a family of your own?'

'I fail to see the relevance of that question,' Snape stated, trying to sound unmoved. But his eyebrows, which were about to disappear under his hairline, betrayed his surprise.

'Nothing would make me happier than to see you settle down, dear boy,' Dumbledore continued, either ignoring or not noticing Snape's shocked expression.

'There is no one to settle down with, Headmaster,' Snape replied through gritted teeth. How dare the old fool take up that issue? He knew damn well that there had only been one woman in the life of Severus Snape. And that woman had been dead and buried for far too many years.

'Forgive a sentimental old man, Severus,' Dumbledore said, raising his hand in a defensive gesture. 'Sometimes, I just think that you are so committed to this school and its protection that you neglect your own needs.'

Snape's jaws tightened. What was the old man playing at?

'I am in perfect control of my needs, Headmaster.'

Dumbledore smiled. 'How about embracing them instead of locking them away?'

'I do not have the luxury to do that at the present time, Headmaster, as you should be very well aware of.' Had the old man not just given him yet another task, to protect the school, Harry Potter and Morgana Belakane? Did he really think this to be a nine-to-five-job that allowed plenty of leisure time?

Still, Dumbledore was smiling. 'We all need a little happiness in these troubled days.'

'Happiness is for fools,' Snape pointed out, scowling at the word happiness as if it were a foul word indeed. 'Next thing you will be telling me that you are organising a Spring Ball.'

'Funny you should mention that.'

Once more, Snape's eyebrows shot up. 'You cannot be serious, Dumbledore.'

'Why ever not?' One could almost hear the wheels in Dumbledore's mind turning. 'It gives people hope. And if I am to leave Hogwarts in a few weeks, I would very much

like to have a last party.'

Snape groaned inwardly as he entered the library at Malfoy Manor. Meeting the Dark Lord shortly before dinner was bad enough, but having to be in the same room with He-Who-Should-Be-Committed, inbred egomaniac Lucius Malfoy and bat shit crazy Bellatrix Lestrange surely spoiled any appetite Snape might have had.

This had certainly been a day from hell. First Morgana had broken Draco's nose, then Dumbledore had called the Heads to discuss the Spring Ball, and just when Snape had hoped that he would finally get some well-deserved peace, the Mark on his left forearm had started to burn. And now it looked like the meeting was going to be all about the Malfoys.

Bellatrix was standing to the Dark Lord's right, much closer than any other Death Eater would ever dare. Lucius was standing beside her, chest puffed out and a complacent sneer on his face. And Snape couldn't shake off the feeling that the next hour of his life would be filled with the sort of bragging only Lucius Malfoy could pull off.

He fell to his knees and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robe, keeping his eyes reverentially cast down. 'My Lord,' he breathed and then waited to be given permission to rise again.

'Severus, dear Severus,' the Dark Lord exclaimed theatrically and took a step backwards, which Snape took as a sign to get off his knees. 'I am pleased you could join us.'

Snape tried not to sneer. As if he had had a choice. Not following the Dark Lord's call meant excruciating pain at the least. Naturally, he had dropped everything the moment the foul mark on his left forearm had started to burn.

'Tell me, Severus, how are things in Slytherin House?'

Ah, the little episode at the breakfast table had already reached the Dark Lord's ears. Of course, Draco had tattled to daddy, and daddy had in his turn run to the Dark Lord. How pathetic! And for a moment, Snape wished that Morgana had actually knocked out a few of his teeth as well as broken his nose, so all this would be worth the trouble.

'My Lord,' he started. 'The incident is most regrettable, of course. The only thing that can be said in the girl's defence is that she is under a lot of stress. The NEWT year is a taxing time for even the most able students. And her pregnancy is not going as well as we had hoped.'

Snape saw the Dark Lord flash Lucius an incensed look. Obviously Lucius had not mentioned anything about the girl being unwell.

'Not going well? Explain, Severus.'

'My Lord, the girl is ill.'

'Nonsense,' Lucius butted in. 'The girl is in perfectly good health.'

'The mediwitch informs me that the girl has neither eaten properly nor had a full night's sleep for two weeks,' Snape explained, blatantly ignoring Lucius. 'I have prepared several potions, my Lord. But the girl is responding poorly.'

'Maybe that is the problem,' Lucius interrupted with a sugary tone. 'Who can blame the girl for being ill when she had to deal with your bitterness and look at your sour face every day?'

It would not take more than a flick of his wand to kill the man. A flick of his wand and a Killing Curse. Or he could strangle him with his bare hands. That would most probably be even more satisfying. But Snape resisted the impulse. He would not lose his temper and give Lucius the satisfaction.

Instead, he merely raised his eyebrow and enquired in a silky voice: 'Your alleged firstborn pestering her has, of course, nothing to do with the girl being upset, has it, Lucius?'

'My son, Severus, is loyal to the cause!' Lucius snapped, just a little louder than expected. And Snape smirked inwardly. He seemed to have struck a nerve.

Unfortunately, Lucius calmed down all too quickly. 'Draco, contrary to certain other Slytherins, is very concerned with the development at Hogwarts. With that ruddy old fool Dumbledore still being Headmaster, the Mudbloods are taking far too many liberties. For example, did you know, Severus, that a pair of Ravenclaws is digging up dirt on one of the most noble Wizarding families?'

Once more, Snape's eyebrow shot up, this time in surprise. Which Ravenclaws was Lucius talking about? And what did he mean with *digging up dirt on one of the most noble Wizarding families*? Surely, he could not be talking about Morrissey and Byrne's genealogy project. Or could he? And if he was, what the hell had the two found that was important enough for Lucius to care?

'What students of other Houses do in their spare time is none of my business, Lucius.'

'I suggest you make it your business, Severus,' Lucius hissed. 'If you let them carry on, people might just start questioning your loyalties.'

'My loyalties are not up for discussion, Lucius. I, unlike you, have not the luxury of having our Lord around for tea.'

'There is a possibility that I will soon be able to visit Hogwarts, dear Severus,' the Dark Lord announced with something that could have counted as a smile on a more human face. On his face, however, it came across like nothing else but a malevolent sneer.

'Dolores Umbridge has done remarkably well to position herself just where we need her,' the Dark Lord continued. 'She has suggested an inspection by the school governors, and Lucius here has made sure that she will get what she wished for.'

Once more, Lucius seemed to grow an inch or two. 'Anything for the cause, my Lord.'

The Dark Lord looked at the blond wizard benevolently before concentrating on Snape again. 'Once the governors have seen what we want them to see, Dumbledore will finally be removed from his office. Which will give you a chance to unearth some of his mysteries, Severus. His office, his instruments ... I want everything turned upside down. I want to know everything.'

Snape nodded in acceptance. As so often, Dumbledore was one step ahead of the Dark Lord, and they already had a plan. 'I can make Umbridge believe Dumbledore sealed his office upon his departure, my Lord,' he explained. 'In that way, I can work undisturbed.'

'Excellent, Severus. Excellent.'

The rest of the conversation consisted of the Dark Lord describing precisely what Snape was supposed to be looking for in Dumbledore's office, but Snape only listened with half an ear. He would show the Dark Lord only those things Dumbledore deemed necessary. And when one of Lucius' elves entered the room to inform her master that dinner was served, Snape excused himself.

'My Lord, the mediwitch will want me to brew another potion for Miss Belakane. We want her to be strong and healthy, so she can provide you with a strong and healthy heir, do we not?'

'Your potions haven't worked so far, have they?' came Lucius' low drawl. 'One wonders if you are deliberately sabotaging them. Or are you just losing your touch?'

Snape felt a muscle in his jaw twitch, but he would not give Lucius the satisfaction of dignifying his insult with an answer. Unfortunately, Lucius took his silence as a sign to go on.

'Do try not to poison the girl, Severus. Neither with your concoctions or your presence. I would very much like to have her around for lunch tomorrow.'

You would very much like to have her, indeed Snape thought, oppressing a sneer. Take her, devour her.

'There is no need to worry, Lucius,' he said instead. 'Miss Belakane will be standing in front of you fresh as a rose by noon tomorrow.'

'Oh, she won't be standing for long.' Lucius smiled lasciviously. 'Women are terribly frisky during pregnancy, and I fully intend to offer my services. Their taste changes due to the hormones, you know. It's delicious, like an exquisite fruit, succulent and sweet ...'

Now Snape did sneer and silently wished that Lucius would develop an allergy against that *exquisite fruit* and die of an anaphylactic shock before he could touch the girl. He hated the thought of the blond philanderer once again sinking his teeth into Morgana. In her current condition, the girl would not stand a chance to resist him.

* * *

Morgana was already awake when Winky came to summon her to Snape's office at seven thirty on Sunday morning. Or was she still awake? It certainly felt as if she had not slept at all.

She had been awoken by Lucius' owl shortly before midnight, and since then she had been too anxious to sleep. He had invited her to lunch, and as sweet as his words had sounded, Morgana could not ignore the ominous feeling in the pit of her stomach. And now Snape wanted to see her at this early hour, and what he had in store was anyone's guess.

She put on a plain, black robe and black leather boots. Make-up she did not bother with. Instead, she placed a simple Beautification Charm on her face. Neither Snape nor Lucius needed to see the dark shadows under her eyes.

She was told to enter at once when she knocked on the Potions master's door. And she slipped inside, closing the door firmly behind herself.

'Good morning, sir,' she mumbled, and Snape pointed towards the chair that was standing in front of his desk.

'Is the potion working?' Snape enquired, and Morgana nodded. She had had some bread and fruit for dinner last night, and it had stayed down. Then again, dinner most often did. Breakfast was a different matter.

Snape narrowed his eyes. He hated to be lied to, and even if the girl was lying to stroke his potioneer ego, it was still a lie. He conjured a bowl of porridge and pushed it towards Morgana, and the tightening of her jaw muscles was exactly the reaction he had expected to see. Without a word, he removed the porridge and replaced it with a phial that contained a bright yellow liquid.

'I have brewed another potion,' he announced. 'It appears that in very rare cases, some people are sensitive to Manga Weed, which is a staple ingredient in the previous potion. The reactions include headaches, nausea and nosebleed.'

And Lucius has been right he added in his mind. *I might indeed have been poisoning you*

That thought was, however, far from Morgana's mind. All she could think about was that Snape had been up all night, researching and brewing a new potion for her. And she felt a gratitude towards her Head of House which she had never experienced before.

'This potion,' Snape continued, pointing at the phial, 'is usually given to infants. It does not contain Manga Weed and has nearly no side effects. Drink.'

'Pineapple?' Morgana asked as she had emptied the phial, and Snape nodded.

'A curious flavour, which is naturally produced by the potion. It makes it palatable to infants. And by the looks of it, even to seventeen-year-old witches.'

He took the empty phial from Morgana and placed two more in front of her. 'I want you to drink those before lunchtime,' he instructed. 'You do not want to insult Lucius even further by throwing up on his Persian rug after lunch.'

Morgana bit her lip. 'You know then that I have been invited to lunch?'

Snape sneered. 'Yes, I have been informed. I fear you do not have the luxury of turning the invitation down, no matter how you are feeling.'

'There is no point in delaying the inevitable, is there?' The bitter tone in Morgana's voice could not be ignored. 'Lucius is going to tell me off for hitting Draco, and he might just as well do that when I am feeling low already. Telling him that I am sorry will be more effective when I am crying.'

Snape swiped around his desk and came to stand mere inches from the girl, glaring down his nose at her. 'I am telling you once again to use your Occlumency against the man. Do not let him know that he is getting to you. Do not let him know that you are weak. And most important, do not believe a word he is saying!'

Morgana nodded. Right there in Snape's office, promising to resist Lucius seemed so easy. And she prayed that she would have the strength to stand firm at the Manor as well. But when she left the dungeon, both she and Snape knew that she didn't stand a chance.

* * *

'Welcome to Malfoy Manor, Miss Morgana,' Silvy piped as she opened the floor and bowed so low that her nose touched the floor. 'Master Lucius is awaiting you.'

The door fell closed, and the elf led the way to the drawing room.

Morgana frowned. 'Silvy, why are you limping?' she enquired.

The elf froze. 'Silvy fell, Miss.'

Morgana reached for the elf and gingerly lifted the pillowcase the creature was wearing, revealing a heavily bruised leg. 'Fell, you say? Over what? Lucius' cane? About five times?'

Silvy looked terrified. 'No, Miss. Silvy is clumsy. Silvy fell.'

Of course, the poor thing was not allowed to tell the truth, but Morgana was certain that Lucius had caused the bruising during a sudden outburst of his temper. And she could not help but wonder what he planned to do with her.

She sighed and patted the elf awkwardly on the cheek. 'I will take you away from here one day, Silvy,' she promised. 'When all of this is over, I will take you to Hogwarts.'

The elf sniffled. 'Miss Morgana is a good witch. Kindest witch Silvy knows.'

Morgana smiled sadly, thinking about the task she was to carry out and about the child that was growing in her womb. She had agreed that this child would never be born. She was anything but good. And being kind to the elf would never be enough to redeem herself.

Lucius was sitting on the sofa, all dressed in grey, as usual looking refined and almost regal. He smiled kindly at Morgana as she entered and patted the empty seat beside him.

'Morgana, my love. Welcome, welcome. Come sit.'

He brushed her cheek with his fingers as she sat down and looked deep into her blue eyes. 'How have you been?'

'I have been better,' Morgana answered, concentrating hard not to shiver at Lucius' touch. She had to resist. She had to control her emotions. Snape had said that it was vital.

'My poor love,' Lucius whispered, his fingers now tracing her neck and collarbone. 'Are you suffering from morning sickness?'

'I'd call it twenty-four-seven sickness,' Morgana explained. 'But it is getting better. Professor Snape made a new potion.'

'Did he now?' Lucius' hand had wandered lower, and he was now touching the side of her breast ever so softly. 'Would you say that your *fitness* has made you act out of character, my love? At all?'

Morgana bit her lip and nodded, and Lucius leant in, breathing softly onto the side of her neck while his hand slid down over her waist.

'Are you overly emotional?' he enquired. 'Do you find it hard to control your anger?'

A soft 'hm' was all Morgana was able to respond. Lucius' breath on the side of her neck made her whole body tingle, and she wanted him to kiss her, wanted to feel his hands on her naked skin. But instead, Lucius withdrew.

'I heard about the incident at breakfast yesterday, Morgana,' he started in a low voice, his steely eyes glinting. 'Draco was most upset, not to mention humiliated. Hit in front of the whole school, by one of his own House, by an older pupil, by a girl.' Once more, he extended his hand and brushed Morgana's cheek with his fingertips, while his thumb trailed lightly over her lips. 'When I found out that girl was you, my heart felt like it was in a vice. My only son, squabbling with the woman I love, the woman who is carrying his sibling ... Love, that cut me like a knife.'

Morgana felt her breath hitch in her throat, and when she opened her mouth to speak, the first thing that escaped her lips was a soft sob. 'I am sorry, Lucius,' she whispered. 'I snapped. I shouldn't have ...'

'No you should not have,' Lucius affirmed. 'It was a cruel act. My first born, humiliated by the woman I love.'

Morgana could not help herself. Suddenly, there were tears burning in her eyes, and as she blinked, they rolled down her cheek.

'My child is an extension of me, Morgana,' Lucius continued, wiping away the first tears with his fingertips. 'I love Draco so, so much. And I will love your little one, too. Our little one. When you are a mother, you will understand.'

'I am so sorry, Lucius.' By Merlin, she was. For everything.

'I know, my love,' he whispered. 'I know.'

He pulled her close and kissed away her tears. And Morgana gave in, pressing her body against his, her lips searching for his.

'I have missed you, my love,' Lucius breathed. 'I can't help but think if we had more time together, if I could be there for you, none of this would have happened.'

He wrapped his arm around Morgana's waist and pulled her onto his lap, grinding against her. The taste of her tears, her guilt and her shame had aroused him beyond reason. And he knew that she would not resist if he claimed her body now.

He Apparated them to the bedroom where Morgana had surprised him at New Year's and laid her carefully down onto the bed. Her black dress clashed violently with the virgin white sheets, and so did her reddened, tearstained cheeks.

'Let me make up for all the time we have been apart, Morgana,' he whispered between kisses. 'Let me touch you. Let me kiss you. Let me taste you.'

He pulled her towards the edge of the bed and knelt between her legs, slowly lifting the folds of her robe up her legs, over her knees and above her thighs until it was bunched up by her waist. He felt his cock twitch at the sight of her milky thighs and the black leather boots. Slowly, he pulled the left boot off, covering her calf with soft kisses as he did so, just to repeat the procedure with the right. When both boots were off, he kissed her right ankle and then let his tongue trail up all the way to her knee.

Morgana exhaled sharply and bit her lip. She knew that she was not supposed to enjoy Lucius' ministrations. Snape had told her not to. He had even given her a memory to concentrate on instead. But as much as she tried, she could not imagine that Snape would ever touch her in such an exquisite way. He had pushed her away once too often. But Lucius had embraced her, even after she had publicly humiliated his son. Lucius had forgiven her. Lucius loved her.

Lucius was now kissing the soft skin on the inside of her thighs, switching sides every so often. He hooked his fingers into her dark green knickers and pulled them slowly down Morgana's legs. Then he moved his face closer to her sex, inhaling her arousal like a fine wine. Sweet indeed, like a succulent, ripe fruit.

He heard her call out his name as he gently parted her lips and took a long, slow lap all the way from her entrance to her clit. He had been right, she tasted incredible. And he could not get enough of her. He suckled at her most sensitive spot as if it were the most exquisite sweet Galleons could buy.

As he heard Morgana call his name for a second time and felt her body shudder, he abandoned her clit and plunged his tongue deep inside her, darting in and out as she exploded.

Her muscles had not yet stopped contracting as he let his tongue trace up her lips again, lapping up every drop of her sweet nectar, and Morgana had to close her eyes. Her breathing was shallow and her whole body was trembling. If Lucius continued like this, she would surely faint.

Her second orgasm hit her the second his tongue touched her clit, and this time she did not even have the breath to gasp. And for a moment, the world around her went black.

When she opened her eyes again, Lucius had removed her robes and had positioned himself between her legs.

'Let me chase your nightmares away, my angel,' he whispered as he softly nibbled at her earlobe. 'Let me make love to you.'

He lifted his head, and steely silver eyes locked onto warm blue ones as he entered her slowly, inch by inch, never breaking eye contact.

Lucius was gentle, rocking slowly in and out of her, now and then grazing her lips with his. And Morgana wrapped her legs around his waist to pull him even closer. She wanted to feel his skin against hers, wanted to touch the magnificent wizard that was making sweet love to her.

She clung onto him as he increased his pace. He filled her up completely, and every movement of his hips sent new jolts of pleasure through her body. And as he moaned into her ear and sunk his teeth into her neck, he triggered her third orgasm. Her muscles were milking him, he thrust into her, fast and deep, shooting his seed inside her

with a deep growl.

He stayed inside her until their breathing and heartbeats had normalised, covering her face with soft kisses. Her cheeks still tasted of the salt of her tears, and Lucius smiled. If that was Morgana's way of saying that she was sorry, he would not mind her making him angry over and over again.

XXVIII: Spring Cleaning

Chapter 28 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXVIII: Spring Cleaning

Albus Dumbledore rolled out the letter he had just received in front of him, spectacles perched on the end of his nose. The Ministry seal confirmed it was the letter he had been expecting for weeks, and he could guess its contents. Shaking the parchment flat, he began to read.

Dear Headmaster,

Further to my earlier letter regarding the upcoming inspection of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I am pleased to be able to confirm the details in writing.

The inspection will take place on Wednesday next week and will be carried out by four school governors: Mrs Smythe, Mr Montgomery, Mr McCoy and Mr Malfoy.

The governors will arrive at Hogwarts on Tuesday evening and will each require a private room to spend the night.

We also ask you to assign four of your students to guide the governors around the school during their stay. We suggest these four students should be seventh-years, preferably one from each House.

Regards,

Gordon Dowling

Minister of Magical Education

Dumbledore's mouth quirked as he put the parchment down on his desk and absently toyed with his beard as he took in the words. The plan to get him out of Hogwarts was finally in action then.

And what executioners had been chosen! Those governors all seemed to be in Lucius Malfoy's pocket in some way or other. The Montgomerys were related by marriage, the Smythes had collaborated with the Malfoys in business for decades, and McCoy had escaped Azkaban just as Lucius had at the end of the first war. It was all an elaborate charade, carefully crafted to oust Dumbledore as Headmaster. Undoubtedly, the governors would find fault with the school, even if they would have to create it themselves, and at last the Ministry would have an excuse to get rid of him and replace him with the Grand Inquisitor herself. He had a week, then, to prepare.

He sighed lightly, opening his desk drawer to fish for a Sherbet Lemon. He wasn't worried. Snape had already been instructed to keep an eye on the children, and there was absolutely no doubt that his formidable Heads of Houses would do their utmost to protect the school in his absence and make life as difficult for the charming Professor Umbridge as possible. At this thought, Dumbledore's mouth cracked into a full smile. Yes, he could trust his faculty. He could even trust some of them with his life.

He popped the sweet into his mouth, taking comfort from the familiar flavour, before pulling a blank piece of parchment towards him and grabbing his quill to pen a letter of his own.

Dearest colleagues,

I am delighted to inform you that our humble school will be visited by four school governors next Tuesday night, to carry out an inspection the following day.

To make their stay as pleasurable as possible, we need to prepare. I invite you therefore to an extraordinary staff meeting tonight at six o'clock in my office.

Affectionately,

Albus

After rolling the scroll up neatly, he stood and approached Fawkes, his beautiful fiery red phoenix, who was resting his head under his wing and snoozing gently. He reached out his fingers and stroked the bird's plumage softly, and the phoenix made a contented warbling sound before lifting his head up and blinking benevolently at his master.

Dumbledore smiled, tilting his head and offering the parchment to the bird, who took it in one of his sharp black claws.

'The Heads of Houses only please, if you do not mind, Fawkes,' the Headmaster said softly. 'I will be sure to have some fresh Billywigs for you when you return.'

Fawkes made a chirruping sound of agreement and let his master stroke his plumage once more before clapping his wings together and disappearing in a flash of light.

Later that same day, Dumbledore was joined in his office by his most trusted faculty members. Minerva looked stern, as usual. Pomona had a speck of dirt on her cheek.

Filius had a book in his hand and looked up expectantly. And Severus, dear, dear Severus, looked like he was about to turn into a tempest any second.

Dumbledore smiled fondly, his blue eyes twinkling characteristically.

'Thank you all for coming this evening,' he started, peering at each and every one of them over his crescent moon glasses with his hands clasped on the desk. 'As you know, it was from a recommendation from Professor Umbridge that we are to be visited by governors for inspection. I can now confirm that four governors will be gracing us for dinner and an overnight stay on Tuesday, in order to carry out a full inspection the following day.'

He noted that each of his faculty shared the same sour and disapproving expression at the news.

'I can see you are as thrilled as I am at the news of our guests,' he continued with a smile. 'The Minister for Magical Education has informed me that he would like four students, one from each House, to show the governors around during their stay. As you know the students in your own Houses best, I would like to seek your advice on who should be nominated for this, ah, honour.'

'I assume they want seventh-years?' Professor Sprout asked with a touch of irritation.

'That is correct, Pomona,' Dumbledore confirmed.

'Such disruption!' she protested. 'The NEWT students should not be distracted in such a way!'

'I agree with you, Pomona, but alas, the situation is out of my hands,' the Headmaster replied mildly.

The Herbology professor sighed testily. 'I recommend Mr Fawcett, then. He is one of my best students,' she said firmly.

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. 'Yes, the boy is a real asset to your House.'

'May I make a recommendation from my own House, Headmaster?' Minerva McGonagall followed swiftly. 'Angelina Johnson? Delightful, talented young witch.'

'Another excellent choice, thank you, Minerva,' Dumbledore conceded. Then he turned his attention to Ravenclaw House. 'Any suggestions, Filius?'

The tiny Charms professor beamed beatifically. 'Charis Byrne, definitely Charis Byrne. Most talented witch in the year.'

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled in response. 'Yes, I am sure she will be able to cope admirably with this task. And you, Severus?'

Snape was standing in his usual position of disapproval: arms crossed in front of his chest, scowling menacingly. 'I assume Mr Malfoy has already made a request?' he asked archly.

The Headmaster looked pointedly at Snape. 'Indeed he has, but I am sure I am not alone in thinking this is a... somewhat inappropriate choice...'

Snape's scowl suddenly took on an extra shade of black. 'And not possible, either. Miss Belakane takes extra Potions lessons on Tuesdays. She will not be available to entertain the governors after dinner,' he added with finality.

'Yes, Morgana has quite enough on her plate at the moment,' the Headmaster agreed, inclining his head. 'So who do you suggest?'

'I suggest Mr Miles Bletchley, Headmaster,' Snape announced without any further explanation. The Headmaster had asked for his opinion, and he had now given it. There was nothing more to add.

'Very well.'

'Albus, if I may,' Minerva started, her wire-rimmed spectacles hanging precariously from her nose, 'Why should Mr Malfoy presume he is getting a Slytherin student guide anyway? Maybe it might be prudent to... mix the Houses,' she suggested.

Dumbledore nodded carefully, stroking his beard. 'An excellent suggestion, Minerva. I was actually thinking exactly the same thing. In fact, I was rather thinking Charis would be the best candidate to escort Lucius...'

The old man's eyes twinkled as he turned his gaze first to Flitwick, then Snape.

'Headmaster, is that a wise idea?' Snape asked smoothly, a pained expression on his face. 'Miss Byrne is Muggle-born.'

'Yes, she is,' Dumbledore replied, his eyes now firmly on his Potions master. 'She is also one of the best pupils in this school.'

'You are aware that Malfoy will hold that fact against you?' Snape asked, his black eyes boring back into twinkling blue.

'Do you think Charis will fail to be an exemplary student in front of Lucius, Severus?'

'Surely not. The question is, will Malfoy be capable of being an exemplary governor in front of her?'

'He cannot pose a threat to her whilst in these walls, Severus,' the Headmaster answered calmly. 'However, this is for Filius to decide. Miss Byrne is his student, after all.'

'I stand by my decision,' Flitwick squeaked defiantly. 'Charis will do both her House and her school proud. And in these times, we should be proud of our diversity and unite. Not pander to bigotry!'

'Well said, Filius,' Dumbledore agreed, clapping his hands together as McGonagall and Sprout smiled fondly at the Head of Ravenclaw House. Snape, meanwhile, still looked sour.

'Albus, maybe we should ask Miss Byrne if she feels she is up to the task,' Minerva opined. 'After all, it is not a pleasurable task we are offering her. Especially as Malfoy's son seems to have daggers out for the poor girl.'

The Headmaster thought about this for a few moments. 'Yes, there does seem to be some tension between those two. Very well. Filius, would you mind asking Charis to join us?'

With a nod, the tiny Charms professor slipped from his stool and made his way back to Ravenclaw Tower.

'Headmaster, have you really thought this through?' Snape interjected again. The whole thing was clearly madness. Malfoy would eat the poor girl for breakfast, and she did not deserve to be brought into this mess, not when everyone knew what strong views the Malfoys held about Muggle-borns. In addition to that, Malfoy was already on the path to destroying one of his students, and Snape did not want to see Charis become yet another of Malfoy's victims.

'Do you have any objections?' Dumbledore countered calmly.

'I think Malfoy will manage to turn this against you somehow,' Snape pointed out once more, hoping it would sink in this time. 'He will take it as a personal insult to be paired up with a Muggle-born.'

'Are you saying we should put our Muggle-borns into hiding?' Dumbledore asked incredulously. 'Pretend they do not exist for the sake of the governors?'

'I never said that, Headmaster!' Snape began to protest.

'Muggle-borns are just as much a part of this school and our society as anyone else, despite what Malfoy may think,' Dumbledore replied, the twinkle in his eyes now replaced by a flinty stare. 'I will not be intimidated by Lucius Malfoy. And, as we have established, it is for Charis to decide whether she will accept this task.'

Before Snape could voice another protest, the old oak door of the Headmaster's office swung open and Flitwick led Charis through to the awaiting Heads of Houses.

Charis had felt worried from the moment her Head of House had approached her in the common room. And once she saw the whole core faculty was gathered in the Headmaster's office, she felt even more worried. What had she done? Maybe her *Mudblood* T-shirt had been a step too far and they were going to punish her. Or even worse: had they found out about her and Severus? Maybe she would be expelled and Snape would be fired. Either way, she was certainly in trouble about something. And a quick glance at Snape, who merely scowled back, did little to quash her fears.

'Professor, if this is about Lily and her little accident in the library, I can explain...' she began, but was cut off by Dumbledore's jovial chuckle.

'No, dear Charis, this is not about your adorable kitten. Please, have a seat.'

Charis perched on the edge of an armchair nervously, feeling the weight of all eyes upon her.

'Charis, you may have heard the rumours about some school governors coming to Hogwarts for inspection?' Dumbledore started.

Charis nodded. 'Umbridge ... I mean, Professor Umbridge's doing, I expect,' she answered quickly.

Dumbledore gave a perfunctory smile. 'Yes, Professor Umbridge might be involved. Those rumours aren't rumours anymore, and the governors are in fact visiting us next week. And they will need to be guided around the castle by a student each, one from each House. And you, Charis, have been chosen for this task.'

'Oh!' Charis felt a mixture of shock and relief. So she was not in trouble! But if she was one of four students chosen for the task, why had the other three not been called to the Headmaster's office? And why was Snape looking like at her like he had Kneazle dung smeared under his nose?

'Now, Charis, before you decide, we need to inform you which governor you will be assigned to,' Dumbledore continued. He looked around patiently at his faculty, waiting for one of them to spill the beans.

Charis' stomach swooped with a pang of premonition. This was not going to be good.

As no one else seemed to have the guts to say anything, Snape took a step forwards. 'You will be assigned to Mr Malfoy,' he said in a cold, disapproving tone.

Charis swallowed drily. 'I see.'

Malfoy. Impregnator of her best friend. Blood status obsessive. Merciless killer. And father of a little shit who was currently making her life hell. Such joy!

'Charis, you do not have to,' Flitwick said quickly.

'We will all understand...' agreed McGonagall.

Charis closed her eyes for a second, thinking of Malfoy's git of a son and everything he had put her through this year. The incident with the charmed drawing. The set-up with Zabini. And his outburst when she had been studying her family tree in the library. Then she flared her nostrils, thinking of how triumphant she had felt when she had worn the *Mudblood* T-shirt and openly defied him, and decided she was not going to feel inferior to the little worm any longer.

'Well, Charis?' the Headmaster coaxed gently.

'Sir, I would be happy to show Mr Malfoy the castle,' Charis replied, looking expectantly up at Snape. To her chagrin, the look he gave her in return could make the sun freeze.

Dumbledore, however, seemed thrilled. 'Excellent,' he began. 'Now, Charis, it is important that Mr Malfoy is happy with his visit. Show him the best side of Hogwarts. And what is even more important, Charis: do not let him intimidate you.'

'Do you have any suggestions of what I should show him?' Charis asked, trying to ignore the knot that was building in her stomach.

'I am sure Mr Malfoy will let you know what he'd like to see,' Dumbledore replied, smiling kindly. 'Now, the governors will arrive on Tuesday night. They expect their guides to have dinner with them. On Wednesday, they will most probably want to accompany you to your lessons.'

Charis opened her eyes wide. Dinner? With Lucius Malfoy? How could she possibly eat sitting next to that man? And whatever would they talk about? His preferred techniques in Muggle torture?

'There will be a special table in the Great Hall reserved for the governors,' the Headmaster went on. 'Now, Charis, it is only fair to warn you. Mr Malfoy is not expecting YOU to be his guide.' He looked at the girl over the rims of his half-moon glasses. 'He might be somewhat, ah, disappointed.'

'I can imagine, sir,' she replied quietly. Of course, Malfoy would expect his mistress, the mother of his child. Then she frowned. Why had the Heads not chosen Morgana?

Snape exhaled sharply through his nose. 'And it should go without saying, Miss Byrne, that you should behave like an exemplary student at all times, which means sticking to the uniform in exact detail... which is more than can be said for your behaviour last Saturday.'

At this comment, Charis had the good grace to look down sheepishly.

Dumbledore, meanwhile, was smiling widely. 'Now, Charis, do you have any further questions?'

'Will Mr Malfoy know I am his guide before he gets here?' she asked with genuine concern. She doubted Malfoy liked surprises, especially those of a Muggle-born nature.

'Yes, I will dispatch an owl to the Ministry tonight,' the Headmaster confirmed.

'I hope I will not disappoint you, or the school, with this task, sir,' Charis replied humbly. Although she was putting up a brave face, she did not like this. Not one single bit.

'We are convinced that you will handle this task admirably, dear girl,' Dumbledore assured Charis as he guided her to the door. 'You and the other three students will come to my office for further information next Tuesday afternoon. But for now, you may return to your common room.'

As she bade goodnight around the room to her professors, Charis noticed each one of them in turn offered a friendly smile. All that was apart from Severus, who was still glowering like he'd lost a Galleon and found a Knut.

* * *

Charis was beyond nervous when Tuesday evening finally rolled around. She stood waiting in silence in the Entrance Hall next to Dumbledore, her palms slightly sweaty, looking towards the great oak door every two seconds. The other three governors had arrived promptly and were now seated in the Great Hall with their House

representatives. Malfoy, however, had Floo'd the Headmaster earlier that day saying he would be slightly delayed due to business. But surely, he just wanted to make a big entrance.

Charis felt the knot in her stomach tighten with each passing minute. She was secretly hoping that Malfoy's business would force him to postpone the visit. But just when she thought Dumbledore might turn to her and suggest taking a seat in the Hall without her guest, the great oak door swung open with a creak and there in the doorway stood none other Lucius Malfoy himself.

Charis swallowed dryly as she watched Malfoy walk towards her and Dumbledore, his expensive thick cloak billowing behind him and his snake-headed cane tucked under one arm. There was no doubt, the man was elegant and good-looking. He was immaculately dressed, with not a single platinum hair out of place. His bearing was proud and almost regal.

Like a peacock, Charis thought to herself. *Strutting on through like he owned the place.* She could see where his son got his confidence. And his cockiness.

Malfoy inclined his head and smiled politely.

'Professor Dumbledore, apologies for the delay. As I explained, most urgent business.' His silver-blue eyes glinted like steel. He seemed truly remorseful.

Dumbledore merely nodded. 'Dinner is yet to start, and we would not dream of starting without you.' He offered Malfoy a polite smile in return before turning to Charis. 'May I introduce your guide for your stay? Mr Malfoy, this is Charis Byrne. Charis, this is Mr Malfoy.'

'Nice to meet you, sir,' Charis looked up at the blond wizard with a shy smile. And both she and Dumbledore saw a shadow pass over Malfoy's face as he observed her.

The shadow was, however, immediately replaced by a fake smile, and Malfoy nodded curtly at Charis. 'Miss Byrne, the pleasure is all mine. Draco has told me all about you.' He inclined his head once more with a little smirk.

Charis could feel her bile rising. Of course, Draco would tattle to daddy all about the Mudblood who had made him miss Quidditch practice for the rest of the season. And daddy was certainly just as unhappy as Draco. Oh, why had she agreed to this?

Gallantly, she offered Malfoy another smile and was spared anything further by Dumbledore ushering her and her guest into the packed hall.

The House tables were full of chattering students as usual, but directly in front of the raised staff table was another table where escorts and governors sat facing each other and happily talking away.

Charis walked silently up to their table with Malfoy by her side, acutely aware of Snape's eyes boring into her skull. Whatever did he want from her? It was not like she had been the one to choose this task.

She also noticed Malfoy giving a small, curt nod towards Draco at the Slytherin table. The little ferret grinned smugly at first, then looked confused as he noticed what company his father was keeping. And Charis couldn't help but feel a little triumphant. The memory of his precious daddy being escorted by a Mudblood would certainly give the little twit nightmares for weeks to come. But the glee was replaced by disgust when Charis saw Malfoy give a wolfish smile towards Morgana, who smiled back in response. The thought of Morgana sleeping with that foul creature suddenly made Charis very angry.

'You must be very proud of your son, Mr Malfoy,' she offered in a calm voice as Lucius stepped behind her to pull out her chair for her and then thanked him politely.

'Draco is my first born. He has been brought up with the values of our family,' Malfoy drawled, walking around the table and taking a seat himself. 'Values that might be beyond your understanding, Miss Byrne.'

Charis knew the comment was intended as a barb, but she let it wash over her, pushing her anger down. She could not afford to let Malfoy get to her.

'The Malfoys are one of the oldest wizarding families in Britain, so I understand,' she started as she poured them both some water.

Lucius arched an eyebrow and peered down his nose imperiously at her. 'Do you indeed? I understand you, on the other hand, are Muggle-born, Miss Byrne?'

Charis inwardly winced. In her attempt to engage Malfoy in conversation she had unwittingly chanced upon the one topic she should have stayed clear of. Talking about her blood status to a known Death Eater was tantamount to signing her own death warrant. Still, there was nothing she could do now.

'That is correct, sir,' she replied politely, her warm green eyes meeting cold silvery-blue.

She watched as the elegant blond wizard shook out his napkin and placed in his lap with a fluid motion. 'First witch in your family?' he asked with a lazy drawl.

'As far as I'm aware, yes, sir. Although I come from a town near Glastonbury, which is in the ancient vale of Avalon. So who knows?'

Charis smiled awkwardly, trying to lighten the mood. But to her misfortune, her comment about Avalon had struck a chord, and Lucius' mouth twitched slightly. The Belakanes had descended from that same mystical place the Mudblood was talking about. And the very idea of the future mother of the Heir of Slytherin being in close contact with such scum made Lucius' skin crawl.

'You surely do not mean that you might in any way be related to the line of the Merlin, do you Miss Byrne?' he enquired.

His voice was smooth and almost playful, but the steely undertone of his words was not lost on Charis.

'Oh, I am sure I'm not that gifted, sir,' she answered quickly. 'But Avalon, as you know, is steeped in mystery and magic. Maybe a little has rubbed off on me.'

Charis smiled again, hoping her vague and naive answer would let them close the topic of blood status. Still, she saw Malfoy's nose wrinkle ever so slightly. But before he had chance to respond, Dumbledore stood on the plinth and officially welcomed the governors.

Charis felt Snape looking directly at her as the Headmaster mentioned something about pupils being on their best behaviour for our esteemed guests, and she lowered her gaze. What did he expect from her? That she would throw herself at Malfoy?

Dumbledore's speech was short and sweet, and as soon as he had finished, the food appeared magically on their plates. Once more, Malfoy wrinkled his nose in distaste, both at the food and the goblets which were now filling with pumpkin juice.

Charis noticed his disapproval and saw this as a chance to change the subject for good. 'Has the food changed much since you were here, Mr Malfoy?' she asked conversationally.

Lucius picked at his chicken with his fork, his nostrils flaring. 'Unfortunately, no,' he sneered, 'which is surprising, actually, seeing as I have lost an elf to Dumbledore's kitchen, thanks to the resident celebrity Mr Potter.'

Charis began to eat what was, by normal people's standards, really nice chicken. It was moist and cooked in its own juices and the gravy was rich and flavoursome. If this was inferior cooking to Malfoy, Charis could not imagine what culinary wonders he was used to.

'How many elves do you have, sir, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Not that it is any of your concern, Miss Byrne, but I now own six elves. One of my best cooking elves unfortunately passed away last week. Fell down the stairs, poor thing.'

Malfoy smirked across the table at Charis and in that moment reminded her completely of his arrogant son. Surely, he had shoved the poor elf down the stairs with his walking stick without even batting an eyelash.

'I am sorry to hear that, sir,' she replied, disturbed at the fake sincerity dripping from Malfoy's tongue.

Lucius sipped delicately at his pumpkin juice. 'I will have a new one delivered by Friday,' he answered carelessly. How dare the Mudblood even ask about his household when she, by the looks of it, most certainly had grown up in a shed?

'So, Miss Byrne,' he started after some moments, placing his goblet back down on the table. 'The Magic of Avalon might have rubbed off on you, you said... Tell me then, what is your point of view in regards to the question of Muggles stealing magic?'

Charis was taken aback by the question, but managed to compose herself swiftly. 'I would honestly say that it would be giving Muggles too much credit to be able to outwit someone who could perform magic, sir,' she said carefully, not wanting to step on Malfoy's toes. 'Magic being an abstract, intangible trait... A Muggle could no more steal magic than I could steal the wind from the skies.'

To her surprise, Malfoy actually looked amused at her answer. But she wasn't off the hook yet.

'Then how do you explain, Miss Byrne, that Muggles can produce magical offspring?' he enquired, leaning back in his chair with his arms folded.

Charis took a deep breath. Malfoy wanted an answer, so she would give him one. She had studied the subject, after all. 'Magical transference is difficult to explain. Logically, it would appear to be largely genetic, which would lead to the assumption that magical lineage resides generally within the gene pool.'

Malfoy once again quirked an eyebrow at her. 'Are you suggesting, then, that the Muggle gene might be the dominant one? Seeing as you yourself are the first witch in your family?'

'I am suggesting that somewhere in my ancestry must be a Wizarding gene, which for whatever reason skipped through generations, and that I am lucky enough to have in my own genetic make-up. So, somewhere back in time, there must have been a witch or wizard that bred into my family, sir, in order for me to have had these powers.'

At this comment, Charis saw Malfoy's face darken. All traces of humour had disappeared from his features.

'You have given this a fair bit of thought, Miss Byrne,' he answered softly, his jaw tight.

'This seems to be the most plausible explanation to my mind, at least,' Charis replied, resisting the urge to bite her nails. Malfoy's stare was making her uneasy.

'Ah, I forgot, you are a Ravenclaw, after all,' Malfoy commented. 'Ravenclaws appear to have an unquenchable thirst for sticking their beaks into matters which should not concern them.'

He pushed away his plate as an awkward and frosty silence descended, and Charis kept her eyes on her own plate. The last thing she had wanted to do was to upset Lucius Malfoy. But he had asked her opinion, and she had given it to him. Now he was most certainly upset, and Charis decided that keeping her mouth shut would be the best thing to do at the moment.

When she dared to look up again after what seemed like an eternity, she saw the blond wizard take another sip of his pumpkin juice. And to her surprise, the expression on his face had become neutral once more.

'Now, Miss Byrne, tell me: how is the mood in the castle, among the students I mean?'

Charis was relieved at the change of topic. For a moment she thought she had made Malfoy very angry indeed.

'Well, currently, all the seventh-years are in bit of a flurry due to the upcoming NEWT examinations,' she replied. 'I'm sure Madam Pince hasn't seen the library so popular.'

She smiled, and Lucius watched her carefully.

'Of course, coming to the end of the school year means coming to the end of the Quidditch season. It's quite close this year; any of the Houses could take it.'

'And how are the inter-house relationships, seen from your point of view?' Lucius asked, checking his cuticles casually. Not that he really cared, but he wanted the girl to feel secure. She would give him all the information he desired soon enough.

'I think a little rivalry is healthy,' Charis went on, 'in the form of the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup. It keeps things interesting.'

'But otherwise, the Houses should get along, is that what you are saying, Miss Byrne?'

Malfoy looked at her with his silver-blue eyes once more. Those eyes were so cold and so devoid of emotion they made the hairs stand up on the back of Charis' neck. And she could not understand how anyone could ever fall for that man.

'Well, there will always be banter,' she started carefully, 'but there is no need for... open hostility, in my view.' What she really wanted to say was that little Slytherin shits like Malfoy's son should be sent to Azkaban indefinitely for their bullying tactics and disruptive ways. But she held her peace. Who knew what Malfoy would do to her if she opened her mouth? He was a Death Eater, after all.

Lucius' lips curled into a smirk at Charis' comment as dessert appeared on their plates: a huge slice of warm chocolate cake with fluffy whipped cream.

'Would you say that the mood among the students has changed, lately, Miss Byrne?' he asked, picking up a spoon and scooping up a little of the cake.

'Well, as I mentioned, the volume of work appears to have gone up, and not just for NEWT students. I personally don't find that to be a bad thing. We are here to be educated, after all.'

'I am not talking about your educational workload, Miss Byrne,' Malfoy cut her off rudely. 'Would you say that there is any more rivalry among the students, either between the Houses, or even within?'

'There has always been a rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor... that is still apparent, even now.' Now Charis was really getting uneasy. What the hell was Malfoy after? And why could he not just ask a straight question?

Malfoy, too, seemed to be getting impatient as he reached forwards in his chair. 'Any new groups, Miss Byrne?'

Charis merely looked back at him innocently. Surely, he could not be referring to the DA, could he? 'I don't know what you mean, sir,' she lied. 'One of the Hufflepuffs tried to resurrect the Gobstones Society, but it appeared to fall flat after a few meetings...'

Lucius looked straight at Charis now, his cold eyes glinting like steel. Did the Mudblood really think he was daft? 'There are rumours about groups trying to undermine the Ministry throughout the country,' he started. 'This surely has not escaped the notice of any of the students, I'm sure. Especially certain students who have far too many column inches written about them in the *Prophet* on an almost daily basis.'

Charis raised her eyebrows. So, he was talking about Harry and the DA. And regardless of her own reasons for not joining them, she sure as Hades was not going to betray their secret to the slime ball sat in front of her.

'I can't think for one moment that any student would be involved in such political activities,' she answered politely. 'We're only children, after all, and Fudge is one of the most popular Ministers we've had.'

Thankfully, this answer seemed to satisfy Malfoy. 'Indeed he is, Miss Byrne, indeed he is,' he replied, leaning back in his chair once more.

When the plates suddenly vanished, signalling the end of dinner, Malfoy seemed in a distinct hurry to leave the Hall.

'Now, Miss Byrne, I would like you to show me around the castle,' he drawled as he stood.

'Yes, sir. What would you like to see first?' Charis asked, rising from her seat, too.

'You're a Ravenclaw, Miss Byrne. Surprise me.' Malfoy answered, flashing her one of his most pleasant smiles. And Charis smiled back, fighting the urge to vomit. Did he have to be so overly insincere?

'Well, I am guessing, as a Slytherin, you probably never went to Ravenclaw Tower,' she started. 'We have some lovely views of the grounds from up there. If you would like to follow me, Mr Malfoy?'

Lucius gave a mock bow. 'Indeed I would.' With any luck, the little gullible Mudblood would lead him straight to her partner in crime.

Once more, Charis was acutely aware of Snape watching as she led Malfoy out of the dining hall. And once more, Lucius nodded at his son and smirked indulgently at his lover on the way out.

'So, what NEWTs did you study, Mr Malfoy?' Charis asked as they climbed their way up the stairway that led to Ravenclaw Tower, desperate to make some small talk.

'I studied DADA, Charms and Transfiguration, Miss Byrne. And what are you studying?'

'I'm studying those, too. And also Arithmancy, Astronomy and Potions.'

'Arithmancy? Of course, a Muggle-born would want to prove herself capable, wouldn't she?'

Charis inclined her head, not rising to the bait. 'I would be lying if I said Arithmancy wasn't taxing, mentally. But the results are worth it, and it's a very unique subject.'

'And what use is it to study that particular subject, Miss Byrne, in terms of your future progression?' Lucius asked as they climbed yet higher.

'Well, I am in two minds of what direction I should go in, at the moment, if I'm honest, sir,' Charis admitted. 'Arithmancy could lead to some exciting roles in the Ministry, such as Unplottable Cartography. But then again, the use of Potions in magical medicine is also a worthy and exciting area.'

'Either way, you fancy a career in the Wizarding world?' Lucius wondered.

'Absolutely, sir.'

Lucius raised an eyebrow and sneered. 'Allow me to wish you the best of luck.' The Mudblood would need it. If she lived to graduate, that was.

As they arrived at the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room, they notice another pupil outside. Charis grinned as she realised it was none other than her friend, Jack.

'Hello, Jack,' she greeted the boy, relieved not to be alone with Malfoy any longer. 'Mr Malfoy, may I introduce Jack, one of my House mates?'

Malfoy looked down his nose at the boy and nodded curtly. 'Mr ..?'

'Morrissey. Jack Morrissey,' the boy replied politely.

'Ah, yes. Mr Morrissey.' He couldn't believe his luck. The girl had really presented him her Bloodtraitor friend on a silver platter. Draco had made it quite clear that Jack's interest in magical lineage had been responsible for their potential discovery of his wife's family's indiscretion. And now, he had them both in his reach.

'I hear you have been working on theories of magical transference with Miss Byrne here,' Lucius started smoothly. 'And what do you make of the genetic theory of magic, Mr Morrissey?'

Jack was unsure what to say in response. Like Charis, he was taken unawares at such direct questioning and did not feel entirely comfortable discussing his work with a known supporter of You-Know-Who.

He was saved by the eagle knocker on the common room door that posed a conundrum to solve, and Malfoy sneered openly.

'This is how we gain entrance to our common room, Mr Malfoy,' Charis explained. 'I know other Houses' common rooms have passwords instead.' Then she turned to Jack. 'Do you want to do it, or shall I, Jack?'

Jack gestured to Charis to go ahead, and as she answered the riddle, the door swung open soundlessly.

'After you, Mr Malfoy,' she said courteously.

Lucius gracefully stepped inside, quickly taking in his surroundings. The Ravenclaw common room had tall, wide windows flanked by endless bookshelves. Blue velvet curtains hung from lush drapes. The room was light and airy and the complete opposite in many respects to the Slytherin dungeon lair.

Then he turned his attentions once more to Jack. 'Mr Morrissey, I believe you have not answered my question yet.'

'Er, genetic theory is the logical explanation for passing magic through families, sir,' Jack answered awkwardly.

Lucius flared his nostrils. 'Tell me, Mr Morrissey, don't you think that this explanation defies the fact that Muggle-borns exist in our society?'

Jack swallowed, casting a nervous glance at Charis. 'They... I mean, the gene for magic could well be recessive, sir, and therefore not show up for generations.'

'So what you are saying is, that Muggle-borns must have genetic material from wizards, otherwise they could not have magical abilities?'

The temperature in the Ravenclaw common room dropped several degrees at Malfoy's question, and Jack nodded, shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

Lucius drew himself up to his full height. 'If I were you two, I would be very careful about pursuing your lines of enquiry in regards to this particular topic.' His voice was not much more than a whisper, and still, every word was crystal clear. 'Sticking your Ravenclaw beaks in to subjects that are best left undisturbed can only lead to serious trouble. Do you understand me?'

His flinty silver-grey eyes flicked from Jack to Charis, tapping the snake head on his walking stick with an impatient finger. He obviously expected an answer.

The two Ravenclaws glanced nervously at each other at first and then up to Malfoy.

'It's not our intention to cause trouble,' Jack answered quietly.

'Maybe not,' Lucius replied imperiously. 'But should you continue to endeavour down this particular path of investigation, you may find that your efforts are *cut short*. I would advise you to cease all further activities. Failure to do so is likely to cause you great distress.'

His mouth curled into a smirk as he saw the pair of Ravenclaws pale with fear at the thinly-veiled threat he had issued them.

'Now, Miss Byrne, I have to speak to the Headmaster,' he drawled, turning to his escort. 'It has been a delight having dinner with you. I have no doubt I will see you at breakfast tomorrow.'

'Would you like me to escort you to the headmaster's office?' Charis asked quickly, desperately hoping Malfoy would turn down her offer.

'That won't be necessary, Miss Byrne. As you know, I was a student here myself.' He gave a little bow and a tight smile to Charis. 'Miss Byrne.'

He then turned to Jack, all traces of smile gone, and nodded curtly. 'Mr Morrissey.'

And with that, Lucius Malfoy left the Ravenclaws in the common room feeling shaken and confused, neither of them sure what to make of the blond wizard's words.

XXIX: Potions and Pestering

Chapter 29 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXIX: Potions and Pestering

Morgana had to admit she was more than curious as to why Charis had been chosen to escort Lucius on his inspection of Hogwarts. She also wondered if it was a good idea. Lucius had told Morgana in one of his letters that he had requested to have her as his guide, and he had been furious when he had been informed by Dumbledore that he was getting someone else. Lucius had, of course, chosen his words well in his second letter to Morgana, saying that he was utterly disappointed not to be able to spend time with the mother of his child. And he had once more professed his love for her and promised that he would do everything in his power to be able to slink away from his guide during the evening and go looking for his young belle.

Sitting at the Slytherin table now, Morgana had mixed feelings. Somehow, she was glad that she had not been chosen to be Lucius' guide. She did not trust herself around him. She knew so well who he was: a Death Eater, a philanderer, evil incarnate. Everyone had been warning her about him: Charis, Dumbledore, Snape ... especially Snape. Morgana knew that they were right, and still she found herself hopelessly falling for the blond wizard. What a feeling it must be to stride through the Great Hall at Lucius' side for everyone to see. And for a moment, Morgana envied Charis. But when she saw the expression on Draco's face turn from shock to disgust, she started to feel worried for her Ravenclaw friend. What, by Hades, had Dumbledore been thinking letting Lucius Malfoy be escorted by a Muggle-born, someone who in Malfoy's eyes was a mere *Mudblood*?

Draco was bound to have told daddy all about the *filth* at Hogwarts, and Charis had got him into trouble enough for him to hold a grudge. And as much as Lucius was always sweet with her, Morgana knew he had a fierce temper with those who got on his bad side. But there was nothing she could do except hope that Charis would use all of her Ravenclaw brain and make sure that she did not give Lucius any more reason to be angry with her.

She was still mulling over Dumbledore's choice of representative when she found herself outside Snape's classroom door once more for her usual Tuesday evening Potions class. Any other student would rather eat slugs than spend their free evenings with the dour Potions master, but Morgana felt differently. Her constant contact with Snape was about the only positive she had to cling to through this whole confusing and demanding pregnancy business, and she found herself looking forward to their Tuesday lessons more and more as time went on. She and her Head of House had built up a respectful relationship with each passing week, and Morgana had discovered that, when faced with a student who was as eager to learn as she was, Snape lost all traces of his sniping and unhelpful manner and was actually a talented and engaging teacher.

Morgana enjoyed Snape's instruction as well as the peacefulness of the quiet dungeon and just watching him create potions from scratch. He really was a master in his field, and his mere presence made her feel safe and secure. To her surprise, Snape had gone from being an object of sexual desire to some kind of companion. She could not say a friend, but she trusted him, and she had seen him protect her so many times that he was the closest thing to a father figure that she had ever had.

She checked her watch quickly before knocking on the door. There was one minute to spare. Morgana was always careful to be early, but she did not want to annoy Snape by being too early.

'Enter,' he growled in his rich, smooth baritone.

Morgana entered his study, clutching her side and wincing as a sudden sting appeared on the right side of her abdomen. 'Good evening, Professor,' she managed through gritted teeth.

'Good evening, Miss Belakane,' Snape replied, looking quizzically at the girl. 'Is there a problem?'

'No, sir,' Morgana replied hastily. 'Just a stitch, I suppose.' The last thing she wanted was to disrupt her precious time with her Head of House. But the pain was sharp, and she took her usual place on the stool behind the enchanted glass panel carefully, trying not to grimace.

Snape, thankfully, did not pursue the issue but started the lesson immediately. 'As you remember, our Wolfsbane potion was left to bathe in the light of the waxing moon for a whole fortnight. As it absorbed the rays, the hue changed from grey to milky white, thus.'

He showed the cauldron to Morgana, who craned her neck to see better, nodding. The potion indeed glowed eerily, like the moon itself.

'The second half of the brewing is much more complex,' Snape continued. 'It involves a mixture of wand work as well as impeccable timing.'

He swept around the desk and placed the cauldron back on the stand, turning to face Morgana whilst folding his arms across his chest.

'You will recall we added powdered aconite initially to the potion. Aconite is the principal ingredient in Wolfsbane, but it requires a balance. Just powdered aconite renders the potion too weak, yet freshly chopped aconite can make the potion unreliable.'

Once more, there was a flash of pain in Morgana's side, and she only managed to suppress a gasp because she was biting her tongue. She had no time for yet another joyful side effect of pregnancy. So she decided to ignore the ache as best as she could and focused instead on Snape's words.

'Years of my own experimentation have proved that a mixture of both powdered aconite and fresh root yields the best results,' he continued. 'The ratio should be around sixty to forty, in favour of the root.'

Morgana was fascinated as she watched her teacher begin to lay out his chopping board, knife, brass scales and ingredients methodically. She knew she was working with a genius and wondered idly if Snape had ever cooked, a silly thought of him appearing with a tray of freshly-baked muffins suddenly popping into her mind.

'May I ask a question, sir?' she asked, pulling her mind back to the lesson.

Snape merely inclined his head and raised an eyebrow for Morgana to go on.

'Does the ratio have anything to do with who the potion is made for?'

'That's an interesting question,' he replied with a quirk of the mouth. One of the reasons he enjoyed instructing Morgana was because she asked intelligent questions and genuinely paid attention. Teaching her never felt like a chore, and if he was honest with himself, he would admit that he looked forward to spending time with her. At least while she was in the dungeons with him, she wouldn't be with that philandering, smug, despicable man.

'In my experience, no. But with potions, there is always an element of risk that the receiver may react badly to its administration. Which makes brewing them to strict instructions all the more important.'

'React badly, sir? What is the worst that can happen with this potion, apart from the transformation?' Morgana's brow furrowed, and once again Snape's mouth quirked.

'If the potion is too weak, of course it will not work, and the lycanthrope will still transform.'

'And if it is too strong?'

'Let's put it this way. Just chopped root of aconite alone makes the potion unstable. It may make the lycanthrope change at any given moment, for any given amount of time. It may work for a short time, but does not have consistent results. It therefore makes the potion unreliable.'

Morgana nodded keenly, watching as Snape picked up the little silver knife in his left hand and began finely slicing the root. His movements were deft and precise, and once more she wondered if his skills transferred to the kitchen.

'One of the reasons this potion is so difficult to brew is due to getting the balance of aconite right,' Snape continued as he sliced.

Morgana looked longingly at the knife. She would so love to do something with her hands. She missed the practical nature of potion making, and although watching Snape and being taught by him personally was an honour and a delight, she would have given her last Knut to have been able to make the potion alongside him.

'The potion must now be put on the lowest flame. Too much heat will evaporate the moon's rays,' Snape said as he lit the flame under the cauldron with a sweep of his hand. Morgana was quietly impressed at the use of wandless magic.

He delicately sprinkled in the chopped root whilst stirring the potion, and Morgana leaned in to see better. Snape appeared to be alternating directions between stirs.

'This complex stirring reflects the waxing and waning of the moon,' he told the girl once he was done.

Steam began to rise from the cauldron now. Snape ran his long fingers through it like a musician with an instrument, almost reading the vapours. Then the potion began to glow brightly, like the moon itself. And the steam turned into a kind of whitish smoke.

'And this is how you know your potion is done,' Snape murmured, still running his hands through the clouds. 'Do you have any questions, Miss Belakane?'

Morgana blinked and looked up at her formidable Head of House. Why he was wasting his talents teaching dunderheads when his own encyclopaedic knowledge of potions surely made him the best Potioneer in the country, she did not know. But she was grateful to have him here at Hogwarts, and at this moment in time, she was grateful to be sat in front of him.

'How long can the potion be stored, sir?' she asked, shifting on her stool.

'Another good question. The potion requires careful storage, in the cool and the dark, as sunlight negates the effects. Thick glass works well, so does heavy pottery. Metal is not recommended as it reacts with the aconite. The potion can be safely stored for up to three months, after which time the potion becomes unstable.'

'How much does the lycanthrope need to drink?' she asked as Snape tidied away his equipment with a lazy flick of his wand.

'The lycanthrope will usually need one vial every day for three days leading up to and including the day of the full moon.'

'Usually?'

Snape raised a characteristic eyebrow. 'The dose can be adjusted according to the size of the person. Some lycanthropes are bigger than others and therefore need higher doses.'

Especially a shabby coward such as Lupin with a fat arse and an addiction to chocolate he thought to himself.

'So, the Wolfsbane is complete. And once I have siphoned off the potion into vials I will then show you how to make a very useful antidote.'

Morgana smiled to herself as she scribbled down some notes. Double Potions! What a treat! And if she were honest, staying down in the dungeons with Professor Snape for another two or three hours was exactly what she wanted to do that evening. The alternative was to go to her dormitory, get changed and then go to see Lucius. And for some reason, which Morgana could not quite put her finger on, seeing Lucius Malfoy was about the last thing she wanted to do.

Meanwhile, up in Ravenclaw Tower, Charis and Jack were still in shock after Malfoy had left them with his thinly-veiled threat. At first, they had just stared at the door he had slammed shut behind him, mouths open and puzzled looks of their faces. Then they had started verbally abuse him, during which Jack had managed to come up with countless combination of words like *inbred*, *ferret*, and *slime ball*. It had made them laugh, but still, the tension lingered.

'He knows we're on to something,' Jack said suspiciously as they sat in their favourite nook by the window.

'Oh, Jack, now you're just being paranoid,' Charis said with exasperation as she plucked absently at one of the soft cushions. 'We're not on to anything.'

However, Lucius' threat had shaken her, even though she was pretty sure it was just Muggle-baiting on his part. He had been sending sniping comments her way all evening. For all she knew, it was Malfoy's way of saying 'Dream on, Mudblood'.

'I'm serious, Charis!' Jack replied, leaning forwards in his seat. 'Why is he so intent on stopping us? If he thinks you're just a plain old Muggle-born, what is he scared of us finding out with our research?'

Charis sighed and looked up at her House mate. 'I don't know. He hates anything that associates wizards with Muggles. Just the suggestion of genetic theory made gave him a bad taste in the mouth.'

'No, it has to be more than that, Charis,' Jack insisted. 'We're just a couple of kids trying to find out who your grandparents and great-parents were. Why is that such a threat to Malfoy?' His eyes widened. 'Maybe he knows something we don't.'

Charis felt her stomach swoop. 'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying,' Jack said in a conspiratorial tone, his eyes glittering in excitement, 'that I am convinced that you have a huge secret in your family, a secret that Malfoy is obviously scared of us finding out!'

Charis' mouth fell open. 'You don't think ... Jack, you don't think I could be related to Lucius Malfoy, do you?' The very thought was making her heart race. Surely, it was not possible?

'Who knows? But whoever you're related to, it's big enough to threaten the oh-so-great Lucius Malfoy and his bollocks pureblood nonsense.'

Jack was looking intensely at her now, and Charis caught sight of the tell-tale glimmer in his eyes that told her he had an idea and he was going to see it through to fruition.

'Come on, we need to go to the library right now.' Jack was already halfway to the door. 'We'll stay all night if we have to. We need some answers.'

Charis took a deep breath and closed her eyes. If what Jack was saying was true, it would rock the foundations of everything she thought she knew about herself and her place in this Wizarding world. She had always with only a few exceptions been proud to be a Muggle-born. What if she wasn't? What if there had been a witch or wizard in the family? What if that witch or wizard had been a Malfoy? Charis shuddered. The thought of finding out she was related to Lucius Malfoy suddenly made her feel physically sick. Really, this could not be!

Still, she and Jack were soon sneaking furtively down the corridors that led to the library, constantly on the look-out for any sign of the blond wizard or any of the other governors. Thankfully, the coast was clear, and soon they were huddled together at the back of the library, away from Madam Pince's prying eyes, sorting through a stack of parchments and records.

'You check the marriage certificates, I'll check the birth certificates,' Jack told Charis as they began the tedious work of sifting through the various documents. And Charis did as she was told, although the knot in her stomach was making her nauseous.

Over two hours later, they had skimmed through all the available records. They didn't find anything new, as they had been through most of those papers before. But something didn't make sense. As hard as they were looking, there was not one trace of Charis' grandmother.

'This is really suspicious, Charis,' Jack opined as they sifted through the papers a second time, just to be sure they hadn't missed anything. 'There's nothing here, from either Muggle records or Wizarding.'

Charis stretched, feeling stiff. Her eyes felt tired from the close work of cross-referencing. 'Dad said Gran came from London. That's a pretty big place, Jack,' she joked.

'Yes, but Callista Byrne isn't the kind of name you hear every day, is it?' Jack pointed out. 'There should have been a marriage certificate here at least.'

'So what now?' Charis asked, rubbing her tired eyes. Maybe, Jack had been too excited after all. Maybe, they didn't find anything because there was simply nothing to be found.

'Well, I don't know about you, but us not being able to find anything smells decidedly piscine to me,' Jack answered with a lopsided smile. 'Next stop for us is to write to the Muggle registrar and to the Ministry of Magic's Department of Births, Marriages and Deaths to find the birth certificate of your gran. On the certificate will be the name of her parents and therefore another piece to our puzzle.'

Jack was grinning in earnest now. He liked nothing more than a problem to solve, and a little thing like being threatened by one of the most influential wizards and known Voldemort supporter was not going to put him off.

Charis smiled back at him, but secretly she wondered if they were getting in way over their heads. But Jack had certainly piqued her curiosity, and they seemed so close to getting some answers. There was no going back now.

* * *

'This antidote works on most venoms and bites,' Snape said imperiously as he walked in front of Morgana once more. 'Naturally, it is ineffective against Werewolf bites and Basilisk bites, for obvious reasons. It is a staple in most first aid kits and a sister potion of Essence of Dittany. Do you know what this potion is, Miss Belakane?'

Morgana didn't even have to think twice. She had read most of the available Potions texts from cover to cover, and although she did not know how to brew this particular potion or that much about it, she certainly knew its name.

'Is it Ceramite, sir?' she asked politely, not wanting to appear too smug.

Snape smirked. 'Yes, it is. Five points to Slytherin.'

Morgana could not help but smile as a warm feeling blossomed in her stomach. Everyone knew that Snape favoured his own House, but the points he had just awarded her showed her he valued her interest in his subject, and she felt proud.

'You will recall from earlier in the year that Dittany requires phoenix tears and is therefore a difficult and expensive potion to brew,' Snape continued, folding his arms across his chest characteristically. 'This antidote also requires a part of a magical animal.'

'Which animal, sir?' Morgana asked with interest. She knew. She had read it. But she wanted Snape to tell her, wanted to hear his low and soothing voice.

'It is the unicorn, or should I say most specifically, a shaving from the unicorn's horn.'

'Isn't that a rather expensive ingredient as well, sir?'

'It is indeed both expensive and comparatively rare,' Snape agreed. 'In apothecaries, unicorn horns would set you back several Galleons. However, we are lucky in many respects to have unicorns within our own forest here at Hogwarts. Hagrid lets us have all the shavings we need.'

Morgana smiled as she saw the glitter in Snape's eyes. She realised that, for a keen Potioneer such as Snape, having a job such as his was the equivalent of a child having the keys to the sweet shop. Hagrid had connections that enabled him to lay hands on any magical creature imaginable, and the Forbidden Forest provided a wide variety of magical herbs and plants. For most potion ingredients, Snape did not even need to leave the school grounds.

'It is illegal to trade in complete unicorn horns, however. Only shavings can be bought, in accordance with the Use of Magical Creatures in Potions act of 1892,' Snape informed the girl, who nodded with interest.

'Sir, does the age of the unicorn matter for the potion?'

Snape quirked an eyebrow. The girl was certainly showing promise to ace her NEWT, and her questions showed awareness of the importance of ingredients as well as the making of the potions themselves. 'Interesting question, Miss Belakane. But to my knowledge, the answer is no.'

Morgana opened her mouth to respond but was interrupted by a persistent knocking on the door.

Snape scowled. 'What is it?' he growled with irritation.

The door swung open, and there in the doorway stood the elegant and dashing figure of Lucius Malfoy in dove grey robes, his right hand lazily resting on the snake head of his cane.

'Good evening, Severus,' the blond wizard drawled before catching sight of Morgana. 'Oh, Miss Belakane!' He feigned surprise and flashed a charming smile before turning once again to Snape. 'Am I interrupting?'

Snape felt his jaw tighten. The inbred twit knew exactly that he was indeed interrupting. 'Lucius,' he said in an indifferent tone so as not to betray his irritation. 'Can I help you? Miss Belakane is in the middle of instruction.'

'Oh, instructions. How delightful!' Malfoy smirked as he walked uninvited into the Potions classroom. 'You don't mind me watching, do you, Severus? I am, after all, here to inspect the school.' His grey-blue eyes were glinting, and he was already pulling up a chair behind the enchanted piece of glass. He would not take no for an answer. He was a Malfoy. No one ever told him no.

Snape's scowl turned a deeper shade of black. He could not argue with Malfoy's reasoning. Of course, he was there to inspect the school in his official capacity. And Snape knew that he would have to behave like a puppet to entertain the man. But he also knew that Malfoy had another, more personal, motive as well. The blond wizard could not resist seeking out his young lover and rubbing his nose in it at any given opportunity.

'I would appreciate the minimum amount of interruption,' Snape hissed through gritted teeth and returned his attention to his cauldron.

'I am not even here,' Malfoy replied with a smirk and a flick of his long, platinum hair. He smiled affectionately at Morgana and took hold of her hand to kiss it lovingly. 'Please do go on, Severus,' he said generously before casually taking a seat right beside Morgana, watching the Potions master expectantly.

Morgana shifted uncomfortably on her stool. She had noticed Snape's knuckles whiten as he gripped on to the desk in frustration, and she flinched at both her teacher's annoyance and Lucius' uncomfortable display of affection.

Malfoy, meanwhile, seemed totally unaware of the tension his arrival had produced in the room. He was smiling contentedly, and while his right hand was still resting on his cane, his left one was on Morgana's shoulder, softly massaging it with tiny finger movements. And every time he moved, his thigh was nudging the girl's buttock. He could not have been any closer to her unless she had been sitting in his lap, which he, of course, would not have minded at all.

Snape breathed deeply through his nose before continuing the lesson. Trust Malfoy to barge into his classroom as if he owned the place and spoil the few hours of teaching he actually enjoyed. But as Malfoy had pointed out so nicely, he was there on official Ministry business, and Snape had to play along.

'The shavings of unicorn horn need to be ground into fine powder using a pestle and mortar, like so,' he began, grinding the horn with his pestle and mortar as he had explained, wishing it were Malfoy's testicles he was pulverising.

Morgana craned her neck to see better. So did Lucius, not to watch Snape, however, but to look at Morgana's cleavage. Was it just him or were her breasts already becoming riper and even more succulent?

'You would use one gram for every fifty millilitres of potion,' Snape continued, transferring the crushed horn from the mortar to the little set of brass scales for measurement. 'In this instance, I am using four grams.'

'How big a batch is appropriate to prepare, sir?' Morgana asked, acutely aware of Lucius' hand now tracing little circles on her knee. Once more, she shifted her position, but Lucius was persistent.

'It depends on how much you need,' Snape replied, measuring the horn swiftly by eye and setting it down on the side. 'I have prepared huge batches for St Mungos, along with Dittany, as you would expect. However, a two hundred millilitre batch should suffice in any home's first aid kit.'

'It can be stored easily, then?'

Lucius' hand was now travelling further up her leg, and Morgana squirmed uncomfortably. Lucius, however, seemed blissfully unaware at his young belle's discomfort as his thigh pressed against hers. He was sitting so close now that she could feel his breath on her neck.

'Just like Dittany,' Snape replied, 'Ceramide can be stored in glass, preferably dark glass, and does not perish easily.'

Morgana nodded, scribbling down notes, and Lucius beamed at her proudly. 'Such a smart little witch,' he cooed.

Morgana's eyes shot up at Snape as she heard him give a little huff of annoyance. Sure enough, he was scowling as he flicked his hand to light the flame under the cauldron. It was obvious that Snape was as uncomfortable as she was having Lucius interrupt their lesson time.

Snape was indeed furious. He knew that Malfoy had interrupted the lesson deliberately, and the smug bastard was beginning to test his famous limited patience. Snape hated scrutiny of any kind, even though he had perfect confidence in his own abilities. And what he hated even more was that Lucius was so openly moving in on Morgana. *His* student, a witch of *his* House, one of *his* girls. It had been enough to see him smile oh-so-sweetly at Charis earlier that evening.

Yes, it might be wrong and despicable, but if Snape were honest, he would admit that he felt possessive of both Charis and Morgana. They were *his* girls. Certainly, he could not love them in the traditional sense of the word. But he could not stop the snakes of jealousy that writhed in his gut whenever another male came too close to either of them. Maybe he was pathetic, but he wanted their attentions all for himself, had done so since the day he had noticed that they were interested in him.

'A medium flame is needed to bring the water to the boil,' he continued his instructions, keeping his voice low and steady. 'Once the water is boiling, reduce the flame and add the unicorn horn.' He did just this, shaking the powder into the cauldron. 'This should turn the potion cobalt blue.'

Morgana nodded again, distracted by the feeling of Lucius shifting behind her. He was now standing behind her back, caressing her arms with his fingertips and grinding himself against her back. She wished he would stop.

Snape didn't miss a thing. He saw Lucius' not so subtle movements and Morgana looking down in embarrassment. This nonsense would have to stop! 'Lucius?' he hissed through gritted teeth.

'Yes, Severus?' the blond wizard drawled innocently.

'May I remind you that this is a lesson, not a harem? I would appreciate it if you did not distract my student.'

The look in Snape's eyes was so cold it could have frozen the Sahara, and Lucius raised his hands in defensive gesture. 'So sorry, Severus,' he answered with fake sincerity and took a step away from the girl.

Morgana gave Snape a thankful look. She had been felt up by Lucius in front of Snape once before and she had no wish to repeat it. It had been embarrassing enough the last time, and she suddenly felt guilty. Silvy had never delivered her message to Snape on Valentine's, and later Morgana had had no opportunity to tell her teacher herself that she was sorry. She really had not wanted him to witness Lucius kissing and caressing her.

Snape exhaled through his nose and continued. At least, Malfoy was not touching the girl anymore. 'The unicorn horn acts as an antiseptic as well as a neutraliser to most poisons. It will come to no surprise for you to discover that the next active ingredient in this potion is one of the greatest natural antidotes in the Wizarding world - a bezoar.'

Lucius was now sauntering around the dungeon slowly, peering at the dusty jars on the shelves, wincing at their contents and now and then giving a sound of disgust. Snape, however, ignored him and went on.

'The bezoar, as you already know, comes from the stomach of a goat and again is another costly ingredient. It is fortunate therefore that the whole bezoar is not required for this potion. You should place an equal amount of bezoar to unicorn horn in this potion. So, in this case, that would be four grams.'

He began to shave off flakes of bezoar into his pestle and mortar swiftly with his sharp silver knife. The ease of his movements showed Morgana that he had clearly done this many times before. Once more she felt a surge of admiration for her skilful teacher and wished she would one day become as proficient as he was. Maybe, he would take her on as his apprentice.

Lucius meanwhile was tapping his stick against the wall as he wandered around the classroom, obviously bored out of his mind. He had never understood the beauty of a softly simmering cauldron whilst at school and hated Potions with a passion. One look at a cauldron made his silvery-blue eyes glaze over.

Morgana winced at the sound of the tapping. Since the start of her pregnancy, she was very sensitive to sound, probably due to the lack of sleep. And also, Lucius seemed to be deliberately trying to hijack her lesson and put Snape off. It was one thing to want to annoy Snape, but this was her NEWT he was interrupting!

'Do you mind, Lucius?' she snapped.

Snape raised his eyebrows in surprise. No one would usually dare to speak to Lucius Malfoy in such a way.

'Tsk tsk tsk, Morgana, such a tone,' Lucius said lightly, disguising any trace of irritation. 'Is your dear Head of House rubbing off on you?'

'I am trying to get a good grade here!'

The girl was clearly angry, and her eyes had narrowed. Snape put down his knife, ready to tell her to be quiet in case she should lose control. He knew that Malfoy had a short temper. Not even Morgana would get away with being insubordinate.

'Why ever would you need a good grade in Potions, love?' Lucius retorted with disbelief, as if Potions was a frivolous subject and not real magic at all.

With her jaw tightened, Morgana managed to ignore his comment and turned instead to Snape once more. 'Please, go on, Professor.'

Snape nodded imperceptibly and continued. 'Once you have ground the bezoar into a fine powder, add it to your simmering potion as before.'

Morgana leant forward and saw the bezoar had turned the potion a deep purple colour.

'So, we have the antiseptic and the neutralizer,' Snape stated. 'Do you know what else this potion needs, Miss Belakane?'

'Oh, does it really matter?' Lucius snapped impatiently before he could stop himself. 'Potions can be BOUGHT!'

Really, this lesson was beyond dull. And all he wanted was to take Morgana upstairs, drive into her and give her a dose of his own magic liquid. He had been thinking about it all day, but instead, he had to sit here and listen to Snape droning on about antiseptics and neutralisers!

'Lucius, if you disrupt this class one more time I will throw you out the door myself!' Snape growled fiercely. The man would have no genitals left by the end of the lesson if Snape had his way.

Morgana cleared her throat as she saw Lucius cock his head to the side and puff his chest out. The last thing she needed was to be in the middle of an argument, so she moved the lesson on before Lucius had time to react. 'Something that contracts, sir?' she asked quickly. 'To close wounds and stop the bleeding?'

'A good guess, Miss Belakane,' Snape praised her. 'You are half right. Something will be needed to stop the bleeding if we were treating a wound. The healing element would be done by Dittany in that case. Potion makers have for many years tried to combine the healing elements of Dittany with this potion and have failed. For some reason, a unified potion cannot be made. However, Ceramite and Dittany CAN be used together to treat a wound.'

Lucius tutted and sat down next to Morgana once more, and his hands again began to caress her arms. He was obviously determined to get the foreplay over and done with already in the dungeons.

Morgana felt a flash of annoyance. She was trying to concentrate, and Lucius' disruption and him behaving like an octopus was really starting to get on her nerves.

'Lucius, knock it off!'

The words escaped her before she could stop herself. And although Lucius didn't bat an eyelid, she knew that she should not be talking to him like that.

'Lucius, please!' she whispered, trying to keep a lid on her anger and to apologise at the same time. 'Please, I need this grade.'

She gave him a shy smile and then turned back to Snape. 'Could one use coneflower then, sir? To stop the bleeding?' she asked.

Snape looked impressed. 'Coneflower, when used on its own, does indeed stem blood flow. However, its effects do not transfer to this potion. It is a useful thing to remember if you are out in the countryside and get injured, to look for a coneflower. Five points to Slytherin for your knowledge.'

Morgana inclined her head proudly. During the course of this lesson, Snape had awarded her ten House points! That was surely a record! And Lucius seemed to have forgotten that she had just snapped at him and was rubbing her back in what he clearly thought was a rewarding and sensual way. But it didn't do anything for Morgana. At any other time, she would have closed her eyes and sunk into his touch, but at this moment in time it felt creepy, and she shrugged herself free from his touch. She never noticed his expression darken as he removed his hands from her.

But Snape did. He could not blame the girl, but he sincerely hoped that she had not gone too far. A man like Lucius Malfoy did not handle rejection well.

'The final ingredient in this potion is Acromantula venom. Again, courtesy of Hagrid, we have a plentiful supply.' He held up a little vial filled with a thick, yellowish liquid. 'Although it seems somewhat incongruous to use a venom in an anti-venom potion, most anti-venoms contain a venom as part of their active ingredient to help the body's immunity. And Acromantula venom also happens to have cauterizing properties. That is to say, it stems the flow of blood from an open wound.'

'How much is used?' asked Morgana, scribbling away feverishly.

'One part venom to every four parts of horn and bezoar. So, for this potion, one fluid gram.'

'Seriously, Severus, can she not just read this in a book?' Lucius asked testily. He wanted to get the girl out of here as fast as possible. He was not used to being overlooked and not being the centre of attention, and Morgana hanging on Snape's every word made him bristle.

Morgana held her breath as she saw the flash of anger in her teacher's eyes. She knew that look. It didn't promise anything good.

'Every other student has had practical experience of making or seeing this potion being made,' Snape hissed. 'I will not have one of my best students being at a disadvantage because of her current ... medical condition!' He swept over to the door and ripped it open forcefully. 'You have disrupted my lesson enough, Lucius. Get out of my classroom,' he said coldly.

Lucius smiled back at him, calmly. 'You do not want to do this, Severus. Trust me.'

Snape's black eyes glittered. 'I said, get out,' he replied in a low growl.

'Severus, Severus. This is not wise,' Lucius answered, standing slowly and tucking his cane under his arm. 'Not wise at all.'

Morgana watched fearfully as Snape drew himself up to his full height.

'Do you want me to physically remove you? Or would you prefer to be hexed?'

'You might want to be nice to me, Severus. I am, after all, inspecting you,' Lucius reminded the dark wizard. He was still smiling. But the smile was as fake as his claims to not be a supporter of the Dark Lord.

'Lucius, please,' Morgana pleaded. 'Why don't you go and have a glass of wine, and I'll come and see you in an hour. Please?' She was begging now. She desperately did not want to get Snape in trouble.

Lucius turned his silvery-blue eyes on to the girl, flaring his nostrils. So, she really would rather be down here listening to Snape's drivel than to be in his bed. It was a huge blow to his ego.

'Lucius, please,' Morgana repeated, gazing at him with big blue eyes. 'This is important to me,' she added quietly.

Snape gave a little hem-hem and gestured at the door.

'I'll be there in an hour, Lucius. I promise.'

Lucius' gaze seemed to soften as he looked at Morgana. 'As you wish, my love.'

He walked forwards and kissed her gently on the forehead. 'I will be waiting for you,' he muttered. 'Don't be late.'

He gently caressed her cheek and then gave a stiff bow and fake smile to Snape before sweeping out of the dungeon and slamming door behind him.

Morgana buried her face in her hands, and her shoulders slumped. The moment Lucius had left, every ounce of energy seemed to have left her. She suddenly felt giddy and strange, and as she shifted on her stool, the pain in her side returned, dull now but just as fierce.

'Trust that buffoon to come and spoil things,' Snape ground out whilst returning to his cauldron. 'The fool could have made me ruin the potion.'

He froze as Morgana looked up at him. The girl was as pale as a ghost.

'Miss Belakane? Is something the matter?'

'I ... that was somewhat exhausting, sir ...' Morgana began, her voice shaking.

'You do not look well,' Snape pointed out.

'I'll be fine in a moment, sir,' she replied, trying to smile bravely. The very last thing she wanted was Snape sending her away now.

'Do you want to continue?' Snape asked carefully. He knew how stubborn that girl was. She would not admit to being unwell even if she were lying on the floor.

As expected, Morgana nodded and sat up straight.

'Very well,' Snape conceded. 'So, for this potion, we require one fluid gram of Acromantula venom.'

He poured the contents of the vial into the potion, which hissed and turned a weird purply-green colour. Morgana wrinkled her nose. It did not look appetising.

'The potion needs to be stirred vigorously counter-clockwise for five minutes,' Snape continued. 'Tedious, but there you are.' He picked up the stirring rod and began to stir.

But Morgana could not concentrate on the potion anymore. 'Are you going to be in trouble, sir?' she asked her teacher in a concerned tone.

Snape snorted. 'It will take more than Lucius Malfoy to get me into trouble.'

'He will be angry that you threatened him,' Morgana persisted, the note of concern still in her voice. She knew that Lucius had the means to make Snape's life very uncomfortable.

'It wasn't a threat,' Snape replied darkly.

Morgana nodded slowly. She had no doubt that Snape could handle himself against Lucius, yet there seemed to be much bad blood between the two wizards. And she had a feeling that the grudge went back a long way.

'Sir, do you mind if I get a glass of water?' she asked, her throat suddenly parched, and the jar of water that stood on Snape's desk looked more than delicious.

Snape effortlessly conjured a glass and poured some water for the girl with his free hand. She thanked him politely before pulling out a phial from her pocket and adding some drops to the water. Once more she felt dizzy and could feel her blood pressure plummet. And she could not keep her hand from shaking.

Snape looked up as he heard the phial clatter against the glass. 'Miss Belakane,' he began sternly, looking serious, 'if there is something wrong, I suggest you tell me immediately.'

'I'm just a little nauseous, sir,' Morgana replied, tucking the phial back into her robes. 'This is essence of ginger. Madam Pomfrey says it's good for me.'

'Do not be a martyr,' Snape said in a surprisingly soft tone. 'Watching me complete a potion is not worth risking your health over.'

He finished stirring and placed the stirrer down carefully onto the desk. Morgana looked up at him. She did not want the lesson to be over so soon. And she most certainly did not want to be with Lucius this evening, despite her promise to go to him in an hour.

'I very much like to stay here a little while longer, sir,' she said quietly.

Snape raised an eyebrow. He could tell from her discomfort earlier that she was reluctant to go to Lucius. And who could blame her? The last thing she needed when unwell was to be pawed by that man-whore.

'The potion is complete, Miss Belakane,' he started and saw the girl's face fall in disappointment. 'However, if you are desperate to assist me, I do have Flobberworms that require chopping. And they are completely harmless, in your current state,' he inflected carefully.

Morgana gave him a tiny smile. 'Well, I am the best Flobberworm chopper in the castle,' she agreed.

'Are you up to it?' Snape asked. Flobberworms, although harmless, were not particularly pleasant creatures, and if the girl was already feeling nauseous, they may do little to make her feel better.

'If that means I can stay a couple more minutes, then yes, I am up to it,' Morgana answered with determination. She'd scrub Neville Longbottom's cauldron if need be.

Snape looked at the girl hard for a few moments. If it meant so much to her, he would not turn her away. 'You may stay for a few more minutes. Without Flobberworms.'

Morgana gave him a grateful smile as she watched him begin to bottle up the potion. His movements were so graceful, no matter what he was doing. Some called him the bat of the dungeons but to her, he was a sleek panther.

As Morgana watched, her brow furrowed as she thought she could hear something. She strained her ears to listen.

Is he humming, she thought to herself.

She cocked her head and listened more keenly. Yes, he was! Severus Snape, surly Potions master, was humming away happily as he tidied away the equipment. Morgana could not help but smile.

'Please, sir, don't take this the wrong way,' she began as Snape cleaned the cauldron with a flick of his wand and he looked up at her, his eyebrow quirked. 'There was a time when I thought that you thoroughly HATED teaching Potions!'

Snape snorted. 'I DO hate teaching Potions.'

'You do?' Morgana was surprised. From their lessons together, she could see how much he loved his subject.

'Trying to teach Potions is like trying to herd Kneazles,' Snape explained. 'Everyone goes in different directions; everyone is at different levels. NEWT level is fine, as the wheat is well and truly sorted from the chaff. But anything else is ... buttock-clenchingly frustrating.'

'I see,' Morgana blurted out, trying desperately hard not to laugh at Snape's rather unexpected turn of phrase. But it was no good. The more she thought about it, the funnier it got.

Snape saw her shoulders begin to shake and raised an eyebrow. 'Something amused you, Miss Belakane?'

Morgana was grinning in earnest now. 'Um, I never thought I'd hear something like *buttock-clenchingly frustrating* from you.'

Snape saw the girl begin to giggle, then guffaw, then downright belly laugh, tears streaming down her face. And he just watched, bemused at her reaction. Her cheeks were getting rosier again. Laughter seemed, indeed, a good medicine.

After a few moments, Morgana tried to catch her breath. 'Sorry, sir,' she panted, wiping away her tears on her sleeves.

'Are you sure that wasn't Draught of the Living Giggles in that phial?' Snape asked with a smirk.

'I have no idea.' Morgana was still trying to stop grinning. 'But that felt good!' she admitted.

'Hormones again, I should imagine,' Snape replied, still smirking.

'Most probably,' Morgana agreed.

Then, suddenly, she turned serious. 'I have to go now, don't I?' she asked, her eyes darting towards the clock on the wall. 'He's waiting for me now, isn't he?'

'You do not have to go this evening, if you are not up to it,' Snape replied. 'I can send you to the hospital wing and explain to Malfoy that you were taken unwell.'

'That's alright, sir,' Morgana answered with a thankful smile. Snape was in enough trouble because of her already. 'I think I can handle Lucius. I've had a lot of practise after all.'

'Indeed you have.' Snape's tone had lost any of its warmth as he turned and opened the door. 'In that case, good night, Miss Belakane,' he said curtly, holding the door open for her.

'You won't be taking of points for me not sleeping in the dormitory, right?' Morgana tried to joke, but it was clear Snape did not find her comment the least bit funny.

'You know I don't like to take points from my own House,' he replied with a scowl. 'And besides, being with Malfoy is punishment enough.'

Morgana inclined her head slightly. 'Good night then, sir,' she said reluctantly as she walked through the door. 'And thank you. For the lesson and the giggles.'

Snape's mouth twitched. Giggles indeed!

He gave the girl a curt nod and then watched her make her way down the corridor towards the Slytherin common room. She would certainly go and slip into something more comfortable than her school robes now, probably into something tailored and expensive that Lucius had bought her. But for what point? Lucius was going to talk her out of her knickers in a blink of an eye anyway. Just as he always did.

With a scowl darker than a midwinter night, Snape slammed the door shut and made his way to the liquor cabinet. There was a bitter taste in his mouth, and he would need something really strong to wash it down.

Come on, make us smile. Leave us a review. Just a tiny one. Please?

XXX: Hell Hath No Fury Like A Slytherin Scorned

Chapter 30 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

A/N: This chapter contains some harrowing scenes. We thought it was fair to warn you.

Chapter XXX: Hell Hath No Fury Like A Slytherin Scorned

Of course Lucius would have been given the best room in the castle Morgana thought as she climbed the stairs to Lucius' chambers. But she wished it would not have been a tower room. The higher she climbed, the dizzier she became, and the stitch in her side was making her wince. But what really slowed her down was that strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. Never before had it felt so wrong to go and see Lucius. And she almost regretted not having let Snape come up with an excuse for her.

She paused a minute in front of Lucius' door to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. Had she been impudent down in Snape's classroom? She had more or less told Lucius to put a sock in it and get out. He had smiled at her and scowled at Snape. But Morgana had the ominous feeling that Lucius had meant to scowl at her as well.

He told her to enter at once when she knocked, and Morgana slunk inside, carefully closing the door behind her. She lingered close to the threshold, her hand still on the doorknob. The climb up the stairs had made her dizzy, and somehow, the cold metal provided security. She tried to suppress a wave of nausea and breathe slowly, but her heart was beating so hard she was convinced that Lucius would hear it on the other side of the room, where he was sitting in an armchair, a glass of brandy in his hand.

'At last,' he growled. 'I started to wonder if the bat had taken you back to his lair.'

Morgana's grip around the doorknob tightened, this time not to keep her balance, but to keep her from slapping Lucius or saying something stupid. She had been angry at him down in Snape's classroom this evening. She had very much disliked him talking to Snape in such a condescending manner, just as much as she had disliked him disturbing her private time with her teacher. Now, once again, she felt anger rise in her chest.

'I said I'd be here in an hour, Lucius,' she replied curtly. 'That makes me three minutes early.'

'I care little for your tone, Morgana,' Lucius hissed in reply. 'Let alone the treatment of me in front of your greasy Head of House. After all I have done for you, after all I have given to you...' He theatrically buried his face in his free hand. 'I have laid my family on the line for you, and that is how you repay me? By mocking me in front of your teacher like I was some kind of pet?'

'It is thanks to Professor Snape that I am still able to be at school, Lucius,' Morgana explained calmly, now wavering between anger and affection for the blond wizard in front of her. Had she been too hard on him? 'I am already off Snape's favourite students list, and I cannot afford him being angry with me. And you disturbing our lesson tonight did not exactly help.'

'Watch your tongue!' Lucius shot up from his chair and fixed Morgana with an icy stare that made her inch backwards. What was he so angry about?

'You humiliated my son in front of the entire school, and me along with him, and I forgave you. I shower you with gifts, begin to plan a life with you, for us, for our child, and you humiliate me all over again.' Lucius closed the gap between them in a flash and grabbed Morgana's upper arms with a force that made her flinch. 'You have tested my considerable patience a great deal over the last weeks, Morgana Belakane,' he growled. 'I demand that you give me the respect I deserve.'

Morgana never got a chance to reply as Lucius pressed her up against the wall, crushing her mouth with his. He tasted of brandy, and his fingers still dug painfully into her biceps as he took kisses from her which she was not willing to give. As he ground himself against her, Morgana could feel that he was aroused. And she knew that she would not be able to refuse him if he decided to take her.

Still kissing her feverishly, Lucius jerked her from the door and marched her backwards towards the bed, his right hand already pulling her robes up. He was still grinding his hips against her, and as the back of her legs bumped against the bed, Morgana lost her balance and fell onto the mattress where Lucius pinned her down with his body.

She inhaled sharply as his smooth hand ran up the inside of her thigh just to brush her core and pull her knickers to the side. His touch sent shivers through her whole body, and she was not sure if they were of the good kind. She had always enjoyed Lucius dominating her, but so far he had always asked for her permission. Now, he had not! She tried to wriggle free, but Lucius had already positioned himself between her thighs, pinning her down with one hand around her throat and opening his trousers with the other.

'I believe,' he growled, his cold eyes boring into hers and glittering menacingly, 'that you owe me an apology *my love*.'

Without warning, he thrust into her, and Morgana stifled a moan. She had not been ready for him, either physically or mentally, and he was hurting her. So were his teeth at her shoulder and his fingers at her throat.

'Say it,' Lucius hissed. 'Say that you are sorry, my love.'

Now Morgana was struggling in earnest. She did not want this, and she was certain that Lucius did not really want it, either. He was drunk. He would never deliberately hurt her. Never.

'Lucius, stop,' she pleaded, trying to make him snap out of his alcohol daze. 'Please stop. You're hurting me.'

'Just like you have hurt me. Now, say it.'

Morgana remained silent, but it wasn't Lucius' hand at her throat that made her unable to utter a sound. It was the look on his face. He looked evil, almost insane.

'Say it, my love,' he snarled as he relentlessly drove into her. 'One little word. Just say you're sorry.'

Later, Morgana would not remember what had made her say it. Maybe she had feared for her life as Lucius' fingers had closed around her throat, maybe she had been sorry for ever trusting the man whose steely eyes had been boring into hers, but she begged him for forgiveness there and then with what seemed to be her last breath, and Lucius came loudly, covering her face with kisses as he shot spurt after spurt of his seed into her.

He rolled off her and pulled her close, spooning her, tenderly kissing the back of her neck and caressing her breasts through the fabric of her school robes. And before he drifted off to sleep, he called her *love* once more.

Morgana only moved when she was sure that Lucius was fast asleep. She did not want him to notice that she was sneaking out. What if he took it as yet another insult? What would he do to her then? The safest thing to do would certainly have been to let him sleep and hope he would have forgotten about the whole evening when he woke up. But Morgana couldn't make herself stay. Her whole body was aching and she felt cold, so terribly cold.

When she had reached the door, she carefully glanced over her shoulder at the sleeping wizard on the bed. His shirt was open, his chest bared, and his long blond hair lay on the pillow like spun gold. He was beautiful.

Once she had shut the door from the outside, Morgana closed her eyes and tried to make sense of what had just happened in the tower room. Lucius could not have meant to hurt her, she tried to convince herself once more. He used to be dominating sometimes, they used to have increasingly rougher sex as time went on, but he had never before taken her like that, he had never hurt her. And he could not have meant to tonight either. He had been drunk. He had lost control. Yes, it must have been the brandy. It must have.

On shaking legs, Morgana made her way down the stairs, holding on to the wall for support and hoping that she wouldn't meet anyone before she reached the girls' bathroom. She did not want to explain her tearstained face and her bruised neck to anyone.

At the bottom of the stairs, she paused to rub her aching side. And only when she stood still did she feel something warm trickle down her thighs. Lucius' sperm, she concluded and did not even consider the possibility of blood before a sharp pain in her abdomen made her sink to her knees.

* * *

Snape slammed the door of his quarters shut behind him. To Hades with what Lucius wanted and what the slippery bastard was going to tell the Dark Lord about either him or the school. He, the Head of Slytherin House, was now going to Lucius Malfoy's room to get Morgana out of there. Surely, even a thick-headed inbred like Lucius must understand that a student spending the night with a school governor was not acceptable. If necessary, Snape was prepared to make a scene that would wake the whole castle in order to get the girl out of Lucius' room.

He should not have let her go to Lucius in the first place, Snape scolded himself. Lucius had been in an odd mood after he had interrupted their lesson, and the girl had obviously not wanted to go. He as her teacher and Head of House should have put his foot down and forbidden her to go. But he had let her go despite his better judgement. With any luck, he would get her out before Lucius had a chance to sink his fangs into her.

It was late, and the corridors were dark. But Snape didn't need any light. He knew the corridors like the back of his hand. But he did light his wand as he turned the last corner and heard a soft sobbing coming from the bottom of the stairs. And his blood turned to ice as he caught sight of a mop of flaming red hair.

'Miss Belakane?' He reached the cowering girl with a few swift strides and knelt down in front of her. 'Miss Belakane, what is the matter?'

Morgana bit her lip and inhaled sharply to cover up another sob. She had not wanted anyone to see her, not like this. She heard Snape call her name, heard him demand that she look at him, but she refused. Her cheeks were stained with tears, and she did not want him to see.

'Morgana, look at me,' Snape asked, now reaching out for the girl's chin to make her raise her head. But when their eyes finally met, he wished he had never made her look at him.

Her mind was wide open, her mental barriers broken down, and Snape's mind was flooded with images he had not been prepared to see:

...Lucius pushing Morgana up against the wall... his hand at her throat... him taking her with raw force... Morgana begging for forgiveness... for her life...

Snape let go of her as if burnt and stumbled backwards, struggling to get his own mental barriers up.

He had arrived too late!

'I should just have told him that I was sorry.' Morgana's voice wasn't much more than a whisper, but Snape heard. And her words enraged him beyond reason.

'Do not even DARE think that any of this was your fault, Morgana,' he bellowed, regretting his tone at once as he saw the girl flinch. But he was so angry that he was shaking. 'I will kill him,' he growled. 'So help me, Merlin, I WILL KILL HIM!'

'He isn't worth it,' Morgana commented in an oddly detached tone, and Snape grabbed her by the shoulders, making her look at him.

'But you are, Morgana. You are.'

He saw her bottom lip quiver and was just about to pull her up when her face contorted in pain.

'What is it?'

'It feels like a really bad stitch,' Morgana gasped, clasping her side, and Snape could literally see all the colour leave her face.

'Can you stand?' he asked, but immediately realised that she couldn't. Judging by the colour of her face, her blood pressure had fallen rapidly, and if she tried to stand, she would most certainly collapse.

Carefully, Snape pulled the girl up, steadying her with his arm around her shoulders. And as he changed his position to help her walk, he noticed that the front of her skirt was stained with dark red blood. Quickly, he extinguished the light of his wand. Morgana didn't need to see what he had just seen. She was upset as it was already. The last thing either of them needed was her panicking.

'We need to get you to the hospital wing, Morgana,' he whispered as he scooped her up into his arms. If his suspicion was right, then there was no time to lose. 'Poppy will know what to do.'

Snape's heart was pounding in his chest. This was the third time he was carrying this girl to the hospital wing, the third time that he was carrying her there because of Lucius Malfoy. And the third time because he had failed to protect her.

Halfway up the stairs to the hospital wing, he felt Morgana squirm in his arms and heard her stifle a sob. Who was she being brave for, he wondered. For him?

'We are nearly there, Morgana,' he murmured. 'Hold on to me.'

Morgana squeezed her eyes tightly shut, but still the tears rolled down her cheeks. It hurt so much, and she was so scared although she knew that she had no reason to be. Not now. Snape was holding her tight towards his chest, and his scent was so familiar and comforting. Dark chocolate and peppermint. She was safe in his arms, she

knew that. And she let herself go and started to cry softly against his shoulder, wishing she had the words to tell him how grateful she was that he was there.

'Poppy!'

The mediwitch dropped a potion bottle as Snape came striding into the ward.

'In the name of the goddess, Severus! What has happened?'

Snape ignored Poppy's comment and marched towards the first empty bed he saw and placed Morgana carefully onto it. She had become strangely limp in his arms as he had climbed the last steps, and she had stopped crying. And for some terrifying moments, he had feared that she had passed out. But her eyes were open, and Snape awkwardly patted her shoulder in a comforting gesture before he swiped over to Poppy.

'Blood Replenishing Potion, Poppy,' he instructed in a low voice so Morgana could not hear. 'And Ceramite. The girl is having a miscarriage.'

The mediwitch paled and seemed to want nothing more than to tend to the girl immediately, but Snape resolutely directed her towards the medical cabinet. There was something he had to discuss with Morgana before Poppy saw the girl.

He silently approached the bed and closed the examination curtains behind him. Morgana was still lying in the very same position as he had left her. She looked too weak to move.

Snape pulled up a chair, listening for any signs of Poppy approaching. But the mediwitch was still busy at the potions cabinet.

'Poppy will ask questions about your bruises,' he stated calmly. 'If you feel like you cannot handle those questions at the moment, I will get rid of the bruises for you.'

Morgana did not object, and Snape took her silence as a yes. Carefully, he withdrew his wand and muttered a healing spell, managing to finish just in time before Poppy arrived with the potions.

'I need to examine the girl,' the mediwitch announced. 'If you'd wait in my office...'

Snape cast a fleeting glance at the girl on the bed. It did not feel right to leave her alone, not even with Poppy. He had already failed her once tonight. But him staying was inappropriate, and all he could do was look into Morgana's eyes as he left, hoping that she would understand that he would not be far away in case she needed him.

He had been pacing Poppy's office for nearly twenty minutes when the mediwitch finally arrived, a tired look on her face.

'Unfortunately, you were right, Severus,' she declared as she let herself fall onto a chair. 'Cervix dilated, membranes ruptured... I cannot say that I had not been expecting this. The poor thing has had a rough pregnancy from the start...'

'Miss Belakane has... lost the baby?' The words tasted bitter in Snape's mouth. This had not been supposed to happen.

Silence settled over the little office, and Severus shifted uncomfortably from one leg to the other. He did not really want to be there with Poppy. He wanted to do something. Brew more Blood Replenishing Potion or a Sleeping Draught for Morgana, wring Lucius' neck. Anything!

'Severus, who has done this to her?'

Snape turned around and fixed the mediwitch with an icy stare. But Poppy didn't flinch.

'I recognise a raped girl when I see one, Severus,' she said calmly. 'I have been a mediwitch for forty years.'

Snape shook his head. 'I cannot tell you this, Poppy.'

'Then tell Dumbledore.'

Dumbledore! With a jolt, Snape realised that the old man did not know yet that his brilliant plan had gone up in flames. Of course, he needed to be informed. But he was not Snape's first priority.

'Poppy, I want you to inform the Headmaster. I will...' Then he broke off, frowning and suddenly wondering if he should ask the mediwitch for permission, and if Morgana wanted to see him at all. 'May I see the girl?'

A kind smile flitted over Poppy's face at the Potions master's soft tone. 'She has been asking for you, Severus,' she said. 'And I saw the look in her eyes when you left. I think Morgana would be very glad to see you. She needs some she can trust by her side right now.'

Snape nodded curtly, turned on his heel and had left the office before Poppy had even risen from her chair. And his hand had already gripped the curtain around Morgana's bed when he paused. Had Poppy told the girl? Did Morgana know that she had lost her child? Or would he have to tell her?

Carefully avoiding making a sound, he pulled back the curtain. Morgana lay curled up under a white blanket, and for a moment, Snape thought that she was asleep and considered leaving.

'Don't go, please.'

Suddenly Morgana was looking at him with her big blue eyes, and Snape felt something tug at his heart. What had this girl done to deserve such a cruel fate? Was being sprung from an ancient bloodline enough to justify how she had been treated, both by Lucius, the Dark Lord and Dumbledore?

With the grace of a panther, Snape approached the bed and sat down on the edge, carefully avoiding getting too close.

'How are you feeling, Miss Belakane?' he asked, at once realising how inane a question it was. But he had to say something. He could not just sit there and stare at the girl.

If possible, Morgana huddled up even more, pulling the blanket around herself. 'It doesn't hurt anymore,' she replied. What else was there to say?

Snape nodded slowly, desperately trying to come up with a conversation topic. But Morgana beat him to it.

'The baby...' she started. 'It's gone, isn't it?'

Once more, Snape nodded. 'I am sorry, Morgana.'

'Don't be. It was never supposed to be born, was it?'

The cold, detached tone in her voice made the muscles in Snape's jaw tighten. The girl was right, of course. He had been supposed to give her a potion in a few weeks' time to get rid of the child, and she had agreed to that back in January. But had anybody been thinking about what that would mean for the girl? Had anyone considered the damage such an act would inflict on her soul?

'What is going to happen now, Professor? Dumbledore said that the resistance isn't ready...'

Snape's first reaction to Morgana's question was to scold her. *Let the grown-ups worry about that*, he wanted to tell her. *The only thing you need to worry about is to get well again.* Instead, he took a deep breath in order to keep his voice calm. 'Lucius will not get away with this,' he murmured.

The Dark Lord would, of course, be informed about what happened this evening. And Snape would personally see to it that he would hear about the horrors Lucius had inflicted upon Morgana and to be under no illusion as to who was to blame for the death of the baby. But of course, he could not tell her this.

Lucius... Morgana shuddered at the very name. He had lied to her from the very first day. And she had believed him when he had told her he loved her. She had been so naive, so incredibly dumb.

'Dumbledore will be best placed as to advise if you wish to press charges through the Wizengamot,' Snape continued. 'If you wish to seek justice, we will support you. I will help you to place your memories into a Pensieve, so you will not need to re-tell what has happened to you.'

'Half the Wizengamot is on Lucius' payroll,' Morgana stated in a bitter tone. 'I very much prefer the idea of Voldemort dealing with him when he finds out.'

To Snape's surprise, Morgana did not even flinch at the name of the Dark Lord. And why should she? She had seen true evil that night, had experienced it at her own body. Why would she fear a name?

'I am sure the Dark Lord will punish Lucius savagely.'

Morgana looked up at her teacher and Head of House. His face was even paler than usual, and he looked tired. And despite her being grateful that he was right there by her side, that he cared, Morgana felt so terribly sorry that he had been dragged into this whole mess.

'It is late, sir,' she pointed out. 'You don't need to be here with me.'

'I will stay until you fall asleep,' Snape announced and pointed to the bottle of Dreamless Sleep Draught that was standing on the table beside the bed. 'Have you taken your potion?'

Morgana nodded.

'I want you to take a Sleeping Potion as well,' Snape went on. 'No discussion.'

He watched the girl carefully as she drank her potion, and as he saw her eyes flutter shut, he extinguished the candle on the nightstand.

'What is your favourite potion, sir?' Morgana murmured.

Snape frowned. 'To make or in general?'

'In general.'

'Felix Felicis,' he answered. 'Luck is the very best friend one can have.'

'Mine is Amortentia,' Morgana declared, her voice now so slurry that it was hard to make out the words. 'It smells of roses and dark chocolate...'

Had her eyes not been closed already, Morgana would have seen Snape's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. And he was unspeakably relieved that the girl, despite everything, had not completely given up on love just yet.

'Sleep now,' he whispered. And as he carefully brushed a strand of hair from her pale face, he realised that Morgana was already fast asleep.

He stayed seated for a minute or two, studying the girl's face. She looked peaceful, and the only thing that betrayed her were the traces of dried tears on her cheeks.

* * *

'Is the girl asleep?' Dumbledore enquired as Snape entered Poppy's office later. He had already emptied half his cup of tea, and Snape concluded that he had arrived a while ago.

'Poppy has told me everything she knows,' Dumbledore continued. 'But something tells me you know more.'

Snape took a seat and gratefully accepted the cup of herbal tea that Dumbledore sat before him. 'Lucius lost control tonight,' he started. 'He interrupted our tutorial, and neither myself nor Miss Belakane were impressed. She all but told him to put a sock in it.'

Dumbledore smiled. 'That sounds like something our Morgana would say, yes.'

'She should not have.' There was a bitter taste in Snape's mouth, despite the sweet tea. 'When she went to Lucius' chambers afterwards, he accused her of humiliating him. To teach her a lesson, he forced himself on her, throttled her to make her apologise...'

He could not make himself go into details. One day, when Morgana decided that she was ready, Dumbledore would see the memories. They were not his to tell.

'Should we have anticipated this, Severus?' Dumbledore asked. 'Should we have anticipated that Lucius would lose control one day? I truly believed Morgana would be safe once she carried his child.'

'So far, he has played his role well, Headmaster,' Snape replied. 'But his error has cost him gravely. Even if Morgana had not lost the child tonight, she would turn from Lucius now. He has lost her. He has lost the heir.'

Dumbledore nodded gravely. 'I assume you will report this to Voldemort?'

'I will leave as soon as you see it fit to dismiss me, Headmaster.'

'Then go now. Inform Voldemort before Lucius gets a chance to distort the truth.'

* * *

Snape entered the library of the Riddle Residence with swift strides. There was no time to lose. If Lucius should come around and for some reason contacted the Dark Lord, he would certainly manage to wriggle himself out of the situation somehow. And Snape wanted to see some punishment.

He fell to his knees and in front of the armchair by the fireplace and reverently kissed the Dark Lord's hand.

'I was surprised to be contacted, Severus,' Voldemort said as Snape had risen again. 'Why the late visit?'

'My Lord, I bring tragic news,' Snape started, trying to sound mortified. It wasn't hard to pretend. He truly suffered for the girl. 'We have lost the heir tonight, my Lord. The girl miscarried.'

'Miscarried?' Voldemort's voice reached new levels of iciness. 'Why? Lucius assured me the girl was well.'

'The girl has not been well for weeks, as I have tried to mention on several occasions. She has been ill and under a considerable amount of stress. And tonight... My Lord, Lucius forced himself onto her tonight. He raped her in a moment of madness.'

Voldemort shot off from his chair as if stung by a Blast-Ended Skrewt. 'Lucius did WHAT?!'

'My Lord, I know it sounds preposterous. But I have seen the girl's memories. Take them, my Lord.'

The force with which Voldemort entered his mind made Snape sink to his knees, and he struggled to shield off any other memories he had of Morgana. The Dark Lord must not know how much the girl meant to him. It was taxing, and when Voldemort finally withdrew, Snape was panting, and his knees were weak as he stood up again.

'The heir... GONE!' Voldemort was beside himself. 'Is it Lucius' fault?'

'The mediwitch informed me that she had anticipated the girl having difficulties as some point. However, Lucius physically assaulting the girl might have been the last straw. Her body could not take anymore, my Lord. Neither could her mind. Lucius broke her.'

Voldemort's red eyes flashed dangerously. 'Your arm, Severus,' he commanded, withdrawing his wand. 'Let us summon the others. They will need to know that Lucius has failed.'

Snape's jaws tightened at the searing pain in his left forearm as the Mark was activated. And within minutes, the library filled with loyal servants of the Dark Lord. Bellatrix arrived first, as usual, tightly followed by Crabbe and Goyle. Then came Nott, Yaxley... Lucius arrived last, his blond hair held back in a ponytail, his expensive robes fluttering around him. He had no idea what awaited him.

Once they had all knelt down in front of their Lord, Voldemort addressed them. 'My friends, as you all know, we have been promised a child in sixth months' time, a child that will combine two of the most ancient Wizard bloodlines in the country. MY HEIR!'

The Death Eaters cheered, and Voldemort strode over to Lucius and benevolently put his bony white hand on the blond wizard's shoulder. 'Lucius here had fathered that child, giving his seed for the cause, our cause...'

Lucius puffed his chest out. Who would have thought that he would get his own private celebration party after his terrible dinner at Hogwarts? But when he felt Voldemort tighten his grip around his shoulder, Lucius' smug smile froze.

'But tonight, my friends, Lucius has failed us all,' Voldemort continued. 'Tonight, Lucius has lost control. And he has destroyed our hope for an heir.'

The vise-like grip Voldemort held around his shoulder made Lucius sink to his knees. He did not understand. 'My Lord, no... what...'

'Only speak when spoken to, Lucius!' Voldemort spat. 'Tell us, what did you do tonight?'

'I was at Hogwarts for the inspection, my Lord,' Lucius began, his mind feverishly trying to figure out what was going on. 'I dined in the Great Hall, where I was forced to converse with a filthy Mudblood. Then, to lift my spirits, I joined the girl for her Potions tutorial with Severus, who, as usual, tried to make me look bad in front of her.'

Snape almost snorted. As if Lucius had needed any help to make himself look bad.

'The girl was where she was supposed to be then, Lucius? In Severus' care.'

'Yes, my Lord,' Lucius affirmed. 'But how could I leave her there, in the dungeons, in the darkness? The girl needs light and laughter, not a sour Potions master. He's turning her against me.'

'How do you mean, Lucius?' Still, Voldemort seemed genuinely interested in hearing Lucius' version of the events. It was like watching a snake carefully slither around a mouse before striking.

'The girl has always eaten out of my hand, my Lord,' Lucius started, seeing his chance to get back at Snape. 'But since she started spending her evenings with Severus, supposedly to catch up on Potions, she has become cheeky, insubordinate. Tonight she disrespected me, belittled me, scolded me like a naughty pet.'

'So you decided to... teach her a lesson?'

Anyone who did not know Voldemort could have mistaken the pitch in his voice as curiosity. But the Death Eaters knew better. And even Lucius felt a shiver go down his spine.

'My Lord, I... it was a game... I meant to scare her a little...'

'What did you do, Lucius? Tell me!'

Lucius swallowed. The tone in Voldemort's voice made it very clear that he would not yield before he was told the truth.

'I... I took her for my own, my Lord, without ceremony. To show her who is in charge...'

Voldemort's Cruciò hit Lucius square in the chest before he had even finished his explanation. And as he lay on the ground, twitching and reeling in agony, he heard the Dark Lord's thunderous voice:

'YOU DARED LAY HANDS ON THE MOTHER OF THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN?'

The curse was lifted, and Lucius gasped for air. 'My Lord,' he panted, 'it was a game, a joke. The girl likes it rough. She has on occasions begged me to take her harder.'

Snape sneered in contempt. How he wanted to strangle Lucius right now. Yes, he wanted to hurt him with his own bare hands. Any spell would be a waste of magic on that sorry excuse of a human being.

'Did she beg you tonight, Lucius?' Voldemort hissed. 'Did she?'

Now Lucius kept silent, realising that whatever he had done to the girl had had fatal consequences.

So the Dark Lord turned to Snape. 'Did the girl beg to be taken harder tonight, Severus?'

'She begged for something else, my Lord,' Snape replied, his head bowed, wondering how he would ever be able to forget what he had seen in Morgana's mind. 'She begged for forgiveness as Lucius strangled her. She begged for her life.'

Slowly, Lord Voldemort turned back to Lucius, who was now kneeling on the floor. And from his lips came a hiss that echoed from the walls of the Riddle library. None of the Death Eaters spoke Parseltongue, but they had all heard that particular sound often enough to know what it meant. The Dark Lord had called for his snake.

Even Bellatrix took a step backwards as Nagini slithered into the room, but she needn't fear the snake. It had received its orders already.

Lucius flinched as the snake approached him, hissing and taking up his scent. Ironically enough, he an exemplary Slytherin hated snakes. Always had, always would. But he did not dare move as Nagini slowly started to coil around his legs.

'Tell me, Lucius,' Voldemort addressed him again, 'what do you know about the girl's pregnancy?'

'I know that she had difficulties to begin with, my Lord, mostly due to Severus' poor potion making.' Despite him having a huge snake coiling around his waist now, Lucius could not pass on the opportunity to make Snape look bad. 'However, she had been strong and healthy over the last weeks.'

'Is that so, Severus?' Voldemort enquired, his eyes never leaving his snake.

'No, my Lord,' Snape replied. 'As I have mentioned earlier, the girl has been ill.'

'That's a lie!' Lucius exclaimed, but both Snape and Voldemort ignored him. Nagini, however, continued her way up his body.

'The nurse informed me about the girl's low blood pressure, nose bleeds, back pains...' Snape continued. 'My potions helped her eat and sleep, but she has by no means been healthy.'

'Did you not know that, Lucius?' Voldemort enquired. 'I believed you would take care of the woman who carried my heir.'

'I did! My Lord, I worshipped the girl! And she threw it back in my face!' Lucius pleaded as Nagini's body tightened around his chest. 'She was becoming a liability. She needed... to be taught... respect,' he gasped.

'And you really believed that scaring a pregnant girl with physical violence would give you respect, Lucius?'

Voldemort chuckled, and Lucius felt Nagini loosen her grip somewhat.

'I tried the path of least resistance, my Lord,' he explained. 'I offered the girl unconditional affection and seduction. Tonight, she crossed the line. She was insolent, and I decided to teach her a lesson. I sought to give her a short, sharp shock to keep her in line.'

Voldemort hissed, and Lucius realised that he had said too much as Nagini's muscles once more contracted around his chest. And to his horror, he heard the snake's hissing close to his ear. The beast was making its way up towards his throat.

'Let us see how well Lucius' lesson works then,' Voldemort said to the other Death Eaters. 'Let us see if Nagini slowly squeezing the air out of him will give him a short, sharp shock.'

Lucius was now clawing at the snake's body, trying to get it off his throat. But Nagini hugged him tighter and tighter.

'Is that what the girl looked like, Lucius?' Voldemort asked. 'Eyes widened in fear, clawing at your hands?'

Lucius did still not understand. Why was Voldemort so angry? Why did he care that much about the girl?

'It is not the girl I am concerned about, Lucius,' the Dark Lord bellowed. He had obviously been using Legilimency on the blond wizard. 'It is the heir I am concerned about. The heir that will never be born.'

Lucius gasped in terror. Never been born? What...?

'Yes, Lucius,' Voldemort continued. 'The girl miscarried tonight due to your treatment of her. YOU LOST ME MY HEIR!'

Voldemort hissed, and Nagini wrapped herself tighter around Lucius' throat. And although he could see the Dark Lord's lips moving, the voice Lucius heard was his own:

'Say that you are sorry, my love. One little word. Just say you're sorry.'

He had demanded an apology from the girl, and now the Dark Lord demanded the same thing from him.

With what seemed to be his last breath, Lucius Malfoy begged for forgiveness and his life, and in the same moment as the word sorry left his lips, the snake disappeared into thin air, and he collapsed onto the floor, coughing and panting.

'Do you really think the girl meant it when she apologised to you with her last breath?' Voldemort asked. 'Or did she do it to save her life?'

Lucius couldn't speak. He was still gasping for air, and his whole body was trembling. Miscarried... the heir gone... HIS child gone... he could not believe it.

'Slytherin self-preservation, Lucius,' Voldemort hissed. 'A Slytherin would do and say anything to survive.' He stepped closer to the blond wizard and forced him to look up.

'I could kill you tonight, Lucius,' he announced. 'I could have Nagini squeeze the life out of you. Or I could let your companions shred you to pieces for your betrayal. But I will not. Gracious as I am, I will give you a chance to redeem yourself. Just one, Lucius. If you fail once more, you will wish that it was you that had never been born.'

* * *

It was long past midnight when Snape finally returned to Hogwarts. He felt drained, but he did not have the peace of mind to retire. He wanted to inform Dumbledore about Voldemort's newest plan. And he wanted to make sure Morgana was still sound asleep, resting and escaping the nightmare of which her waking hours were made up.

He found Dumbledore still in the hospital wing, sitting alone in Poppy's office, drinking yet more tea, while the nurse was busying herself in the ward.

'You return unharmed, I see,' Dumbledore greeted him and pulled up a chair which Snape gratefully accepted.

'The Dark Lord was anguished by the news I brought,' he started as he saw Dumbledore's questioning look. 'It was the closest to regret and sorrow I have ever seen from him. As much as he is incapable of love and happiness, he very much wanted this child. And it upset him greatly when he found out how Lucius had treated the girl.'

'I assume Lucius has been punished?'

Snape nodded. 'He set Nagini on him. But his true punishment is yet to come.' Snape rubbed his tired eyes with his left hand before he went on. 'Lucius has been charged with retrieving the Prophecy from the Department of Mysteries.'

Dumbledore frowned. 'A suicide mission. Lucius is bound to fail. The Order is ready, Severus.'

'They better be,' Snape spat. 'By summer I want to see Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban for what he has done to the girl.'

Dumbledore fixed his Potions master with an inquiring stare. 'I had no idea that Morgana was that dear to you, Severus.'

Snape frowned. 'Miss Belakane,' he responded, stressing her last name, 'is one of the most capable witches in my House. I demand justice to be done.'

'And justice will be done, Severus,' Dumbledore assured him.

Then the door opened, and Poppy entered the office, looking just as tired as Snape felt. 'Good thing you're here, Severus,' she announced as her eyes fell on the Potions master. 'The girl refuses to take another Sleeping Potion. Maybe you can have a word? She seems to respond to you.'

'Another Sleeping Potion?' Snape frowned. 'The dose I gave her earlier should have made her sleep until lunch time at the least.'

Poppy sighed. 'I know, Severus. But as with your other potions, her body seems to be fighting it somehow. Or her mind, I don't know. In any case, she keeps waking up, and I do not want to give her anything stronger. Not in her condition.'

Snape narrowed his eyes. What, by Hades, made the girl resistant to his potions? It was a hard blow for his professional ego. And with a scowl on his face, he billowed out of Poppy's office without further explanation. Maybe, ordering the girl to rest would help.

The expression on his face softened immediately when he approached the side of the ward where he knew Morgana's bed stood, and heard soft sobs from the other side of the curtain. The sound enraged him beyond reason. That girl had once been the cockiest witch in the castle, and now Lucius had broken her, reduced her to a mere shadow of her former self.

Snape cleared his throat unnecessarily loudly to give Morgana a chance to wipe away her tears. The last thing she needed right now was him witnessing her weakness. As expected, the sobbing subsided immediately, and Snape carefully pulled back the curtains and approached the bed.

Morgana was sitting with her knees drawn up to her chin. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying but lit up as she caught sight of her Head of House.

'I hear you are having problems sleeping, Miss Belakane. I thought I would pop by and tuck you in for the night.' Snape did not know what to say to the girl, but he hoped his attempt at humour would ease the blackness of the situation and at least make her smile.

Morgana gave a strange sound somewhere between a sob and a snort, and the corners of her mouth indeed twitched upwards. But that beginning of a smile disappeared almost immediately.

Snape strode over to the nightstand and picked up the bottle of Sleeping Potion. 'I cannot believe this is not working,' he muttered. 'Is that your newest project? Trying to make me doubt my potion making abilities?'

This time, he succeeded, and he relished the sight of Morgana's face brightening with a little smile.

'Making you doubt your abilities, sir?' she asked. 'Convincing people that Hungarian Horntails make good pets for children would be easier.'

Snape snorted, unspeakably relieved that the girl still knew how to smile and jest. Maybe Lucius had not managed to break her spirits after all.

'You need to rest now, Miss Belakane,' he announced. 'Tomorrow, you will be excused from your lessons.'

'First lesson tomorrow is Potions, sir,' Morgana protested. 'I would very much like to participate, now that... now that I can handle the fumes again.'

'You will pose a hazard to everyone in the room when you fall asleep over your cauldron,' Snape growled. 'If you do not sleep for at least six hours, I will not have you in my classroom.' He waved the Sleeping Draught in front of her nose, his eyes glittering. 'Like some?'

While Morgana obediently drank her potion, Snape rummaged around in the nightstand until he found a little, leather-bound book and then pulled up a chair.

'Beedle the Bard?' Morgana asked in disbelief. 'You are not planning on reading me a bedtime story, are you, sir?'

Snape smirked. 'This is the only book available at the moment. And I am not leaving until you are asleep. So unless you want me to be gawking at this drivel all night, I suggest you stop fighting the effect of my potion and snuggle up.'

He settled onto the chair and casually crossed his legs before opening the book. And he had not even read the first page of *The Wizard and the Hopping Pot* before her slow and rhythmical breathing told him that Morgana was finally fast asleep.

XXXI: How To Handle A Snake

Chapter 31 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXI: How To Handle A Snake

It was seven forty-five on Wednesday morning, and Charis was hovering just outside the Great Hall, tapping her foot impatiently. The governors were already having breakfast with their escorts. All the governors except Lucius Malfoy, that was. He was nowhere to be seen. Charis huffed. Aristocrat or not, arriving late twice in a row was just plain rude, even for a Malfoy. Surely he was wealthy enough to buy a decent alarm clock, she thought with a flash of irritation.

Charis herself was up at in her opinion an ungodly hour, much to her displeasure. She was not what could be described as a morning person, and normally, she couldn't be spotted in the Great Hall earlier than twenty minutes before her first class. Today, however, she had dragged herself out of bed and into the shower at seven o'clock. And now Malfoy had the audacity to keep her waiting. The cheek! He deserved to have his toast burnt and his coffee taste of Skrewt dung.

Charis stifled a yawn behind her hand, just as the figure of Albus Dumbledore appeared by her side.

'Good morning, Charis,' the old man said amiably. 'I am sorry to let you know that Mr Malfoy will not be inspecting the school today as he had some rather personal business to attend to,' he began, peering over his half-moon glasses characteristically. 'Therefore, you are free to attend to breakfast now and return to lessons as normal.'

He gestured his hand towards the door, signalling that Charis was now free to go. 'I am very sorry that you had to get up unnecessarily early.'

Charis was surprised by this news, but she was also relieved. After the threat she and Jack had received from Malfoy last night, her stomach was tight with the thought of seeing the man again and having to spend the whole day guiding him around and not rising to his inevitable snarky comments.

Dumbledore noticed the girl's shoulders slump with relief as she thanked him and headed towards the door of the Great Hall. He could understand her reaction well. To entertain the likes of Lucius Malfoy was certainly not a pleasurable task. 'And, Charis?' he called behind her.

'Yes, sir?'

'Thank you for your exemplary behaviour last night. You have done your House proud.'

Charis smiled shyly and thanked the Headmaster once more before entering the hall and joining Jack at the breakfast table.

Jack, of course, was surprised. 'Aren't you supposed to be entertaining Bollockchops Malfoy?' he asked Charis as she slunk on to the bench beside him.

Charis grinned. 'Apparently, dear Bollockchops had some personal business to attend to and will not be inspecting the school today. So I'm off the hook, thank Merlin,' she replied, reaching over and helping herself to a couple of fat, greasy sausages and some hash browns.

'Personal business, eh?' Jack asked suspiciously as he poured them both some coffee. 'Looks like it's got nothing to do with Bollockchops Junior over there,' he added, his eyes flicking towards the Slytherin table. 'That one has been cackling away like Babbity Rabbit's Stump all morning.'

Charis looked over at the Slytherin table and sure enough, she saw that Draco was horsing around with his cronies and sniggering away like he did not have a care in the world. Her eyes narrowed as she watched, and once again she felt a feeling of dread about the possibility of being related to that disagreeable twit. But of course, they would only find out for sure once she and Jack had managed to get hold of the missing birth and marriage certificates.

As if reading her mind, Jack leaned forwards conspiratorially. 'Shall we meet at break time and send off those owls, then?' he asked her quietly.

'Sure,' Charis replied with a small smile. She did not want to admit to Jack that she was scared of Lucius' threat, but at the same time she wanted to know one way or the other if she had any Wizarding blood in her.

She chewed on a sausage thoughtfully, wondering how long they would have to wait to get a response from each of the registrars, and her eyes once more fell to the Slytherin table, but this time to the seat that was normally occupied by Morgana, which was this morning unusually empty.

Strange, she thought herself. Even though Morgana had never been too keen on breakfast and had been suffering from morning sickness lately, she always attended breakfast. Then Charis thought of Malfoy's excuse for not inspecting the school today, and her face fell. What if Malfoy's *personal business* had something to do with Morgana's absence this morning?

The worried look on her face was not missed by Jack. 'It's Morgana, isn't it?' he asked gently, noticing that Charis was once more looking towards the Slytherin table.

Charis nodded, looking at him with sad eyes. 'It's not like her to miss breakfast,' she pointed out. She did not, however, mention the strange dream she'd had last night. She had dreamt of the necklaces she and Morgana had once been wearing. And one of the stars had been glowing crimson.

'You miss her, don't you, kitten?' Jack asked, placing his hand lightly on her back.

'Very much,' she replied quietly, looking down. And she wondered if Morgana missed her, too. Somehow, she doubted it. Probably, Morgana was out having breakfast with Malfoy, celebrating the pureblood baby they were about to have. Why would she even spare a thought for the little Ravenclaw Mudblood that had once been her friend?

* * *

Snape was just about to close the classroom door after the last NEWT student when he heard hurried footsteps from the far end of the corridor. He paused. Who would be running along the dungeon corridor at this time of the morning? All the students had classes to attend, and his NEWT class was complete. Well, complete apart from one particular student. But after last night's events, Snape severely doubted that Morgana would show up, despite her comment about wanting to return to her favourite class. Hopefully, his Sleeping Potion was working and the girl was sound asleep in the hospital wing.

But Morgana wasn't in the hospital. She was hurrying down the corridor that led to the Potions classroom with her school robes billowing around her and her heels clicking against the stone floor. She had planned to sneak out of the ward while Poppy was at breakfast, but the mediwitch had returned early, and it had taken Morgana about fifteen minutes to persuade her that she was fine and ready to attend classes. Hence, she was running late.

Snape frowned as he caught sight of the girl. She was carrying herself tall, and the only things that suggested that anything was out of order were her pale face and her red-rimmed eyes. But then again, she had looked unhealthy for days. It was unlikely that anyone would notice a difference today.

When Morgana came closer, Snape raised a questioning eyebrow at her. He had a good mind to send her back to Poppy or at least to her dormitory. But he doubted that his by any means well-meant advice would be well received. The girl was stubborn, to say the least, and proud. She would not want him to patronise her.

Carefully, he reached out for her, but while her mind had been wide open the night before, it was now firmly closed. And Snape withdrew. He could sympathise with her need for privacy. He had seen her at her worst last night, and that experience had been painful enough for both of them.

Dark eyes met blue ones for a moment, and Snape contemplated what he should say. To ask the girl about how she was doing seemed absurd. And as abysmal as she was feeling, Snape knew that she would not tell him, not in the corridor outside the Potions classroom for anyone to hear. His asking would only force her to lie. So he did not ask.

Morgana did not know what to say either. She had no words to express her gratitude, no words to tell her teacher how much it had meant to her that he had been by her side last night. And what would Severus Snape reply if she said something as trivial as thank you? He would probably just sneer at her and tell her to hurry up so he could get his lesson started.

And so Morgana opted for a shy smile, hoping that he would understand, and Snape nodded at her before welcoming her into his classroom with a sweeping gesture of his arm.

Morgana slunk inside the classroom, and as Snape closed the door behind her, he noticed the girl hesitating. The reason for it was obvious: the only free seat was the one right in front of the teacher's desk, the seat Morgana had occupied since her very first lesson, the seat next to Charis Byrne.

For a moment, Morgana considered leaving again and cursed her stubbornness. What had she been thinking? Why had she not listened to Poppy's advice and stayed in bed? Why had she insisted on attending Potions? But it was too late to turn around now. Snape had closed the door, and if she left now, everyone would notice. So she walked to the front of the classroom with Snape right behind her and took her old seat beside the blonde Ravenclaw who had once been her best friend and whom she now barely dared to look at. She had not been fair to Charis the last time they had spoken. She had been the one to return the necklace, the symbol of their friendship. And she had been sorry ever since. But Slytherins were not known to apologise.

Charis watched as her former best friend slipped onto the stool beside her and noticed that Morgana was resolutely avoiding her gaze. She looked tired and sad, so incredibly sad. And for the second time that morning, Charis couldn't help but wonder if Morgana missed her as much as she missed Morgana.

Sure, she had Jack to study with, and he was great fun and had been a complete rock for her. But she missed the near-telepathy she had shared with her Star Sister, and sometimes there were things she needed to share which she could only tell a girl. She had not, for instance, been able to tell Jack anything about the situation with Snape, and the only way she could release those feelings was to sob gently by herself in her dorm at night. She needed her Star Sister. But did her Star Sister need her anymore?

'What are you doing here?' Charis whispered. She was genuinely surprised. Morgana had not attended any Potions lessons since the start of her pregnancy. It was too dangerous for the baby. By Merlin, did that mean ...? 'Are you alright?'

Morgana raised her head so fast that Charis was afraid the Slytherin would snap at her. But the expression on Morgana's face was soft, and when she spoke, her voice was trembling slightly. 'The baby's gone,' she whispered so no one but Charis would hear.

'What? What do you mean, gone?' Charis looked puzzled for a moment, but then her Ravenclaw brain put two and two together. She had not been the only one to see that Morgana had looked like owl droppings for weeks. Even some of her House mates had pointed out that the Slytherin seemed ill. And now she said that the baby was gone. Had she miscarried? Merlin, that would be so dreadful!

All Charis wanted to do at that moment was to offer an embrace to her friend. Yes, her friend. They might have had a terrible fight, and they might both have said things they regretted and then not spoken for weeks. But the tremble in Morgana's voice and her puffy, red eyes suggested that she was suffering. And fight or no fight, Charis' heart went out to Morgana.

'Sweetie ...'

Charis extended her hand to lend her friend comfort, but the Slytherin flinched away.

'Don't touch me!'

Morgana's words made Charis withdraw her hand as if she had been hit with a whip. Any trace of softness had disappeared from Morgana's voice, and the iciness of her tone was only matched by the cold look in her eyes.

'You will be brewing an antidote today. An antidote to snake venom, to be precise.' Snape's commanding tone made the two girls break eye contact, and they directed their attention to their teacher.

'As you hopefully know by now, most antidotes contain a small amount of the venom they are supposed to counteract,' Snape went on. 'This is why you need to learn how to milk snakes.' He lazily flicked his wand, and on every desk appeared a glass container, each enclosing a snake: vipers, rattlesnakes, adders[,] a collection of some of the most dangerous snakes in the world.

'These snakes are no pets,' Snape warned. 'One bite will suffice to send you to the hospital wing. If you are lucky.'

He opened the container on his desk, and the whole class flinched as the bluish-black Krait bared its fangs and hissed menacingly.

'To milk the snake, you will naturally need to pick it up. For that, you must get a firm grip around the snake's head, preferably without being bitten.' He sneered and let his gaze wander around the classroom. 'Watch closely as I demonstrate how to do this, since I will only show it once.'

He calmly studied the snake for a few moments, then without warning his hand shot into the glass container as fast as lightning, and he picked up the snake as nonchalantly as if it were a Pygmy Puff. 'Whatever you do, do not let go of the snake. If you drop it, it will strike.'

He picked up a little vial with his free hand and held it towards the snake's nose. 'As you can see, there is a membrane stretched over the receptacle. The firmness of your grip behind the snake's head will bring its fangs to the fore as thus.' Promptly, the Krait opened its mouth, revealing a pair of deadly fangs. Snape didn't bat an eyelash.

'Bring the snake's head close to the edge of the receptacle, and it will bite instinctively,' he went on, as he brought vial and snake closer together. 'Pressure will be applied to the venom glands, and the venom will collect in the receptacle. Simple.'

The snake latched on, and the yellow coloured venom trickled slowly down the inside of the vial.

'I will supervise each student separately when you are milking your snake,' Snape explained as he removed the vial from the snake's mouth and put the animal back into its container. 'Once you have collected enough venom, I will help you release your snake and put it back where it belongs.' He fixed the class with a serious look. 'Do not be fooled. Just because your snake has just released a massive amount of its venom into a vial, does not mean that its supplies are exhausted. If you are bitten, you might die.'

One of the Hufflepuff girls in the back row gave a little squeaking noise, but if Snape had heard it, he had the good grace to ignore it. 'Those of you who are waiting to be supervised,' he instructed, 'will occupy themselves by studying the chapter on antidotes starting on page three hundred and ninety four. And keep your mouths shut for a change.'

Once all the students had opened their books, silence settled over the classroom, only disrupted by the occasional hissing of a snake and Snape's hushed instructions. He kept a close eye on his students. So far, he had never had to send anyone to the hospital wing due to a snake bite. He had an antidote in his pocket and his wand ready to Stun any snake that seemed too aggressive. And besides, he had not distributed the snakes randomly. He knew his students and his snakes. Those students who had been given a highly poisonous or aggressive snake would undoubtedly be able to handle it.

Morgana kept her eyes firmly on her book, but she did not take in a single word. She could not concentrate. Why? Why had she not stayed in the hospital wing? She should have known that Charis would wonder why she had returned to Potions. She should have known that Charis would understand that something had happened to the baby. And she should also have known that Charis would care enough to ask how she was doing.

Sweet, kind Charis. Morgana could feel the Ravenclaw look at her from the other side of the table, but she did not dare look up and meet her green eyes. She knew that those green eyes would be filled with kindness and understanding, and she did not know how to handle it. She wasn't worthy of it, Morgana was very certain of that. She had agreed to sell her soul to the devil, and her actions had cost an innocent life. Someone like her did not deserve any kindness.

'Miss Byrne, your turn.'

Charis hastily put her book aside and looked up at Snape, who was towering in front of her. She had heard him tell off the student behind her, and the look on his face made it very clear that he would not like it if she confessed that she was scared to death of the snake. But her hands were shaking when she opened the container, and when the lid clinked against the edge of the glass, the rattlesnake hissed and struck. Charis jumped and almost dropped the lid.

'Steady, Miss Byrne,' Snape said in a low voice. 'You startled the snake. Now it is frightened. It does not understand what is going on and therefore strikes out in order to defend itself.' He took the lid from Charis and placed it back on the container. 'You need to be patient. Once the snake has calmed down, you will be able to handle it.'

Snape's eyes darted towards Morgana just to lock onto Charis' moments later. He wasn't deaf. He had heard the murmured conversation between the girls at the beginning of the lesson. And he had heard Morgana hiss at her friend. Just like the snake in the glass container, the girl was scared and trying to defend herself. And as any Slytherin, she defended herself by hissing and baring her fangs.

The symbol of Slytherin House wasn't a serpent just because Salazar Slytherin had been a Parselmouth. It was a serpent because that animal best represented the members of Slytherin House.

'I recommend slow, temperate movements, Miss Byrne,' Snape continued. 'Be patient.' Hopefully, the Ravenclaw would understand that he was not just talking about the

snake but also the red-haired girl who was hiding behind her Potions book with her jaw clenched and her shaking hands buried in the folds of her robes. Hopefully, Charis would have the patience to wait until Morgana had calmed down enough to accept any kind of help.

'Miss Belakane, your turn.'

Morgana closed her book and observed the snake in the container in front of her: a beautiful, olive green Tiger Snake with a highly potent neurotoxic venom that would certainly guarantee a trip to St. Mungo's if she were bitten. And if she were bitten on a sensitive spot, at the wrist maybe, right into the artery ...

'Do not get any stupid ideas now, Miss Belakane.'

Snape's voice had not been much more than a whisper, and still it made Morgana jump. Was he using Legilimency on her? Was that how he knew what she had been thinking? And where had those dark thoughts come from anyway?

She blinked and then removed the lid from the container with a steady hand. The snake did not even move. It was easy to pick it up, and had it not so willingly latched on to the glass vial, Morgana would have suspected that Snape had put a Calming Spell on the animal to keep her from hurting herself.

'Well done, Miss Belakane,' Snape murmured and took the snake from the girl, relaxing his grip around his wand. He had indeed been prepared to keep her from doing anything irrational. There was a dark cloud hanging over the girl and evil demons were tugging at her mind. He could sense that clearly, no matter how much she was trying to shield off her mind from him. And he could not blame her for her thoughts. He had been in that dark place himself many, many times. He knew how lonely a place it was and how desperate one was to get away from there at any cost.

'Wow, Morgana, that was awesome,' Charis whispered as Snape had left their table. She was truly impressed. 'How can you be so calm when handling a snake? Will you teach me one day?'

'You don't want me to teach you anything,' Morgana snapped, wishing that Charis would stop being nice to her. The sweet Ravenclaw should not even be close to a foul being like herself.

Charis had already opened her mouth when Snape interrupted. 'Since I hope that all of you are able to read, I will not explain the recipe any further. You have your instructions, you have your venom, and you have exactly one hour to brew your antidote. You may begin. Miss Byrne, my office. And bring your snake.'

Charis swallowed drily. This was the first time she had failed to carry out one of Snape's assignments. All the other students had managed to milk their snakes. Surely, he was going to give her a good telling-off in his office now. With shaking hands, she picked up the container containing her rattlesnake and followed Snape into his office.

'Put the container on the table over there,' Snape instructed once he had closed the door and shut out the noises from the classroom. 'Let us try this again, shall we, Miss Byrne.'

As he took off the lid, the snake rattled its tail, and Charis flinched.

'The rattling is not a sign of aggression, Miss Byrne,' Snape explained. 'The animal is scared. Let it calm down. Be patient.'

Charis looked up at her teacher. He seemed so calm and relaxed, as if the snake were indeed a Pygmy Puff. 'I'm scared,' she confessed, hoping Snape would not make fun of her admission.

'That is only natural,' Snape pointed out. 'Be assured, it is not the snake's intention to hurt you. Now, try.'

The snake lay still now, and Charis quickly reached into the container and grabbed the animal firmly by the neck. It struggled, but Charis did not let go.

'Good,' Snape commented and handed Charis a vial. 'Now let it bite.'

When the snake had released its venom, Snape took it from Charis and put it back into its container. 'Well done, Miss Byrne.'

'Still think they're scary,' Charis replied, eying the snake suspiciously and drying off her sweaty palms at her robes.

'Fascinating creatures, snakes,' Snape mused. 'Humans fear them like no other animal. They are said to be vicious and insidious, whereas in fact they only bite to defend themselves.' He took his eyes off the rattlesnake and fixed Charis with a meaningful stare. 'It is no coincidence that the Slytherin banner carries a snake.'

He pulled up a chair and beckoned Charis to sit while he leant against the table opposite her. His eyes didn't leave hers for a second.

'Slytherins, as you may have noticed, have a tough shell. They hide their emotions well. Mainly the positive ones, I am afraid. Slytherins will never cry for help, no matter how hurt or scared they are. Instead, they rattle their tail and bare their fangs, just like this snake.'

Charis shifted on her chair. Snape's gaze had her transfixed, and she could not look away. Not that she wanted to. She had the feeling that her teacher was going to tell her something very important.

'A Slytherin cannot ask for help,' Snape continued. 'It is against their nature. And when they are in a place of absolute darkness, when they need someone to take care of them, they hiss and strike out and scare people away. And then there is no one to hold on to and they fall. Into the darkness ...'

He knew what he was talking about. He, too, had lashed out against his best friend many, many years ago, in a time when he had needed her the most. He had scared her, and she had turned away. And he had fallen into the darkness, had been consumed by it and made the biggest mistake of his life. He had taken the Dark Mark. He had sold his soul.

He abruptly pushed himself from the table and started pacing the room. Merlin, how those two girls reminded him of himself and Lily. Charis was just as kind as Lily had been. Smart and loyal, a true friend. He had seen her reach out for Morgana today, and he had seen Morgana react like a true Slytherin: she had hissed and lashed out and hurt her friend. Just like he had.

He had observed those girls for almost seven years. They had been thick as thieves for so long, and, suddenly, they had fallen apart, at a time when they couldn't afford to be alone. Now that Morgana had stepped onto the trail of darkness, she needed her friend more than ever.

'Sometimes, Charis, one person's fate depends on the actions of another,' Snape continued. He was not looking at Charis now, but he could feel her eyes on him. 'Sometimes, they need someone who grabs them firmly by the neck and hangs on no matter how much they struggle. It is just like that with snakes.'

He swirled around and saw Charis looking at him with her big, green eyes. She seemed in awe.

'How much do you know?'

Charis swallowed to make the lump in her throat disappear. 'I ... I know that something has happened to the baby. She ... Morgana said it is gone.'

Snape nodded slowly. The Ravenclaw had no idea, then, about the true cause of Morgana's miscarriage. It appeared that Morgana had told her nothing about Dumbledore's despicable plan or about Malfoy. It seemed as if the girls had drifted even further apart than he had feared.

What had made their friendship shatter, he wondered. The first time he had seen the girls fight had been shortly after New Year, shortly after Morgana had given herself to Lucius for the first time, shortly after *he* had pushed her away. Was that it? Was he the wedge that had driven them apart?

The realisation hit Snape like a Stunner. In the beginning of the school year, when he had noticed that the two girls were both trying to gain his attention, each in their own, specific way, he had found their competition quite amusing at first. And when Morgana had gained the upper hand he had tried to push Charis into trying harder. But he had lost control and gotten too close. Surely, Charis would have told her friend about the detention and even about the incident in the Room of Requirement. And competitive Slytherin as Morgana was, she would not have taken her defeat well. And Charis ...

Sweet, kind Charis. She was sitting there in front of him now, hanging on his lips and absorbing each and every one of his words like a sponge. Just like she always had. She admired him, looked up to him, *loved* him even, and he had used her in the most despicable way. At first, simply because he had been able to. Later because he had needed to. He had relished the power he had held over that gentle, innocent girl, and she had let him use her because she loved him. What a vile creature he was. One day, he would have to fall to his knees and beg this girl for forgiveness. But now, he needed to beg for her help. And he desperately hoped that she would listen to him.

'Losing a baby is a painful experience, both physically and mentally,' he went on. It was not his place to tell Charis the whole story. Morgana would have to do that herself. When she was ready. 'At the moment, Morgana is hurt and very, very frightened, Charis. But she is a Slytherin. She will not ask for help. You and I both know that. Instead, she will hiss and struggle and make herself unapproachable. You have already tasted her poison today, have you not?'

Charis nodded silently. She had not understood Morgana's reaction earlier. To be honest, it had first scared her and then upset her. She had tried to be friendly, and Morgana had thrown it back in her face.

'I am aware that Morgana is lashing out like an angry viper at the moment. And I am also aware that is hard not to shrink away,' Snape continued. 'But she will not be able to keep her barriers up forever. One day, she will break. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but she will break. And what she will do then, I do not know.'

He saw the girl in front of him chew her lip. He could not even imagine how difficult this must be for her to understand. But he hoped that she was strong enough to stand up against Morgana's insults and that she had the patience to wait until the Slytherin had calmed down.

'I am begging you, Charis. Do not let Morgana fall. Be patient. Be there. Save her.'

Beetle-black eyes locked onto green eyes, and the green ones filled with tears. Charis had had no idea that Snape cared so much. The way he had treated her lately had made her believe that he truly was the cold-hearted bastard everyone made him out to be. But he was not. By the goddess, he was not. And she could not help but think that he had not only been talking about snakes and Morgana but also about himself. He, too, hissed at people and kept them at bay. Did he, too, do that because he was afraid of letting anyone come too close? Was he hurting, too?

Snape looked into Charis' tear-filled eyes and carefully brushed her mind with his own. He found she was still open to him; even after all he had put her through. And in her eyes he found not only the pain he had caused her but also admiration and affection. In his surprise, he pulled away. Charis had every right to be angry with him, but she was not. She was hurting, but she held on. She was loyal, indeed. And although Snape was relieved the girl did not hate him, he needed Charis to show her loyalty now to her best friend.

He handed her the vial containing the rattlesnake poison as Charis nodded and wiped off her tears and gave her a moment to compose herself before turning on his heel and back into the classroom. Taking a deep breath, Charis hurried after him with the vial clutched in her hand.

The NEWT class was still busy brewing their antidotes, everyone except Morgana. She had finished and bottled hers about five minutes ago and had left the carefully labelled vial on her desk. And by the time Charis and Snape had returned to the classroom, she was already lying face down in her bed in the Slytherin dormitory, softly crying into her pillow and wishing that she had let the snake bite her after all.

* * *

Charis returned to her dorm after dinner that day and lay on her four-poster bed, staring at the deep blue canopy above. She had tried to find Morgana the whole day, but after Potions, she had not attended any other classes and had missed lunch as well as dinner. And Charis was increasingly worried for her friend.

Of course, losing the baby was going to be traumatic. And although Charis did not agree with Morgana's supposed decision to keep the baby, she was not heartless and could see Morgana was genuinely upset, and she wanted to reach out to her and comfort her. But Morgana had pushed her away.

Charis hugged her pillow close to her chest. 'A Slytherin will never cry for help,' Snape had said. But dammit, Morgana did not need to cry. She, Charis, had offered her help. And Morgana had flinched away. What was it she was scared about?

Malfoy! The insight came to Charis out of nowhere. If Morgana had lost the baby last night, when Malfoy had been at the castle, then he would know. Was that why he had left? Had he left because he blamed Morgana for losing the baby? Was he angry with her?

Charis turned on to her stomach with a sigh. The last thing Morgana needed was Malfoy giving her a hard time. As incomprehensible as it was to Charis, Morgana seemed deeply in love with Lucius Malfoy. If he pushed her away, who would she have to turn to?

At that thought, Charis became very, very sad. She imagined Morgana all alone and suffering, and it broke her heart. She had to do something! She would not just sit back and watch her friend suffer. She thought back to Snape's words about Slytherins often pushing people away when they needed them most, and suddenly a plan formed in her mind. She was going to hang on to that snake, even if it struggled and hissed and lashed out.

With renewed energy, Charis leaned forwards and opened her bedside cabinet to pull out a quill, some ink, a piece of parchment and a small box containing the necklaces she had made. Carefully, she opened the box and pulled out the necklaces, holding them up in the light. She gently squeezed one of the stars, thinking of Morgana, and to her surprise, the other star glowed blue.

The charm still works, she thought triumphantly. She hastily put her own necklace on, carefully put the other back inside the box and pulled a piece of parchment towards her.

What to write? she thought, brushing the quill up and down her chin. Where to begin? I'm sorry? I miss you? I'm here for you? None of it seemed to convey what she wanted to say. She fiddled absently with her necklace, looking for inspiration. They were the Star Sisters, born mere minutes apart. And even though they had not spoken for weeks, Charis wanted her friend to know that she was still right here, to support her if she needed it.

Suddenly, a smile appeared on Charis' face. The shape of the star twinkling in the evening sunlight had given her a flash of inspiration. Dipping her quill into the ink, she wrote one simple line on the parchment and then tucked the note inside the box before calling for Winky.

A/N: Snakes mentioned in this chapter:

Adder: Adders are relatively short and robust with large heads and a rounded snout. Although an adder's venom poses little danger to a healthy adult human, the bite is very painful and requires urgent medical attention.

Krait: Krait is the second most venomous snake in the world, black or bluish-black in colour with white narrow crossbands and a narrow head. Its venom is a powerful neurotoxin that causes respiratory failure.

Rattlesnake: There are approximately thirty species of rattlesnake, with numerous subspecies, varying in colouring and size. Most species of rattlesnakes have hemotoxic venom, destroying tissue, degenerating organs and causing coagulopathy (disrupted blood clotting).

Tiger Snake: Tiger Snake are olive to dark brown in colour above with yellowish or olive belly and crossbands. It has very potent neurotoxic venom that attacks the nervous

system.

Viper: The Viperidae are a family of venomous snakes. All have relatively long hinged fangs that permit deep penetration and injection of venom. Viperid venoms typically contain an abundance of protein-degrading enzymes, called proteases, that produce symptoms such as pain, strong local swelling and necrosis, blood loss from cardiovascular damage complicated by coagulopathy, and disruption of the blood clotting system. Death is usually caused by collapse in blood pressure.

XXXII: Friends Are Like Stars

Chapter 32 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXII: Friends Are Like Stars

'Hm, I was hoping my last meal would not be made up of lamb chops and potatoes. What a shame that there won't be a spring ball. I had such a nice menu planned.'

Snape frowned and looked up from his plate to find Dumbledore smiling serenely. 'Your last meal, Headmaster? Are you not being a little overdramatic?'

'My last dinner at Hogwarts, that is,' Dumbledore clarified. 'The inspection is over, the governors have departed... I expect very much to be removed from my post before midnight.'

'I doubt the governors have found fault...'

'Dear Severus,' Dumbledore interrupted. 'As I have already mentioned, the inspection was merely pro forma. I would be removed even if the castle had been spotlessly clean and every single student had achieved nothing else but O's. But do not fret. The school will be in good hands.'

He raised his goblet and toasted towards Dolores Umbridge with a stunning smile. Umbridge gave a little hem-hem and toasted back, never noticing that the Headmaster had not only raised his goblet but also cast a silencing spell around him and his Potions master.

'Upon my departure, my office will seal itself. No one will be able to open the door. No one except you, Severus. In case you need to contact me but are unable to leave the castle, use my fireplace.'

Snape nodded. They had been through the plan already. He knew his task.

'Keep an eye on the children, will you, Severus,' Dumbledore beseeched Snape once more.

'I can only do that much, Headmaster,' Snape growled. 'The boy ...'

'I will talk to Harry once more, Severus. I will tell him to listen to you, to do anything you tell him and practice his Occlumency.'

As if that would help, Snape thought with a sneer. The boy carried his emotions on his sleeve and was practically incapable of closing his mind.

'As for Morgana...' Dumbledore put down his fork and looked towards the Slytherin table, where her usual spot was empty. 'She was not at lunch either,' he pointed out. 'And Poppy tells me that she is not in the hospital wing.'

'Miss Belakane is in her dormitory,' Snape replied calmly. 'She has been there all day.'

'I heard she attended Potions this morning.'

'Yes, she did. And she left early.' Snape stated. Surely, Dumbledore could not hold HIM responsible for Morgana hiding in her dorm. 'I think Miss Belakane took on more than she could manage,' he went on. 'She should have stayed in bed today in order to rest. Hopefully, she came to the same conclusion during Potions.'

'You think Morgana is... resting, then?'

Dumbledore looked at his Potions master over his half-moon spectacles, and Snape scowled back. Trust the old man to try and give him a bad conscience. He had instructed an elf to keep an eye on the girl. Merlin, he had even spoken to Charis. What more could he do?

'Maybe Morgana being on her own is not the best solution,' Dumbledore continued.

'Miss Belakane cannot be blamed for wanting to be alone at the moment,' Snape stated. At times, choosing to be on one's own was the only way to keep sane. He of all people knew that. At times, he was so disgusted with himself that he could not stand being close to any other human being lest he poison them with his self-hatred. Judging from Morgana's reaction towards her friend's approach in Potions, she might be thinking along those lines today as well.

'What we want is not always what is good for us, Severus.' Dumbledore was still peering at Snape over his glasses, and his blue eyes were twinkling in a way that suggested Snape needed to do something about the situation.

Snape was on the verge of ripping his napkin apart on his lap. 'What do you suggest I do?' he snapped. 'Physically drag Miss Belakane down here to dinner?'

'Only if everything else fails, Severus. But I doubt physical violence will be necessary,' he added lightly.

Snape threw his napkin on the table. 'You want me to go and get her then? Right now?'

'The girl needs to eat.' Dumbledore looked innocent as a fawn. 'And who else other than you would she listen to, Severus?'

The line between Snape's eyes became deeper and deeper. He had no idea how he could persuade Morgana to come to the Great Hall for dinner. Actually, he had no idea what to say to her at all. Still, he got up from his chair.

'I will do what I can, Headmaster,' he announced. 'But if Miss Belakane prefers to stay in her dormitory, I refuse to humiliate her by forcibly making her.'

'I think if you ask her nicely, Morgana will not turn you down, Severus.'

'For the very last time, Dumbledore,' Snape growled. 'Nice is not part of my vocabulary.'

And with that, he stomped out of the Great Hall, clenching his fists under his robes and fighting the urge to close Dumbledore's twinkly eyes for good.

* * *

The Slytherin common room was abandoned when Snape arrived. Naturally, all the students were at dinner. All but one.

It didn't take Snape more than a flick of his wand and a murmured password to lift the wards that kept any male from entering the girls' dormitory. He was, after all, the Head of Slytherin House. Still, he froze in front of the heavy oak door. The last time he had stormed through that door, he had found Morgana bleeding in the bathroom with her wrists cut open. Snape resolutely shook his head and knocked. Certainly, the elf he had instructed to look after the girl would have informed him if Morgana were about to do anything stupid.

At first, there was no answer, and Snape flinched slightly. Surely, the girl wouldn't have...? Then he scowled. He knew that she had been hiding in her dormitory all day. The elf had informed him that Morgana had even cast a charm around her bed that prevented her roommates from seeing her. Yes, *hiding* was exactly the word to describe what Morgana was doing.

He knocked again, harder this time. Again, he received no answer. Did the girl think he was daft? But then again, how could she know that it was him?

'Miss Belakane, open the door.'

Still no reaction.

'Miss Belakane! Right. Now.'

Snape was just about to draw his wand in order to open the door by magic when a soft clicking told him that the door was being unlocked. A moment later, it was opened.

'Sorry, sir,' the girl muttered. 'Pansy has been knocking on the door all afternoon.'

Snape raised an eyebrow. 'Miss Parkinson?' It seemed unlikely that Pansy Parkinson would be the kind of person to even notice when one of her House mates isolated herself.

'On Draco's orders,' Morgana explained. 'Seems like he has something he wants to tell me.'

'And what would that be?'

'Like I'd give a damn what the little ferret has to say.'

Snape did not even react to Morgana's rude language. She was projecting a hard shell, but he knew that she was not half as tough on the inside. He had seen her break last night, and he had seen her red-rimmed eyes earlier. But he would let her believe that he was buying her act for a little while longer. His eyes travelled over the girl. Yes, even her clothes were a part of her armour: dark green trousers instead of the skirt that was standard girls' uniform, and a black sweater with a hood that covered not only her red hair but also obscured half of her face.

'Care to explain why you are not at dinner, Miss Belakane?' Snape started. He was still standing outside the door. The girl had not asked him to come inside.

'I am not hungry,' Morgana simply replied.

Snape's eyes darted toward the desk he knew was Morgana's. He spotted a plate of lamb chops, potatoes and some vegetables. Obviously, one of the elves had been taking good care of the girl. Unfortunately, the food seemed to be untouched.

'You have not been to any lessons today either,' he stated in a neutral tone.

'I ...' Morgana paused. 'I wasn't feeling well.'

'I do not recall asking to hear your excuse, Miss Belakane.'

Snape saw the girl's shoulders slump and took it as his cue to enter the dormitory. She was obviously about to give in. He closed the door firmly behind him and warded it. An uninvited visitor was the last thing either he or Morgana needed.

'Have a seat, Miss Belakane.'

Morgana moved reluctantly towards her bed. When she had realised that it was her Head of House who had been knocking at her door, the first thing she had done was cast a spell on her bed. He didn't need to see that she had been lying there all day, contemplating where she had gone wrong, when she had messed up. Gingerly she sat down, her hands folded in her lap and her eyes resolutely on her thumbs.

'You say that you are not feeling well,' Snape began. He had only taken a few steps into the room and was standing there now, several feet away from the girl, with his arms crossed in front of his chest. 'Have you seen the nurse today?'

Morgana shook her head.

'And why not, Miss Belakane?'

'Because there is nothing Poppy can do.'

'I assume your ails are not of a physical nature then,' Snape concluded, and Morgana shook her head, her eyes still on her hands.

'I thought as much.' Snape decided to step closer, carefully monitoring the girl. She did not flinch away as he approached, which he took as a good sign. But she did not look at him, and that disturbed him deeply. She had trusted him last night. What had happened? Her mental shields were up, but they were so weak that Snape did not even need to use Legilimency to sense her pain and sorrow and, most of all, her fear.

'Hiding away from the world will not do you any good, Morgana.' He saw her wince as he said her name, and he hesitated for a second. Maybe, throwing the truth at her like this was not the most pedagogical approach. But Snape knew how much damage hiding away could do. He would not let it happen to the girl. 'You have a choice,' he went on. 'You can choose to be a victim, to hide away and let your demons tear at your soul. Or you can choose NOT to be a victim, to acknowledge the pain and tread on it before it treads on you, to face people head-on and be proud of who you are and everything you have been through.'

'I am unable to make this choice,' Morgana replied. She had meant to say this out loud, but was now afraid that she would start to cry if she did anything else than whisper. 'I can't,' she said, shaking her head. 'I simply can't.'

'Can't?' Snape snorted. 'The cockiest witch in the castle tells me she can't. The witch who seven months ago was convinced that she could conquer both her Potions master and Lucius Malfoy.'

Morgana was now feverishly trying to hold back her tears and keep her voice from shaking. 'That witch is gone,' she stated slowly and sadly. 'She bit off more than she could chew and choked on it.'

'Are you seriously telling me you will let Malfoy win?' Snape realised that he was yelling, but he did not know why he was angry. He was most certainly not angry at the girl. She had done nothing wrong. Her only mistake had been that she had started to develop feelings. 'Has Lucius Malfoy not taken enough from you already?' he asked, trying to keep his voice low. 'Do not let him rob of your personality as well as your dignity, Morgana. Prevent him from doing you any more damage.'

He stepped closer to the girl now, sat down beside her on the bed. And had she not clenched her hands into fists, and had he not been afraid that she would flinch away, he would have taken her hands into his. But instead, he kept his distance and tried to catch her eyes.

'Morgana, look at me,' he demanded. 'Do not feel shame. Do not blame yourself. Let yourself grieve. For yourself, for Lucius, for your baby. Let your grief out so that it does not fester and damage you further.' He knew only too well what he was talking about. His grief had festered in him for so many years, and he sometimes feared that his soul was beyond repair. For the girl, there was hope still. 'Let your grief out, Morgana,' he repeated. 'Or it will consume you.'

It started with a small sob that escaped her lips and made Morgana's hand fly up to her mouth to stop the unbidden sound. She did not want to cry. Not in front of the man who over and over had told her to control her emotions. But now he was telling her differently and more or less urging her to give in to her emotions.

He was sitting there right beside her now, like a dark angel that was watching over her, and her nose filled with his well-known and comforting smell: sandalwood, musk, dark chocolate and a hint of peppermint. And the closer he came, both physically and mentally, the faster her armour crumbled. It was no use to resist anymore. The tears were already running down her face, and Morgana did not stop them. She did not even try to hide them. Nor did she try to stifle her sobs.

Snape was slightly taken aback. He had told the girl to give in to her grief, had expected her to cry, but still he had not been ready for the desperation he could hear in her sobs. How much had this girl suffered, he wondered, not just over the last twenty-four hours, but ever since Dumbledore had asked her to do the unspeakable, ever since she had started to fall for the charms of Lucius Malfoy. How much had Lucius hurt her last night?

Silently, Snape raised his arm, hoping the girl would accept his gesture of comfort. It was all he had to offer. If she turned away, he would not know what more to do. When Morgana buried her face at his chest, he drew the hood from her head and gingerly caressed her red hair. It was soft and silken. And Snape could not help but wonder how it would look if she wore it long.

'I am so sorry,' Morgana brought forth between sobs. 'I messed up everything. Lucius ...'

'None of this is your fault, Morgana,' Snape could not keep himself from growling. 'Especially not what happened with Lucius.'

'I should have tried harder.' The girl's words were almost unintelligible, as her voice was muffled by the fabric of Snape's robes and distorted by her sobs. 'I should have resisted. I should not have fallen for him.'

'Maybe you had no choice in the matter,' Snape said softly. 'Even Slytherins are not impervious to love.'

'It's not worth the pain.'

Snape winced slightly at the bitterness in the girl's voice. She was too young to give up on love. She must believe that there was hope. Once more, he let his fingers trail through her red hair. 'Love...' he murmured. 'It is the only thing worth staying alive for.'

A new wave of sobs hit the girl, and Snape silently folded his arms around her shoulder and let her cry. For herself, for her child, for the love she had lost. And, hopefully, even a little bit for him.

* * *

'Now, will you attend breakfast in the Great Hall tomorrow?' Snape asked expectantly once Morgana had calmed down. He had offered her his handkerchief, and she was now drying her tears.

Morgana shook her head in response.

'Your absence at dinner has been noticed,' Snape continued calmly. 'By the members of your House, the Headmaster... but first and foremost, by Miss Byrne.'

Morgana froze. 'They might have noticed, but I doubt that they miss me.'

'That is where you are wrong, Morgana.' Snape was still using the girl's first name. After what they had been through together over the last twenty-four hours, it seemed ridiculous to call her Miss Belakane. Besides, he had a feeling she would listen more attentively if he used that familiar address.

'I do not deserve to be missed,' Morgana stated in a bitter tone.

'And why is that, Morgana?' Of course, Snape knew what was going on in the girl's mind. He had had the same thoughts far too many times. But he could not hand Morgana the solution to her problems on a silver platter. She needed to figure it out herself.

'I have... not been nice to Charis,' Morgana started, and Snape nodded.

'No, you have not. I heard you snap at your friend earlier.'

Once more, Morgana lowered her head. Snape had no idea. He had no idea how angry she had been with Charis because she had slept with him. It seemed so petty now, ridiculous to say the least. But Morgana was too proud to apologise, too scared that Charis would not listen.

'I am more than aware how easy it is to push away the very people we need the most, Morgana.'

Snape's voice was soft, almost compassionate, and Morgana looked up at her Head of House, taking in every word as if they were drops of rain and she the dry ground at the end of summer.

'As a fellow Slytherin, I understand that you are hiding away in order not to get hurt any more than you have already been hurt. I understand that you hiss and spit to defend yourself. And I know that you mean no harm,' Snape went on. 'Miss Byrne, however, is a Ravenclaw. She sees the rattlesnake that is rattling its tail, the cobra that is flattening its neck. As much as she cares, your attitude scares her and upsets her, and she does not know how to approach you. You need to meet her half-way, Morgana.'

The pride of a Slytherin, he thought as he looked at the girl. The odds for her actually going to Ravenclaw Tower were so minuscule that the chances of Neville Longbottom acing his next Potions test were better. And for the time being, Snape had no idea about how to reunite the Star Sisters. All he knew was that they needed each other.

A loud crack announced the arrival of an elf, and Morgana flinched. For a second, she had mistaken Winky for Silvy, Lucius' elf.

'Winky brings a package for Miss Morgana,' the elf squeaked.

Morgana's eyes darted from the elf to Snape and back to the elf. A package? She was taken aback. Who would send her a package? The only packages she had ever received had been from Lucius. And they had contained nothing but heartache.

'I doubt it will bite,' Snape stated dryly.

With shaking hands, Morgana took the small package from the elf, which disappeared moments later. For a while, she just stared at it, seeming at a loss about what to do with it.

'Open it,' Snape instructed finally, and when Morgana pulled her necklace out of the little box, he smiled. He had recognised the little silver star at once. He had, after all, been wearing it for a couple of days.

'You have more people on your side that you realise, Morgana,' he said quietly and then rose to leave the dormitory. He had done all in his power. The next step, the girl would have to take on her own.

Silently, he closed the door behind him. He never saw the tears that welled up in Morgana's eyes as she read the message from Charis, her best friend, her Star Sister:

Good friends are like stars. You don't always see them, but you always know that they're there.

* * *

Once more, Charis was lying on her bed with a book open, her little white kitten curled up and purring contentedly beside her. She had been down to the common room for a while, but had been unable to stand all the chatter and laughter. Not even Jack had been able to distract her. Hence, she had returned to her dorm and had grabbed the first best book on her shelf.

But she could not concentrate on reading, of course. She looked at the book but did not take the words in. She had far too many thoughts buzzing around to be able to read. Every so often she would glance up at her alarm clock, wondering if Morgana had received her gift yet, toying absently with her own necklace. She had dispatched Winky well over an hour ago, and yet she had not received any message from Morgana. At least, she could have sent back the elf with a *thank you*, Charis thought. But then an awful feeling crept into her stomach. Maybe the gift had not been well received? Maybe it had angered Morgana? Or even worse, maybe she was indifferent and had thrown it away?

Charis chewed on her bottom lip anxiously. She had been brave and offered an olive branch. She had gripped hold of the snake, just as Snape had instructed her to. If Morgana pushed her away once again, not only would Charis feel stupid and hurt, but it would be the end of their friendship once and for all. There would be nothing more Charis could do to show her support for her friend.

Once more, she glanced at her alarm clock. One and a half hours since Winky had brought the necklace to the Slytherin dormitory and still no sign from Morgana. Charis sighed. That lack of response could only be interpreted in one way: rejection.

She could feel the tears beginning to well up at this thought. Was she really such a bad friend? Maybe she had not been loyal or supportive enough. Maybe it really was too dangerous for Morgana to be seen with a Mudblood in these troubled times.

Charis swallowed hard, toying with her necklace once again. And as she looked down at it, she noticed it had begun to glow a very, very faint green. Charis was so surprised that she shifted position on the bed, which disturbed her sleeping kitten, who voiced her protest with a little mew. Charis had no time to comfort her disgruntled cat however, as all her attentions were on her necklace. As she watched, it glowed steadily brighter, and her heart swelled. Morgana had accepted the gift after all, and with it, she had accepted Charis' friendship.

With a flash of excitement, Charis raced off the bed and out of the dorm, leaving her confused, sleepy kitten mewling after her. She knew exactly where she was headed to find Morgana to the spot they usually went to discuss matters away from prying ears, to the place they had haunted since their very first year: the top of the Astronomy Tower.

She raced down the corridors and up the stairs, not caring who she bumped in to, and not even caring if she happened to bump into a teacher, who would then inevitably deduct House points for her negligence. They could deduct them all and leave Ravenclaw's hourglass void of sapphires for all Charis cared. She needed to get to her friend as soon as possible.

Another minute and she was soon climbing the stairs to the Astronomy Tower, her necklace glowing ever brighter, telling her she was indeed growing ever closer to her estranged friend. As she rounded the corner, however, she was not at all prepared for what she was about to see.

Morgana was sat huddled in a corner, shaking and crying, clutching in her hand the silver snake pendant that Lucius Malfoy had given her. She did not seem to have heard Charis' arrival at the top of the tower, and Charis ran to her friend straight away and folded her arms around the distraught girl.

'Morgana,' she whispered, cradling her head against her own.

Morgana did not even fight the gesture, but instead turned towards her friend and threw her arms around her. She was so choked she could not even speak. Not that she had any words to express how immensely grateful she was that Charis was there, that she had not turned away from her. If Charis had not answered her call, if she had not followed the charm of the necklace, Morgana did not know what she would have done. She felt so alone, so desperate. And for some horrible moments that evening, she had seriously considered putting an end to it all.

But Charis had come. Her best friend had hurried to her side when she had called for her, despite all the terrible things she had said and done, and Morgana was so thankful, so endlessly relieved. And for the second time that evening, she let her tears run down her pale cheeks, burying her face in Charis' robes, letting herself be soothed by her best friend.

Charis merely stroked Morgana's hair and made gentle shushing noises, allowing her friend to let out all her pent-up grief and frustration. It pained her to see Morgana in that much distress, the tough Slytherin who had always seemed to be able to hide any kind of emotions that could be compromising in any way.

'The baby...' Morgana started once she managed to draw breath.

'I'm sorry,' Charis murmured, still holding her friend. She knew Morgana had lost her baby and needed the time to grieve, and she rocked her gently as new sobs shook her body.

'No... You don't understand...' Morgana shifted position to look at her friend. Her eyes were puffy and red, and Charis saw that she looked distraught. 'It's my fault. All my fault...'

'Morgana.' Charis looked at her friend with compassion and lifted a hand to her face. 'How can you say that, sweetie?'

'The baby. It wasn't supposed to be born. It was Lu... Lu... Lucius...' Morgana burst into tears again, and all Charis could do was pull her ever closer. She had never seen her friend in such a state before. Of course, they had cried together, but Morgana was currently borderline hysterical. How could she think that losing the baby was in any way her fault? And what did she mean when she said that the baby was not supposed to be born? Once again, Charis stroked her hair and made soft, reassuring shushing noises.

After a minute or so, Morgana sat up and wiped her eyes on the sleeves of her robes, taking a deep, shuddering breath. She had to pull herself together. What would

Charis think of her if she sat there crying like a Hufflepuff?

'What happened to the baby?' Charis asked gently, squeezing Morgana's hand.

Morgana took another shaky breath and closed her eyes. 'The baby was never supposed to be born,' she started carefully. 'Lucius wanted to give the baby as a present to Voldemort. A child of two old bloodlines, a child worthy to be Voldemort's heir.' Once she had started talking, the words just tumbled over her lips, and she could not stop. It felt so good to finally tell someone, to tell her best friend whom she should have told from the beginning. And she did not care if she were allowed to tell her now or not. She had messed up the plan already anyway.

Charis looked horrified. 'The heir of Voldemort?'

Morgana nodded. 'That's why Lucius was so intent on seducing me. It wasn't me he wanted, it was my bloodline.' She gripped on to the necklace that Lucius had sent her even tighter as she said this, and Charis realised that her friend had indeed developed feelings for the cruel wizard. Suddenly, Morgana's comment about the baby being *almost royalty* started to make sense.

'But Dumbledore knew about Lucius' plans,' Morgana went on. 'He asked me to conceive the heir and carry it for three months, after which time I would take a potion to abort it.'

'He asked you to do what? Dumbledore knew what Lucius was planning and asked you to play along?' Charis couldn't believe it. How could Dumbledore, that wise, benign wizard, ask such a terrible thing from Morgana?

Morgana fiddled absently with the necklace in her hand. 'Dumbledore said that I would be in more danger if I put up resistance against Lucius. By letting him think I was playing along with his plan, I would be safer.' She let out a little strangled noise at this, somewhere between a sob and a laugh. 'The Order needed more time to prepare against Voldemort. Whilst I was pregnant and in the castle, Hogwarts would be safe from attack.'

Charis shook her head with disbelief, her initial shock turning into anger. To her, Morgana had been betrayed twice over firstly by Malfoy, and then by Dumbledore. Dumbledore was supposed to be on the side of the light! But he had used Morgana as a pawn in the war effort. It was despicable! Then she thought of Lucius' swift and unexplained departure from the inspections today. Did that have something to do with the baby?

'Does Malfoy know that the baby is... gone?' she asked tentatively.

Morgana shrugged her shoulders, looking down at the snake pendant in her hand. 'I don't know,' she answered quietly. 'Lucius was angry with me last night. He...' She broke off as the tears once more rolled down her cheeks. Lucius could not have meant to hurt her. He couldn't have. He had said that he loved her.

Charis frowned. As far as she could recall, Malfoy had looked anything but angry with Morgana in the Great Hall. He had smiled so indulgently at her. 'What happened?' she asked cautiously.

'Snape was showing me how to brew Ceramite when Lucius came to the dungeons. He was touching me and kissing me, and I told him to stop. I did not want Snape to see. Not again.'

'Again? What do you mean, not again?'

'Dumbledore made Snape play the middleman all the time,' Morgana explained. 'How would it have looked if he had just let me go to Malfoy Manor on my own? I needed a chaperone.'

A chaperone? Charis had to bite her tongue to keep herself from snorting. Dumbledore had agreed to Morgana being knocked up by Malfoy, and still he had bothered to send along Snape as a chaperone? Dumbledore could not be that hypocritical. 'Maybe Snape was there to protect you?' Charis wondered. 'To make sure that Malfoy would not hurt you in any way?'

'Lucius NEVER meant to hurt me!' Morgana clutched her hands over her mouth. She had not meant to flare up like this. 'Lucius never meant to hurt me,' she repeated, her voice now not more than a whisper. 'It's all my fault. All my fault.'

'What is your fault, Morgana?' Charis' stomach knotted with a sense of dread. Something seemed to have happened to her friend. Something truly horrific.

Morgana closed her fingers so hard around the pendant in her hand that it hurt. 'I should never have fallen in love,' she whispered. 'I should never have started to care.'

'Oh, sweetie,' Charis murmured, squeezing Morgana's hand. 'How could you not have cared? How could you not have fallen in love? Malfoy is charming; he was nice to you. Not even Slytherins are impervious to love.'

When Morgana once more buried her face at her friend's shoulder, Charis could not stop her own tears from falling. She knew herself how much unrequited love could hurt. But Morgana had been through even more. Dumbledore had made her give her body to the cause, and Malfoy had taken her heart. And now she had lost the baby that had been fathered by a man who had never cared for her. Her body was broken, and so was her heart.

'I am so sorry, Morgana.' Charis' heart ached for her friend, and she wished there was some way she could share her burden or say something to ease her pain. But all she could do was be there for her.

'I am sorry, too, Charis,' Morgana whispered, freeing herself from Charis' embrace. 'I am sorry for pushing you away. Please, please, believe me that I did not mean to.'

'Honey, hush.' Charis was overwhelmed by affection. How could Morgana apologise *for that* now? Now, when she had such heavy burdens to carry on her own? 'I know you didn't mean to. The mood in your House...'

'I wish I had been Sorted into Ravenclaw,' Morgana commented sadly and tried to give her friend a small smile. 'It would have saved me a lot of trouble.'

Charis smiled back and once more pulled her friend into a tight hug. 'You know you're always welcome in Ravenclaw Tower, Morgana Belakane.'

It was almost midnight when the girls let go of each other. They had cried together, they had even laughed. And they had talked about all the things they had kept from each other over the last couple of months, realising how silly they both had been. There had never been a reason for jealousy or anger. They were the Star Sisters. Nothing and nobody would ever make them stop loving each other.

They parted at the bottom step of the stairs that led to the Astronomy Tower, Charis headed for Ravenclaw Tower and Morgana for the dungeons. And both of them were so keen not to be seen by anyone that they both missed Fudge, Dawlish and Shackelbolt, who in their turn were heading for Dumbledore's office.

XXXIII: Dispatches

Chapter 33 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXIII: Dispatches

'My apologies for the early start, but I very much wanted to tell you this before you hear it from anyone else.'

All eyes in the Ravenclaw common room were on Professor Flitwick, the tiny Head of Ravenclaw House, who was currently pacing back and forth and fidgeting anxiously with his wand, causing puffs of foul-smelling blue smoke to belch out of the tip. It was early in the morning, and most of the House were not even dressed yet, but standing around in their pyjamas, dressing gowns and slippers. Many rubbed their eyes and stifled a yawn as Flitwick once more paced the floor.

'There is no easy way to say this, so I will just come right out and say it,' Flitwick sniffed, just as another particularly flatulent gust of blue smoke burst forth from his wand. 'Professor Dumbledore has been removed from Hogwarts, and Professor Umbridge is now Headmistress, with immediate effect.'

Charis and Jack exchanged horrified glances as all around them their fellow Ravenclaws gasped and muttered in disbelief. Dumbledore removed from Hogwarts? How could that have happened? For most of the students, Dumbledore was a part of Hogwarts just as much as the House ghosts or the Giant Squid in the Black Lake. Hogwarts without Dumbledore was unimaginable. As for Professor Umbridge being the Headmistress now, that was almost as bad as You-Know-Who himself taking over the position.

Terry Boot was the first to speak out. 'What in the name of Frej's enormous, throbbing, pink...?'

'Yes, thank you, Mr Boot, it's safe to say we are all as shocked at this terrible news as you are,' Flitwick replied, somewhat flustered, trying to fan away the blue smoke. This always happened when he was nervous. The smell really didn't help matters.

'But, sir,' Anthony Goldstein piped up, 'why has Professor Dumbledore been removed from Hogwarts? And where is he now?'

Flitwick shook his head ruefully. 'I am not privy to Professor Dumbledore's whereabouts, I'm afraid. Suffice to say, I am sure he can take care of himself. However...' The tiny professor sighed heavily. 'His departure is due to rumours of an army formed at this very school in his name.'

Once more, Charis and Jack exchanged furtive glances, as Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, Cho Chang, and all the other Ravenclaw members of Dumbledore's Army looked aghast. They had been so careful. They had spoken ever so quietly about their meetings. They had never entered the seventh floor corridor more than three people at the time. And still, they had been discovered. They were all so shocked that none of them noticed that Marietta Edgecombe was missing.

'Now, I will not be handing out punishments for those of you who were smart enough to see what is going on outside these walls, and who have chosen to pledge allegiance to the Light,' Flitwick continued, noticing many of his house looking forlorn and guilty. 'You are members of my House. You know we are in the midst of troubled times. But, for your own safety, I must implore that any of you who are involved in such activities must now cease.'

Once again, Flitwick noted several students shuffling uncomfortably, avoiding his gaze. So it was true, then. There had been an army set up under the teachers' very noses. Flitwick didn't know if he felt more proud or annoyed at the students' daring.

'I mean it,' the diminutive teacher continued. 'With Professor Umbridge at the helm, this school will be very different to what you have known before. Do not give her a reason to punish you.'

A first-year girl with bushy blonde hair, sitting at the front, raised her hand gingerly.

'Yes, Miss Hawkins?' Flitwick asked wearily.

'Will Professor Dumbledore be coming back next year?' she asked timidly, her blue eyes filled with fear.

Flitwick sighed once more. 'That, I am afraid, I do not know.'

* * *

When the first students of Slytherin House tried to leave their common room for breakfast in the Great Hall that morning, they found the door locked. Moments later, a note written in green ink appeared, instructing them to stay put until their Head of House arrived.

'Do you think he is about to reward us?' Pansy Parkinson squeaked happily. 'After all, it was us who busted that Potter brat and his gang.'

Draco Malfoy nonchalantly leant back in one of the leather armchairs and put his feet up on the table. He couldn't have looked any more smug. 'Yes, we did a fine job,' he drawled, casually inspecting his fingernails. 'I expect at least fifty House points for each of us. Maybe we will even be given a medal.'

Pansy looked as if she were about to levitate with happiness. So did the other members of the Inquisitorial Squad. All except Crabbe and Goyle, that was. Those two boys seemed mostly annoyed at the fact that their breakfast was being delayed.

'I doubt Professor Snape will reward snitches,' Morgana's voice came from the shadows. She had been lingering by the door for quite some time, long enough to conclude that Draco and his cronies were once more boasting about having busted an organisation called *Dumbledore's Army*. Pansy had given quite a speech about her heroic deed already the night before in the girls' dormitory. Morgana had pretended to be asleep then, but she had not missed a word.

'And what would you know about that, Belakane?' Draco spat and shot up from his chair. He had not drawn his wand, but his sudden movement had been enough for

Morgana to flinch involuntarily. For a split second, Draco had looked so much like his father with his blue-gray eyes glittering and the corner of his mouth twitching in anger. And she regretted having spoken.

Fortunately, she was saved by her Head of House.

'Sit down, Draco,' Snape murmured. His voice was not much more than a whisper, but still it made not only Draco take a seat but everyone else in the room. As so often, Snape's arrival had taken them all by surprise. He had not entered through the common room door, had he? No one could tell.

'I assume that you are already aware of the changes that have taken place in the castle last night,' Snape started, raising his eyebrow and nodding slightly towards Educational Decree Number Twenty-eight that had appeared on the message board by the door. 'As of today, High Inquisitor Dolores Jane Umbridge has replaced Albus Dumbledore as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'

A murmur went through the Slytherin common room. Of course, not all of the students had read the decree. Crabbe and Goyle looked most surprised, and Snape sighed inwardly. Were the rumours true then, that those two boys did not know how to read? Others, however, looked unusually pleased with themselves, and Snape assumed that Draco Malfoy had most certainly received notice from his father the moment the decision had been taken to remove Dumbledore from his post. Most probably, the boy would soon be gifted with yet another new broom for having had a hand in the Headmaster's downfall.

Suppressing a sneer, Snape continued his speech. 'A new Head means new rules. I know that some of you are already familiar with the new terms and standards. For you others, I recommend using your brain when it comes to following them. I have better things to do than getting you out of trouble. Off to breakfast with you now.'

The common room was cleared of any students in a blink of an eye, and Snape followed them up to the Great Hall. It wouldn't be a wise move to not make an appearance at the staff table and pay homage to the new Headmistress. He was just about to put together an excuse for making his stay in the Great Hall a short one when he saw one of his Slytherins detach herself from the group.

'Miss Belakane,' he growled and pointed towards the entrance to the hall. 'Breakfast would be that way.'

Morgana resisted the urge to groan. Why had she not turned to see that Snape was following? 'I am not in the mood for breakfast, sir,' she explained half-heartedly.

'Whatever anyone of us is in the mood for is not of the essence today, Miss Belakane,' Snape stated. 'I am certain that the Headmistress would like to address the whole school this morning. But do tell where you were planning to go.'

He didn't like the idea of the girl sneaking around at all. She had snuck out of the castle once too often for his taste already.

'The Owlery, sir,' Morgana answered in a tone that was too quiet for his liking, and Snape frowned. It was then that he noticed her carrying a little box wrapped in plain, brown paper. 'I gathered some things last night which I would very much like to return to their sender as soon as possible. But I can do that after breakfast as well.'

Quickly, she tried to stuff the package into her book bag. But Snape caught sight of the handwriting on the package and put two and two together. The girl was obviously about to return the gifts she had received over the last couple of months.

'You know very well that every package arriving at and leaving the castle is searched nowadays,' he pointed out, reaching his hand out for the package. 'Do you deem it wise to let anyone know about your *relationship* with Lucius Malfoy?'

Morgana just lowered her head.

'I thought as much.' Once more, Snape reached out his hand, his voice a little firmer this time. 'If you are so desperate to get rid of your trinkets, I will take care of them for you.'

A quick wave with his wand and a muttered spell was all it took to reduce the package to the size of a thimble, and Snape stuffed it into one of his pockets, slightly annoyed by the rueful look in Morgana's eyes. Suddenly, he doubted that she would actually have carried out her plan. Most probably, she would have returned the package to her dormitory, and all her gifts and broken dreams with it.

'To breakfast with you now,' he growled and then watched after the girl as she silently slunk into the Great Hall and took her seat among the other seventh-year Slytherins. And when Headmistress Umbridge rose from her chair with her characteristic and oh-so-annoying little cough, he wished that he had followed Morgana to the Owlery instead.

* * *

If breakfast at Hogwarts on Professor Umbridge's first day as Headmistress were a joyless matter, it was nothing compared to the Saturday brunch at Malfoy Manor three days later. Lucius had been sitting in his favourite chair, his still aching upper body supported by soft cushions. Who would have guessed that crushed ribs still hurt days after they were mended? Damn that ugly snake! But he didn't mind being pampered by both his wife and his elves and had just been about to sink his teeth into one of Silvy's famous chocolate croissants when Bellatrix Lestrange had come bursting into the room.

'Your little threat did not work, Lucius. Runcorn tells me the Ministry received an owl asking for certain birth and marriage certificates this week... the very ones that Draco removed from Hogwarts.'

Bellatrix was furious. Her dark eyes glistened with malice; her deep red lips were pursed into an angry pout. She had screwed her hands into fists, both arms ramrod-straight down by her sides.

Lucius regarded the woman as he sat back in his chair. Her quickness to anger often amused him as much as it scared him. At this moment in time, Bella looked like a petulant little girl, who had been told she could not have a second slice of pumpkin pie. Nevertheless, the Black women were all famously blessed with good looks, and even during a tantrum, Bella was a fine looking specimen. Lucius let his eyes roam from her bright eyes, down her sculpted cheekbones, eventually resting on her succulent cleavage, which was currently swelling with Bella's temper. And he could not stop his mind from drifting back to a certain afternoon a couple of months ago when he had seen Bella's bosoms heave with excitement as Morgana had freed them from the confinement of Bella's tight corset. How he wished that he had fucked both of them that afternoon.

Regretfully, he abandoned the happy memories and returned to the present. 'My dear Bella,' he drawled lazily, crossing one of his legs over the other. 'Under the circumstances, I did as much as I could.'

'You did nothing!' Bella hissed, stepping forwards towards the blond wizard.

'What did you expect me to do? Strike them both down whilst inspecting the school? Come now, Bella, even one as wand-happy as you could see how foolish that would have been,' Lucius replied calmly.

'Your family's honour is at stake!' the dark witch spat in return. 'Or are you happy to sit back and watch our names be defamed by a Mudblood? It seems you are losing your touch if you cannot even threaten a couple of school children properly.'

Bella stalked slowly around Lucius' chair, her voice dropping to honeyed tones as she leant forwards to coo in his ear. 'And yet, you were able to destroy the heir of Slytherin on that very same night. No wonder the Dark Lord is angry with you. It appears you can do nothing right, Lu-Lu.'

At this, a shadow crossed Lucius' face. He did not need reminding of his indiscretion at the castle, and Bella's insinuation that he was a failure hit a sore spot. And the sickly use of her secret pet-name for him made his hackles rise. As fast as lightning, his hand reached up and grabbed Bella's face as he turned his to face her. His silvery-blue

eyes flashed dangerously.

'The Dark Lord has entrusted me with a highly important task,' he ground out through gritted teeth. 'It would be imprudent to jeopardise that task by drawing undue attention to myself now.'

Bella grunted as she tried to wriggle herself free from Lucius' grasp, but Lucius squeezed his grip tighter.

'As you clearly have nothing better to do, Bella dear, I suggest that YOU should be the one to take action. After all, it is YOUR bloodline that is coming under scrutiny here, not MINE. Go and prune your family tree, and make sure this time that the weeds are gone once and for all.'

He let Bella go as if burnt, and she straightened herself quickly, still glaring down at the blond wizard.

'Am I interrupting something?'

Snape's velvety baritone made Bellatrix spin around. Lucius, however, only smirked lazily.

'Not at all, Severus. Not at all. Bella was just leaving. Were you not, dearest?'

Bella huffed indignantly and shot her brother-in-law a last poisonous look before turning back to Snape. 'How are things at Hogwarts?' she purred, pouting and looking up seductively at the Potions master. She was unable to keep her hand from tracing along Snape's forearm as she spoke.

'Surprisingly calm,' Snape stated, looking down his hooked nose at the dark witch. She was standing much too close to him, and he could feel the softness of her fingers tickle the inside of his arm. 'Not that it is any of your concern.' Unceremoniously, he snatched Bella's wrist and pulled away the hand that had made its way under his sleeve. 'Neither is the inside of my robes.'

He let go of her with a look of disgust on his face, and Bella's pout turned into a sour glare. 'You will soon see that it concerns me very much how things are at Hogwarts, Severus,' she hissed. 'Especially since you still seem unable to keep your students in check.'

'That is quite enough now, Bella,' Lucius interrupted. Bella couldn't be as daft as to hint to Snape that she was about to dispose of the Mudblood and her Blood-traitor friend, now could she? But then again, this was Bella. One never knew what she would do next. 'You were about to leave, so leave,' he added in a condescending tone. 'Run along. Shoo, shoo.'

'Such a temper,' Snape stated after Bella had slammed the door so hard on her way out that several portraits had fallen from the wall. 'And so unpredictable.'

'That is how I like my women,' Lucius drawled. 'Fierce and feisty...' He broke off and looked at Snape, eyebrow raised and nose slightly wrinkled. 'I guess your type is more of the, shall we call it, *submissive* kind? The type to lie back and think of England?'

'I have not come here to discuss women with you, Lucius,' Snape hissed in response. 'But if you would rather revel in erotic fantasies, I will owl you my report instead.'

Lucius raised his hand in a yielding gesture. 'Forgive an injured man, Severus. I was only yanking your wand. Please, sit. Have a drink.'

'I would rather get this over and done with quickly,' Snape replied curtly.

'Suit yourself. I for one will have a brandy. It's eleven o'clock after all. Elf!'

Silvy appeared almost immediately. Once more, she was limping, and there was a deep, fresh cut above her right eyebrow.

'Brandy,' Lucius commanded.

'I see you have been treating your favourite elf very well, Lucius,' Snape commented drily. Obviously, Lucius had let the poor thing tend to his injuries and had rewarded her by inflicting some on her himself.

'Your report, Severus?' Lucius insisted, deliberately ignoring Snape's comment about the elf as Silvy poured him a healthy glug of brandy into a cut crystal glass.

'The Order is still patrolling the corridor at the Department of Mysteries at night,' Snape started. 'If you want to make a move, you will need a proper decoy.'

They went on to discuss possible decoys and the best time to make their move. Snape's report was nothing more than a charade, however. As usual, he had reported nothing that the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters didn't know already. But still, it made him look good in the eyes of Voldemort, who, after all, still thought that Snape was working for him and him alone. And for the time being, Lucius seemed content as well with their in depth discussion.

Snape was already on his way out when he remembered the package in his pocket. 'By the way, Lucius, I have a gift for you. From Miss Belakane.' He cast a quick *Engorgio* charm and handed the parcel to Lucius.

If Lucius was surprised, he did not let it show. 'From Morgana?' He put on a radiant smile. 'I knew she would miss me sooner or later.'

Snape almost vomited on the expensive Persian rug. He had always known that Lucius Malfoy's arrogance had no boundaries, but this was outrageous. Did the smug bastard truly believe that the girl was still longing for him, that he could have her back if he just winked at her? After all that he had put her through?

His smile growing ever broader, Lucius ripped off the brown wrapping paper and revealed an emerald green box. 'Gift wrapped and everything. The darling angel.'

His smile, however, froze as he lifted the lid. 'WHAT is the meaning of this?' he snapped, lifting up the ring he had gifted Morgana back in October.

Snape smiled innocently. 'I assume Miss Belakane has no longer any use for any of your trinkets and baubles, Lucius. I volunteered to bring them back to you, with her compliments.'

Lucius' jaw was so tight that Snape could actually hear his wisdom teeth crack as he fished a pair of silken knickers out of the box with his index finger. 'The ungrateful little trollop,' he spat and flicked the delicate lingerie away from him in anger. 'How dare she?'

'Master Lucius ...' came a hushed, trembling voice from the side after a moment.

Both men turned to the liquor cabinet where Silvy was still standing ready to receive any new orders from her master. The pair of knickers had landed right on her tiny head, looped over one of her big, floppy ears and now hung down over one eye.

'Master Lucius is giving me ... sexy clothes!' Silvy's unobscured eye was shining with delight, and she clutched her hands together in front of her with joy.

'WHA-? I have not ...' Lucius blustered. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't have accidentally lost yet another elf through sheer carelessness.

'Silvy has clothes,' the elf squeaked in delight, ignoring her now ex-master. 'Sexy clothes! Silvy is free!' And with a pop, she was gone.

Lucius was furious, and Snape had to suppress a snort. 'Would you like me to pour you another drink before I leave, Lucius?' he asked with glee. 'We would not want you to overstrain yourself in your condition, now would we? After all, the Dark Lord expects great deeds from you.'

But the brandy tumbler that smashed against the wall mere inches beside his head made it very clear to Snape that he could consider himself dismissed.

Out in the hall, he felt something tug at his robes. It was Silvy.

'Why are you still here, Silvy?' he enquired. 'Your master has presented you with clothes. You are free.'

'Silvy knows that, Master Snape,' the elf replied, radiant with happiness. She had now tied the knickers around her leg like a garter. 'Silvy wants to ask Master Snape a favour.'

Snape crouched down and listened.

Five minutes later, he ushered Silvy through the door that led to the girls' dormitory in Slytherin House. Morgana was not there, but Snape was certain that a smile would light up the girl's face when she returned to find an old friend and trustful servant waiting for her on her bed.

* * *

The Easter holidays had begun. Morgana would be staying at Hogwarts as usual for the duration, not having any family to stay with. Jack and Charis, however, were both going to stay with their respective families and so took the Hogwarts Express from Hogsmeade that very morning.

Charis felt particularly sad leaving Morgana this time, especially after all the heartache they had shared after renewing their friendship over the last few days. But Morgana had put a brave face on when it came to saying goodbye and they had hugged tightly. Charis took some comfort in the fact that she had seen her friend genuinely laughing the night before. As usual, Ravenclaw Tower had hosted an end of term party where the Butterbeer flowed freely and sweets and snacks were piled high. Jack had everyone in stitches with his very own *Eggspelliarmus* charm, which caused the suits of armour in the corridor outside to start clucking like hens before squatting down and laying brightly-coloured chocolate eggs.

Fred and George Weasley had got wind of the hilarity at breakfast the next day before the mass departure to Hogsmeade and had offered Jack an eye-popping amount of Galleons for the spell, to which Jack refused and insisted on showing them it for free. The twins in return had written Jack an I.O.U on a piece of parchment and told Jack he would know when the time was right to cash it in, leaving the Ravenclaw table with a wink and an enigmatic grin.

After saying their goodbyes, Jack and Charis had boarded the train without incident, and as soon as they were in their own compartment and away from prying ears, they once more began discussing the next stage of their investigations into Charis' family tree. Charis had received an owl earlier in the week from the Ministry, saying that the certificates would not be issued in the post, due to them having been issued once before. Bless Wizarding bureaucracy and economy measures. Hence, the documents would need to be collected in person from the records office in London. As they were not allowed to leave campus during term time, Jack and Charis were both relieved at the swift arrival of the Easter holidays, which meant that they could meet up in London to collect the certificates together.

By the time they had reached the Lake District, they had settled on a plan to meet the following week. Neither of them had taken their Apparition tests yet, so it would mean an early start and Muggle transport. But that did not matter to either of them. They both felt excited at the chance to explore both Muggle London and Wizarding London together, as well as finding out if Charis did indeed have any skeletons in her closet.

Charis had to take a connecting coach from London to Somerset after leaving the Hogwarts Express, which took another three hours, and it was evening once Charis had finally returned to her family's home in Somerset. Approaching her house, she found herself praying that she would not be walking in on an argument, as she so frequently did. She let herself in the front door quietly and peeked around the lounge door. To her delight all was calm except for the hum of the television, which was probably showing one of her mother's favourite soaps.

Her mother glanced up, and her eyes lit up immediately with a big smile. Her father was absent, however *Probably down the pub*, Charis thought.

'Hi, Mum.' She grinned back and hugged her mother tightly.

'You made it then?' her mum said in response, hugging her daughter back.

'Dad at the pub?' Charis continued, dropping her heavy bag by the side of the sofa and shrugging off her jacket.

'Yes,' her mother replied, rolling her eyes. 'It is a Saturday after all.'

A creature of habit, my father, Charis thought to herself as she made them both a cup of tea. She had noticed as she brought out the biscuits that the cupboards were freshly stocked with crisps and various snacks and smiled. Her mum knew that crisps were not freely available in the Wizarding world and always made sure to stock up on her daughter's favourites for the holidays.

Feeling tired from her day's travelling, Charis only watched a little television with her mother before retiring to bed early. When she closed the bedroom door, she smiled wearily. Her boxy old room was feeling much too small and child-like for her these days. It still had the same chipped wallpaper from when she was a little girl and the carpet still bore the singed hole from the time she had tried smoking when she was fourteen. Plus, she was used to sleeping in a queen size four-poster bed, and now she had to get used to cramming into a single bed again.

Sighing, Charis crawled into bed and wriggled down, lying on her back. In five days time, all would be revealed regarding her family tree. The more she thought about it, the more she thought Jack was right: that the reason Malfoy had threatened them was because they were on the edge of finding out something important. Part of her didn't want to know, after all ignorance was bliss. Imagine if she was related to Malfoy, or to Dumbledore, as Jack had suggested jokingly... or to Severus! She shuddered at this thought and drew the duvet up closer around her. Surely, if she were related to Snape, she would have inherited his impressive nose. At this thought, Charis gave a giggle.

The giggle soon faded, however. Severus. That name seemed to trigger a dull ache inside her these days. None of her dreams had come true. Severus had not turned into the gentle lover she had hoped for. Neither had he confessed his love for her. The only time he had spoken to her about private matters after their night in Firenze's classroom had been when he had told her how to handle snakes. And as intimate as that discussion had been, it had not been about *them*, not about Charis and Severus and the things that could have been. Charis had cried countless times over her Potions master. It hurt so much. She loved him still, although she knew that she mustn't, that he would never love her in the way she loved him. The only way to stop the pain, she had discovered, was to find distraction. So she tried not to dwell on it. Luckily enough, the whole business with her family tree was just the distraction she needed.

So yes, maybe she was a little, tiny blossom somewhere in a Wizarding family tree. And who knew, maybe she was related to her Star Sister in more ways than just spirit. Charis smiled and closed her hand around the silver star that was dangling from her necklace. She had not taken it off since she had returned its twin to Morgana.

It was too late to turn back now, she decided, turning to her side and plumping her pillow. The documents were waiting and she had made her plans with Jack. First thing tomorrow she would book her coach tickets. And soon she would find out once and for all if she did indeed have magical genes.

XXXIV: Pruning

Chapter 34 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXIV: Pruning

After a somewhat hasty breakfast and a surprised, 'What are you doing up this early?' from her mother, Charis caught the coach to London the following Wednesday at seven in the morning and arrived in Hammersmith at just past ten. She had arranged to meet Jack at Tower Records in Piccadilly at eleven, where they spent the morning happily browsing through thousands of CDs. Charis bought *Logical Progression* mixed by LTJ Bukem, whereas Jack plumped for *Second Toughest in the Infants* by Underworld.

From there, they decided to have lunch in Diagon Alley, after replenishing their Galleons at Gringotts, and spent a happy hour milling around the various shops, Flourish & Blotts being a particular favourite. A store full of books was like paradise for the two Ravenclaws, and had they had the money, they would have bought ten books each. But alas, neither of them were rich. Still, Jack furtively bought a booklet called *Teaching Your Cat Magic* and smuggled it into Charis' bag outside the store, hoping it would make his friend smile when she found it.

Fatigued from their shopping, they then had a well-deserved ice cream at Florian Fortescue's. Charis loved the ice cream parlour. If she could have chosen one shop from Diagon Alley to have a branch in the Muggle world, she would most probably pick Fortescue's. There was so much to choose from: good old favourites like vanilla, mint chocolate chip and fudge, but also magical flavours like frozen Chocoballs full of strawberry mousse and clotted cream, Ice Mice and frozen Chocolate Frogs. Not to mention all kinds of lollypops, some which made you blow bubbles when you belched and others which guaranteed a different flavour with every lick. Charis took her time to pick her flavours, but Jack quickly opted for vanilla sprinkled with Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

By the time Charis had devoured her delicious Double Cream Vanilla with miniature Chocoballs and fought off Jack, whose flavour to his great dismay had turned out to be earwax, it was well after three. Charis quickly bought Jack a frozen bat-shaped lolly to lift his spirits, and off they went to the Wizarding Office of Registration Materials, or WORM for short, as the big plaque at the entrance stated grandly.

'WORM?' Charis frowned. 'I do understand the need to shorten the name, but could they not have come up with something a little bit nicer?'

'It gets even better,' Jack explained. 'The Wizarding Office of Registration Materials is known affectionately as *The Worm Hole*. It's rumoured that disgraced Ministry employees are sent to work here.' Then his voice dropped to a whisper. 'Those who behave really badly even get Transfigured into worms.'

'Oh, come on, Jack!' Charis exclaimed. 'They wouldn't ...'

Jack grinned. 'It's true, I swear! Look there's one trying to get out.'

Charis looked down and sure enough there was an earthworm wriggling at her feet.

'Hope that's not the clerk who was supposed to get our documents.' Once more, Jack laughed and then opened the door. 'My lady,' he said and bowed. 'Welcome to The Worm Hole.'

Charis was not sure what she had been expecting, but a cramped, shabby little room had somehow not featured in her thoughts. She looked around tentatively, noting how the olive-green walls clashed rather violently with the swirling orange and brown carpet. Charis felt she could not look at the carpet for too long as it was making her feel quite nauseous.

Behind the counter sat a stocky middle-aged woman, scribbling away on a parchment with a speckled quill. She had the kind of rinsed hair that only rebellious teenagers or old women could get away with, in a shade of light pink. The style, Charis thought, was reminiscent of the Muggle Queen, Elizabeth II. The woman wore fuchsia lipstick on her thin, lined mouth, which was pursed in concentration as she wrote and reminded Charis somewhat unfortunately of a cat's bottom.

The woman did not look up as Jack and Charis approached the counter. In front of her was a brass name plaque, bearing the name *Mimi Abagrow*, alongside a big, domed, shiny, brass bell with a button on the top.

Jack and Charis looked at each other before Charis hesitantly cleared her throat to try and get Mimi Abagrow's attention. Still, the woman did not look up.

Jack decided to try a more forthright approach. 'Good afternoon, Ms Abagrow,' he started politely, smiling at the woman.

Once more, Ms Abagrow continued ignoring the pair, pausing only to swiftly point her quill at the large brass bell before continuing to scribble away.

Jack and Charis gazed at each other with disbelief. The woman clearly knew they were there, they were the only people in the room, for Merlin's sake, and yet she wanted them to ring the bell for assistance! Feeling bemused by the woman's rudeness, Jack leaned forwards and, in an exaggerated manner, struck the bell, which rang out loudly.

Eventually, the woman raised her head to look at the pair. She looked bored, and vaguely irritated to be interrupted from her work. 'Can I help you?' she asked impatiently.

'Er, yes... my name is Charis Byrne and this is Jack Morrissey, and we wrote to you last week concerning a marriage and birth certificate that we would like copies of, and your letter said we need to collect them personally from you,' Charis said breathlessly.

Ms Abagrow continued to stare at them, her bored expression never changing. 'The letter,' she sighed, holding out her hand.

Charis retrieved the letter from her bag and smoothed it out hurriedly before handing it over to the woman's still-outstretched hand. She hurriedly snatched the letter from

Charis and began to read.

After muttering to herself whilst skimming through the letter, her head snapped up again. 'I'll need to see your identification,' she sniffed.

'The letter is addressed to us!' Jack began, already losing patience with the rude woman in front of him. 'You were the one that wrote the letter!'

'I don't make the rules,' she replied wearily. 'No ID, no certificates.'

Jack breathed heavily through his nose as both he and Charis turned out their bags and pockets and handed over their Muggle bank cards and their Gringotts cards, the only form of ID they both had on them.

The woman eyed the cards suspiciously for some time, turning them over in her hands. 'Well, I supposed this will do,' she answered reluctantly, pushing them back across the counter at the pair. 'Wait here.'

She huffed and puffed as she got up from her seat and made her way over to a shelf where she began riffling through envelopes, once more muttering to herself. Jack and Charis exchanged glances, with Jack pulling an incredibly rude face at Ms Abagrow whilst her back was turned. Charis had to cover her mouth with her hands in case she snorted with laughter. The last thing they needed was the woman scolding them or withholding the certificates.

After what seemed like an age, Ms Abagrow returned with a plain manila envelope which had the name *Callista Byrne* printed on it in curly handwriting. She placed a piece of yellowing parchment under their noses and thrust the speckled quill at them. 'Signatures,' she demanded.

Jack glared at her and snatched the quill and parchment from her and scrawled his signature quickly before handing the quill over to Charis. Only when the quill and parchment had been returned did Ms Abagrow hand over the manila envelope. Charis took it and thanked her politely, but she had already resumed scrawling away and had reverted back to pretending they weren't there.

'Bloody hell, that woman was a complete worm!' Jack exclaimed once they were outside. 'Could she have been any more officious and unhelpful? And what kind of name is Mimi Abagrow anyway?'

'Well, we have the certificates now,' Charis replied, relieved to be out of the dingy little office. 'Let's sit down at the Cockatrice Cafe and open them together.'

Choosing a booth near the back, Jack and Charis ordered a pumpkin juice each and shifted so they were sitting next to each other, the manila envelope on the table in front of them.

'Are you ready?' Jack asked softly.

Charis nodded, and taking a deep breath, they opened the envelope. They both grabbed a corner of one of the certificates and pulled it slowly out.

Neither of them had a chance to see what was written on it however, as the certificate began glowing a bright blue, and before either of them knew what was happening, it felt as if they were being jerked forwards by the navel. There was a rushing sound of air as the cafe dissolved from below them and they began spinning, unable to let go of the certificate in their hands.

They landed on their stomachs on the damp forest ground with a thud that knocked the air out of them, each of them still holding on to a corner of the certificate. For some moments, neither of them was capable of movement or coherent thoughts. What by Hades had just happened?

'Haven't we seen those two before?' a gruff, male voice came from the shadows.

Charis' heart skipped a beat. She knew that low, menacing growl. But from where? Tentatively she turned her head just an inch to venture a peek.

'Eyes to the ground, Mudblood,' someone shouted, and Charis felt a spell hit her cheek that felt like a slap. But the sting lingered, and she squeezed her tearing eyes shut.

'Now, have we seen them before or not?' There was that voice again.

'Oh, we've seen 'em before, alright. That time they 'ad been loiterin' 'round a dark alley and got a couple of our mates locked up. You'd think Ravenclaws were smarter than that.'

A shudder went down Charis' spine. Of course! That gruff voice belonged to one of the Death Eaters she and Jack had run into in Hogsmeade that day they had been to Madam Meow's. Snape and Dumbledore had come to their rescue and sent two of them to Azkaban. Was this some kind of retaliation?

Before she could think about it anymore, Charis found herself being roughly pulled to her feet by a hooded figure. Her first impulse was to stamp on the feet of whoever was holding her and then plant a nice hit in their solar plexus, but she was unable to move either her arms or legs. And by the looks of it, Jack had been hit by the same immobilising spell.

'Hello there, little babies. So glad you could join our party.'

Bellatrix Lestrange was using a sickly babyish voice, her head tilted slightly to the side, and was now looking at Jack and Charis like a Kneazle looks at a cornered mouse. She was the only Death Eater that was not wearing a mask. Obviously, she wanted the two teenagers to know who she was.

'I'm afraid there is no tea or cake.' She gave a screech of a laugh at this, delighted with her little joke.

'Doesn't seem much of a party to me then,' Jack muttered under his breath.

Bella's eyes flashed dangerously, but her voice was sweet as Honeyduke's finest when she spoke again.

'Tut, tut, little bloodtraitor. I know one cannot expect much of your mother, but I had hoped your father would have taught you some manners at least. Only speak when spoken to, little one.'

She did not even need to utter the curse. *Crucio* was one of her best; she could cast it silently and with closed eyes if need be. But why would she close her eyes? Seeing the boy twitch in agony on the forest ground was such a lovely sight.

'Make him stand up again,' she instructed her fellow Death Eater imperiously once she had lifted the curse and Jack had stopped twitching.

The Death Eater roughly pulled Jack up by his robes and held on to him tightly. Bella approached the boy slowly, leaning in to his face and whispering sweetly, 'From now on, we will only speak when spoken to, won't we?'

Then she turned to Charis. 'Do you have any idea why you have been invited to the party, little Mudblood?'

There it was again, that sickeningly sweet smile. If that woman weren't Bellatrix Lestrange and had she not just seen her torture her best friend, Charis could actually have believed that Bella was being nice. But reality was another matter, and Charis wisely opted for keeping her mouth shut.

Bella huffed. 'Really, you Ravenclaws are a disappointment. The rule *Speak only when spoken to* implies answering when given a question. But then again, how could your little Mudblood brain understand a concept as difficult as that?'

From nowhere, a wave of pain washed over Charis, and she fell to the ground. It felt as if someone were tearing at her flesh with hot irons and simultaneously crushing her bones. But what was even worse was Bellatrix's hysterical cackle. It reminded Charis of the shrieking sound of a circular saw, and it seemed to be cutting into her very brain. She lay on the damp forest ground, her muscles twitching uncontrollably. The pain was excruciating. She had burnt her hand on a cauldron in her third year. The pain was the same, but not just on her skin. It seemed to be in her bones, in the very marrow, and prevented her from moving. She did not know if she was screaming or not, but someone else's voice cut through the pain.

'Charis!'

Jack's voice was filled with urgency but was at once drowned in Bella's shrill shriek. 'YOU DON'T GET IT, DO YOU?! You are not supposed to talk!'

Shut up, Jack. Please, shut up. I beg you! Silently, deep inside her mind, Charis repeated her plea over and over again, hoping against hope that Jack would somehow hear her. He needed to be quiet. Bellatrix would be angry with him. She would surely punish him.

The liberating sensation of the curse being lifted from her made Charis dizzy, and she saw the treetops dance around her. Faster and faster they spun, and Charis felt her stomach turn and retched, digging her nails into the soft moss. Bellatrix's deranged laughter and Jack's screams of agony were the last things she heard before she passed out.

Bella meanwhile was having the time of her life. The little bloodtraitor was twitching in pain but couldn't fall to the ground since Carrow and Yaxley were holding him by the shoulders like two vices. One particularly violent twitch actually made his shoulder pop. Here and there, blood started to colour his shirt and trousers. It happened sometimes during *Crucio* that the bones twisted so violently that the skin broke.

Toughie, that one, Bella thought. She had been bombarding the little bloodtraitor with alternating curses for about ten minutes now. She had seen grown men faint for far less. It would almost be a shame to kill him...

* * *

Charis' nostrils filled with the smell of moss. What was she doing in the forest? And why was she lying on the ground? Then she identified another smell, the sour reek of vomit and ... What was that sharp, metallic tang? Blood?

She was on her feet in a blink of an eye, and her hand shot automatically to her pocket to pull out her wand. But it wasn't there.

'Looking for this, little one?' Bella was waving Charis' wand in front of her nose. Again, there was that sickeningly sweet smile on her face. 'Ash tree, is it? Who would have thought? Wonder what's inside?'

She snapped the wand right in two, as easily as a twig, and Charis flinched and gasped. Seeing her wand being broken almost created a kind of physical pain. The wand had been with her for nearly seven years; she had never once let it out of her sight and she even slept with it under her pillow. It was a precious reminder of the gift of magic she had been blessed with and symbolic of her powers, as much as a tool with which to harness them. It was like an extension of her. She watched and moaned with grief as the wood splintered easily and the Unicorn hair core fizzed and sparkled slightly before Bellatrix threw the now-useless wand to one side.

Bellatrix tutted. 'Don't give me that look, little Mudblood. It's not like you'll ever need your little wand again anyway. Let me show you how real witches use their wands instead.'

A big ball of what appeared to be silvery string erupted from Bellatrix' wand. It looked beautiful at first, and Charis stared at the ball as if hypnotised as it rolled towards her, unable to take her eyes off it, unable to move. She could not even scream as she realised that the supposed silvery string was in fact something that resembled barbed wire as it started coiling itself around her wrists and ankles like a snake.

Her stomach knotted in fear as she felt her feet leave the ground, but still Charis was unable to scream, just as she was unable to shed the tears that filled her eyes when she caught sight of Jack. Suspended in mid-air, held up by Bella's magical barbed wire that cut into her flesh, all Charis could do was look down at her friend, who lay sprawled out on the forest ground, his clothes bloody and his face contorted with pain. She did not even know whether he was still alive.

Charis felt a tickling sensation in her throat and started coughing. And suddenly, she was also very much aware of the pain the barbed wire caused as it cut into her flesh. Whatever spell she had been under had lost its effect or had been lifted.

'Now, little Mudblood,' Bellatrix started with a sugary tone that suggested that she was about to offer cake. 'What should we do with you?'

We? Charis' eyes widened in fear. How could she have forgotten about the other Death Eaters that had held her and Jack while Bellatrix had thrown *Crucios* at them? They were standing around Bellatrix now in a semi circle, and although they were wearing masks, Charis could imagine their sneers as they looked up at her.

The first spell that hit Charis felt like a poke in the ribs with an elbow.

Bellatrix huffed. 'Seriously, is that the best you can do?'

The Death Eater to her left drew himself up to his full height and pointed his wand at Charis once more. This time, the spell knocked the air out of her and drove tears into her eyes.

'More, come on!' Bellatrix screeched. 'That won't even leave a bruise.'

The third spell cracked a rib, and Charis yelped, but still Bellatrix was not happy. 'I don't understand why the Dark Lord puts up with such incompetent idiots like you. Let me show you how it's done.'

She tilted her head to the side and brought the tip of her wand to her pursed lips. She reminded Charis of a little schoolgirl who was contemplating an essay topic. But of course, Bellatrix Lestrange had darker thoughts than that. Eventually, her lips curled into a smile, and her eyes started to glitter. 'Yes, that will do. That will do *very nicely*.'

Charis tried not to scream but it was in vain. The pain that shot through her as Bellatrix cast a spell that felt as if she were slicing up Charis' legs with a red-hot knife was too much to bear. Charis screamed, and Bellatrix cackled, and the Death Eaters laughed.

Suddenly, everything was over. The pain was gone, and as Charis looked down, she did not see any blood.

'Why did you heal her?' one of the Death Eaters asked roughly, as if she was somehow stupid.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. 'Because otherwise she would bleed to death, you blistering idiot! And I am not quite done with her just yet.'

She stepped forwards and poked Charis' left shoe with her wand. 'Can you hear me, little Mudblood?' she called in a sing-song voice.

Charis resisted the urge to kick the dark witch in the face. By now she was convinced that she would not survive this afternoon, but if she had to die, she hoped to die quickly. Enraging Bellatrix Lestrange would result in anything but a quick death.

'Tell me, Mudblood, smart Ravenclaw as you are, do you know why you were invited to this little party?'

Charis silently shook her head. She did not dare utter a sound.

'How utterly disappointing!'

Bellatrix turned and walked away, lazily flicking her wand over her shoulder. The barbed wire disappeared and Charis fell to the ground. She landed face first and heard the sickening sound of the bones in her nose cracking. She felt herself roughly turned onto her back and all she could see were blinding white stars as she felt hot blood gushing from her broken nose. Then Bellatrix's face came into focus again.

'Weren't you warned, Mudblood?' she asked slowly, making each poisoned word sound like a honey-dipped caress. 'Weren't you warned that sticking your Ravenclaw beak in to subjects that are best left undisturbed would lead to serious trouble?'

Charis shuddered. Bellatrix was using the exact same words Lucius Malfoy had used in Ravenclaw Tower. So, this was not retaliation after all?

Charis never managed to finish her thought as there was once more a searing pain shooting through her legs. But this time, it didn't stop. This time, she could feel the blood trickle down over her thighs.

'Little baby,' came Bellatrix' sweet voice as she stalked towards Charis once more, and she even brushed a tear from Charis' cheek with her fingers as she drew close. 'Do you want it to stop?'

'Yes, yes, please.' Charis knew that there was no point in begging. Bellatrix Lestrange would never stop. But still she begged. 'Please, stop.'

'What was that, Mudblood?' Bellatrix asked innocently, enjoying the girl's suffering and pleading as she twirled a lock of black hair around her index finger. 'I didn't hear you. Say it again.'

'Please, stop.' Charis hated herself for begging. But what else could she do? She was desperate. 'Please!'

'Good girl.' Once more, Bellatrix brushed Charis' cheek with her fingers. 'Soon you won't feel a thing ...*Sectumsempra!*'

Charis had never heard that spell before. It sounded awful. But the pain it created was much worse: it was sharp and seemed to split her chest in two; it felt like the skin all over her body was being scraped away from her flesh with a blunt knife.

Bellatrix screeched in delight and the Death Eaters cheered.

'*Morsmordre!*'

A flash of green burst forth from Bellatrix's wand, shooting up a jet of shimmering light which curled round and round, eventually forming the shape of a skull with an entwined snake spilling from its gaping mouth.

Charis didn't feel pain anymore. Everything seemed to be floating away, even Bellatrix's hysterical laughter. She felt her body become heavy and imagined herself sinking into the moss as her blood seeped into the ground below her. All sound faded away and so did all the light.

Before her eyes fluttered shut, Charis saw the Dark Mark glowing eerily in the sky. To her, it looked beautiful.

* * *

Snape leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the footrest, smiling contently. He had certainly done his House proud today.

At first, Filius had, of course, stared at him as if he had claimed that the Dark Lord had a liking for pink, fluffy bunnies, but then the Head of Ravenclaw House had almost started levitating with excitement.

'An Easter egg hunt in Hogsmeade? Severus, that is a wonderful idea! Just imagine how much fun the students will have! The holidays are always a tough time for some of them, especially those who cannot afford to travel home to see their families. Or those who don't have any family to go home to. Who would have thought that you of all people would come up with such a frivolous pastime?'

Then Filius had hopped away happily, and Snape had sneered after him.*He of all people? Whatever did Filius mean? Of course, an idea that resulted in emptying the castle of remaining students and staff alike could only have sprung from a Slytherin mind. So did the idea of faking a headache and staying behind.*

And so there was Snape now, the only living creature left in Hogwarts castle that Wednesday afternoon whilst everyone else was gallivanting around Hogsmeade after chocolate eggs. Oh, glorious silence!

With a content sigh, Snape unbuttoned his cuffs and then held out his left arm towards the liquor cabinet.*Accio Firewhisky.*' Surely, having come up with such a cunning plan entitled him to a glass of Odgen's finest.

The bottle crashed to the floor as his arm jerked upwards, and Snape swore loudly. By Merlin's scrotum, that could not be! Not the Dark Mark! Not today! But there was no doubt. The Dark Mark was burning as if someone had pressed a red-hot iron onto his bare skin. And Snape knew that he could not ignore the call.

Gritting his teeth, he swept into his bedroom, unlocked his heavy trunk and picked up the bundle which contained his cloak and his Death Eater mask. As always, he would not put them on before he had entered the Forbidden Forest. He always Disapparated from there. The risks of being spotted were minimal.

He swept out of his quarters and through the dark dungeon corridor. He had no idea why the Mark was burning. Maybe the Dark Lord wanted to see him personally. Maybe everyone had been called. Maybe it was not Voldemort who was calling at all, but another Death Eater. As usual, he would only find out once he had Apparated and answered the call of the Mark.

He turned a corner so fast that he did not even notice that there was a person rushing towards him, and he cursed as he was almost knocked off his feet. For crying out loud, no one was supposed to be in the castle today!

'Miss Belakane!'

The girl was pale as a ghost and totally out of breath. She must have run all the way from Hogsmeade just to find him. In her eyes Snape saw a panicky look that reminded him of a trapped animal. Whatever had happened? Surely, Lucius would not have...

When he saw the star at Morgana's necklace glowing red, the blood froze in Snape's veins. He knew the spell that had been put on those necklaces. Charis was in danger.

He heard Morgana stammer something about Charis and her friend Jack being in London, but he did not listen. This couldn't be a coincidence.

He prayed that Charis being in danger had nothing to do with his Mark burning. But he feared that he was hoping against hope as he told Morgana to go straight to her dorm and then fled across the school grounds to the edge of the Forbidden Forest as fast as he could.

XXXV: A Black Day

Chapter 35 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXV: A Black Day

The Dark Mark was already fading over the treetops as Snape Apparated into the middle of the forest. To someone who had never seen the horrid skull, it would have looked like an oddly shaped, green-tinged cloud by now. But Snape knew better. He had seen the Dark Mark often enough to recognise even the faintest trace of its outline. And besides, there was magic hanging in the air: Dark Magic. He could sense it. It made his skin crawl and his stomach clench.

'And once again, you are one of the last to arrive, Severus,' Bella's scornful voice greeted him as he stepped out of the shadows of the trees and into the clearing. 'The others have already left.'

'Unlike those others, I do not have the luxury to drop everything and Disapparate from the spot,' Snape retorted, desperately trying to sound as if he had no idea why he had been called. But his heart was racing in his chest. He could make out the outlines of a body behind Bellatrix, but there was no way of telling if it was Charis or Jack, or someone else entirely. 'Was it you who cast the Mark, Bella?' he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Bellatrix's eyes glittered, and she nodded as eagerly as a five-year-old who had finished off all her peas. 'Yes,' she replied proudly, a tone of sheer insanity in her voice. 'I did it. I took care of the little problem. Those two Ravenclaws will never again stick their beaks into other people's business.'

Snape scowled at her. 'Are you telling me you killed two Hogwarts students?' It took him all his willpower to keep his voice steady. What he wanted to do was scream out the pain he was feeling in his heart. He had come too late. 'Do you have any idea how serious this is?'

'Oops.' Bella looked as innocent as a fawn for a few moments, but then she broke out into peals of tinkling laughter. 'Dear Severus, for a second there you had me fooled. You actually looked concerned. Do remember that facial expression when you tell Dumbledore.' She pouted and twirled a lock of hair around her wand in a characteristically girlish manner, a flirtatious twinkle in her eyes.

Snape resisted the urge to close his hands around her throat. 'What is your plan now, Bella?' he sneered. 'Bundle them up and send them to the Order of the Phoenix with a note saying, *This is what happens if you mess with us?*'

Again, Bellatrix laughed coquettishly. 'Oh, Severus, who would have thought that you had such a delightful sense of humour? But no, I had actually planned to let them rot here until someone finds them. But now I think YOU should take them to Dumbledore. You could tell him that you tried to save them, couldn't you? Snape, the hero teacher of Hogwarts.' She faked a wobbling lip but then rolled her eyes. 'The senile fool would actually believe you, would he not? And to think the Mudbloods count on him to protect them from the wrath of the Dark Lord. Ridiculous.'

She turned around and poked the body behind her with the tip of her boot. That was when Snape realised that it was Jack. Half of the boy's face had been turned into an unrecognisable, bloody pulp. But it was Jack, alright.

'Do whatever you want with them,' Bella said. 'The other one is somewhere...' She gestured towards the edge of the forest carelessly. '... over there. Just a filthy little Mudblood. Begged for her life, that one. Had no pride at all. This one here was brave at least.' Once more she kicked the lifeless body with her foot. 'It was almost a shame to kill him. Almost. Oh, well, one has to be consistent. Happy Easter, Severus.' And with that, Bellatrix blew Snape a kiss and giggled maniacally before turning and Disapparating on the spot.

The very second Bellatrix had gone, Snape broke into a run towards the edge of the forest. He had little hope for Jack. If the rest of the boy's body was in a similar condition to his face, he was most certainly dead. But maybe, just maybe, there was hope for Charis...

He found her straight away, sprawled on the moss and heather. He froze at the sight of her mangled body. Her face and chest looked as if she had been slashed with a sword. There was so much blood everywhere, and beneath, Charis' face was pale, so terribly pale.

Snape sank to his knees beside her and sent a silent prayer to every deity he knew as he checked her throat. *Let there be a pulse. Please. Please let there be a pulse.*

It was so faint that he at first doubted his fingers. But yes, there it was: a faint sign of life pulsating under his index finger. The girl was still alive!

Snape drew his wand and started tracing it over the wounds, willing his voice and hands not to shake. *Vulnera sanantur. Vulnera sanantur. Vulnera...*

He knew this incantation well. He had invented it only weeks after he had invented *Sectumsempra*. He had shown the Dark spell to Mulciber, by practicing it on an innocent rabbit at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. The desperate screams of the dying animal had made Snape feel so wretched that he had not rested until he had come up with the counter curse. And to this day, he never ate rabbit. Now he wished desperately that he had never invented the disgusting, brutal spell.

'*Vulnera sanantur. Vulnera sanantur.*' The flow of blood eased, and the wounds seemed to be knitting.

With shaking fingers, Snape wiped the residue from Charis' face. Yes, the wounds on her face had closed already. Obviously, Charis' face had not been Bellatrix's main target.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Snape's lips curled into a tiny smile as he focused on Charis' torso to charm away what was left of her shirt. Trust the little Ravenclaw to be wearing a top that carried more stars than the night sky.

The smile froze on Snape's lips as he examined the girl's torso, however. Many things could be said about Bellatrix Lestrange, but she certainly knew her Dark spells. The cuts were so deep that the rib bones were exposed in some places. But still, they were so well placed that none of them were lethal on their own. What would have killed the girl was blood loss. A slow, cruel and painful death.

Once more, Snape repeated his incantation. There would be scarring, even if he applied dittany right there and then. But most probably, hopefully, the girl would survive.

He brought his hand to his face to rub his eyes, smearing blood all over his brow in the process. Charis needed medical attention, Essence of Dittany, Ceramite, and Blood-Replenishing Potion, and she needed them right away. But he could not Apparate with her under one arm and Jack under the other. Should he Apparate to St. Mungo's with Charis first and then come back later to retrieve Jack's body?

A loud crack disturbed Snape's thoughts and made him spin around instinctively, his wand raised in front of him.

'Please, do not hex Silvy, Master Snape,' the elf squeaked and cowered.

'Silvy! What are you doing here?'

'Miss Morgana has sent Silvy,' the elf explained. 'Miss Morgana said Master Snape might need help.'

She has no idea just how much help we need, Snape thought bitterly.

'I need you to take the body of the boy back to Hogwarts,' he instructed the elf. 'Straight to the hospital wing. Tell the nurse that the boy's name is Jack.'

Silvy scurried at once towards Jack, and Snape gingerly scooped up Charis' limp body into his arms. Her head lolled against his shoulder, and Snape felt a stab in his heart. What if she had died without him having told her how sorry he was for the way he had treated her?

'Master Snape,' Silvy suddenly piped up. 'This is no body, sir. Master Jack is still breathing.'

Snape gave a sigh of relief. 'To the hospital wing,' he repeated. 'Quickly!'

Maybe, Jack and Charis would be better cared for at St. Mungo's. But with Poppy, he could be sure that she would act first and ask questions later. And there was no time for questions.

With a loud crack, Silvy Disapparated with Jack, and Snape tightened his grip around Charis to make sure he would not let go of her during Apparition. He thought he saw her eyelids twitch slightly, and as she moaned, he breathed a gentle, consoling kiss on her forehead.

'Everything will be alright,' he whispered. 'I promise.'

Poppy was already busy tending to Jack as Snape arrived at the hospital wing. Just as he had predicted, the mediwitch had immediately sprung to action. Certainly, she would ask later how the boy had ended up in such a state. But for now, she would make sure he would survive.

He carefully placed Charis onto an empty bed and scrambled towards the Potions cupboard. Poppy was busy, and the girl's wounds had been caused by his curse. He would treat her himself until Poppy could take over.

He propped some pillows behind Charis' back and held a phial of Blood Replenishing Potion to her lips. 'Come on, Charis,' he muttered. 'Swallow.'

She coughed as the potion went down, and Snape gingerly patted her back before he opened a second phial. When he was about to administer the third, he heard Poppy approach.

'I sent the boy to St. Mungo's,' she said sadly.

'Will he survive?'

'I don't know, Severus. You saw how he was.'

The boy was indeed in a terrible state, but Snape had no room in his head to think about him now. All he could think of was Charis, lying there and fighting for her life, from a curse of his own invention. Had he not hurt her enough? First he had broken her heart, and now his spell had broken her body, and may yet take her life. What could she and her housemate have possibly done to incur such wrath from Bellatrix Lestrange? She was so pure, so sweet of heart...

Snape's musings were interrupted by Poppy bustling over with armfuls of bandages, and he quickly made space for the mediwitch at Charis' bedside and retreated behind the curtains as she started to peel off the girl's bloody clothes to treat her wounds. It was not appropriate for him to watch.

'Who did this, Severus?' he heard Poppy ask.

'Death Eaters,' he answered curtly. Poppy didn't need to know more.

'You did a good job closing the wounds, Severus,' Poppy commented. 'Some dittany and there will barely be any scars left. How many phials of Blood Replenisher have you given her?'

'Three,' Snape answered. He had now taken to pacing the ward. If there was one thing he hated, it was the feeling of being useless. He wanted to do something. Anything!

'Good. I will give her one more every half hour until her blood pressure is stable.'

Snape heard Poppy move about behind the curtain. Most probably, she was applying bandages to the girl now. When she emerged some fifteen minutes later, she looked tired but confident.

'I will not ask you how you found the children, Severus,' she said in a low voice, 'but I am glad you did. For Jack, it was just in time. You saved their lives.'

Snape's jaw tightened. He should not have had to save their lives. He should have taken Bella's threat seriously and made sure that she never got her dirty hands on the children in the first place. He should have protected them.

'I assume you will inform Dumbledore,' Poppy continued.

Snape nodded, and his eyes darted towards the curtains behind which he knew Charis was lying. He did not want to leave her alone.

'Go, Severus,' Poppy urged him. 'You have done what you could. I will take care of the girl.'

Of course she would, Snape knew that. Poppy was the most capable mediwitch in the country. Still, he was reluctant to leave.

'Go now, Severus,' Poppy repeated in a kind but firm voice. 'Dumbledore will want to know what happened.'

'I will be back shortly.' Resisting the urge to open the curtains and make sure Charis was indeed breathing, Snape turned on his heel and stomped out of the ward, using *Scourgify* to get Charis' blood off his robes as he walked. The last thing he needed was to bump into Umbridge and having to explain why he looked as if he has stabbed someone.

Outside in the corridor stood Morgana, who was as pale as a ghost and fiddled nervously with her necklace.

'Bumping into you is starting to get annoying,' Snape snarled but regretted his harsh tone at once as he saw the fear in Morgana's eyes. 'Why are you here?' he asked in a somewhat softer voice.

'Silvy told me you had returned.'

'Of course, she did.' Snape saw the girl's eyes dart between him and the door he had closed behind him. Morgana seemed tense, and he wondered how much Silvy had told her. 'It was a wise move to send the elf, Miss Belakane,' he started. 'Five points to Slytherin for quick thinking.'

'Is Charis alright?' Morgana asked, not even noticing the House points she had been awarded. There was an urgency to her voice that suggested that she wanted nothing more than see her friend. She had no idea what state Charis was in. Silvy had been too upset to give a proper report.

'Miss Byrne will be alright, Miss Belakane,' Snape assured her. 'Ask Madam Pomfrey nicely and you might be allowed to see your friend for a while. Prepare yourself, however; Miss Byrne has been through a terrible ordeal today. You may find her appearance shocking. And I must ask you not to say a word to anybody about what happened this afternoon. Is that quite clear?'

'Yes, sir. Crystal clear.'

'Good.' He held open the door for her and saw Poppy direct her to Charis' bed. Obviously, the mediwitch thought it was alright for Charis to have some company.

For some moments, Snape watched the girls. He must be imagining things, he told himself, but it almost looked as if Charis' body relaxed the second Morgana took her friend's hand into hers. What a bond those two shared, Snape thought and wondered if any power in the world was strong enough to drive a wedge between those girls. They were sisters, indeed.

With a sigh, Snape turned and made his way down the stairs. He would report to Dumbledore and then hurry back. He knew that it was silly, but he had come so close to losing those girls so many times now that he, for the time being, wanted to be close to them. He felt responsible for each of the horrid things they had been subjected to lately. Tonight, at least, he would not let either girl out of his sight.

* * *

Snape arrived at Grimmauld Place in just ten minutes. As he had expected, the place was deserted. It was the Easter holidays, after all. Normal people, even Order members, had family and friends to be with.

He strode through the long, narrow hallway, casting a cursory glance into the kitchen as he walked towards the back of the house. The lounge door was ajar; through it came the tinkling of a tea set and the unmistakable voices of Albus Dumbledore, who was using the Order headquarters as a temporary hide-out, and his host, Sirius Black.

Snape's nostrils flared. Black was a useless, overbearing idiot at the best of times. He could only just tolerate his presence when it came to Order business, but this was different. This was Hogwarts business, and indeed, private business. He had no desire for the filthy hound to start slobbering over a matter which was no concern of his. He would therefore have to dispatch him as quickly as possible.

He gave a curt rap on the door and pushed it open, pulling himself up to his full height as he stood in the door frame. He noticed Black's face turn from an expectant smile to a sour glare. Dumbledore, meanwhile, shifted in his seat and peered over his glasses with a twinkle in his blue eyes and the crease of a smile in his beard.

'Severus, what a pleasant surprise. I'd rather thought you'd be out hunting for Easter eggs with the rest of the faculty on such a clement day.'

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched in irritation as Sirius let out a scoffing bark of a laugh.

'Would you care for some tea?' Dumbledore extended his hand and an extra fine-bone china cup and saucer appeared on the coffee table in front of him.

'I am here regarding some emergency Hogwarts business. Some *private*, emergency Hogwarts business.' At this, Snape arched a sinister eyebrow at Black, who glowered back up at him.

'Run out of quills, have we, Severus?' Black asked, his eyes glinting cruelly. 'Or maybe you need some new test tubes for your chemistry set?'

Snape felt the red mist of pure anger welling up inside him. Black had no idea what he had witnessed that afternoon, and no idea of the burdens he was carrying around on a daily basis, or what he had sacrificed. He gripped the handle of his wand inside his robes tightly, employing every scrap of his Occlumency not to hex the wretched cur in front of him into a thousand pieces, just like he should have done when he had first found him in the Shrieking Shack.

'What I am here for is none of your concern, Black,' he managed to grind out through gritted teeth.

It was Dumbledore who stepped in quickly to stop the already frosty atmosphere from dropping to sub-arctic levels.

'Well, then, Severus, I am sure you would not have left Hogwarts without good reason,' the old man said mildly. 'Sirius, would you mind giving us a few moments?'

'As you wish, Albus,' Black replied, sounding just like a petulant teenager as he placed his cup and saucer on to the table. On his way out, Snape heard him whisper 'Snivellus' under his breath before closing the door a little too loudly behind him.

Once they were alone, Dumbledore folded his hands across his stomach and smiled up serenely at the dark Potions master. 'Why don't you have a seat and tell me about your news, Severus?'

Snape remained standing. This was not a social call. He wanted to tell Dumbledore what had happened and then return to Hogwarts as soon as possible. If he sat down, he would surely go out of his mind.

'Two students have been attacked by Death Eaters today,' he announced, his voice cold and emotionless. Dumbledore did not need to know how much the whole ordeal had shaken him.

Dumbledore's face fell, and his eyes crinkled as he placed his teacup on the table. 'Who? And where?' For once, the otherwise so eloquent wizard seemed to be unable to form a coherent sentence.

'Miss Bryne and Mister Morrissey,' Snape reported. 'I found them in Epping Forest.'

'Are they alive?'

'Barely.' Snape started pacing, as he so often did when he felt helpless. 'Poppy sent Mr Morrissey straight to St. Mungo's. He was in such a state when I arrived I doubted that he was still alive. Miss Byrne is at the hospital wing. She has lost a lot of blood but Poppy seems confident.'

'Sweet Merlin,' Dumbledore murmured, shaking his head in disbelief.

'They are lucky to be alive,' Snape continued. 'Normally, Bellatrix makes sure she finishes what she has started.'

'Bellatrix.' Dumbledore sighed and poured himself another cup of tea. 'I should have known.'

Snape spun around to face the Headmaster. 'What do you mean, you should have known? How could you have known?'

Once more, Dumbledore gestured towards the chair opposite him. 'I really think you ought to take a seat, Severus.'

Snape crossed his arms in front of his chest. He would not sit down.

Dumbledore shrugged. 'As you wish.' He took a deep breath and pushed his spectacles up his Roman nose with his index finger. 'Severus, Charis Byrne is not Muggle-born. Charis Byrne is a Black, a descendant from Marius Black, a Squib who was blasted off the family tree.'

The colour of Snape's cheeks went from pale to chalky. 'A BLACK?' This could not be! That sweet girl could not be related to some of the most despicable wizards in Britain. 'These Blacks?' he asked, pointing towards the door through which Sirius Black had left the room mere minutes ago. 'And you knew?'

Dumbledore raised his hands in a calming gesture. 'Of course, I knew, Severus,' he replied serenely. 'The Ministry monitors Squibs and their offspring. And when a magical child is born into that lineage, the information appears in our files at Hogwarts.'

Snape stared at the old man in front of him in disbelief. 'And you have not deemed it necessary to inform anyone about Miss Byrne's family secret?'

'It was not mine to tell, Severus. But I expected Charis to find out sooner or later.' He sipped at his tea and then smiled. 'She has not been sorted into Ravenclaw House without reason. And when she and Jack started to look into her ancestry, I let them.'

If looks could kill, then the glare Snape shot Dumbledore would have been more effective than the Killing Curse. 'People have doubted your sanity for decades, Dumbledore, and I start to think they are right. How could you let Miss Byrne and Mr Morrissey conduct research into the House of Black? You know how protective pureblood families are of their reputation, especially the Blacks!'

'I did not think anyone would know. Information about most Wizard families can be obtained at the Hogwarts library...'

'Did you not even consider the possibility that someone might notice what they were doing? Another descendant from the House of Black?' Snape took to pace the room again. The twinkly-eyed old fool! What had he done?

'You mean Draco Malfoy?' Dumbledore asked. Still, his voice was annoyingly calm.

'Of course I mean Draco Malfoy,' Snape snapped. 'You and I both know that he has never liked Miss Byrne. He has been bullying her for the better part of this school year, for reasons that are beyond me. If he found out that she and Mr Morrissey were doing research... And Lucius! Lucius spent a whole evening with Miss Byrne. I know he visited Ravenclaw Tower...'

Of course, Lucius knew. And Bella knew. For the love of Merlin! The realisation hit Snape like a Bludger to the gut, and he let himself fall onto the nearest chair, suddenly doubting that his legs would support him any longer. 'I could have prevented this.'

Dumbledore looked at his Potions master with his eyes narrowed. 'Severus, this is not your fault!'

Snape, however, did not seem to hear him. 'Bella made a remark at the Manor a few days ago about me not knowing what my students were up to. I should have understood what she meant...'

'Severus, please!'

'My spell, Dumbledore!' The look in Snape's eyes was wild, almost demented. 'Bellatrix used MY spell on MY students! Sectumsempra. She could have killed them!'

'But she did not kill them, Severus.' Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair, trying to catch Snape's eyes. 'You found them. You saved them.'

'I did nothing, Dumbledore. NOTHING! If Bella had not wanted to celebrate, if she had not cast the spell that activated my Mark, I would not even have known that she had captured them. They would have died. They would have bled to death on the forest ground.' Snape buried his face in his hands. He wanted to rant and scream, but he lacked the energy. 'I am doomed to failure, aren't I, Dumbledore?' he muttered instead. 'I just cannot protect them. Miss Belakane was ripped into pieces by Lucius right in front of my eyes. And Miss Byrne had fallen victim to Bellatrix because I did not take her threats seriously. I failed them, both of them.'

Dumbledore rose from his chair and approached his Potions master. 'Listen carefully to me now, Severus. You have not failed them! You saved them. I have seen the respect Morgana gives you and the way she looks at you. You were the only thing she had left after Lucius lost control. And Charis... who would have saved her, if not you? She might have been wounded by your curse, but it was also your counter curse that healed her.' He extended his hand but withdrew quickly as Snape flinched. 'You have given more to those girls than you will ever know, Severus.'

Snape shot up from his chair as if hit by a hex. 'They should not need to be saved, Dumbledore! They should be chasing boys and worrying about their NEWTs.' He drew himself up to his full height and glared down his nose at Dumbledore. 'Why? Why are you doing this to those girls, Dumbledore? You fed Morgana to Lucius without batting an eyelid. And by letting Charis discover her heritage herself, you let her walk right into a minefield. WHY?'

'Morgana was already in too deep with Lucius from the end of her sixth year,' Dumbledore replied, careful to keep his voice calm as he folded his hands behind his back. 'The very day she became of age, she was in danger. I had to make sure her involvement with Lucius did not benefit Voldemort. It might seem callous to you, but the by-product of that was also to protect Hogwarts and give the Order more time. I hoped things would have run more smoothly, but alas, they didn't.'

Snape's lips twitched in disgust. He had hated Dumbledore's plan from the very start. He had seen Morgana suffer, had seen one of the cockiest witches in the castle turn into a mere shadow of herself and experience things no seventeen-year-old should have to go through.

'As for Charis, she had every right to find out everything about her lineage,' Dumbledore continued. 'I had hoped she would find everything she was looking for and then come to me for advice. Unfortunately, my plans were thwarted.'

'What is next, then?' Snape spat. 'Will you ask them to join the Order?'

Dumbledore cocked his head to one side and his mouth twitched in his beard. 'I am planning to, as it happens, yes, Severus.'

Dumbledore's benign smile made Snape's bile rise. 'You must be joking!'

'I am afraid I am quite serious.'

'No, Dumbledore. NO!' Snape bellowed. 'Over my dead body!'

'That should not be necessary, Severus.' Dumbledore absentmindedly stroked his beard. 'Morgana has shown that she, although continually surrounded by Dark, has what it takes to fight for the light. She has sacrificed much already. She will want justification. And Charis is as brave as any Gryffindor. Now that she has seen what Death Eaters mean to do to good, innocent people such as herself, she will want to fight back. Don't you agree, Severus?'

'They are too young, Dumbledore.' Snape was desperately looking for arguments to change Dumbledore's mind. He did not want his girls to be involved in this war. 'And as you have said yourself, they have both been through enough already.'

'They are of age, Severus,' Dumbledore countered once more in his maddeningly calm voice. 'Once they leave Hogwarts in a few months' time, they will be able to make that decision for themselves.'

'We will see about that.' Snape shot Dumbledore a last furious look and turned on his heel to leave. He had heard enough. But Dumbledore called him back.

'Dolores Umbridge cannot hear of what has happened to Jack and Charis today,' the Headmaster declared in a grave tone. 'No one must know, not even their parents. We cannot risk anything upsetting the plans in motion for the Ministry, nor my return to Hogwarts.'

Once more, Snape stared at Dumbledore as if the latter had declared that he was about to join the Dark Lord. 'You want me to act as if nothing happened?'

'No one is to know, except you, myself and Poppy,' Dumbledore repeated.

'Miss Belakane knows,' Snape pointed out. 'She sent an elf to my help and waited outside the hospital wing.'

Dumbledore smiled. 'They are like twins, those two. If one is tickled, I am sure the other laughs. Charis will need Morgana by her side now, just as Morgana needs Charis by hers.' Then his smile disappeared. 'As for Bella, Severus, you will need to use your discretion, as always. You must let her think that she did enough to scare Jack and Charis, and that they do not know the truth.'

Snape sighed. 'I will come up with an excuse on why I saved them. But Bella will not be happy.'

'She will have more pressing engagements soon. Distract her with talk of the prophecy,' Dumbledore recommended. 'We know she would do anything to be Voldemort's favourite, even if it means snatching away the glory from Lucius.'

'I will be sure to make the suggestion,' Snape replied caustically. 'Make sure the Order is ready, Dumbledore. If Lucius and Bella are not in Azkaban by the end of June, I will not be held responsible for my actions.'

The older wizard looked hard at the younger wizard, his blue eyes serious over the half-moon of his spectacles. 'The Order will be ready, Severus. They will be.'

Snape turned to leave, but once more, Dumbledore called out for him before he had reached the door.

'Thank you, Severus.'

Dumbledore never knew if the Potions master had heard him, because his voice had been drowned by the sound of the slamming door.

* * *

'Status, Poppy?'

'You should not startle an old woman like that, Severus,' the nurse pointed out as Snape burst into her office.

Snape, however, was not in the mood to be lectured. 'How are the students?' he demanded to know.

'Mr Morrissey's condition is still critical, but he is being taken care of by the best Healers at St. Mungo's.'

'And Miss Byrne?'

'She has been given two more doses of Blood-Replenisher. Her wounds are healing as we speak, but she had not yet regained consciousness.' Poppy smiled. 'But her condition is stable, and if I did not know better, I'd say her body relaxed once her friend arrived.'

Snape scowled. 'I assume Miss Belakane is still here?'

Poppy nodded. 'I made up a bed for her. I did not have the heart to send her away.'

There wasn't a sound to be heard as Snape re-entered the ward, and for a moment he considered retiring to the dungeons. He was so endlessly tired. But he could not just leave. He needed to see with his own eyes that Charis was still alive and that Morgana was by her side.

He found Charis tightly tucked in, still propped up by several pillows. He was pleased to see that some colour had returned to her cheeks. Morgana was lying on her stomach on a bed beside her friend, but immediately scrambled up into a sitting position as she became aware of her Head of House.

'Why is it that you are never asleep when I find you here, Miss Belakane?' Snape growled.

Morgana gave him a shy smile. 'Would you sleep if your best friend were lying here?' she asked, nodding towards Charis.

'Of course not,' he answered roughly. His best friend had been dead and buried for over a decade, however. But the girl was not to know that.

He pulled up a chair between the two beds and sat down, now noticing that every muscle in his body was aching. He longed for a hot bath and his bed, but once he had settled on the chair, he doubted if he had the strength to get up again. And he could not make himself leave the girls alone, not even in Poppy's care.

'What are you reading?' he asked, pointing at the book that lay on Morgana's pillow.

'Just some drivel,' she replied and handed him the same copy of *Beedle the Bard* that Snape had threatened to read to her just a few short weeks ago.

'Great Odin's raven!' Snape exclaimed. 'That is drivel indeed.'

A tiny laugh escaped Morgana's throat. 'The Warlock's Hairy Heart is one of Charis' favourite stories,' she explained. 'I thought she might like it if I read it to her.'

'Trust a Ravenclaw to have a favourite story like this.' Snape gave the book back to Morgana. 'But by all means, do read your friend a bedtime story.'

Morgana frowned. Somehow, she had the feeling that the story she was about to read was not only Charis' favourite. But she chose to keep silent about it. She doubted Snape would tell her anyway.

She fluffed Charis' pillows and then settled on her stomach once more. 'There was once a handsome, rich and talented young warlock, who observed that his friends grew foolish when they fell in love ...'

Morgana knew the story by heart and did not really need to keep her eyes on the book, so she did not miss the furtive looks Severus Snape gave Charis and herself as she spoke. But she kept silent about that, too.

XXXVI: Healing and Feeling

Chapter 36 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXVI: Healing and Feeling

Bella's high-pitched laughter echoed from the walls of the dimly lit room. She was clearly having the time of her life as she threw curse after curse at Charis, who was suspended by invisible, magical bonds. The girl had stopped screaming quite some time ago, however. Her eyes were closed, and the tears on her blood-smeared cheeks had dried, leaving trails down her face. Snape prayed that she had lost consciousness and did not feel the pain anymore.

He had tried to protect her. Heaven knew he had. When everyone present in the room had taken turns to throw curses at her, he had instead cast healing spells and tried to deflect the unfriendly curses. But when Bella had decided that she and she alone was going to torture the girl, he had been forced to abandon his attempts to protect her. Bella would have noticed. So would the Dark Lord. And Snape did not even dare imagine what would happen if the Dark Lord noticed that he, Voldemort's most loyal servant, was trying to protect Charis. So there he was now, standing among his fellow Death Eaters, desperately trying to look unmoved but at the same time unable to take his eyes off the gruesome scene that was taking place in front of him.

'Enough now, Bellatrix,' the Dark Lord suddenly commanded. 'You want to save some fun for later, don't you?'

Bella pouted like a spoilt girl but lowered her wand at once. As much fun as it was to torture the little Mudblood that had escaped her clutches once already, she would not defy the Dark Lord.

'Tell me, Bella,' Voldemort enquired, 'how did you manage to get this Muggle filth out of Hogwarts?'

'I have ... friends in the right places, my Lord.' Bellatrix smiled and extended her hand. 'I have not only brought you the Mudblood, my Lord,' she declared with a triumphant voice, 'but I also brought you a pureblood.'

The Death Eaters parted and from their midst stepped Morgana. She too was smiling. And she looked proud. She sank to her knees in front of the Dark Lord and kissed the hem of his robes reverently.

'Indeed, you have.' Voldemort gestured for Morgana to rise and cupped her chin with his long, white fingers. 'Are you ready to carry out the task for which you have been destined since the day you were born, Morgana Belakane?' he asked, his cold voice like the caress of a mid-winter wind.

Red eyes looked deeply into blue. Morgana answered clearly, her voice unwavering. She was not afraid.

'Yes, my Lord.'

'Then choose.'

The girl's eyes travelled over the men before her, and Snape shuddered. He couldn't believe that Morgana had agreed to this.

How had this happened? Both of the girls were lost. Charis would be dead before the end of the hour, and Morgana had chosen to walk along the path of the Dark. Where had he gone wrong? When had he failed them?

He watched his fellow Death Eaters cast suggestive glances at Morgana. Of course, each of them would want to sire the child that would grow up to be the Dark Lord's heir.

Yaxley puffed out his chest and ran his hand through his dark hair as he gave Morgana one of his trademark unpleasant smiles. If it were the Dark Lord's choice, Yaxley would definitely be a candidate. But Morgana barely looked at him. *Thank Merlin*, Snape thought. Yaxley was a sadist to say the least. Mother of the Heir or not, Morgana would not stand a chance.

Avery was practically drooling. He had wanked himself into a blissful stupor over Morgana's performance with Bellatrix that Sunday afternoon at Malfoy Manor. Most likely, he had done so many times more since then and would probably kill to be chosen as Morgana's mate. Avery's only interest in women was what lay between their legs. And the more slutty they were the better. After the fateful lunch at the Manor, Avery surely thought Morgana was a deliciously slutty schoolgirl and was desperate for his own piece of the action. Snape wrinkled his nose in disgust at the thought. But Morgana just smiled at Avery and walked on.

She paused in front of a handsome wizard with long, platinum-blond hair and an almost regal smirk on his face. Two pairs of blue eyes locked, and Snape struggled not to yell. Not Malfoy! She mustn't choose Malfoy! Not again! She might have thought that the blond wizard loved her once, but if she chose him, he would just break her all over again. This time, she might not survive.

The seconds ticked by, agonisingly slowly, as Morgana made her way across the room, now and then casting a glance over her shoulder at Lucius. Did he dare open his mind towards the girl and help her turn away from Malfoy's mesmerising stare, Snape wondered. Or would the Dark Lord notice?

Then he felt her hand on his bicep. He looked down, and there she was, smiling up at him seductively. No... Surely not... He was acutely aware of all eyes in the room on him as she caressed his arm gently.

Morgana Belakane had made her choice...

* * *

'Professor Snape? Sir?'

Snape jerked awake. Gone was the dimly lit room, gone were the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord. But Morgana's hand was resting on his arm, and her blue eyes were looking straight at him, not seductively anymore but concerned.

He shot up from his chair and glared down his nose at her, relieved that the awful scene had only been a dream and at the same time angry that he had fallen asleep in the first place.

He gritted his teeth and damned his weary body as his eyes darted towards the clock on the wall. It was three o'clock in the morning.

He should have listened to Poppy. She had told him that Charis would most certainly not wake up before the early morning and that she would inform him as soon as the girl's condition changed. But he had refused to retire to the dungeons. First he had been hovering around Poppy's office, and when the medi-witch had finally retired for the night, he had sneaked into the ward and found Charis still unconscious and Morgana watching over her. Wordlessly, he had pulled up a chair and settled down with a copy of *Potions Monthly*.

Morgana's teeth had been working her lower lip, and Snape had known that she wanted answers, that she wanted to know why her friend had been tortured and almost killed by Bellatrix Lestrange. But she had not asked a single question, and towards midnight, she had fallen asleep.

And so had he, obviously. From the pain in his back he judged that he had slept at least two hours. Maybe he had moaned in his sleep? Or even talked? Had that woken up Morgana?

She had withdrawn her hand and backed off, but the look in her eyes suggested that she sensed that something was amiss. Snape scowled. Merlin, if she knew about the contents of his dream.

'Shocked that your Head of House is human and actually sleeps now and then, Miss Belakane?' he growled.

If he had meant to scare her away, he had failed. Snape noticed that the second Morgana crossed her arms in front of her chest and smirked. 'Relieved, actually,' she said. 'It seems like the rumours about you being a vampire aren't true then. Because Professor Lupin once told us that vampires don't sleep at night.'

Snape's scowl turned a deeper shade of black at the mention of the werewolf, and he considered deducting House points from Morgana for being cheeky. But she beat him to it.

'I thought you might want to be awake for this.' She nodded towards Charis. 'I think she is coming around.'

'Waking Madam Pomfrey would have been a smarter move,' Snape pointed out, his eyes on Charis. Her eyelids were indeed fluttering, and she was moaning softly. She was awake! She had pulled through. The knowledge sent a flood of relief through him.

'I did, sir,' Morgana informed him. 'Poppy said she'd be here in a minute with a potion for Charis.'

In that moment, Charis' eyes snapped open, and her outcry made both Snape and Morgana flinch. But while Snape stood rigid, unable to do anything else other than stare down at the wounded girl, Morgana moved closer beside her friend and took her hand.

'It's alright, sweetie,' she whispered soothingly. 'You're at Hogwarts. Everything's alright.'

Poppy came bustling around the curtain to administer the potion, and Snape observed the scene in front of him with big eyes. Poppy was doing her job, of course, but what Morgana was doing surprised him no end. Who would have thought that this girl, a girl with a biting wit and such thick armour around herself, held such compassion? The girl that hated to be touched in public and hated any public display of affection was now stroking her friend's fingers with her thumb and making reassuring noises as Charis groggily blinked her green eyes, looking first at her friend, then the medi-witch, before finally coming to rest on him.

'Jack...' Charis whimpered, her eyes becoming wide with panic. 'Where's Jack?'

'Jack is in St. Mungo's, dear,' Madam Pomfrey replied gently. 'He had to be taken to intensive care.'

Morgana squeezed Charis' hand as she moaned with grief.

'He's still alive, child,' the medi-witch continued. 'The Healers give me updates every hour. But he's in a very bad way, and St. Mungo's was the best place for him. Now, I need you to take this potion, to help you wake up properly.'

The nurse carefully administered the potion to Charis as Snape looked on. The girl was clearly scared, not just for her friend but for what had happened to her. The look of fear in her eyes made his heart clench. This should not have happened!

'There, that's better,' Poppy murmured as Charis finished the vial of potion. 'It's perfectly natural to feel groggy for a few minutes, but the potion will help.'

Charis cast her eyes back to Snape. 'What happened? I-I don't really remember... Jack and I, we were in a cafe in Diagon Alley, then the next minute we were in a forest...' Her eyes filled with fear once more as her memories returned. 'Bellatrix Lestrange was there!'

Snape gritted his teeth as Morgana again made soothing noises to calm her distressed friend. Of course the girl would be confused and want answers. She had nearly been killed, for Merlin's sake! She *deserved* answers. But Dumbledore wanted to tell her the truth himself when she was better, and Snape could not reveal exactly what had happened or how he found her, as it would betray his own secret of being a Death Eater.

He exhaled through his nose. His whole life was made up of half-truths, concealment and lies. What difference would one more make?

'Miss Belakane's necklace began glowing crimson, after which she sent Silvy to find you,' he explained. 'I followed the elf and found you and Mr Morrissey unconscious in the forest. I brought you here, and Silvy took Mr Morrissey to St. Mungo's.'

To Morgana's credit, she did not even bat an eyelid at her teacher's lie. He had already been on his way out of the castle when she had bumped into him, and when she had told him that Charis was in danger, he had seemed to know exactly where to go. How he had known was beyond her, but Morgana knew better than to ask now. After all, Snape had instructed her not to talk to anybody about this afternoon's events. That seemed to include Charis.

Charis' brow, however, creased into a frown. 'But... how did I get to the forest?'

'That, I cannot say for sure,' Snape replied. 'Most probably by a hidden Portkey.'

'A Portkey... the certificates!' Charis struggled to sit up, much to the chagrin of the medi-witch.

'Don't move, child, you'll wrinkle your bandages!' she admonished firmly. 'You need to rest. All of you do, actually. Five more minutes, then I will have to ask the two of you to leave.'

'But, Madam Pomfrey...'

Morgana's protest was cut short by the medi-witch's stern look. 'Five minutes, Morgana. Either you are in that bed by then or I will send you down to the dungeons. Is that understood?'

Once Poppy had left, Charis flopped back onto the pillows and looked pleadingly at Snape. 'Why did Bellatrix take us?'

Snape hated himself in that moment. He hated lying, he hated Bellatrix Lestrange and he hated everything that she had done to the sweet, innocent girl. And as much as he had wanted to stay by the girl's side mere hours ago, he very much wanted to be alone right now.

'I do not know, Miss Byrne,' he snapped. 'And if I were you, I would take Madam Pomfrey's advice and rest and not bother yourself with upsetting questions.'

And with that, he turned on his heel and left the hospital wing with his robes billowing, leaving Charis and Morgana with confused looks on their faces.

After a few moments, Charis turned her gaze back to her friend. 'You... you sent Silvy?' Her eyes were filling up with tears, but this time not from the pain.

'The necklace glowed,' Morgana started, busying herself with straightening the bed sheets. Tears always made her uncomfortable. 'I knew you were in London, but that was about all. I didn't know how to get to you. So I sent the elf and then informed Snape.'

'You saved me.' Charis' voice wasn't more than a tearful whisper.

'Snape did.'

Morgana bit her lip. Somehow she had to tune in with what Snape had said and let Charis believe that all Snape had done was follow the elf. But it was HIM who had saved Charis and Jack. Why would he not take credit for it?

Then Charis started to cry. 'Oh, Morgana, I thought I was going to die. I thought Jack was dead. Bellatrix... the woman is pure evil. She cut me and laughed at me...'

'Hush, sweetie.' Carefully, Morgana put her arm around Charis' shoulders. 'We don't want Poppy to come back, do we?'

'Bellatrix... she... she broke my wand,' Charis sobbed. 'What am I going to do without my wand?'

Morgana wrapped her arms tighter around her crying friend. A broken wand may have seemed like a petty thing compared to almost losing her life, but maybe Charis was not in the condition to think about what had happened to her. Plus, losing one's wand was, Morgana had to admit, a distressing thing at the best of times. The wand chose the wizard or witch, and formed a unique bond with its owner. A witch or wizard usually had their wand for life, from the age of eleven. Bellatrix's destruction of Charis' wand was therefore symbolic and probably one of the most humiliating acts she could have done to her.

'You can get a new wand,' she whispered. 'Once you're better.'

Charis squirmed in her friend's arms, and a new wave of sobs shook her body. 'Jack... I wish I could see Jack...'

'Jack's being taken care of. I'm sure he'll be alright soon.' Once more, Morgana started chewing at her lip. Silvy had told her what horrid state Jack had been in. At the moment, she severely doubted that he would be alright. But she couldn't tell Charis.

'Tell you what,' she started instead, 'once you're better, we'll go to London and visit Jack and go wand shopping. Doesn't that sound fun? We can have ice cream, and you can go to Flourish & Blotts... Hey, you could show me Muggle London...'

'Snape knows, doesn't he?' Charis suddenly interrupted her. 'He knows why Bellatrix took us.'

Morgana swallowed. Her Head of House always knew a lot of things and very often was around to prevent bad things from happening. But how he knew, she did not know. 'I have no idea what Professor Snape knows,' she admitted. 'I only know he is very worried about you. He was here all night.'

Charis looked up at her friend in surprise. 'He was?'

'Of course he was, sweetie. He left only for an hour or so, to inform Dumbledore, Poppy said. He came straight back and wouldn't even go to dinner.'

'Really?' Through the hurt came a small bubble of hope. Severus had rescued her after the tip-off from her fast-thinking friend. That was one thing. But to find out he had spent a vigil by her bedside, just like Morgana had, made a small glow spread through Charis' heart. Dare she believe that he cared for her, just as she still cared for him?

Morgana raised an eyebrow at her friend. 'No, I am making all of this up,' she said with an ironic tone but quickly nudged Charis softly as she saw her face fall. 'Professor Snape wouldn't leave your side, Charis.'

Once more, Charis' eyesight was clouded with tears. 'And neither did you,' she whispered and squeezed Morgana's hand.

Morgana grinned. 'I had nothing better to do anyway.'

'Thank you,' Charis murmured hoarsely, squeezing her friend's hand in return.

'You don't need to thank me. That's what friends are for.'

Morgana let Charis nestle up against her chest and absentmindedly stroked her blonde hair. It felt, in a strange way, good to be able to offer some comfort to Charis. For far too many times lately, she had been the one who had been crying, who had needed someone to lean on. Being there for Charis took her mind off her own problems.

Morgana blinked fiercely as tears started burning in her eyes. She did not know what she would have done if she had lost Charis. With a shudder, she thought about how close Bellatrix Lestrange had come to taking her best friend away from her. What on earth could the dark witch have wanted with Charis?

'Charis,' she started carefully. 'Did Bella say anything? About what she wanted from you? Why she took you?'

Charis shook her head.

'Could it just have been one of her Muggle hunts?' Morgana went on. 'And you and Jack were at the wrong place at the wrong time?'

'No. No. Snape was right.' Suddenly, foggy images from the afternoon's events came creeping back into Charis' mind. 'The documents were a Portkey. Jack and I were sitting in a cafe, about to open them together, and as soon as we pulled them from the envelope they turned blue and we got transported to the forest. I didn't even get to see the documents!'

'What documents?' Morgana asked.

'The documents we picked up from the WORM office,' Charis explained. 'You know Jack and I couldn't find either the birth or the marriage certificate of my gran on my dad's side? And when Malfoy came for inspection, when I showed him Ravenclaw Tower he basically warned me and Jack not to continue, but without explicitly saying so...'

Morgana flinched as Charis mentioned Lucius Malfoy and that fateful night he had spent at Hogwarts, but she quickly hid away the memories in a dark corner of her mind. Malfoy was not important right now.

'You know what Jack is like when he gets an idea in his head,' Charis continued. 'After Malfoy's little threat we decided to get the certificates personally from the WORM office to see what the fuss was about.'

'Shame you didn't get to read the documents,' Morgana pointed out. 'If both Lucius and Bella are so interested in your research, that must mean there is something on your dad's side they do not want you to see. Maybe you're not Muggle-born after all.'

Charis' eyes grew wide. 'You don't think I could be related to... him, do you?'

'To Lucius?' The mere thought made Morgana's skin crawl. 'If you are, I am seriously not going to talk to you again,' she added jokingly. 'And it would mean you're related to Draco. What a disgusting thought.'

Charis wrinkled her nose. 'Urgh, don't!'

'Well, you all have that lovely blonde hair,' Morgana added. She found that when she made jokes about Lucius, it hurt a little less.

The girls both jumped as Poppy pulled open the curtains. 'I said five minutes, did I not?' But her frown disappeared immediately as she saw the two girls with their arms wrapped around each other.

'You should both get some sleep,' she said. 'You do not want me to send you to the dungeons and inform your Head of House, do you Morgana?'

'No, ma'am.' Morgana grinned. Trust Snape to give her a lecture at this time of day and then deduct a zillion House points.

She stayed seated on the edge of Charis' bed while Poppy checked the bandages once more. When the medi-witch had left, she hugged her friend tightly. 'You better not be a Malfoy,' she whispered.

When she tried to withdraw, Charis held on to her. 'Thank you, Morgana. For saving me. For being here.'

'Go to sleep,' Morgana whispered and awkwardly patted Charis on the back. She did not know what to say.

Once Morgana had returned to her own bed, Charis lay in hers, staring at the ceiling. Her mind was racing. She tried to block out Bella's screams and the memory of the pain and instead focus on the thought that Severus had rescued her and that he'd been by her bedside, just like Morgana had been. Deep down in her heart, if she was honest, she had never given up on Severus. The flame was still burning inside her, no matter how hard she tried to quash it. Did Severus care about her, too? She let the small tendril of hope unfurl in her heart, basking in its warmth as Poppy extinguished the lights in the ward, and her eyes fluttered closed.

* * *

'Severus,' came Albus Dumbledore's friendly voice from the fireplace in Snape's quarters. 'You're up early. Or have you not been to bed at all?'

Snape scowled. Did the old man really think that he would have been able to go to sleep and have happy dreams after everything that had happened over the last twelve hours?

'I thought you would want to know that Miss Byrne has woken up,' he said in a sour tone.

'Ah, excellent. How is the dear girl?'

'Hurting and confused, of course.' Snape's patience was running thin. One more stupid question and he might just say something really unfriendly.

'Yes, of course.' Dumbledore took off his purple night cap with the fluffy bobble on the end. 'Have you written to Charis' and Jack's parents yet?'

'I am about to,' Snape snarled. *Right after I have washed the Dark Lord's feet and slain all the dragons in Bulgaria* he added in his thoughts. 'Anything else?' he asked in a weary tone.

'Actually, yes, dear boy. You should, of course, inform Filius. After all, the pair belong to his House, and we can trust his discretion. Oh, and Severus?'

Snape's jaw tightened, but Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily.

'Go to bed.'

That was the best suggestion Dumbledore had made all year, Snape thought as he let his weary body sink into the eiderdown. His bed had never felt more welcoming. The last twenty-four hours had felt like a week.

He closed his mind to the image of Charis lying bloody and helpless in his arms, but he could not stop thinking of the news about her heritage that Dumbledore had spoken of earlier. Charis was a Black! It almost made Snape shudder. The only Black he had any affinity at all with was Narcissa. She, at least, had beauty, poise and grace, and was unerringly loyal to her family. The rest of them, as far as Snape could see, were inbred, psychotic half-wits. Well, there was Nymphadora, of course. A little clumsy, but a brave little thing nonetheless. Pretty, too. Charis had certainly inherited the famous Black females' good looks. But she had certainly not inherited the inbred psychosis.

Snape turned over with a snort and fluffed his pillows. Why was he thinking such whimsy? Yes, he had been upset to find her in such a state. Anyone would have been. And it was natural to stay by her bedside, when it was his spell that put her there. Yes, that was definitely it, he thought. It was guilt that had made him act. Nothing more. Definitely nothing more.

* * *

It was late in the afternoon when Snape returned to the hospital wing once more. He had started to hate that part of the castle. Too many times he had visited the ward this year; too many times he had witnessed suffering and the aftermath of barbarity at the hands of his fellow Death Eaters; too many times had it involved those two girls that had started to mean more to him than any other student ever had.

He walked towards Charis' bed, where he could hear the sound of giggling and chattering behind the drawn curtain, and scowled. As much as he was relieved to hear such happy sounds, they made his headache go from slightly annoying to simply unbearable.

'I sincerely hope that the two of you have not been having Sillyweed for tea,' he snapped as he sharply withdrew the curtain from the bed and revealed the sight of Morgana perched on one side. Both girls looked somewhat flushed, and Snape couldn't help but wonder what exactly he had just interrupted.

'I have come to inform you, Miss Byrne, that your parents have been told that you are safely at Hogwarts, and there is no need for them to be concerned. For your information, Mr Morrissey's parents have been told the same thing, although he is still in St. Mungo's.'

'Safely?' Morgana piped up. 'With all due respect, sir, Jack is not exactly doing well.'

Snape scowled. 'I do not recall having addressed you, Miss Belakane.'

Morgana bit her lip, cursing herself for once more having stepped on Snape's toes.

'But, sir,' Charis said quietly. 'I... I would very much like to contact my parents.'

'I am afraid that is impossible for the time being, Miss Byrne,' Snape started, his voice somewhat softer as he saw the pleading look in Charis' eyes.

He stepped closer towards her bed and cast *Muffliato*. What he had to say was not for anyone else to hear. 'According to the Ministry, the Dark Lord has not returned. Hence there are no Death Eaters. It is important that no one knows about the attack on you and Mr Morrissey.' He sneered. 'I do not have them all memorised, but I am sure that there is an Educational Decree that forbids any mentioning of the Dark Lord and his followers. Headmistress Umbridge might have you expelled for conspiracy if she finds that you have written to your parents about having been attacked by Death Eaters.'

Charis' eyes filled with tears. She very much wanted to talk to her mother at the moment. Not that her mother would be able to do anything, but somehow the thought of being in contact was comforting.

'Do not worry, Miss Byrne,' Snape continued. He hated seeing the girl in distress. 'With any luck, Dumbledore will return soon.'

He had already turned to leave when a soft meow made him swirl around again. From under the blanket that lay between the girls had emerged a little white kitten.

'May I remind you both that this is a hospital wing, not a petting zoo?' he snapped.

Morgana at once took the blame. 'It was my idea, sir,' she confessed. 'I thought it would cheer Charis up, seeing Lily. She's been ever so good.'

To his credit, Snape did not flinch at the sound of the animal's name. Instead, he strode forwards and picked the kitten up easily by the scruff of the neck, placing it on his outstretched hand, level with his face.

'Did you not stop to think about health considerations, Miss Belakane? Cats have no place in a hospital. They could spread infections, allergies and germs.'

Morgana had already opened her mouth but thought better of it. Obviously this was one of Snape's nastier days, and her telling him that Poppy had given her consent would probably not go down well.

'You might well have endangered Miss Byrne's health further by doing such a thing!' Snape thundered. 'Five points from...'

His rant was interrupted by the kitten, which had leaned forwards to rub her cheek against Snape's chin, purring all the while. Snape saw Morgana's mouth fall open and Charis cover hers with her hands. If he wasn't mistaken, the girls had gone misty-eyed and were blushing slightly.

He himself felt a blush rising as he glared at the cat, who was now lightly tapping at a strand of his hair with her paws. Damn the infernal kitten! How dare it upstage him when he was giving a serious talk! He swiftly placed the kitten inside his robes, where Lily mewed sweetly as she was hidden by the billowing black fabric.

'Five points from Slytherin, Miss Belakane,' Snape continued, regaining his composure. 'And Miss Byrne, I will take your animal back to Ravenclaw Tower, where I will ask Professor Flitwick to make sure it stays until you are discharged.'

With a flurry of black robes and a curt swish of the closing curtain, Snape left Morgana and Charis staring at each other wide-eyed and whispering about the scene they had just witnessed.

'He won't hurt her, will he?' Charis asked worriedly, chewing on her lip. 'He wouldn't do that, would he?'

'He's probably gone to the Forbidden Forest to feed her to the Acromantula,' Morgana teased, to a distressed wail from her friend.

The girls had no need to fear, however. As Snape strode down the corridors which led to Ravenclaw Tower, anyone who had approached him would have thought he had merely pulled his robes around him, with his arms habitually folded across his chest. In truth, Lily was contentedly nestled into the crook of Snape's arm, purring gently, whilst he tickled her chin with a finger. And if anyone happened to look closely at his face from the light of the flames from the torches on the wall, they would have seen that Snape was actually smirking.

XXXVII: A Nice Family Dinner

Chapter 37 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXVII: A Nice Family Dinner

It was raining Kneazles and Crups when Snape made his way to Grimmauld Place, and the weather fitted the Potions master's mood perfectly. He was, for once, the bearer of good news, but he knew that with Charis' recovery came Dumbledore's insistence on telling the girl the truth. And this could, in Snape's opinion, only lead to more trouble.

He found Dumbledore by the fireplace in the sitting room with a pot of tea and a huge carrot cake.

'Ah, Severus, what a surprise.'

Snape did his best not to sneer. As if anything would ever surprise Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard seemed to know everything about everybody. Certainly, he even knew what kind of underwear the Minister of Magic was wearing or what Voldemort had eaten for breakfast. And he had probably known that Snape was on his way for quite some time.

'Tea? Cake?' Dumbledore asked, his blue eyes twinkling and his lips curled into a smile. 'Please, have a seat. Take off your boots, if you like. It wouldn't surprise me if your socks were drenched. We have had such terrible weather today.'

Ignoring Dumbledore's comment about the state of his socks, Snape took a seat, secretly enjoying the warmth the fire lent. 'Tea would be... acceptable,' he replied as Dumbledore once more made an inviting gesture towards the pot and the cake.

The old man poured them both a cup of divinely smelling herbal tea, cut off an enormous piece of carrot cake and put it onto a plate right under Snape's nose. 'Cake lifts the spirits, Severus.'

'As should the news I am bringing you,' Snape stated and demonstratively crossed his arms in front of his chest. When would Dumbledore understand that he would not eat in this house? 'Miss Byrne was dismissed from the hospital wing last night.'

'That is wonderful news indeed, Severus,' Dumbledore exclaimed, brushing cake crumbs from his beard. 'Wonderful.'

'As for Mr Morrissey, he is apparently stable,' Snape continued. 'He will, however, be kept in St. Mungo's for some time.'

Dumbledore fixed his Potions master with a piercing look. 'Only you could deliver such agreeable news with a frown on your face, Severus.'

Snape raised an eyebrow. 'I would have thought that by now you had realised that this is my natural expression.'

'Don't try to fool me, dear boy.' Again, there was that look in Dumbledore's eyes that made Snape's skin crawl. 'What is on your mind?'

Since Dumbledore had asked such a direct question, Snape decided to give him a direct answer. 'I have reservations regarding Miss Byrne being told of her heritage.'

'Don't you think Charis deserves to be told, Severus?' Dumbledore asked, peering over his half-moon glasses characteristically. 'After all she has been through?'

'What if that knowledge places her in even greater jeopardy?' Snape shot back. 'It took some quite advanced methods of persuasion to keep Bellatrix from storming Hogwarts to finish what she had started. I told her that the girl was terrified after her ordeal and that I had used a memory charm on her so she would forget about delving into her ancestry. Still, Bella is anything but happy.'

'I assume you were able to... take her mind off things?' Dumbledore asked tactfully.

'I suggested she should lead the operation at the Ministry to retrieve the prophecy with Lucius,' Snape confirmed.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. 'I assume dear Bella bought your suggestion at once. She would be only too happy to snatch the glory from her brother-in-law. Unfortunately for her, there will be no glory. The Order is ready. We will be awaiting them.'

A *poor consolation*, Snape thought. But at least, both Bella and Lucius would hopefully be in Azkaban by the beginning of summer. Of course, they would be sent there for breaking into the Ministry and not for their crimes against Charis and Morgana. But as long as they rotted behind bars, Snape would be content.

'Say, Severus,' Dumbledore suddenly asked. 'Do you have any plans for tomorrow evening?'

'You mean aside from dusting off potions phials?' Snape answered in a wary tone. What did the old man want him to do now? Steal an egg from a dragon?

'I would like you to join us for dinner,' Dumbledore explained. 'Molly is making Rumbledethumps. She and Arthur will be here, and Remus, Alastor, and Tonks. A nice family dinner, so to speak.'

'Is my presence quite necessary?' Snape asked, hoping against hope that Dumbledore would say no. Suddenly, stealing a dragon egg did seem quite appealing after all.

'In fact, it is, Severus,' Dumbledore started to explain. 'Seeing as Grimmauld Place is Unplottable, I need someone to escort the girls.'

Snape felt the muscles in his jaw tighten. 'The girls? And which girls might they be?' Maybe, if he played dumb, Dumbledore would realise how nutty the idea was. Unfortunately, it seemed to amuse the old man instead.

'Sometimes you are surprisingly slow, Severus. I am, of course, talking about Charis and Morgana.'

'And just why are Miss Byrne and Miss Belakane invited to this...*family gathering*?' Snape asked with narrow eyes. The old man was clearly up to something. Could he not resist meddling in other people's lives for even a moment?

Dumbledore, however, seemed in no hurry to answer Snape's question. He simply closed his eyes in delight as he took a bite from yet another piece of cake and then slowly sipped on his tea.

'If this is about your insane idea about inviting them to the Order...' Snape burst out, but Dumbledore cut him short.

'Insane idea? I am giving them a choice, Severus.'

Now it was Snape's turn to interrupt. 'A choice?' he spat. 'Just like you gave me one?'

Dumbledore slowly placed his cup on the saucer. 'Remember that it was you who approached me, Severus.' Dumbledore looked hard at the younger wizard for few moments before continuing and casually refilled his cup. 'But that is another matter. Charis and Morgana are already involved in this war. Introducing them to the Order provides them with a safety net. They will know that we are right behind them and will protect them, whether or not they decide to join us. Bring them around for dinner so they can meet everyone. Let us introduce them to the family.'

'Introduce them to the family.' Snape sneered. 'You have no idea how much you just sounded like the Dark Lord, Dumbledore.'

'Has Tom ever offered you such delicious cake?' Dumbledore asked mildly. The insult had run off him like water off the Giant Squid. 'But if you'd rather not come, I can always send Remus around to fetch the girls...'

Snape shot off his chair as if stung by a Skrewt. 'You will do no such thing.'

'Won't I?' Dumbledore asked innocently.

'If Umbridge catches a whiff of a werewolf at Hogwarts, she will have him in Azkaban so fast his knackers will be swinging like a Newton's Cradle.'

Dumbledore leant back in his chair and looked up at Snape. 'And since when are you concerned about Remus' welfare?'

Snape took a deep breath to calm himself. He should not have flared up like this. 'I am looking at the bigger picture here, Dumbledore. Lupin is famously one of your most vocal supporters, just as you are famously tolerant of his lycanthropy. If he gets caught at Hogwarts without invitation, that will be yet another nail in your coffin. Umbridge will tighten security; there will be yet another decree...'

'I can count on you to bring around the girls around by seven then?' Dumbledore replied, cutting Snape off mid-rant, and Snape folded his arms with a silent *tmph*. Once more, he had walked right into Dumbledore's trap.

'Charis will have to go to Diagon Alley to acquire a new wand,' the older wizard continued. 'I would like you to accompany her and Morgana on Saturday. Of course, this will mean that you will all have to spend the night.'

Snape's stomach turned at the thought. Not only would he be forced to eat at Grimmauld Place, he would also have to sleep over! What next? Would Dumbledore ask him to bunk in with him or instead lay tightly spooned against the Black hound?

'Molly will make up a room for you,' Dumbledore announced, as if in answer to his unspoken question. 'The girls, I suppose, will not mind sharing one of the big beds upstairs.'

When Dumbledore returned his attention to his cake, Snape considered himself dismissed and left with hurried steps. Thank Merlin he was a brilliant Occlumens. He would have hated to explain to Dumbledore just what kind of thoughts the mentioning of Charis and Morgana sharing a bed had awoken in him.

* * *

'Why don't we let Silvy decide?' Morgana suggested. She and Charis had discussed the choices for their Friday-Girls-Only-Dinner for about ten minutes now. And not only was it making her more and more hungry, it was also making her grumpy. Before she could call her elf, however, there was a rap knock at the door.

The girls stared at each other for a moment, neither of them moving. It was still the Easter holidays and the castle was still pretty much deserted. Who could it be? Had Umbridge returned early and somehow found out that Morgana had more or less moved to Ravenclaw Tower? Surely, that would violate Educational Decree two thousand and twenty-seven somehow.

'You open it,' Morgana said eventually, sternly looking at Charis. 'It's your common room, after all.'

Charis reluctantly peeled herself of the cosy armchair she had spent the better part of the afternoon in and made her way towards the door. 'Peeves, if that's you...' she started in a weary tone.

'It is not Peeves, Miss Byrne!'

The Potions master's voice made Charis stop dead in her tracks and Morgana jump off the sofa. What, by Merlin's saggy scrotum, was Snape doing in Ravenclaw Tower?

After a moment of shock, Charis hurried to open the door. 'Sorry, sir. Peeves has been a little active over the last few hours,' she blabbered. 'His latest trick is leaving green slime all over the door handles. It's quite disgusting.'

The look on Snape's face suggested that he had some of said slime on his own hands, and Charis quickly lowered her gaze. She hated it when he looked at her that way. She wanted him to look at her... well, as if he cared about her.

Blushing slightly, she gestured for Snape to enter the common room, but he kept standing in the door.

'You are both invited, at Dumbledore's request, to attend dinner this evening,' he announced.

The news made both girls raise their eyebrows in surprise. But before they could interrupt and ask any questions, Snape swiftly continued.

'You will be spending the night, so you will need to pack an overnight bag. Tomorrow I will escort you to Diagon Alley so you, Miss Byrne, can buy a new wand before term commences.' He looked down his nose at the girls with a judging expression on his face. 'We are expected for dinner in half an hour, so I need you two to powder your noses very quickly. I will be waiting for you here. There is no need to dress up.'

Leaving the girls feeling confused, Snape turned on his heel and with a bang, he slammed the door shut behind him.

Charis turned around and looked at her friend with a puzzled look on her face. 'Why would Dumbledore invite us to dinner? And to stay over for the night? Stay where?'

Morgana shrugged. Dumbledore involved in dinner invitations and Snape as an escort had not proved to be a good combination for her in the past. But she decided not to say anything, although she could think of millions of nasty comments. She was also puzzled as to why Snape had been chosen to escort Charis to buy a new wand instead of her own Head of House. But instead of voicing her concern, she urged Charis to haste.

'Judging by the scowl on Snape's face, we won't have much more than ten minutes before he kicks down the door and drags us to dinner. Let's hurry and not ask him any questions.'

Five minutes later, Charis and Morgana stood ready in front of their Potions master. They had each packed an overnight bag as requested. Morgana's had been brought to Ravenclaw Tower by Silvy along with the black trousers and matching blouse she was now wearing. Charis, on the other hand, had chosen a modest, dark blue dress. Snape, however, did not seem to care what either of them was wearing. He just gave them a curt nod and billowed down the stairs ahead of them. They had to jog to keep up with him, and once they had arrived outside the gates, they were both slightly out of breath.

'As I cannot divulge our destination to you, we will have to use Side-Along Apparition,' Snape announced and raised both his arms. 'I suggest you both hold on tight. I have no desire to deal with any Splinching tonight. And trust me, this is just as awkward for me as it is for you. Now get moving.'

Charis took hold of Snape's arm first. She felt the sinewy curve of his bicep and could not help but imagine how it would feel to touch his bare skin instead of the fabric of his robes. Oh, to touch his muscular upper arm, to trace a line down his manly chest with her fingers... Charis blinked to clear her mind. The mere thought sent a shudder of pleasure through her.

Morgana, however, was more cautious. She had always hated touching people and that feeling had become stronger over the last couple of months. Now it extended even to Snape, one of the people whom she trusted more than anyone else. But she had no choice.

'Hold hands,' Snape commanded and exhaled sharply as the Charis and Morgana joined their hands right in front of his stomach. Having them so close felt both good and uncomfortable at the same time. Uncomfortable because he himself was unused to prolonged physical contact and tried to avoid it whenever possible; good because those two were his girls and having them standing on either side of him made a warmth rise inside his chest that he had not experienced in years. Did they want him still, he wondered? Would they, if he lifted his arms and pulled them into an embrace, forget about Dumbledore's invitation and follow him to the dungeons instead?

A muscle twitched right under Snape's right eye, and he mentally slapped himself. What in Hades was he thinking? Those girls were about to be lured into joining the Order to fight in a war in which they should never have been involved. And here he was, fantasising about taking them both to his bed? How low could one sink?

'Are you ready?' he growled and drew himself up to his full height. 'We will Apparate on three. One, two ...'

'Welcome, welcome to both of you.' Dumbledore greeted both girls with a warm handshake and an even warmer smile. 'I am so glad to see both of you up and about. Severus, thank you for bringing them here.'

Snape just nodded curtly, and the girls peered curiously around the hall. Snape had not told them where he was bringing them, and the procedure to get into the house had been peculiar to say the least. As far as they could understand, there were several spells put on the house to keep unwanted persons from entering and even from seeing the building.

Whatever was so special about that place, they wondered. And why all the fuss to keep people away? The entrance hall itself seemed unfriendly enough to make anyone want to leave again. It was gloomier than the darkest corridors of the dungeons at Hogwarts, the carpet was worn and the wallpaper was peeling off. The only specks of colour were Albus Dumbledore's purple robes.

'Dinner isn't quite ready yet,' Dumbledore explained. 'So why don't we go and have a little chat in the...'

He was interrupted by a deafening shriek.

'Mudbloods! Filth! Blood traitors...'

The tantrum of the woman in the portrait at the end of the corridor stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and she just stared at the people standing in front of her with her mouth hanging open. Charis and Morgana stared back at her with slightly puzzled expressions on their faces. Dumbledore and Snape, however, exchanged meaningful glances.

A door flew open and rushing out of it came a rather good-looking, if somewhat rugged, man. He had long, wavy, dark hair, which fell over his shoulders casually, and his

appearance was only marred by dark circles under his eyes.

'Who managed to shut up the hag?' he asked and covered the portrait swiftly with heavy curtains. Then his grey eyes fell onto the visitors.

'Sirius,' Dumbledore started. 'Our guests of honour have arrived. Morgana, Charis, I'd like you to meet the master of the house, Sirius Black.'

Instinctively, both girls took a step backwards. Sirius Black? What, by Hades, was Dumbledore playing at? Sirius Black was a convicted murderer on the run.

Charis narrowed her eyes. Sirius Black was also Harry Potter's godfather, she had learned from her brief involvement with the DA. And he had, according to Harry, right-out accused Snape of being a Death Eater. How dare he? Dumbledore, however, seemed to trust Sirius Black. Why else would he hold a dinner party at his house? But Charis was wary. For the time being, she did not trust the man one bit.

'I wish people would stop flinching at my name,' Black grumbled and expectantly looked at Dumbledore. The old man, however, seemed suddenly terribly interested in a piece of wallpaper that was peeling off the wall.

Charis was the first to pipe up. 'Professor Dumbledore, sir, um... I don't mean to be rude or anything but why exactly have Morgana and I been invited... here?'

Stroking his beard, Dumbledore turned towards the girls and smiled. 'You have been invited to dinner.'

'Are we to expect a Ministry raid around dessert?' Everyone looked at Morgana, who stood with her arms crossed in front of her chest and her eyes blazing. But with everyone looking at her, she just shrugged. 'What? That would seem natural whilst having dinner with two of the most wanted men in Britain.'

Snape didn't know if he should award Morgana House points for her honesty or deduct some for her being insolent. So he just gave her one of his darkest scowls.

Dumbledore, however, smiled. 'I very much doubt the Ministry will find us today. They have failed so far. But yes, it is time we explain to both Charis and Morgana why they have been invited here today. I think we should all have a seat in the drawing room.' He pointed towards the door Sirius Black had stormed out of only minutes before. 'Severus, I would like you to join us as well.'

Once upon a time, the drawing room had certainly been exquisite, but now it looked just as rundown as the corridor had. The pelmets, by the look of it, had seen a recent Doxy infestation, and the embroidered carpet was now tattered and frayed in places. Not even the crackling fire in the large ornate fireplace managed to lend the room a cosy atmosphere.

Black positioned himself by the fireplace, leaning casually against the mantle. Dumbledore took a seat in a dark green armchair opposite the couch on which he had bidden the girls to make themselves comfortable. Snape, just like Black, kept standing, but by the windows. From there, he could observe both the movements on the street in front of the house as well as the people in the drawing room. This was bound to be interesting.

'The Blacks have always been incredibly proud of their heritage, and this was once the most important room of the Black Mansion,' Dumbledore started, making a sweeping gesture around the room. 'Family heirlooms were kept in the cabinets over there. And whoever doubted the purity of the Black family tree only needed to have a look at the tapestry on that wall to see how far back lineage went.'

The girls followed Dumbledore's hand with their eyes. Only a blind person could miss that tapestry. It covered the entire wall and had certainly been a sight to behold once. But as everything else they had seen of the Black house so far, it had lost its glory. The colours had faded, and here and there black holes disfigured the tapestry. They looked like burn marks.

'Did someone try to set the thing on fire?' Morgana asked, wondering why anyone would treat their family tree like this. There was a similar tapestry in Lucius' office at Malfoy Manor. One day last summer, she remembered, an elf had accidentally broken off a piece of golden thread while dusting. The poor thing had received twenty strokes with Lucius' cane.

'My dear mother, whom you have had the pleasure to meet in the corridor, had the rather nasty habit of blasting off family members who didn't live up to the Black standard,' Black pointed out sourly. 'Puff!' he said and mimed an explosion with his hands.

'Sirius here was removed the day he was sorted into Gryffindor,' Dumbledore explained. 'Another reason to be removed is marrying below family standards. Yet another is to be born a Squib. This is why you won't find your great-grandfather on the tapestry, Charis.'

One could have heard a needle drop in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place. Even the fire seemed to have stopped crackling. The first one to move was Sirius Black as he sauntered towards the tapestry.

'Marius Black,' he said and pointed towards one of the holes. 'My great-uncle and your great-grandfather.'

Charis stared at Sirius with big eyes. Was he seriously saying that she was a Black?

'I understand that this must come as a shock to you, Charis,' Dumbledore said calmly. 'But it is important that you know the truth.'

Charis was still unable to tear her eyes of the tapestry. 'Is that why ... because of ... but how ...'

She was unable to form a coherent sentence. Thankfully, Dumbledore understood what she was trying to ask.

'You and Jack were on the verge of discovering one of the best kept secrets of the Black family. The documents you picked up at the WORM contained all the information you needed to find out that you are a direct descendant of Phineas Nigellus Black, just like Sirius.'

Suddenly, Dumbledore was holding both the envelope from WORM and Charis' bag and held them out towards Charis, who took them without really knowing what she was doing. She was still staring at the gaping hole where once the name Marius Black had stood.

'Marius married a Muggle and had one daughter, Callista, who later married George Byrne,' Dumbledore explained.

Finally Charis' brain kicked into gear again. 'George Byrne was my grandfather,' she pointed out.

Morgana rose from the sofa to scrutinise the tapestry. 'You are related to the Malfoys?' she suddenly asked and turned towards Sirius, her blue eyes glittering.

Black nodded. 'Cousin Narcissa is married to Lucius Malfoy, yes. All pure-blood families are interrelated. Your choice of partners is severely limited when you are only allowed to marry pure-bloods.'

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. 'Sorry to disturb you,' Remus Lupin said as he poked his head inside. 'Alastor and Nymphadora have just arrived. And Molly says dinner is ready.' Then he smiled shyly towards the girls. 'It's nice to see you two again.'

Dumbledore at once rose from his chair. 'We don't want to keep Molly waiting. Come on, everyone.'

He left the room swiftly followed by Black and Snape, who ushered the girls out of the door in front of him. Neither of them said a word. It seemed absurd that they, only a couple of weeks ago, had been joking about Charis being related to Draco Malfoy just to find out now that they were indeed third cousins.

'Eat, girls, eat,' Molly Weasley encouraged Charis and Morgana as she filled their plates for the third time.

'Are you trying to fatten them up for Christmas?' Alastor Moody grumbled into his own bulging plate. His comment earned him a look from Mrs Weasley that could have made a troll shiver.

'Alastor is right, Molly,' Lupin agreed. 'They won't have any room for your famous chocolate cake if you keep refilling their plates. And that would be a shame indeed.'

Snape looked up from his plate which, against his will, also had been refilled twice. As much as he appreciated a good home cooked meal, his stomach had started to rebel. He never ate that much for dinner these days, and if he wanted to be able to go to sleep before midnight, he would have to wash the meal down with a healthy measure of Firewhisky. His eyes came to rest on Charis and Morgana, who were sitting opposite him, between Black and Lupin. Neither of the girls seemed especially eager to empty the plates in front of them. Sitting between two of the Marauders would spoil his appetite as well, Snape thought, but he doubted that their dinner partners were what kept them from eating.

Charis was every now and then glancing up from her plate to look at her new-found cousin. Snape didn't need to use Legilimens to sense her confusion. Dumbledore had certainly not beaten about the bush back in the drawing room. He had not, however, offered any explanations. Obviously, he counted on Charis to be able to ask the right questions and once more figure out everything herself.

Morgana on the other hand had not looked up once during the whole meal. She was harder to read. She, too, seemed confused, but there was another emotion which Snape couldn't really put his finger on.

'What will you two girls be doing once you've graduated from Hogwarts?' Nymphadora Tonks suddenly asked brightly, grinning across the table. Her hair was bubblegum pink that evening and clashed violently with her bright orange T-Shirt.

Both girls looked at her as if she had just awoken them from deep sleep.

'I haven't decided yet,' Charis answered. 'I have been looking into Healing, but I am not sure it would be right for me. A position in the Ministry would be nice, though.'

'You will have to pass an insanity-test to work at the Ministry,' Moody growled. 'Fudge is going loopy and requires his staff to do the same, it seems.'

'Don't start again, Alastor, not at the dinner table,' Mrs Weasley interrupted.

'Last time Moody discussed Minister Fudge, he got so excited his eye popped out,' Sirius whispered into Charis' ear, and she giggled despite herself.

Snape, who hadn't heard what Black had said, scowled. What right had Black to whisper things into Charis' ear?

'How about you?' Tonks continued, now addressing Morgana, who slowly folded her napkin and then placed it beside her plate. Before she could give an answer, however, Moody spoke.

'That one has applied to Auror training.'

Snape cocked an eyebrow. That was total news to him. Last time he had spoken to Morgana about her career choices, she had needed a letter of recommendation to seek apprenticeship with Slug and Jiggers in Diagon Alley. Auror was a dangerous job, and Snape couldn't help but wonder if Morgana was deliberately putting herself into danger. His musings were cut short by Dumbledore raising his glass.

'High goals for two excellent students,' he proclaimed. 'Let us drink to their success. May Lady Fortuna always smile on them and help them make the right decisions.'

* * *

Shortly before midnight, Snape poured himself a third glass of Firewhisky. It was normally against his principles to get drunk in a place that wasn't his own, but that night he couldn't care less. He was in dire need of alcohol, and it had little to do with Molly's dinner laying in his stomach like a set of bricks. All he wanted was to get drunk enough to sleep without nightmares.

He had realised something during the course of the evening, something unsettling. He had realised that Charis and Morgana, his girls, were growing up. Soon they would leave Hogwarts and enter a world where he could not protect them. Both of them had chosen a dangerous road to travel on: Morgana was about to fight Dark wizards, and Charis seemed to be leaning towards applying for a position within the Ministry. Couldn't they both pick a career that kept them out of the line of fire instead? Couldn't Charis stick to her plan of becoming a Healer and Morgana to hers of becoming a Potioneer? Did neither of them understand that there was a war coming and that they were both in danger? And that the Ministry itself would be under threat?

Snape sighed. Of course they understood. They weren't dumb. But what difference did it make what career the girls chose? They were in danger anyway. Both due to their damn blood status.

Snape snorted and emptied his glass just to refill it a moment later.

Dumbledore had not yet offered the girls the opportunity to join the Order, but that was only a formality. They had met the gang and were, in Snape's opinion, already getting far too friendly with some of them. Charis had been talking to Black all night, and although she seemed reluctant to at first, it appeared they were now getting along like a house on fire. Of course they would. They were family after all. But that didn't mean that Snape had to like it. And Morgana had been discussing Defence Against the Dark Arts with Lupin for hours. She was concerned that Umbridge's teaching methods would keep her from performing well at Auror training, and Lupin had offered to train her over the summer. Snape, of course, didn't like that either.

But as usual, nobody cared what he liked or what he was thinking about the whole situation. As usual, he was supposed to do what Dumbledore told him to. He could question his orders but would in the end have no other choice than obeying. So he had spent the evening listening to Moody's latest conspiracy theories and doing his best to turn down Molly's chocolate cake without coming across as too rude.

When Moody and Tonks had said their goodbyes around eleven, Molly had decided that it was time for everyone to retire, especially the girls. In her opinion, teenage girls needed three helpings at dinner and eight hours of sleep. Black had gone to the backyard for a smoke, and Lupin had joined him. Snape, with no desire to make small talk with Dumbledore, had nicked a bottle of Firewhisky from the kitchen cabinet and had retired to his room. Surely, Charis and Morgana were now sat giggling in their room down the corridor, talking about their new friends and the adventures that awaited them. Surely, neither of them were wasting any thoughts about their old, grumpy Potions master.

Little did Snape know that neither of the girls were in the mood for giggling.

Morgana lay alone in the big four-poster bed that she was supposed to share with Charis for the night, staring at the ceiling. She was quite glad that Charis had snuck downstairs once more to look at the Black family tree. Being alone in the room gave Morgana the chance to try and sort out the unbidden emotions that had bothered her all evening.

It was just not fair. Charis already had a family. Sure, her parents didn't seem to be the most loving couple in Britain, but having squabbling parents must be better than having no parents at all, right? But now Charis had a second family, one she had always dreamed of: a Wizard family. And not just any Wizard family but the Blacks, one of the oldest and noblest Wizard families in the country.

Morgana drew the blanket up to her chin and scowled. *Fine friend you are, Morgana Belakane,* she chided herself. *You're supposed to be happy for Charis. Instead you're being jealous. Get a grip.*

She fluffed her pillow and settled down to sleep. If she was still awake when Charis returned, she would congratulate her friend on her confirmed blood-status. And she would actually mean it!

But Charis had no plans of returning to bed any time soon. She had managed to sneak back into the drawing room without being seen by Mrs Weasley. There, she had pulled up one of the armchairs and was now sitting right in front of the huge tapestry, examining her family tree in the dim light of a candle. She could barely believe it. She had long hoped that there was a witch or wizard hiding in her family somewhere, but never had she dared hope that she was part of such a noble family.

'The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. You really should have chosen a better family to belong to.'

Charis spun around. She had not heard the door open and was therefore startled to see Sirius Black standing in the room.

'I... I'm sorry, Mr Black,' she said and scrambled off the chair. 'I didn't mean to intrude.'

Black smiled. 'You're not intruding. You're part of this family. Hence, you should be calling me Sirius.'

He pulled up a chair of his own and settled beside Charis. *He must have been a handsome man once*, Charis thought as she looked at him up-close for the first time that evening. But the years in Azkaban had not been kind on him.

'Phineas Nigellus Black, our great-great-grandfather,' Sirius started, pointing at the tapestry. 'He was the least popular headmaster Hogwarts ever had, you know. Rumour has it, Dolores Umbridge is doing her damndest to steal that crown now.'

Charis giggled, and Sirius smiled once more. His smile, too, was handsome.

'There are some nasty characters in our family, Charis,' he continued. 'A cousin of my mother's tried to force through a bill to make Muggle-hunting legal. And the funniest thing my aunt Elladora knew was to behead old house-elves.' He narrowed his eyes and examined the tapestry. 'Actually, most of the people you can see here are nasty characters. The decent ones have been blasted off a long time ago. Tonks, for example...'

'You're... I mean, WE are related to Tonks?' Charis asked with surprise.

'Yes, her mother Andromeda is my favourite cousin. She married a Muggle-born and so...' He mimed blasting the tapestry with his wand and winced. 'It's amazing that a nice witch like Andromeda can have such a hag for a sister.'

Charis followed Sirius' wand with her eyes. Beside the hole where Andromeda's name once had stood, she found the name Bellatrix. Just reading the name made the hairs on Charis' neck stand upright and sent shivers of fear down her spine.

'So that is why she wanted to get rid of me,' she whispered. 'Bellatrix, I mean.'

Sirius nodded. 'Marius having been a Squib has been a well-kept secret for many years. And now his line has produced another witch, a very talented witch from what I've heard. Bella couldn't have that, of course.'

Charis swallowed. 'She'll try again, won't she?'

Sirius fixed Charis with his grey eyes. 'Don't worry, Charis,' he said solemnly. 'You're not alone anymore. We will protect you.'

Charis gazed back at her cousin and offered him a small smile. In that moment, she knew that what lay ahead would not be easy. But she also knew that whatever it took, she would fight tooth and nail against the people like Bellatrix, and now she knew she had people around her that would fight for her, too.

Sirius poked the tapestry with his wand, looking rather grumpy. 'Really nice family you picked,' he growled once more. 'Being a follower of Voldemort is more of a rule than an exception.' He took a step back to get a good look at his family tree. 'Malfoys, Lestranges, Crouch, Yaxley, Crabbe. They are all on Voldemort's pay list in one way or the other. Some are Death Eaters, others are just hangers-on.'

Suddenly he turned around and fixed Charis with his grey eyes. 'Come on, ask.'

Charis swallowed. There had indeed been several questions hanging on her tongue the whole evening, but so far she had not dare ask. Family or not, Sirius Black was a stranger. 'Are you... I mean do you have...?'

Sirius saved her the trouble and pulled up his left sleeve to reveal his forearm. 'I have never even been tempted to take the Dark Mark,' he explained. 'I have never been interested in power or riches, and I don't believe in the supremacy of purebloods. Voldemort had nothing to offer that was of any interest to me. Still, he managed to take everything from me. He killed my best friend, and I went to Azkaban for twelve years for a crime I did not commit.'

Charis frowned. As so many others, all she knew of Sirius Black was that he had somehow been involved in the deaths of the Potters, killed Peter Pettigrew and a whole bunch of Muggles with him. But none of it added up. He was Harry Potter's godfather, and Harry seemed to think highly of him. So did Dumbledore, obviously.

'You... you didn't do it then?' she started gingerly. 'You didn't kill those people?'

'Of course not!' At once, Sirius raised his hand in an apologetic gesture. 'Sorry, Charis, I didn't mean to yell. But no, I did not kill those people.'

How terrible a fate to be locked up in Azkaban for murders someone else committed. How much had the man in front of her suffered, Charis wondered.

'Why haven't you been cleared yet?' she asked. 'Officially, I mean?'

'The people who know the truth aren't the most respected at the moment,' Sirius pointed out. 'I doubt the Minister of Magic is going to invite Dumbledore to tea any time soon.'

'But Dumbledore must be able to do something, right?'

Sirius gave a tired smile. 'I'm quite happy that Dumbledore believes me. Not many people do. But then again, Dumbledore is known to give people second chances. Half of the people at dinner tonight have jobs and a place to sleep thanks to Dumbledore's goodwill. Take Remus, for example. How many people do you know that would employ a werewolf?'

Charis nodded thoughtfully. But Remus Lupin was not the one she had been thinking about. Instead, her mind had once again wandered back to a conversation in the Room of Requirement a couple of months ago. Harry had said that Sirius had told him that Severus was a Death Eater.

Was Severus one of those people Sirius had been talking about? One of those people who were only tolerated because Dumbledore had given them a second chance? But before she had chance to voice her thoughts, Sirius had bidden her goodnight and left her once more in front of the huge tapestry with only a candle for company, and she did not have the courage to call him back and ask him about Severus. What if he told her something she did not want to hear?

XXXVIII: London

Chapter 38 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXVIII: London

When Snape made his way down to the kitchen early the next morning, his mood was beyond foul. And he alone was to blame for it. He was one of the best potioners in the country, for goodness' sake. He could just have whipped up a Dreamless Sleep potion in the kitchen sink last night. But no, he had opted for Odgen's Finest instead, and here he was now, with a killer headache and a massive urge for black coffee, eggs and bacon. With any luck, he would be the first one up and could have his hangover breakfast in peace and quiet.

He wasn't the first one up, however, and the voice he heard through the kitchen door did not belong to anyone he wanted to meet early in the morning.

'A memory. A single, very happy memory.'

Snape sneered. Certainly, Lupin's happiest memory was the chocolate cake Molly had served last night. He was just about to return to his room and forget about coffee when Lupin's words made him freeze.

'You must have a happy memory, Morgana.'

Morgana? What the hell was Morgana doing in the kitchen with Lupin, alone, at six-thirty in the morning? Had they not been cosy enough last night?

Roughly, Snape pushed open the door. 'Earning some extra Galleons by giving private lessons, Lupin?' he snarled.

'Morgana happened to ask my advice on how to improve her Patronus charm, Severus,' Lupin answered, as usual not reacting to Snape's sour tone, which irritated the Potions master even more.

'And what did you suggest?' Snape asked. 'Chocolate?'

'I don't eat chocolate for breakfast,' came a small voice.

Snape frowned at Morgana's tired tone. He had been so eager to snipe at Lupin that he had barely looked at her upon entering the kitchen. Once more, she was far too pale for his taste, and the dark circles under her eyes suggested that she had not slept well.

'Coffee?' she asked, already half-way to the counter, and Snape could not help but wonder if she was avoiding looking at him. 'You'll have to do with my brew, I'm afraid,' she said and handed him a steaming cup. 'Remus said Mrs Weasley returned home last night.'

'Morgana and I were just about to fry some eggs,' Lupin announced cheerfully. 'How do you like yours, Severus? Sunny side up?'

Snape glared once more at Lupin. *Sunny* was not part of his vocabulary.

He was just about to declare that he had no intentions of having breakfast when Morgana cracked the first egg into the frying pan. 'I saw that there is some bacon as well. Would you like some, Professor?'

How could one sound so miserable while offering breakfast, Snape wondered. And how could he turn her down?

'Bacon would be acceptable,' he answered, deliberately turning his back to Lupin and addressing Morgana only. 'And I like my eggs double-fried.'

They were already eating when the kitchen door opened and Dumbledore entered, wearing a bright pink dressing gown. 'I had a feeling that it wasn't Kreacher who was making breakfast. Because, for once, it smells delicious.'

He took a seat and accepted the cup of coffee that Morgana offered him. After taking a sip, he smiled contentedly. 'I have always said that it takes a good potioner to brew a decent cup of coffee. You have taught her well, Severus.'

Snape scowled. 'I do not teach my students how to brew coffee.'

'Maybe you should.' Noticing that his suggestion hadn't gone down well, Dumbledore turned back to Morgana. 'What about your roommate?' he enquired. 'Charis has never been one to miss breakfast.'

'Charis is still asleep. She went to bed quite late.'

'She and Sirius were up talking about family,' Lupin declared. 'I think it was about three in the morning when I heard Sirius go to bed.'

Snape almost choked at his coffee. So Charis had spent half the night with Black, and Morgana had watched the sunrise with Lupin? Could they all get any more friendly?

'Well, I see no reason why Charis should not have a lie-in,' Dumbledore said. 'She has a lot of news to digest, and Ollivander's won't open up before nine o'clock anyway. There is no rush.'

'Um, sir,' Morgana piped up, looking at Snape and clutching her cup as if it were a lifebuoy. 'Charis and I have been talking and... Well, we were wondering if it would be possible to visit Jack at St. Mungo's?'

'Now that is an excellent idea!' Dumbledore exclaimed.

But Snape scowled. 'I was not intending to spend the whole day babysitting you two. If you want to visit Mr Morrissey, then you better do it quickly after your shopping trip. Because I intend to return to Hogwarts by lunch.'

Not that he had any pressing engagement for the afternoon. He just hated the fact that, once more, no one had asked about his opinion on the matter.

'I'll go and wake up Charis then,' Morgana announced and cast a glance towards the clock on the wall. Right now, any excuse to get out of the kitchen was good enough. She had slept far too poorly to be able to cope with Snape's sour mood. 'Will it be acceptable for you to leave at eight, sir?'

Snape gave a curt nod.

'We'll be punctual.'

When the kitchen door had fallen closed behind Morgana, Dumbledore addressed Snape with a disapproving look. 'I know that you are not what they call *anorning person*, Severus, but I do hope that you are planning on displaying a better mood later today. I'd hate it for the girls to be infected by your grumpiness.'

Snape put down his cup so violently that the coffee spilled on the table. 'I am not grumpy, Dumbledore.'

'Let us call it un-cheerful then,' Dumbledore suggested with a smile but became at once serious again. 'This is a difficult time for those girls, Severus. They have both been through terrible ordeals lately, and they deserve a nice day in London.'

'I very much hope that you do not expect me to buy the ice cream at Florean Fortescue's,' Snape snapped.

'I think you would enjoy the Frozen Mice,' Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling mischievously. 'Of course I am not asking you to take them to the ice cream parlour, Severus. Just try to be accessible. If they feel like talking to you, please, do not turn them down.'

Snape huffed. Whatever would those two girls want to talk to him about? They had both found new friends last night.

'You know that both Charis and Morgana trust you,' Dumbledore continued. 'Charis is bound to feel confused. She has always hoped to have wizard genes, but never did she expect to be a part of an ancient wizard family like the Blacks. Also, she has to come to terms with the fact that the woman who tried to kill her is her cousin. As for Morgana...'

'Morgana is just as confused as Charis,' Lupin commented. 'While she wants to feel happy for her best friend, she is at the same time feeling jealous. She is an orphan, and Charis has now two families.'

'What would you know about how Morgana feels?' Snape interrupted. Surely, the girl would not have talked to Lupin about how she felt. She was a Slytherin, for crying out loud. Slytherins did not talk about their feelings.

'One doesn't need to be a Legilimens to understand how other people feel, Severus,' Lupin replied calmly. 'Sometimes it is enough just to listen to them. And sometimes, what they are not saying is just as important as the things they do say.'

* * *

Snape, Charis and Morgana arrived in Diagon Alley shortly after eight-thirty in the morning. Thankfully, the rain had stopped, but the ground was still wet from the evening's precipitation, and the girls picked their way gingerly through the puddles, following Snape's long strides. Ollivander's would not be open until nine, but Snape had insisted on leaving early, telling the girls he wanted to be there when the shop first opened in order to be first served. This gave Charis and Morgana a little time to window shop, but it was hardly a joyous affair, with Snape looming over them with crossed arms like some kind of disapproving chaperone.

Just why he had to act like an overprotective parent, neither of them knew. Apart from the odd witch or wizard hurrying by and minding their own business, Diagon Alley was mostly deserted. But still, Snape huffed impatiently and seemed uncomfortable with both girls being out in the open.

The first stop on their swift window shopping tour was the exhibition window of Dervish & Banges, which never failed to rouse interest with their vast array of magical equipment on show, including Sneakoscopes, Omniculars and, the girls noted with an excited squeak, a rare and gorgeous pair of two-way mirrors.

'Just imagine how useful those mirrors would be once we have left Hogwarts,' Charis pointed out and nudged Morgana playfully. 'No matter where you are, I could always keep an eye on you.'

'As if I were the one who needed to be kept an eye on,' Morgana muttered and craned her neck to see the price tag. 'But unless you being a Black also results in you having access to the family fortune, we'll have to do without those mirrors. Twenty-five Galleons is just a tad above my prize range.'

'We'll just have to get flats with fireplaces,' Charis suggested. 'Then we can use the Floo.'

'Do knock,' Morgana said dryly. 'So I can at least put some knickers on before you barge in on me.'

'Since when do you wear knickers?'

The girls started giggling, and the mirrors seemed forgotten. And neither of them noticed that their Potions master cast a furtive glance into the window of Dervish & Banges after they had set course towards the divination suppliers.

The wide range of divinatory artefacts on display in the front window of Mist & Fortune was as always an attraction for Charis. This time, a delicate miniature brass astrological instrument, used to calculate the planets' movements throughout the zodiacal constellations, had her pressing her nose against the glass and sighing with longing. How nice it would be if she indeed had inherited some money from the Blacks.

Morgana's attentions, meanwhile, were caught by a familiar-looking piece of jewellery in Amber's Amazing Amulets: a delicate pair of silver drop earrings, fashioned like beautiful coiled snakes, with tiny emeralds for eyes. Her heart began to race, and she swallowed hard. It was the sister piece to the set Lucius had given her.

Oh, Lucius. Returning the trinkets, gifts and letters he had given her had stopped her from sentimental brooding, and she had managed to push all thoughts of him out of her mind once Charis had been in jeopardy. However, seeing the familiar jewellery out of the blue made her reel in shock, and she had to hold on to the window sill for support. Thankfully, Charis, who had joined her by the window, was busy laughing over a diamond-encrusted cat collar and musing about who would have more Galleons than sense to buy such a thing.

Morgana set her jaw. She knew that she should not hold feelings for the blond wizard still, and it angered her to have them. She was also angry about the presents he had given her and his seduction of her by his wealth. So typical of Lucius to think that if one threw enough money at something, then one could buy whatever they wanted, even people's hearts and minds.

She dug her nails into her palms as she willed herself not to cry and squeezed her eyes shut for a second, trying to blot out the white-hot lump of pain that was now forming in her throat. It seemed ridiculous to have been bought by mere bits of rock and metal, no matter how many Galleons they cost. Baubles and trinkets, that's all they were, and they were every bit as worthless and hollow as the words of love Lucius had once whispered in her ear. And yet she had fallen for them, had relished being lavished with such exquisite gifts from such wealth as she had never known. How could she have been so stupid? And why were there still nights when she wished that Lucius had meant what he had said?

'Miss Belakane,' came the rich baritone of her Potions master, interrupting her thoughts. 'We do not have all day.'

Morgana shook her head to clear her musings and scurried towards Snape, who was holding the door of Ollivander's open. Charis, it appeared, was already inside. Morgana ducked under Snape's arm into the gloom of the dusty old shop, and once he had allowed the door to swing shut behind him, it took her several moments for her

eyes to adjust to the lack of light.

Mr Ollivander was peering at Charis curiously with his pink, rheumy eyes.

'Miss Byrne has a broken wand, you say, Professor Snape,' he wheezed. 'I must say that is a surprise. You don't look like the clumsy type, dear.' He offered Charis a yellowing, kindly smile, which she returned sheepishly. Obviously, neither she nor Snape were going to reveal what really happened.

Ollivander, however, seemed used to discretion in such circumstances and continued. 'Bet it feels like your arm has been cut off without your wand, eh, child?' he asked, sensing Charis' discomfort.

Charis nodded her agreement. 'I... I feel... exposed and useless without it,' she admitted quietly.

'Perfectly natural,' Ollivander commented as he took out a rather battered notebook, bound in red leather, from his waistcoat and started flipping through it. 'Let's see... Ash and Unicorn hair, wasn't it? Nine inches, slightly springy?'

'Er, yes, that's right,' answered Charis, shocked at the old man's recollection.

'I never forget a wand,' Ollivander replied proudly, in answer to Charis' surprised expression.

'Do you... I mean, have you got another one in that... style?' she asked, gnawing at her lip. 'It's just I was ever so happy with my old wand... I don't really want anything different...'

The old man once again looked at her with his kind eyes. 'I know what you're thinking, dear,' he said quietly. 'You think that your replacement won't be as good as your old wand. But I will tell you this: the wand always chooses the witch or wizard. Each of my wands are crafted with the same care and skill as the others. And what was right for you when you first got measured when you were eleven years old may not be right for you now. I've provided countless replacements for lost, broken and stolen wands, and I've never had a complaint yet. So don't you worry your pretty head about it, child.'

Mr Ollivander patted Charis' arm awkwardly, and she managed to give him a small smile as she felt her eyes pricking with tears. That was exactly how she was feeling: she was scared in case she would not be able to find a wand, or that the one she did find was a poor substitute. And yes, she did feel exposed and naked without it, or as if a piece of her was missing. She found it reassuring that Mr Ollivander could understand those emotions. Clearly, he had dealt with many similar happenings in the past. Feeling reassured, she quickly wiped her eyes as Mr Ollivander withdrew his measuring tape.

'Now, dear, I will need to take some new measurements. Obviously you've grown up a bit since you were last here, and that needs to be taken into account, you see. If you could hold your arms out by your sides, please... yes, very good.'

In a few moments, Ollivander's measuring tape had suddenly whisked itself around Charis, and she noted that his battered notebook was now magically suspended in mid-air and had been joined by a quill, which was seemingly writing down each of the measurements.

Charis was measured from hand to hand, from elbow to fingertip, from head to toe and, somewhat bizarrely, from eye to eye. The measuring tape flew back into Ollivander's pocket, and he snatched his notebook from the air as the quill continued to dance around as if pulled by a string.

The old man stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'Hmm. Not too radical, I think,' he muttered to himself as he trudged off to the back of the shop, towards a pile of teetering, dusty boxes.

Charis gave a nervous glance to both Morgana and Snape. Morgana gave her a friend smile of support, whereas Snape nodded curtly, and Charis was grateful beyond words that they were both there with her for this. It may have seemed inconsequential to them, but to Charis this was a big deal. It almost seemed to her like getting a new wand was in a way symbolic. She had only yesterday discovered that she was part of a very ancient wizarding family, and today she was getting a brand new wand. It seemed to be part of a bigger picture somehow, reflective of how she was growing up, and how both she and the world around her were changing. And sharing that moment with the people whom she cared so much about meant very much to her.

Ollivander came back a few minutes later with a long, black box and opened it reverentially.

'Try this one, dear,' he said kindly, offering the box towards Charis. 'No radical changes here. Ash, unicorn hair, nine and three-quarter inches, slightly springy. The only difference is it's just a little longer than your old one.'

Charis reached towards the box and raised the wand carefully. Her old wand had been made from the same pale wood, but it had delicate twists on the handle. This one, however, had a smooth handle and had a trail of tiny flowers, each with five petals, curving up the shaft. Charis gasped as she held it aloft. She felt a small shudder, akin to a static shock, run down her arm, as several small white stars began to hiss from the tip.

'It's beautiful,' she murmured, turning it from one side to the other.

'Give it a wave then, child,' encouraged Mr Ollivander with a smile. 'A simple spell. Let's see if you like it.'

'*Orchideous*,' Charis breathed, and to her delight a beautiful bunch of white roses emerged on the shop desk. She looked straight at Morgana, a grin spreading over her face, and Morgana cheered. Snape merely raised an eyebrow, but inside he breathed a sigh of relief. Some witches and wizards lost their magical ability after a traumatic event, and what Charis had been through at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange had certainly been harrowing. He could see that Charis' confidence had been severely shaken by the incident, but she seemed to be recovering. Once more, he thanked Merlin for small mercies.

'Wonderful, wonderful,' Ollivander exclaimed, clapping his hands together in delight. 'There now, dear, do you like it?'

Charis smiled gratefully at the old man. 'I love it. Thank you.'

Mr Ollivander waved her thanks away as if swatting a fly as he hobbled over to the counter. 'All part of the service. Now then, I presume you'll want to be keeping that on you and not want it gift-wrapped?' he asked, noticing the way Charis was admiring and stroking her new wand. She thanked the shop owner once more and watched as Ollivander put the empty box into a bag along with a complimentary box of Wheelan's Wand Wipes.

'There you are,' said Ollivander, handing over the bag.

Charis began rooting through her bag to find her purse. 'How much do I owe you, Mr Ollivander?'

'That has been taken care of,' Snape sniffed.

Charis looked at him with surprise. 'But...'

'This is not up for discussion,' Snape growled. 'Suffice to say, Mr Ollivander has already had remuneration for his excellent services, so you can put your purse away.'

Charis did as told, blushing slightly and carefully stowing her wand, not wishing to ask questions and annoy Snape any further. He seemed in a really nasty mood today. Instead, she thanked Mr Ollivander once more, and Snape gave the old man a curt nod before all three of them made their way back in to Diagon Alley and up one of the small side streets that led to St Mungo's.

The Abraxas Marr ward was situated on the fourth floor of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Snape had told the girls to go up there by themselves, telling them that he had some important business to attend to and that he would come and pick them up once he was done. The girls were actually quite glad. Their Potions master's mood had certainly not improved during their trip to Diagon Alley, and having him breathing down their necks whilst they were talking to Jack was something they could certainly do without.

Room four hundred and twenty-nine, the nurse at the reception desk had said. Four hundred meant fourth floor, twenty meant that they had to take the second corridor to the left, and nine an odd number indicated that Jack's room was on the right-hand side of the corridor. In fact, his room was at the very end of the corridor. There was a big window, but the blinds were down, and all they could see was a plaque with Jack's name. Carefully, they knocked and then pushed the door open, hoping it would not creak.

Jack sat propped up in his bed. He was awfully pale, and there were several tubes sticking out from under his blanket, leading to odd machines beside the bed. On top of one of the machines stood a radio. But Jack seemed to be too absorbed in his crossword puzzle to actually hear the music.

As the door fell shut, Jack turned his head, and his face lit up as he caught sight of Charis.

'Kitten!'

Charis was by her friend's side in a blink of an eye, but as much as she wanted to hug him, she did not dare. He looked so frail, and the tubes were scaring her.

'Don't be silly, kitten,' Jack told her as she tentatively squeezed his hand. 'I'm not made out of glass.'

He lifted his uninjured right arm, and Charis slipped under it, wrapping her arms carefully around the boy's torso.

'It is so good to see you, Jack,' she whispered, almost too choked up to be able to utter the words.

'It's good to see you, too, kitten,' Jack replied and tightened his one-armed embrace. 'I was afraid you would never come.'

'We almost didn't make it,' Morgana commented. She was lingering by the door, too uncomfortable with the emotional scene in front of her to approach. 'Snape nearly burst a blood vessel when we asked if we could come to see you.'

Both Jack and Charis snorted, but once they had broken off their hug, Jack frowned. 'Why did Snape come along?'

'He was the one who rescued us,' Charis blurted out. 'He and Morgana,' she added and held out her hand to her best friend, who smirked at the puzzled look on Jack's face.

'What?' she asked, her grin growing broader. 'Surprised that Slytherins can be good for something at times?'

The room was filled with laughter, which was interrupted when Charis opened her purse to throw a big paper bag into Jack's lap. 'We brought you sweets,' she announced. 'Honeydukes' finest.'

At once, Jack dived at the bag. 'Cheers, kitten! I am seriously only getting rock cakes and stale biscuits here. What, no Sugar Bats?' he asked, winking at Morgana.

Charis giggled. 'Morgana ate them all. She has a thing for bats.'

'Don't we all, Miss Byrne?' Morgana replied with a tone that could have made a troll shiver. But her smirk betrayed her. 'Now, Ravenboy, how are you?' she asked.

'Apart from being unconscious for three days, a punctured lung, a zillion broken bones and more bruises than a mouldy banana, I'm just dandy. Even more so now that I have some eye candy.' He laughed. 'The nurses here are Trolls, I tell you.'

As if Jack's word had been heard out in the corridor, the door burst open, and in came a stoutly built nurse with ash-blond hair that was pulled back into a tight bun. 'Mr Morrissey,' she thundered. 'Are you eating sweets?'

'No, ma'am,' Jack lied. But the chocolate around his mouth gave him away.

The nurse snatched the bag from him and turned to glare at Charis and Morgana. 'Und two wisitors at vunce? Zis von't do! You vill exhaust yourself!'

'Um, I'll be waiting outside,' Morgana said at once and nodded towards the door. 'It was nice seeing you, Jack. Get well soon, alright. I'm kind of sick of babysitting Charis. She's making me study and stuff.'

Jack grinned and blew the Slytherin girl a kiss before mouthing, 'German,' and pointing at the nurse, who was now checking the odd machines beside his bed. Morgana just managed to shut the door from the outside before she burst into giggles.

* * *

Snape made his way through the seemingly endless corridors of St. Mungo's hospital. Outside the pharmacy, he paused and peered through the thick glass of the window. The scowl on his face could not have been darker.

He could have had a brilliant career as medical potioneer. In his fifth year at Hogwarts, his Head of House had even recommended him for the summer's trainee program. But Snape had never taken the chance. That summer, he had, for the first time, been invited to Malfoy Manor. He had gazed at the Malfoy wealth and power and had fallen for the temptation. And instead of choosing a career which would have let him do good, he had taken the Dark Mark only two years later. And instead of being Head of the Potions Department, he was now a puppet played by two masters of whom he sometimes wasn't sure which one was worse.

He sighed. Both Lily and he had once made plans for future medical careers. They both had loved Potions and often talked of how much fun it would be to work in the same place and to be able to brew potions together all day, every day. Of course, all that changed. One of the reasons Snape now detested teaching Potions was because it reminded him so much of Lily. Every glance at a cauldron was a fresh stab at his heart, every filled phial another lost memory.

Snape mentally shook himself and made his way back to the Abraxas Marr ward. Surely, twenty minutes must have been enough time for the girls to visit Mr Morrissey.

He found Morgana sitting alone on the bench outside Jack's room. 'Any reason why you are not by your friend's side?' he asked, looking down his nose at the girl.

'Jack is Charis' friend,' Morgana replied, completely misinterpreting the word *friend*. 'He's too weak to have more than one visitor at the time. Naturally, Charis stayed.'

Snape made a noncommittal noise and then nodded towards the book in Morgana's lap. 'I sometimes wonder if you have been sorted into the wrong House. I find you far too often sitting in abandoned corridors, reading. What is it this time? Love potions?'

Morgana smiled at the memory of Snape catching her with a book on Mind Controlling Potions a couple of months ago. That afternoon had been the first time they had talked privately.

'Remus gave me this, sir,' she explained and showed Snape the cover. *Fighting Your Darkness and Finding Your Magical Light*

Snape frowned. 'Why, Miss Belakane, would you bore your keen mind with drivel like this?'

'There was no copy of *Beedle the Bard* at Grimmauld Place. And I am too old for fairytales anyway.'

Always an answer ready. Snape tried hard not to smirk. It felt good to see that the old Morgana was now and then peeking around the corners of the wall the girl had erected around herself. If he were honest with himself, he missed the cheeky witch who made it so obvious that she wanted to get under his robes.

'Are you too old for tea and biscuits as well?' he asked. 'The St. Mungo's tearoom is famous for their stale biscuits.'

He was certain that Morgana would not turn down a biscuit, stale or otherwise. She had not eaten anything for breakfast at Grimmauld Place, and he was certain that she had not drunk any of her coffee either. With any luck, he would be able to talk her out of reading that nonsense Lupin had given her. And besides, *he* suddenly had the strange urge for company and some inane small talk.

'How come you failed to mention your ambition of becoming an Auror in our last appraisal session?' he asked over a cup of tea ten minutes later.

Morgana shrugged. 'It was just an idea. But I might take a sabbatical. I am not sure I have what it takes to undergo Auror training ...'

'Nonsense,' Snape snapped. 'Your grades are only outshone by some Ravenclaws. Professor Flitwick informs me your Charms work is exceptional. Professor McGonagall says the same about Transfiguration. As for Defence Against the Dark Arts, I rely on your old teacher's judgment.'

Trust Umbridge to destroy a perfect grade score, he thought sourly. 'How is your Patronus charm?'

'Fuzzy,' Morgana replied, crushing biscuit crumbs between her thumb and index finger. She didn't dare tell Snape that she hadn't been able to cast even a simple Shield since the last time she had seen Lucius.

'And that would be why Lupin has offered his coaching, no doubt,' Snape replied, trying to hide the bitterness in his voice but failing.

Thankfully, Morgana did not seem to notice. 'I need an O in Defence to get on to the Auror training. At this rate, it feels like I will barely make a T in the practical exam.'

Once again, Snape scowled. 'Don't be ridiculous. Defence is all about confidence, and a good Patronus charm can only come from a strong memory. The key to it is to immerse yourself in it totally and relive it over again once more... the sounds, the smells, the colours... and the feeling of happiness that swells in your chest as you recreate it...'

Snape broke off as he noticed Morgana looking at him with a curious expression on her face. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, he took a sip from his tea. Of course, the girl wasn't to know what memory generated his Patronus, and he sure as hell wasn't going to give her an opportunity to find out. He had already said too much.

'So, Miss Byrne and Mr Morrissey,' he began, swiftly changing the subject. 'They seem very close. Are they... an item?'

He noticed Morgana's knuckles whiten as she gripped the handle of her tea cup. 'They are close, sir,' she replied quietly, 'but to my knowledge they are just good friends.'

Snape snorted. 'Friends with benefits,' he muttered into his teacup before draining it. Unfortunately for him, he happened to miss both the black look that had crossed her face at his comment and the way she had crushed a whole biscuit in her fist.

Had Snape noticed and asked Morgana about her reaction, she would have been unable to give him an answer. For the time being, she had no explanation on why the thought of Charis and Jack being an item bothered her that much.

* * *

'Do you remember us being at the café?' Charis asked. She was now sitting beside Jack on the bed, and he had wrapped his right arm around her waist. The nurse had told her that she could stay for another ten minutes. This would be just enough time to tell Jack what had happened.

'I remember... the woods...' Jack started. 'The documents we picked up at the WORM, were they a Portkey?'

Charis nodded. 'Planted by Bellatrix Lestrange. She did not want us to see the content of those documents.'

Jack frowned. 'Those documents contained information about your family. What was it that Lestrange did not want you to... Just WHO are you related to, Charis?'

Charis smiled and playfully nudged Jack in his side. 'Aren't you the curious one? Well, two days ago, Snape showed up in Ravenclaw Tower and told Morgana and me that Dumbledore wanted us to come and have dinner with him. You know, estranged, sacked from Hogwarts Dumbledore. And as if that wasn't odd enough, it turned out that dinner was at the Black family mansion.'

Jack's mouth fell open in surprise. 'Black?'

Charis nodded. 'Already before dinner, I was told that I am descended from Phineas Nigellus Black, that my great-grandfather was a Squib, and that my dear cousin Bellatrix Lestrange, née Black, would do just about anything to make sure that no one would ever know about me and my bloodline.'

Jack's brain worked fast. 'Then you ARE related to Bollockschops Malfoy.'

Charis pulled a face. 'To Draco and his mother, anyway.'

Jack theatrically withdrew his arm. 'Let me call the nurse. I think I need a disinfectant bath.' Then he became serious again. 'How about your other cousin, Sirius Black?'

'Despite what you've heard, he's innocent,' Charis declared. 'He must be. Why else would Dumbledore trust him?'

'Don't get defensive, kitten,' Jack said and once more laid his arms around his friend. 'Harry has said for a long time that his godfather is innocent. And I believe Harry.'

'So do I,' Charis muttered. But she wasn't really sure. Harry might have been right about Sirius. But she would never forgive him for what he had said about Severus. 'Aren't you bored in here, Jack?' she asked to change subjects.

'Out of my freaking mind!' Jack exclaimed and mimicked his brain exploding.

Charis giggled. 'I'll Floo you some books, alright?'

'Some?' Jack looked appalled. 'Send ALL of them. I won't be out of here for another two weeks, and I have to study for my NEWTs!'

'So Ravenclaw of you,' Charis pointed out. 'You'd be studying if your head was hanging off a sinew, just like Nearly Headless Nick's.'

Jack smiled and once more squeezed Charis tightly towards his chest. 'And that is why you love me, don't you, kitten?'

* * *

They returned to Hogwarts shortly after lunch. Snape had urged the girls to hurry up after they had left St. Mungo's, and once back at Hogwarts he sent them straight to Ravenclaw Tower. He did not even bother sending Morgana to her own common room. She'd sneak out soon, anyway. After everything the girls had learnt over the last twenty-four hours, there was just no way that they'd stay in their own common rooms with no means to communicate. They had a lot to talk about.

No means to communicate. Snape smirked at the thought. The girls had no idea that he had sent an owl to Dervish & Banges whilst they had been with Jack.

He had heard them talking outside the shop. Obviously, they had started to think about the fact that pretty soon they wouldn't be able to see each other every day. A big change for them, for sure. They had been thick as thieves ever since the day they had arrived at Hogwarts almost seven years ago. And despite all the things they had been through over the last couple of months, they now seemed closer than ever. Neither Lucius nor Bella had managed to destroy their friendship. And Snape doubted that even Voldemort himself would succeed in that task.

Hell, not even their rivalry concerning him had driven them apart. Snape shook his head at the thought. It seemed as if his girls had all but forgotten about him.

What a shame. He had watched them grow from little girls into young women. And soon they would not be his students anymore. Soon, they would be forging their own careers, out in the world on their own, without his protection. Soon, it wouldn't be wrong anymore if he noticed the scent of their perfume, or the soft curve of their hips...

The flutter of wings interrupted Snape's thoughts, and he turned his attention towards the brown owl that had arrived from Dervish & Banges at the window of his office, carrying a small, carefully wrapped package. He paid the owl by tying a fat pouch of Galleons to its leg, and the owl hooted its thanks as it took off into the grey sky, circling high overhead.

Yes, soon, many things would be changing Snape thought as he watched the owl in flight. And once more, he would be powerless to stop any of it.

XXXIX: Revenge Is A Dish Best Served Cute

Chapter 39 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XXXIX: Revenge Is A Dish Best Served Cute

The girls had started chattering about their stay in London the very moment they had left Snape's earshot back at Hogwarts. They had so much to talk about. For one, they still hadn't reached any firm conclusions on why such a strange assortment of people had been gathered in the Black household for dinner, or indeed who had foot the bill for the cost of Charis' new wand. Morgana suggested it had been Dumbledore, because technically Charis would need it for her schooling. Charis, meanwhile, hoped deep down that Severus had bought for her it as a way of offering an olive branch.

'What, in the name of Frej, are you looking for?' Morgana now asked in a slightly annoyed tone.

The moment they had returned to Ravenclaw Tower, Charis had started rummaging through the bag which Dumbledore had returned to her the previous night. But so far, her quest hadn't seemed to yield any results.

'How much stuff can there be in that bag?' Morgana craned her neck. It was a simple book bag, yet Charis had been searching it for about five minutes now.

'Tons.' Charis grinned. 'I put an extension charm on it.'

'Clever little Ravenclaw,' Morgana muttered and took off her boots. She might as well make herself comfortable. At this rate, Charis might be digging around in that bag for quite some time. She had just settled in one of the squishy armchairs when Lily jumped up onto her lap.

'And who gave you permission to use my lap as a pillow?' Morgana growled and glared at the little white kitten as if it were filthy vermin.

'Be nice to Lily,' Charis demanded, looking up from her bag. She just could not understand Morgana's dislike for cats. How could anyone not love those soft paws, that fluffy white fur and the cute pink nose? Oh, right! *Soft, fluffy and cute* were considered swear words in Slytherin language.

Charis' grin turned into a triumphant smile as she finally found what she had been looking for. 'Found it!' she announced and waved the booklet in the air.

'*Teaching Your Cat Magic?*' Morgana looked down at the kitten in her lap and cocked an eyebrow. 'This one can't even be taught to stay off my lap.'

Scowling, she tried to pick up Lily to place her on the floor, but the kitten dug its claws deeply into the fabric of Morgana's trousers and mewed in protest. Obviously, Lily liked to sleep in a Slytherin lap.

'Why are you so grumpy?' Charis enquired as she flopped into the armchair opposite her friend. 'I know we're pre-menstrual, but that's no reason to...'

The look on Morgana's face went from dark to pitch black. 'Me not wanting to get cat hair all over my clothes has nothing to do with me menstruating tomorrow or not.'

Once more, she took hold of Lily, a little firmer this time, placed the struggling kitten on the floor, and started brushing off the cat hair from her trouser legs in a very exaggerated manner.

She had to calm down, she told herself. She had no idea just why she had been in such a foul mood ever since they had left St. Mungo's. But it was certainly not Charis' fault. Hence, Morgana did not want to snap at her friend. But now Charis had unintentionally of course managed to comment on a topic which Morgana had no desire to discuss. She didn't feel like telling anyone that she had not had her period since she had miscarried, not even her best friend. She hadn't told the nurse either. She knew it was stupid, but keeping quiet about it made the bitter truth somehow a little less real.

'Tell me why you would want to teach your cat magic?' she asked, trying to smooth things over.

'It was Jack's idea,' Charis explained. 'He bought the booklet when we were in London and smuggled it into my bag. He told me today.'

Even Morgana couldn't help but smile at the boy's sweet gesture. 'What more did you two talk about after Nurse Fritz had thrown me out?'

'Nurse Fritz?' Charis giggled. 'Well, I told Jack everything that Dumbledore and Sirius had told me, that I'm a Black and that the woman who tried to kill us is my own cousin.'

'A Black,' Morgana repeated pensively. Then she, too, grinned. 'You realise that this limits your choice in wizards, right? Almost everyone in the Wizarding world has Black genes.'

'Do you?' Charis asked.

To that, Morgana shook her head. That was one thing she was quite certain of. The Belakanes were an old family, but they had always made sure to add new blood to the family tree to avoid inbreeding. She had done quite some research when she had been old enough to understand what her family name meant, and unlike the Blacks, the Belakanes did not marry their cousins. But now, the Belakanes were dying. Morgana was the last one. She had no siblings who could carry on the lineage, and if her suspicions were right, she wouldn't either.

Morgana blinked and locked those thoughts in the very back of her mind. There was nothing she could do about it. No use crying over spilled potion.

'How does it feel,' she asked instead, 'to know that you indeed ARE a witch? By blood, I mean?'

Charis sighed. 'It's a bit overwhelming, to be honest. I mean, we all joked about me being related to someone awful like Draco.'

Morgana smirked. 'Which reminds me, I should be going. Seeing that I said I wouldn't talk to you anymore if you're related to Ferret Boy...'

Charis picked up a pillow and hugged it tightly to her chest. 'Finding out I actually am related to him is... well, creepy.'

Morgana's grin disappeared as she heard the strange tone in her friend's voice. Charis seemed confused, maybe even a bit scared. Who could blame her?

'This changes everything, you know,' Morgana started carefully. 'Your position in society...'

'No! It doesn't!' Charis interrupted. 'As far as cousin Bellatrix and cousin Draco are concerned, I am still a Mudblood.'

'Who cares what Bella and Draco think?' Morgana asked. 'Bella obviously cares enough about your blood status to try to do you in. That means she has realised that others might just care who you are.'

Charis shook her head and sighed once more. This was all so overwhelming. 'Sirius told me there are some awful people in the Black family. The only good ones seem to be him and Tonks.'

Morgana snorted but not at the memory of Tonks pulling faces at the dinner table. Sirius Black a good person? That would depend on who you asked. But she kept her peace for the moment. She did not want to make her best friend's new-found cousin look bad. Better to find out a little bit more about him. 'I wonder what made him different,' she started. 'Why did Sirius turn against his family?'

'He had different ideals to them, always did,' Charis explained. 'I guess that's why he was Sorted into Gryffindor, whereas his whole family were Slytherin. His mum, you know that awful shrieking portrait on the wall? She sounds awful... Sirius ran away when he was sixteen, she was making his life such hell.'

'So he's nice then, cousin Sirius?' Morgana bit her tongue, but luckily Charis seemed not to have noticed the slightly ironic tone in her voice. 'You were up quite late talking to him. I never heard you come to bed.'

'Yeah, he actually seems like a decent bloke. Although...' Charis broke off and uncomfortably started to play with the pillow she had been hugging to her chest.

'Although what?' Morgana demanded to know.

'I know it's stupid, but I can't shake something I heard Harry Potter say that Sirius had said.'

'Harry "Golden Boy" Potter?' Morgana snorted. She had actually never spoken more than ten words with Potter, but having heard all the gossip in the Slytherin common room had not let her develop a good picture of the boy. 'What did he say?'

'Well, Sirius is his godfather, and of course he has been saying Sirius is innocent for ages...' Charis stopped, feeling uncomfortable. She and Morgana had got into a row about Severus before. She did not want to go there again. But she had to get this off her chest. 'But Harry also said that Sirius went to school with Sev... I mean, Snape, and that Snape is a... Death Eater.'

To Charis' surprise, Morgana just shrugged. 'He isn't the only one to say so,' she announced.

'What do you mean?' Charis had dropped the pillow and was now staring at her friend with big eyes.

Morgana stared back at her, at least equally surprised. 'Are you seriously telling me that those rumours have reached Slytherin ears only?'

Judging from Charis' open mouth, this seemed to be the case indeed.

'There are rumours that Snape was a follower of Lord Voldemort during the first war and that he has changed sides,' Morgana continued in a matter-of-fact tone. To her, this was old news.

'No!' Charis exclaimed, looking scandalised. 'That can't be true...'

'It can't?' Morgana narrowed her eyes. Obviously, her friend still believed only the best about Severus Snape. So did Morgana. Or at least, she tried to. But she also had access to information Charis had not. 'Almost everyone in Snape's graduation class is or has been on Voldemort's payroll...'

Charis looked at her friend pointedly. 'Being a Slytherin doesn't necessarily qualify you for Voldy-worshipping.'

Morgana tried to grin but failed. 'You have to admit that it is plausible that Snape at least considered joining Voldemort when he was our age. There are photographs in the common room. Snape hung around with Avery, the Lestranges, Rosier... Malfoy.' Morgana swallowed. Lucius certainly knew a lot about Snape. They must have been close once, if not friends. 'You do not just break with Slytherin House,' she continued. 'Those people all ended up as Death Eaters, and Snape... he... he might have...'

Charis feverishly shook her head, and Morgana broke off. She did not want to believe it either. So she brought up the same argument she had so often used in her common room. 'Dumbledore trusts Snape. He would not have employed him otherwise, would he? So if Snape has ever been on Voldemort's side, he must have had a change of heart...'

'But Snape is intelligent!' Charis burst out. 'Why would he blindly follow a megalomaniac xenophobic idiot like Voldemort?'

Morgana shrugged. One didn't need to be dumb to follow Voldemort. Lucius certainly wasn't dumb. He followed Voldemort because he was power hungry. Whatever motives Snape might have had, she knew nothing about them.

Charis was looking at her friend now with real concern. 'Do you really think that Snape could hold those ideals... about blood status and stuff? Has he ever given you that

impression?'

To that, Morgana firmly shook her head. 'No, never. On the contrary. At the last start of term, Snape made it very clear that he would not tolerate any pro-Voldemort activities in his House.' But what did that say about the beliefs he had held as a teenager, she wondered.

Charis' shoulders sagged with relief at this news, and she seemed placated for now. 'What did Snape look like?' she suddenly asked. 'When he was our age?'

Morgana grinned. The pictures in the common room weren't exactly flattering. 'About like he does now. Pale, greasy hair, big nose...'

Charis' pillow hit her right in the face. 'Don't be mean!'

'Mean?' Morgana laughed. 'I'm objective.'

'He hasn't got greasy hair,' Charis murmured.

'He had a rather unfortunate nickname as a teen, you know,' Morgana started. 'But you have to swear you will never tell anyone. You did not hear it from me.'

Charis looked excited. 'Come on!'

'Swear!'

'I swear!'

Morgana took a deep breath, realising that she was both about to give away one of the best kept secrets in Slytherin House as well as point the finger at Charis' cousin. 'They called him Snivellus,' she said.

Charis' mouth dropped open. 'That's awful!'

Morgana nodded. 'So much for Sirius' Gryffindorian chivalry.' There. She had said it.

Charis' jaw dropped even further. 'SIRIUS called him that?!'

'Remus happened to spill the beans,' Morgana explained and then held her peace. Charis didn't need to know where she had first heard about those teasing Gryffindors and how Snape had dealt with them.

'Poor Severus!' Charis exclaimed. 'No wonder he seems uncomfortable around those two.'

Severus? Morgana cocked an eyebrow at Charis using Snape's first name, but had the good grace not to say anything.

Charis, too, seemed eager to quickly forget about her little slip. 'Is Remus' advice working out for you then?' she asked instead. 'About the Patronus?'

'He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. Fact is, I find it hard to focus on a happy memory at the moment. He thinks this might be stress related.'

'Anything I can help you with?' Charis offered.

'You could keep me company. I was planning to use the Room of Requirement for practicing a couple of nights every week. DADA, Potions, Charms...'

'I need somewhere quiet to study as well,' Charis pointed out. 'You know, I'm starting to think six NEWTs is pushing it!'

'You think? I hear Granger is already planning on taking eight.'

Charis groaned. 'She's so smart. I don't understand why she's not in Ravenclaw.'

'I bet she was put in Gryffindor so the Golden Boy has someone to copy from.'

Charis giggled at her friend's sour tone. 'Missy, you are grouchy tonight.'

'Are you smiling at me for being grouchy?' Morgana threw the pillow back at Charis. 'Cheers for that, mate.'

Despite the pillow having hit her in the stomach, Charis was still smiling. 'You're cute when you're grouchy,' she pointed out. 'You get a little frown line just between your eyebrows.'

That said little frown line grew deeper as Morgana scowled. 'Aren't you the attentive one? Anything else you'd like to comment about?' She got up from her chair and twirled around.

'Cute butt?'

Morgana rolled her eyes. If she still had a pillow, she would have made sure to hit Charis right on the nose this time. Instead, she playfully slapped her right butt cheek.

'This cute butt should drag itself back to the dungeons. If Umbridge returns tonight and finds out that I am in the wrong common room...' She pulled out her wand and pretended to be writing with it. '*I must not sleep in Ravenclaw common room* That would make a huge scar, you know. I doubt it would fit on the back of my hand.'

Charis shuddered. 'I can't believe that woman. Now it wouldn't surprise me if SHE had an effing Dark Mark.'

Morgana snorted. 'Even Voldemort has certain standards.'

Then she winked at her friend and picked up her bag as Charis giggled.

'Good night, my favourite little snake,' Charis said and winked back.

In response, Morgana hissed, which made Lily jump. Of course, Morgana couldn't help but repeat the noise, which made Lily go into hiding under Charis' robes.

'Heart of a lion, that one,' Morgana pointed out. She had already reached the door when she turned back to face her friend once more. 'Call Silvy if you need something, right? Night, Ravenclaw.'

Charis smiled and bade her friend goodnight before picking up Lily. 'You know, little one,' she said and kissed the kitten on its snowy white head, 'I think deep down, the Slytherin actually likes you.'

* * *

The recommencement of term saw the girls whisked into a flurry of activity. Lessons were now about preparing for the upcoming NEWTs, and most of the teachers recommended using the time to go over course material, or any spells, charms or practical work that needed polishing. On top of this, there were numerous surprise pop quizzes, and homework mainly included stacks of revision.

Charis thought her eyes were going to pop out from all the studying and wondered if she had bitten off more than she could chew with her additional NEWT in Astronomy. Morgana, meanwhile, relished any chance to play with her cauldron, and the Room of Requirement always adapted itself nicely to both of the girls' needs for their evening revision sessions. Most of the time, Charis had her head stuck firmly in a book while Morgana stood bent over a cauldron, and although the pair rarely spoke much whilst they were studying, they found it placating just to be in each other's company. And when they had finished their individual tasks, they always found some time to practise Defence on each other.

This afternoon, in a free period before dinner, Morgana was brewing Amortentia. Once again, the Room had provided a perfect workstation with tools and ingredients, along with a sofa area for Charis and, of course, the girls' favourite drinks and snacks. But not even stacks of Chocolate Frogs could lighten Morgana's mood.

She had for a moment thought that Snape was pulling her leg when he had given her this task. Sure, she was still catching up on the potions she had missed during her pregnancy, and mind controlling potions were the next on the list, but Amortentia? Really? Couldn't he have chosen a potion that was a tad less, well, silly? But of course, Professor Severus Snape had been deadly serious, and here Morgana was now, trying to make a good potion.

Steady, now, she chided herself as she methodically stirred in the last ingredient. Timing was everything in Potions, and something as simple as a stir in the wrong direction at the wrong time could render the whole concoction useless.

Her eyes narrowed in triumph as the contents of her cauldron began to take on the characteristic mother-of-pearl sheen, and within a minute the steam started to billow up in spirals, signifying the completion of the Potion. Morgana could not help but take a deep breath through her nose. Amortentia, of course, smelled different to each person, but for her it was dark chocolate, spicy herbs and the delicate waft of roses. The scent was comforting, and Morgana had to shake herself not to stand there sniffing it all night.

Carefully, she took a ladle full and poured it into a little glass jug, which from there was transferred to a delicate crystal phial, all the while never spilling a drop. She then labelled the phial in her neat, cramped handwriting and placed it back on to the desk. Snape would be pleased, she thought, ignoring the little voice in her head which was quietly wondering what fragrances Snape detected in his Amortentia.

She was in the process of tidying up her workstation when she felt the familiar soft graze of Lily's tail wind around her legs.

'Not now, Lily!' Morgana told the playful little cat, who mewed up at her sweetly. 'Go and see Charis instead. You know she loves to cuddle.'

Instead, the little cat jumped up on the workstation and watched Morgana with curiosity as she continued clearing up the remaining ingredients.

She had just Vanished the remaining Potion from her cauldron and was ready to join her friend on the sofa when a tinkling of glass made her spin around. There, sat in a puddle of Amortentia and broken phial, was Lily, looking up at her from the floor with big green eyes and mother-of-pearl liquid dripping down her nose.

'LILY!' Morgana shouted angrily, which made Charis peek her nose over her book at the noise. 'BAD CAT!'

Lily, who was not used to raised voices, flattened her ears against her head in fear and bolted through the cat-flap as quick as a flash. Charis had by now placed her book down on the sofa and hurried over to Morgana to see what the fuss was about. She was greeted with the sight of Morgana breathing deeply through her nose and glaring at the mess on the floor and a trail of shimmery footprints that led away to the still-swinging cat-flap.

'Your ever so sweet cat has just ruined an hour's work!' Morgana hissed at her best friend. She was shaking with rage. She didn't even know why she was so angry. It was only a Potion after all.

'Did you have to shout at her?' Charis asked quietly, not liking seeing her friend so worked up.

Morgana closed her eyes. She needed to get a grip on her emotions. It was just a potion, and neither Charis nor her curious little cat deserved such harsh tones. But she couldn't help it. Her nerves were lying bare, and it would probably be the best for everyone involved if she kept to herself for a while to cool off.

'I'm sorry,' she said roughly, turning to her workstation to pack away various instruments into her bag. She could not bring herself to look at Charis and see the concern in her eyes.

'Are you OK?' Charis asked timidly.

'I have the temper of a Troll today, that's all,' Morgana replied, swinging her bag over her shoulder and still carefully avoiding eye contact with her friend. Now was not the time to say what was really bothering her.

Meanwhile, the little white cat fled down the corridors of Hogwarts as if chased by a Dementor. She didn't know where she was going, but her instincts told her to hide, somewhere dark, somewhere safe. She shot down the stairs that led to the dungeons, skittered through a pair of legs coming through an open door and found herself hiding behind a heavy-looking green armchair in a rather gloomy room.

It was very different to the room her owner spent most of her free time in. This room had a low ceiling with stark grey-brick walls, and the greenish lamps reflected murky light off the many skulls that adorned the room. It was noticeably colder down here, too, and Lily shivered, her fur still wet from the spilled potion. It was certainly dark enough to hide here, even if it wasn't especially cosy.

On hearing male voices, she carefully peeked around the chair to see what kind of humans could inhabit such a place. Sitting on the very chair she was hiding behind was a pale, blond boy with a rather pointed face. He was talking animatedly to a boy sitting opposite him in an identical chair. That boy had rich, smooth cocoa skin, almond-shaped eyes and high cheekbones that would probably make most teenage girls envious. He looked rather nice, and Lily wondered if he liked to cuddle.

She jumped as the blond boy placed a silver goblet down roughly onto the cold flagstone floor, the sound of the metal against stone making a rather horrible clanging sound. He was still talking animatedly, although about what, the cat had no idea. She was, however, very thirsty after running the length of the castle. Cautiously, she craned her neck forwards towards the goblet, her tiny pink nose twitching as she sniffed the contents of the goblet. Pumpkin Juice! Lily's eye widened. She liked Pumpkin Juice.

Ever so slowly, the little cat reached forwards and took a few grateful laps at the juice. It was cool and refreshing. She was about to take a few laps more when the blond boy's hand came swooping down to grab the goblet. Lily shrunk back behind the chair to avoid being seen as she watched his hand swing back up again.

There was silence for a few moments, and then something strange happened.

Lily pricked up her ears. The tone of the blond boy's voice had changed. He had been talking excitedly and rather loudly, but now his voice took on a kind of soft, simpering tone. This seemed to be alarming to his friend, who had, by the sound of wood scraping against stone, stood up and backed away from him. The simpering sound continued, and the friend's voice grew louder and louder until he was shouting something at the blond boy.

Lily flattened her ears against her head once more. She really hated the sound of shouting. It seemed that she was not safe here after all.

She turned and fled towards the door, which had been flung open by the dark-skinned boy, and raced through his legs and back up the corridor, once more trying to find a safe, quiet spot to hide where there was no shouting.

'Get your hands OFF me, Malfoy!'

Zabini's patience had just about reached its limit. Convinced that Draco was not messing around and something had indeed been slipped into his Pumpkin Juice, he was now trying to lead Draco to their Head of House's study for some advice.

Draco was not making it easy for Blaise, however. 'Your skin, Blaise,' he cooed in wonder. 'It's so soft... Like deepest walnut...'

'I mean it, Draco!' Zabini hissed. 'If you touch me again...'

'Blaise!' Draco implored, tugging at Zabini's sleeve. 'Marry me! I can't live without you!'

Zabini balled his fists and marched ever onwards to Snape's office, with Malfoy trailing behind him like a lost puppy, plucking at him and uttering words of love.

Oh, the whole school would hear about this Zabini thought to himself, grinding his teeth. As long as no other pupil could see the spectacle, he would make damn sure Malfoy came off worst from this little humiliating incident.

He rapped curtly on Snape's door, silently counting to ten as Draco began reeling off a spontaneous sonnet, rhyming *Blaise with Amaze and Zabini with Panini*.

Zabini was about to turn around and throttle Draco to within an inch of his life when Snape threw open the door, looking down his nose at the two boys.

'Shouldn't you both be at dinner?' Snape started in an annoyed tone.

'Uh, sir, it's Draco. I think he's been spiked with something.'

As Zabini spoke, Draco had snuck his arm inside the crook of his House mate's elbow and was now resting his head on Zabini's shoulder, with a silly, love-struck grin on his face. Zabini tutted and tried to shrug Draco off, who responded by trying to link hands with him instead.

Snape merely raised a black eyebrow and tried not to smirk. He was clearly witnessing the affects of Amortentia, and as amusing as it was to see the Malfoy brat making a fool out of himself, administering potions without the receiver's consent broke one of the fundamental rules of Potioneering. Also, only one pupil in the school had been instructed to make that particular potion at present. Morgana Belakane. He would deal with her later.

With a scowl, Snape motioned for both boys to come through to his study.

'What happened?' he asked curtly as he billowed his way over to a large cabinet and began scanning the shelves for a phial of antidote.

'I don't know, sir,' Zabini replied truthfully. 'We were sitting drinking Pumpkin Juice in the common room. One minute we were talking about our plans for the summer break, the next he goes all gooey-eyed and starts telling me he loves me!'

At the word love, Draco giggled dreamily.

'Where did you get the juice from?' Snape enquired, finding the phial he was searching for and snatching it up in his right hand.

'Same as we usually do. Called down for an elf. I drank the same thing, and I'm absolutely fine.'

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'Are you sure you did not see anything suspicious?'

To that, Zabini shook his head.

Draco had now taken to mouthing the words *I love you* and blowing kisses in Zabini's direction.

'Mr Malfoy,' Snape's baritone cut through the boy's reverie. 'Mr Zabini here has a gift for you.' He held out the phial to Draco, who took it reverently, as if it were the most priceless antique.

'For me?' he breathed.

'Yes, for you,' Snape replied. The antidote to Amortentia worked best if the affected person drunk it out of their own free will. Hence, Snape decided to encourage Draco a bit. 'Mr Zabini wants you to drink this down, and then the two of you will be taken to the Great Hall to be wed.'

Draco's eyes were the size of saucers and filling up with tears of pure joy. 'We're getting married? Blaise and I? Tonight?' he managed to croak hoarsely.

'That is correct,' Snape replied. 'Your families are waiting. Just take a drink now to steady your nerves.'

With a shaking hand and a deliriously happy grin on his face, Draco unstopped the phial and drank the contents down in one while Zabini still looked terrified.

It took less than ten seconds for the antidote to take effect. Draco's face fell as reality dawned on him, and he looked at first from Snape to Zabini, who was now looking at him like he was something unpleasant that he'd just scraped off his shoe.

As he watched Draco's look of confusion and him trying to formulate the right question, Snape's thoughts turned to the perpetrator. Or, most likely, perpetrators. Whatever had those silly girls been thinking? Were they trying to get themselves expelled mere weeks before their graduation?

Snape sent the boys to dinner and angrily slammed the door shut behind them. One thing was for sure, Belakane and Byrne were not going to get away with this.

* * *

Morgana was leaning with her back against the wall in the corridor outside Snape's office with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. She had no idea what Snape wanted from her. Probably, he was about to tell her off for not having handed in that ruddy Amortentia yet. But he could have done that in the Great Hall. Instead he had just told her to wait for him outside his office.

A private telling-off, then. Morgana's scowl turned a darker shade of black. There had been a time not so long ago when she would have hacked off her left arm in order to spend some time alone with Snape in his office. But those times had passed.

The sound of footsteps made her turn her head towards the stairs. The steps were, however, too light to be Snape's. Who could it be?

'Charis?' Morgana frowned. 'What are you doing down here?'

Charis shrugged. 'Snape showed up at the Ravenclaw table and told me to wait for him outside his office. I really don't have the time for that. Lily's still missing. I want to go and look for her.'

Morgana bit her lip. 'I'm sorry I yelled at Lily.' She really was. The little kitten had surely not broken the phial on purpose. 'I'll help you look for her once we're out of here.'

'It's not like her to run off like that.' Charis felt her throat go tight. What if something happened to Lily? There were a lot of steep stairs in the castle. What if Peeves found her and did something nasty to her?

'She'll come back when she's hungry,' Morgana pointed out. 'They always do.' Oh, she felt guilty. How would she ever be able to look her friend in the eye again if something happened to the kitten? After all, the kitten had run away because of her.

'If you say that again, I'll hex your balls off!'

Pansy's shrill voice made both Morgana and Charis peer down the corridor that led to the Slytherin common room, but all they could see was Pansy throwing the door open right in Zabini's face. The never heard what exactly Zabini muttered before he followed her inside.

'What was that about?' Charis wondered.

'Haven't you heard?' Morgana's scowl gave way to a gloating grin. 'Zabini told everyone at dinner that Malfoy confessed his undying love for him earlier.'

'He did WHAT?'

Morgana nodded eagerly, her grin growing wider. 'In the common room before dinner. Zabini was so shocked he ran out on him. I think it's brilliant. If Draco's gay, that means he won't reproduce. And that might just save the Wizarding gene pool.'

Charis burst out in giggles. But the joyful sound was shattered by Snape striding down the corridor towards the two girls.

'In!' he bellowed and flung open the door to his office.

Both grins and giggles disappeared into thin air, and the girls hurried to get inside. Snape seemed to be in a really foul mood, and neither of them had any desire to suffer it.

'What have you two been thinking?' Snape yelled as he had thrown the door shut behind them. 'Slipping a fellow student Amortentia!' He looked pointedly at Morgana. 'And to one of your own House mates. I am seriously disappointed in you, Miss Belakane.'

Morgana's eyes widened and she ventured sneaking a glance at her best friend. Charis, however, seemed as clueless as she did.

'This was a very juvenile prank and below both of you. You will be serving detention tonight.'

Detention? Hell, no! Despite her being Slytherin, Morgana's sense of justice was akin to a Hufflepuff's. She was not going to serve detention for something she had not done! 'I haven't slipped Amortentia to anyone, sir,' she protested.

'Don't. Lie. To me.'

The sound of Snape's voice made the girls' skin crawl, and not in a good way. Oh, the man was pissed!

'You are the only one in possession of the ingredients for Amortentia in the castle, Miss Belakane,' Snape continued.

Once more, Morgana opened her mouth to defend herself, but Snape cut her short by addressing Charis.

'Do you or do you not still hold a grudge against Mr Malfoy because of the ridiculous picture he showed off in the Entrance Hall in October, Miss Byrne?'

Charis blushed. She had just about managed to get that embarrassing incident out of her brain.

'Do you, Miss Byrne?'

How could Severus ask her that in such a cold voice? After all, HE had been on that picture as well. And that evening, she had for the first time confessed her love for him. And he had told her that she mustn't love him. She felt tears burn in her eyes and quickly lowered her head.

Snape, however, interpreted the movement differently.

'I rest my case,' he announced. 'The choice is yours. Either you serve detention with me, scrubbing cauldrons, or I will hand you over to Headmistress Umbridge. The words "I must not slip anyone Amortentia," would produce a deep and long scar on those pretty hands of yours.' He sneered. 'Well, what do you choose?'

It was an easy choice. Scrubbing cauldrons wasn't the most pleasant task in the castle, but anything beat writing lines for Umbridge. Hence, the girls could be found in the Potions classroom five minutes later, surrounded by filthy, burnt cauldrons.

Snape himself had retreated to the store room. Not that any of the Potions ingredients needed re-organising, but he couldn't make himself face the girls. Maybe they weren't guilty after all?

He had seen the angry frown on Morgana's face. He had seen it before. It was different from the dark scowl she wore all too often lately. The first time he had noticed it had been in her third year, when he had given her an A on one of her Potions essays because she had written more than the two rolls of parchment he had required. She had meant to do a thorough job, and he had insisted on her following the rules. Hence, he had marked only the first two rolls of her essay and scribbled down an A. The frown had appeared the moment she had noticed that he had not marked the other two rolls. She had felt that she had been judged unfairly, just like she did now. And he had never told her that her essay had been one of the best third-year essays he had ever read.

Since then, Morgana had done a lot of things, but she had never lied. Why would he think that she was lying now? To protect her friend, maybe?

Charis would have many reasons to play a nasty trick on Draco. Merlin knew that boy had made her life a living hell for the better part of the last year. First that blasted picture and then the prank with Zabini on New Year's Eve. Charis didn't know that he knew, of course, but Snape knew many things that went on in the castle. Zabini throwing Charis' knickers at her the morning after he had taken her virginity was one of them. Poor, sweet Charis... She had looked so hurt at his accusations. Maybe she had nothing to do with it at all.

Snape was just thinking about cutting the girls' detention short when a sweet sound reached his ears, a sound that was rarely heard in his dungeon. Were the girls laughing? Soundlessly, he edged towards the door and listened. Yes, they were indeed.

'I would have paid good Galleons to see Blaise's face when Draco proposed to him!' Charis was laughing so hard there were tears running down her face.

Morgana grinned. 'Wonder if Draco has written home to Daddy yet to tell him that he'll bring home his fiancé for the summer?'

Snape stifled a snort at the very last moment. He could just about imagine Lucius' face upon receiving that owl.

He shifted and craned his neck. Both girls had taken off their jumpers and were scrubbing cauldrons in their plain white shirts. Charis' shirt was properly tucked into her skirt while Morgana's was hanging down over her trousers. And Snape found himself wondering just when she had stopped wearing skirts.

'Do you think you'd be invited to the wedding?' Morgana asked teasingly. 'Being cousins with Draco and all?'

Snape saw Charis' eyes flash, and the next thing he knew, a dripping sponge was flying in Morgana's direction. It hit her right on the chest, and after a exchanging shocked glances, both girls collapsed in a fit of giggles.

Now, that was enough!

Snape slammed the door shut behind him and strode into the room. 'Seeing as scrubbing cauldrons seems to be far too much fun, you will be chopping Flobberworms instead. A bucket each.'

He sat down behind his desk and pulled a stack of essays towards him. But he couldn't concentrate on grading. It was now so silent in the room that he could hear the girls' breathing and the rustling of their clothes as they moved.

He glanced in their direction. The water had turned Morgana's white shirt almost see-through. Was that an emerald green bra she was wearing? Her House colours? Did her knickers match, Snape wondered. Was she Slytherin right to the very core? And Charis, was she wearing blue knickers today, made of the same soft fabric he had vanished that night in the library?

There mere thought sent a shiver down Snape's spine, and he shook his head. Merlin's crotch! This was the third time within a week that he found himself having improper thoughts about those girls. Had he no self-control at all?

With an angry grunt, he pushed back his chair and billowed back to the store room. If he looked at those girls any more, he might just lose the last bit of control he still had. Or the seam of his pants might burst.

Aconite, Acromantula venom, Ashwinder eggs and Asphodel. Belladonna, Blackroot, Boomslang Skin and Bubotuber Pus. Caterpillars and Chinese Chomping Cabbage.

Everything was in order. Unless he was about to re-organise the alphabet, there was absolutely nothing Snape could occupy himself with in the store room. So he started pacing, which proved to be rather unsatisfying as well. The room was too small to pace properly.

'Meow.'

Snape froze. Had he just heard meowing?

'Meow.'

There it was again, coming from a basket on the bottom shelf. The lid wasn't on. How could he have missed that?

'Meow.'

Snape crouched down and carefully pulled the basket towards him. Looking up at him was a pair of sleepy green eyes coming from a mass of white fur.

'And what exactly do you think you are doing here?' he growled. He couldn't make himself yell at the little kitten. It looked far too adorable.

He was just about to pick it up when he noticed her white fur shimmering with a mother-of-pearl sheen. Could it be? He moved his head closer and inhaled deeply, and his nostrils filled with the sweet scent of roses and honey. 'Amortentia,' he breathed.

Then he firmly shook his head. 'Looks like you are responsible for this mess then, little one. And your mistress is out there chopping Flobberworms.'

Resisting the urge to pat the little creature on its head, Snape put the lid on the basket and stomped back into the classroom.

'Miss Byrne,' he called out from the door. 'Do you have any idea where your cat is?'

Charis looked up, and her bottom lip started to quiver. Oh, no! Something must have happened.

'We kind of lost track of Lily this afternoon, sir,' Morgana buttoned in. 'She... I yelled at her, and she ran away.'

'And why, Miss Belakane, would you yell at an innocent little cat?'

'She happened to break the potion phial I was supposed to hand in today, sir.'

'I see.' With a smirk, Snape placed the basket in front of the girls and took the lid off. 'Cleaning the Amortentia off of the cat instead of yelling at her would have saved you both two hours of detention. Like this.' He pulled out his wand and cast a cleaning spell. 'Make sure that cat stays away from the dungeons from now on. Away with you now.'

The girls didn't need to be told twice. Charis picked up Lily, whispering what a clever cat she was into her ear, while Morgana grabbed their jumpers. They reached the door in a blink of an eye. Snape, however, called after them.

'Miss Byrne. Miss Belakane.'

Reluctantly, they turned around to face their Potions master once more. To their surprise, he looked quite calm.

'Thank you for chopping those Flobberworms,' he said. 'The first-years always make such a mess when I get them to do it.'

The girls' eyes widened. Had Severus Snape just said thank you? Hell must just have frozen over.

'What are you waiting for?' Snape asked, desperately trying not to grin. 'You are dismissed.'

He heard them murmur something that sounded like good night, and before he had a chance to wish them the same, Charis and Morgana were gone. But the scent of roses and honey lingered long after they had left.

XL: Unveiling

Chapter 40 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Chapter XL: Unveiling

'What do you mean, Potter fought Voldemort single-handedly?'

'They duelled.'

'No, they didn't. It was Dumbledore who fought Voldemort and made him flee.'

'How'd you know? You weren't there.'

'Well, neither were you!'

Never before had Hogwarts castle seen such a flurry of activity that early in the morning. Students were out of bed hours before breakfast, owls fluttered through the corridors, and the elves carried messages between friends in different House common rooms, some written in code, others in invisible ink. Rumours ranged from Professor Umbridge being ripped to pieces by a monster in the Forbidden Forest to Lord Voldemort having taken over the Ministry. The only thing that could be said for certain was that no one knew what exactly had happened during the night. Some students, however, knew more than others.

'Several members of the DA followed Harry to London,' Jack whispered. He and Charis sat closely together in a quiet corner of the Ravenclaw common room. Lily lay cuddled up in Charis' lap, and her wand, with which she had cast *Muffliato* around them, lay on the armrest beside her.

'What did they do in London?'

'Harry said his godfather was being held hostage by You-Know-Who.'

Charis paled and Jack quickly leant forward to take her hand.

'I'm sure he's alright, kitten. I heard that Harry came back with Dumbledore before dawn. They wouldn't be here if anything terrible had happened.'

Charis swallowed. She hoped that Jack was right. Surely, if something had happened to Sirius, she would have been informed. Yes, Dumbledore would have told her. But then again, as the members of the DA were back at Hogwarts, why had none of them for example, Harry told her what had happened?

Because Harry doesn't know that you're Sirius' cousin, silly girl! Charis chided herself. Yes, that must be it. Everything was fine, and she wasn't told anything because no one knew that it was any of her business.

A loud pop made both Jack and Charis spin around. In front of them, bowing so deeply that her nose almost touched the floor, was Silvy.

'Silvy has a message for Miss Charis from Mistress Morgana.'

'Mistress?' Jack frowned.

'I thought Morgana told you not to call her that, Silvy,' Charis wondered.

The elf started to tremble. 'Indeed Mistress has ordered Silvy not to call her Mistress, but Silvy cannot help herself.' She lifted a tiny hand and pinched her left ear. 'Mistress has also said that Silvy is not allowed to punish herself for disobeying orders. So Silvy will only pinch her ear.'

The poor little elf. Had her years in Malfoy's service scarred her so much that she could not understand that Morgana meant only well and that she certainly did not want her elf to punish herself?

'What is the message, Silvy?' Charis asked quickly before the elf got a chance to try and rip her own ear off.

'Silvy is to make sure no one except Miss Charis sees the message.'

Jack got up. 'I'll be going then.'

'Nonsense,' Charis protested. 'If Morgana had known you were here, she would surely have included you in her orders.' She stretched out her hand. 'May I see the message, please?'

Silvy eyed Jack suspiciously for a second but then handed over a roll of parchment. Morgana's otherwise neat handwriting was even more cramped than usual, and the ink was smudged in several places. She seemed to have been in a hurry.

Still protected by *Muffliato*, Charis started to read the note:

Charis,

I guess the rumours of last night's events have reached your common room as well.

Down here, people have been up since five, when Crabbe and Goyle received owls from home. Malfoy got one, too. He went to see Snape, and no one has seen him since. Rumour has it that he has been called home.

Can I come up? Tell Silvy.

M.

'Malfoy's been called home?' Jack burst out. 'But why...'

'What reply may Silvy bring her Mistress, Miss Charis?' the elf interrupted him.

'Tell her I'll be meeting her outside,' Charis replied, and with a pop, the elf disappeared.

Charis got to her feet. 'So Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy received owls,' she repeated.

'Death Eater kids,' Jack concluded. 'I'm starting to think that those rumours are true. It almost sounds like there has been a battle between Death Eaters and... well, the "good" side at the Ministry.'

Charis nibbled at a fingernail. The "good" side... all those people who had been gathered at Grimmauld Place. Were they on the "good" side? Some kind of army, maybe formed by Dumbledore? And was Sirius part of it? Her mind was racing. Oh, how she wished she could talk to Dumbledore and ask him. Surely, he'd know if something

had happened to Sirius.

Her wish was fulfilled when she met her best friend a few minutes later in the stairs that led up to Ravenclaw Tower. Morgana was not alone, but accompanied by yet another elf, one of the Hogwarts elves this time.

'Hurry up,' Morgana said without even saying good morning. 'You and I are to have tea with the headmaster.'

* * *

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes before standing. It had been a long night. He had once again been forced to walk the fine tightrope between the sides of Light and Dark, and was exhausted from the effort it took to do so, as well as having to Occlude his true feelings. What he wanted now was a nip of Firewhisky, a soak in a hot bath and then the complete oblivion offered by a phial of Dreamless Sleep potion. But all this would have to wait, of course. He would have to keep an eye on the members of his House and make sure no-one engaged in pro-Voldemort propaganda before Dumbledore had the chance to inform all the students about Voldemort's return. So he would have a shower and a huge goblet of Headache Potion instead.

'I'd like you to stay, Severus,' Dumbledore said as Snape rose from his seat. 'I have invited Charis and Morgana to tea.'

Snape raised a black eyebrow. 'And just why have you done that, Headmaster? Surely, they will be informed of last night's proceedings along with the rest of the school later today?'

'Some of the things I have to tell them are not for everyone's ears, Severus,' the old man replied, peering over his crescent moon spectacles. 'Charis lost her cousin last night. That is not something she should hear about first in front of the entire school.'

Snape scowled. 'That does not explain why Miss Belakane's presence is required.' It would be hard enough breaking the bad news to Charis. He didn't want to inflict the upset on Morgana too.

'Charis will want to have her friend by her side,' Dumbledore replied confidently. 'And let us not forget, Morgana has lost someone, too, last night.'

The Headmaster's pointed look was not lost on Snape, whose scowl had turned a deeper shade of black. Lucius Malfoy's trip to Azkaban could hardly be called a loss, from where he was sitting.

'THAT particular absence is nothing but a good thing, Dumbledore,' he spat, 'and Miss Belakane herself would agree!'

Indeed, it was about time that egomaniac Malfoy was locked up. And maybe, his imprisonment would help Morgana heal from what she had been subjected to at his hands.

'Still, she needs to be told,' Dumbledore answered firmly. 'You know as well as I do that Morgana's, um, *sentiments* towards Lucius will be of use to us later on.'

Snape's eyes flashed. He still could not believe what the old man was planning next for the poor girl. 'Miss Belakane has been through enough!' he protested. But he knew it was no good. They had been through this topic before, and the Headmaster would not be swayed.

He now merely gazed back calmly at his Potions master. 'Morgana is strong. She will manage.'

Snape could not stop the bubble of frustration that welled up inside him. 'I can see that absolutely nothing I say or think will make a blind bit of difference, Headmaster. But for the record, it is low even by your standards to use Sirius Black's death as a way of manipulating those girls!'

The older wizard had the gall to look affronted. 'Manipulating? Severus, this is war!'

'Yes,' Snape shot back, resting his hands on the desk and leaning towards the Headmaster, 'and innocent civilians should NOT be included!'

Dumbledore closed his eyes and spoke once more with the infinite patience that made Snape want to hex him between the eyes. 'Those girls are involved already, Severus. They have been from the day they were born.'

'And that is why we should be protecting them! Not pushing them into harm's way!' Snape was becoming animated now. He knew it was futile to argue with the puppet master, but he had to try. He had to at least try to save his girls.

'Do you not want to see Voldemort defeated, Severus?'

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'How can you even think of asking me that question, after all I've sacrificed?' he asked through gritted teeth.

'Our side needs to use all the weapons we can lay hands on,' Dumbledore continued.

'The girls are not mere weapons or playthings! They are PEOPLE.' Snape banged the desk with his palm for emphasis.

'They are USEFUL,' the old man countered.

At this, Snape had to summon all of his composure not to hex the headmaster into the middle of next week. Instead, he started to pace the office anxiously, gripping the handle of his wand so tightly that the knuckles of his hand turned white.

This was how Dumbledore saw the girls, and this was how he indeed saw Snape himself: mere pawns, pawns to be pushed and manoeuvred into position to fight Voldemort, like some grotesque life-sized game of wizard chess. What gave him the right?

Taking a deep breath, Snape tried once more to appeal to Dumbledore's better nature. 'Headmaster, I implore you... Give them the one thing you never gave me: A choice.'

The old man looked up at the younger wizard and saw passion burning in his onyx eyes.

'They will be given a choice, Severus,' he began, admiring the depth to which his Potions master took the oath to protect the school and its pupils. 'I cannot force either Charis or Morgana to join the Order. But the day I ask them to, I doubt they will refuse. They have seen the Dark. They WILL fight for the Light. And by fighting, they will create a better future... For themselves and for all of us.'

Snape was about to reply with something caustic but was interrupted by a curt knock on the door.

'Will you stay, Severus?' the old man asked quietly. 'If not for my sake, then for theirs?'

Snape looked at the Headmaster for a heartbeat before taking a deep breath through his nose and moving to stand by the window, folding his arms across his chest. Of course he would stay for their sake. If he couldn't stop the old meddler from toying with their future, he could at least keep an eye on things.

'I take that as a yes,' Dumbledore noted at Snape's lack of response. With a swift wave of his hand, the huge wooden door opened.

Charis entered the office nervously, followed by a serious-looking Morgana.

'Charis, Morgana. Come in, have a seat. Tea? Crumpet?' The Headmaster's blue eyes crinkled as he smiled at the girls, and he extended his hands for them to sit opposite

him.

Charis cast a glance at Snape, who just stared sternly back. 'Thank you, sir,' she murmured politely as Dumbledore busied himself with the tea.

Morgana meanwhile just nodded respectfully, looking suspiciously at the old wizard. She could sense the contempt that was oozing off her Head of House and couldn't help but wonder what Dumbledore had done to make Snape scowl like this so early in the morning.

'How are the NEWTs coming along?' Dumbledore asked jovially, sending cups and saucers soaring gracefully towards the two girls.

Charis seemed thrown by that comment. She hadn't expected this to be a social call. But she recovered quickly. 'I'm halfway through,' she told the Headmaster. 'I just have Charms, DADA and Astronomy to go. I'm a bit worried about Astronomy. As much as I love the practical work, the mock exams were really tough...'

Dumbledore nodded politely, smiling all the while, before turning his attention to her friend. 'And you, Morgana?' he enquired. 'I am sure Potions was a walk in the park, was it not?'

Morgana narrowed her eyes and defiantly crossed her arms in front of her chest. Why could the old man not just say what was really on his mind? 'This is not about our exams, is it, Headmaster?' she asked quietly, first giving Dumbledore a piercing look and then looking up at Snape.

'Never try to fool a Slytherin, eh?' The Headmaster smiled towards Snape, who merely scowled in return. 'No, Morgana,' he continued, 'this is not about your exams. And as you have already seen right through me, I better get straight to the point. I assume you have both heard ... rumours this morning. Have you not?'

The girls cast furtive glances at each other. Of course, they had. The whole castle had. But should Dumbledore be informed?

Charis was the first to speak. 'People are saying there was an incident at the Ministry... with Harry Potter... and... You-Know-Who...'

'And there are quite a few students missing ...' Morgana joined in.

Dumbledore nodded and stroked his beard. As he had expected, the gossip had spread like wildfire. What was surprising, however, was how accurate that gossip actually was.

'Regrettably, I have brought you here to inform you that those rumours are, in fact, true,' he confirmed, looking serious now.

'He's back then?' Morgana asked unflinchingly. 'Voldemort? It's official?'

The old man nodded gravely. 'Harry Potter was indeed involved in an incident at the Ministry Of Magic and came face to face with Voldemort.' He paused as the girls' mouths dropped simultaneously. 'He wasn't the only one there, however. There was a battle, involving parties from both sides: men and women loyal to the Light, Death Eaters, and yes, even your fellow students and friends.'

'Has anyone been injured? Students, I mean?' Morgana asked with real concern. After Cedric Diggory last year and the attack on Jack and Charis, she knew all too well what the Dark Lord and his henchmen were capable of. 'Is that why some are missing? The two Weasleys, for example.'

Dumbledore inclined his head. It seemed very little got past those two girls. Morgana even knew that there were Gryffindor students missing. 'Harry escaped relatively unscathed,' he started. 'But Ron Weasley is in St. Mungo's, and a number of other pupils are recuperating in the hospital wing. You should know that they fought with as much skill and courage as any Auror, and we are lucky to have them back with us alive.' His expression now turned rather grave. 'There were losses from both sides, however.'

Snape straightened. This was the part he had been dreading. How would the girls react?

Charis bit her lip, and Morgana couldn't help but inhale sharply. Lucius was a Death Eater, and Draco had been called home. What if... Despite everything, she found herself desperately praying that Lucius had not been injured.

'Charis, your cousin, Sirius,' Dumbledore began, looking at the girl kindly over his half-moon spectacles. 'He did not return from the Ministry. I am very sorry.'

Charis' eyes widened. 'He's... dead?' she asked quietly.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. 'I am truly sorry, Charis.'

Charis made a yelping sound and covered her mouth with her hand. No! This simply could not be! Sirius couldn't be dead!

She started to shake in pure shock, and Morgana immediately got up from her chair and knelt down in front of her friend, taking Charis' hands. Regardless of her own personal feelings about Black, her friend needed her right now.

Charis squeezed Morgana's hands tightly as the tears started to fall. Quite why she was so upset, she had no idea. Maybe it was too close to home and reminded her of how close she had been to death at Bellatrix's hands just a few short weeks ago.

'I know it's stupid... I don't even know him...' She was so choked up, she could barely speak.

'I wish you could have had more time to get to know him, Charis. Sirius was a great man...' Dumbledore offered by way of comfort.

Snape, to his credit, did not even snort at the sweeping and, in his opinion, blatantly untrue statement. Sirius Black had been nothing but an arrogant, self-satisfied bully. But still, Charis was crying for him, and Snape found it hard to see her in such distress. So he kept his eyes firmly on the quill and ink pot on the headmaster's desk. He was no good with tears and grief. You could fix many things with magic but you could not take away the pain in someone's soul. And Charis had certainly suffered enough this year, at Bellatrix's hand, at Draco's and, alas, at his own.

Charis took a moment to swallow the white-hot lump of pain in her throat and took a deep breath. 'How did he ... What happened?' she asked, wanting to know, yet not wanting to all at the same time.

'This will not be easy to hear, Charis, but you deserve the truth,' Dumbledore answered, folding his hands across his chest. 'The fight took place in the Death Chamber, which happens to be one of the most secretive places in the Department of Mysteries. Sirius was killed by a curse from Bellatrix Lestrange, which pushed him through a portal called the Veil, into the realm of the dead.'

Charis reeled at the name of Bellatrix Lestrange. Once again, the woman had attacked a member of her own family. Was there nothing the woman would not stoop to in the name of the Dark Lord? Charis squeezed her eyes shut. She needed a few moments to process this.

'You mean there is no ... no body?' Morgana asked over her shoulder. She was still kneeling in front of Charis and holding her friend's hand tightly.

'That is correct: Sirius went over,' Dumbledore confirmed.

'But... can't he come back?' Charis pleaded desperately. She was looking at Dumbledore now, and the sad look in her green eyes was truly heartbreaking.

'No, Charis,' the Headmaster answered softly. 'I am afraid the portal is a one-way passage only.'

Charis chanced a glance at Snape, who once more had to look away. He could not bear to see her in such pain.

For some moments, there was silence in the office as each of the girls processed the information they had been given. Morgana awkwardly patted her friend's arm, not really knowing how to comfort her. Grief was such a private thing, after all. But suddenly, another thought filled her mind. She got up and looked at Dumbledore.

'Headmaster, you were talking about losses... plural...'

Once again, Dumbledore could not help but be impressed by the girl's coolness under pressure. She would surely make a fine Auror.

'At least one Death Eater was killed,' he conceded. 'And several were captured and taken to Azkaban... including Lucius Malfoy.'

Morgana paled slightly at this, but her voice didn't give away her shock.

'Azkaban?' she repeated in a steady tone. Everyone knew that an eternity in Hell was a picnic compared to just one day in the wizard jail. Her blue eyes focused on her Head of House.

'Is that why Draco has been called home?'

'Draco has been called home regarding a family emergency, yes,' Snape said sternly and watched as a muscle twitched at Morgana's jaw. The girl should be rejoicing, for Merlin's sake, after all the bastard had put her through! She could not hold feelings for him still. She mustn't!

Morgana broke eye contact and turned back to Dumbledore. 'I supposed we are not to talk to anyone about this,' she said quietly.

'This is sensitive information,' the Headmaster replied. 'There are those who deny Voldemort's return, and those who will tell their own versions of these events. You both, however, deserve to know the truth.'

'We'll keep quiet,' Morgana promised and laid a protective arm around Charis' shoulders. 'Are we dismissed, Headmaster?'

She set her jaw. She didn't want to be in that room a second longer. The news of Lucius in Azkaban shocked her like a bucket of cold water to the face. And even though she knew deep down it was where the blond Death Eater belonged, the news troubled her nonetheless. He had been kind to her once. She had loved him...

'You may take all the time you need, both of you,' the Headmaster told Morgana with a look of concern on his face. She seemed to have closed up. A glance toward Snape told him that the Head of Slytherin had noticed it, too.

Morgana looked sternly at Charis, desperately hoping that her friend would understand. *Please, let us get out of here, Charis*, she thought.

Charis blinked furiously. 'I... I'd like some time to take this in, if you don't mind, sir.' She was talking to Dumbledore, but her green eyes were firmly locked onto her friend's blue ones.

'Of course, Charis,' Dumbledore replied. 'If you have any questions, my door is open. Any time.'

'Thank you, sir,' Charis murmured quietly. Once again, she looked at Snape, hoping for some kind of reassurance. All she received, however, was a curt nod.

The Headmaster watched as the girls linked arms and left the office together, huddled close. Once the door had closed, he turned to Snape. 'What do you make out of their reactions, Severus?' he asked the stern Potions master.

Snape sighed. 'Miss Byrne has always been one to wear her heart on her sleeve,' he began. That was an understatement. The phrase about the eyes being a window to one's soul was particularly true in her case. Morgana's eyes, on the other hand, had been cold as ice. She might have shown a brave front but he knew she was shocked and upset. Snape recognised the classic Slytherin behaviour of withdrawing behind a portcullis when hurt or upset. He did the same thing.

'Where do you think they are going now?' Dumbledore enquired. There was an atypical frown on his face, and Snape wondered if there was any room for regret in Dumbledore's heart.

'Where they always go,' Snape replied. 'The Room of Requirement.' He would have put his last Knut on this.

* * *

The girls didn't need to talk. Morgana took the lead, holding Charis firmly by the hand and pulling her with her to the seventh floor.

In contrast to their last visit, the Room of Requirement did not provide a table with potions ingredients or stacks of text books this time, but instead a huge, comfortable looking sofa, fluffy pillows and cosy blankets. On the little side-table stood a pot of tea with two cups, a bowl of chocolate and a box of tissues.

Morgana let go of her friend's hand as soon as the door had fallen shut behind them and marched towards the window to shut the blinds. Bright morning sunlight and chirping birds just did not fit the situation.

When she turned around to face her friend again, Charis was still standing mere feet away from the door, looking forlorn.

'Charis?' Morgana asked with a gentle voice. Something wasn't right. Up in Dumbledore's office, Charis had been in tears. Now she seemed calm. Too calm, maybe. And her big green eyes just stared blankly ahead of her.

'I think you should have a seat,' Morgana suggested, pointing towards the sofa.

Charis started walking robotically, and let herself fall onto the sofa. She accepted a cup of tea without saying thanks and held it in her hands until the tea had become cold. And Morgana didn't know what to say.

'I know I didn't know Sirius...' Charis finally said. Surely, they had been sitting there in silence for almost half an hour. 'I don't know why I am so upset.'

Tears started running down her cheeks again, and Morgana took the tea cup from her friend and replaced it with the box of tissues. 'It's alright to be upset,' she said. 'He was your cousin.'

'But... I didn't even know him,' Charis repeated. She had not spoken to Sirius again after she had left Grimmauld Place, the first and only time she had met him. Why had she not sent him an owl, at least, just to ask how he was doing or thank him for telling her about her their family? Sure, she had been busy with her NEWTs, but was that really an excuse?

'Maybe you could talk to Potter?' Morgana suggested, trying to offer a solution.

But Charis shook her head. 'I think Harry has enough on his plate at the moment.' He must be terribly sad himself. He had known Sirius. And Sirius had been the closest thing to a father Harry had ever had. Surely, he wouldn't want to talk about his godfather with a girl he barely knew.

'I can't believe it was Bellatrix,' Charis suddenly said. 'He was her cousin, too.'

'Bat-shit crazy that one, I'm telling you,' Morgana pointed out, trying to make her friend smile. But it didn't work.

'It's going to be worse from now on, isn't it? Charis asked in a quiet voice. 'There WILL be a war.'

Morgana nodded. 'Yes, there will be a war. And if the Ministry doesn't acknowledge Voldemort's return soon, Dumbledore and his followers will have to fight alone.'

Charis looked up. 'Surely, there is no way the Ministry can cover this up?'

'They have covered up the murder of Cedric pretty well, don't you think?' Morgana's tone was bitter. It had been a year now since the boy had died, and still the Ministry was talking about a "tragic accident".

Charis sighed. 'Tell me, why did we decide to work at the Ministry again?' she asked.

Morgana sneered. 'We had the glorious idea of wanting to make a difference, remember? But according to Mad-Eye Moody, the Aurors seem to be working AGAINST the Ministry. Or against Fudge, at least. Moody is convinced that Fudge has gone loopy.'

Charis smiled faintly. In her head, she heard Sirius' voice, telling her that Moody's eye had popped out at the dinner table because he had become so agitated talking about Fudge.

'Well, something isn't right at the Ministry,' she pointed out. 'If a group of Hogwarts students, a gang of Death Eaters AND Voldemort can run around undetected, then there is either a serious security problem or...'

'Or?'

'Fudge let it happen!' Charis exclaimed, eyes wide with realisation. 'And that would mean he supports Voldemort.'

'Rubbish,' Morgana retorted. 'Fudge DENIES Voldemort's return, remember?'

Charis' Ravenclaw brain was working feverishly. 'Then there must be someone senior at the Ministry who allowed Harry and Voldemort in.'

Morgana's jaw tightened. She had a good idea about who it had been. But there was no point discussing it. He was in Azkaban by now.

'What were they doing there anyway?' Charis went on.

Morgana shrugged. 'There are rumours...'

'Rumours?' Charis was getting agitated. 'What about the truth?'

'Want to go back to Dumbledore and ask him?'

Charis closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the headrest. 'No, he certainly has enough in his plate right now.'

'Would you stop thinking about how much everybody else had on their plates?' Morgana bit her lip, immediately regretting her harsh tone. 'Sorry, didn't mean to snap at you.' But her nerves were lying bare, and she couldn't help herself.

Charis sighed. 'It's OK.'

Morgana, too, let her head fall back. 'I'm afraid we will have to get used to rumours and half-truths. You and I, Charis, we aren't important enough to know the whole truth.'

It was a bitter thought. They had already been through so much. Charis had almost been killed, and she herself had let Dumbledore use both her body and her soul for the cause. And still, they weren't told the whole truth.

'I thought joining the Ministry would give us security and prestige,' Charis mused. 'But now... It's going to be dangerous, Morgana.'

Morgana nodded. Security seemed to be a word that belonged to the past. It seemed as if no one was secure anymore.

'I am scared, Morgana,' Charis said quietly. 'I'm scared to think about the future, and I am scared to leave Hogwarts. This is my home. I don't want to leave.'

Morgana swallowed. She was scared, too. Despite all the things she and her friend had been through this year, Hogwarts had always been a safe haven. Despite his wicked plans, she still trusted Dumbledore and knew that he'd do anything to keep his students safe. The same went for Snape.

But most importantly, at Hogwarts, Charis had always been close. They had shared so much over the last seven years: laughter and tears, joy and heartache. They had fought, and they had made up. They had hated, and they had loved. And in a few days' time, they would have to say goodbye at King's Cross Station. When they would see each other again and under what circumstances, neither of them knew. And Morgana hated the very idea.

'Have you ever considered going Muggle again, Charis? Leaving the Wizarding world?' she suddenly asked.

Charis frowned. 'Why would I want to do that?'

'To get away.' Morgana's teeth worked at her lower lip. 'The war has started...'

'I know us Mudbloods are the main target of the war,' Charis said quietly. 'But I will not run away. This is my world, too.'

'Maybe you should run.' Morgana looked pleadingly at her friend. 'I don't want to see you on the list of victims one day.'

'Would you run?' Charis asked. 'If you were me?'

Morgana shook her head. 'I am not you, Charis. I cannot run.' Where would she run to? Unlike Charis, she had no Muggle family to go back to. She had no family whatsoever. She had nowhere to go.

'If it comes to fighting, then I will stand and fight,' Charis declared. 'And if I die, then I will die fighting.'

'I don't want you to die.' Morgana bit her bottom lip hard as she realised that she had just confessed one of her biggest fears, not only to her best friend but also to herself.

Charis stared at her friend with eyes big as saucers. She had never seen Morgana like this. They had cried together before, they had shared their heartaches, but never before had Morgana looked so... scared. Not knowing what else to do, Charis opened her arms and embraced her Star Sister. And to her utter bewilderment, the Slytherin did not resist.

The feelings that welled up inside Morgana's chest as Charis enclosed her in her arms were almost too much to handle. Never before had Morgana let anyone hold her like that. Never before had she been so grateful for a hug. And never before had she felt so safe. But she did not allow herself to shed the tears that were burning in her eyes.

As she shifted to free herself from Charis' arms, Morgana caught a scent of roses and froze. Roses. Her Amortentia smelled of roses. She had always thought of Lucius. After all, he had been the first and only man who had ever sent her such delicate flowers. But his roses had smelled different. Their scent had been heavy and intoxicating. The scent Charis was wearing, however, was innocent and sweet, just like Amortentia. And Morgana couldn't help but inhale deeply.

Whatever made her kiss the sensitive skin at her friend's neck, Morgana did not know. But once she had started, she could not make herself stop. Charis' skin tasted so sweet.

Charis shivered. Morgana's breath at her neck was feather-light and caressing. It tickled slightly but felt soothing at the same time. She shifted her weight as Morgana ran her hand slowly down the curve of her back, and as she felt Morgana's nose trace along her neck, Charis couldn't help but moan softly.

The little sound encouraged Morgana. She pulled her friend closer towards her, all the while placing small, tender kisses right under Charis' ear. She held Charis steady around the waist with her left hand, while the right one was slowly making its way up her side.

Then suddenly, Morgana pulled away. Blue eyes locked onto green, two pairs of eyes that had looked at each other so many times before. But right now, it felt as if they were seeing each other for the very first time.

As Charis reached out to brush her cheek with her fingers, Morgana felt the muscles in her neck tense. Why, she did not know. Charis' touch was gentle, and her fingers were warm.

When Charis cupped her chin and slowly leant forward, her red lips slightly parted, Morgana felt the breath hitch in her throat. *No kiss*, she thought as a wave of sheer panic rushed through her body. *Not on the lips*. Swiftly, she shifted her weight and leant forward to once more cover Charis' neck with kisses.

But Charis wanted more. 'Morgana,' she whispered as her best friend's teeth grazed her collarbone and her fingertips softly brushed against the side of her breasts. 'Kiss me.'

Morgana froze, and Charis' heart sank in the same moment she saw Morgana's shoulder slump. Why did she have to ask, she wondered. Now the spell was broken.

But Morgana didn't pull away. Instead, her hand sneaked around to Charis' back, and she pulled her friend closer, her face still at her neck. She did not want to give up the rose scent.

Relieved, Charis ran her hand through her friend's short, red hair, wondering how it would look if she wore it long. Her musings were, however, interrupted as Morgana's kisses grew bolder, and a sweet moan escaped Charis' lips as Morgana started nibbling softly at the side of her neck. She let her head fall to the side to give her better access, and Morgana slowly made her way upwards until she reached the sensitive spot right under her friend's ear.

She had to try. Carefully, Charis turned her head to the side, hoping to graze Morgana's lips with hers. But once more, Morgana flinched away.

'Charis... please, don't.' Morgana's voice was hoarse, almost as if she had been crying. But as she lifted her head to look at her best friend, there were no tears in her blue eyes. If anything, she looked scared.

Charis understood: a kiss on the lips was too much. It was such a private gesture, filled with so many emotions, and Morgana wasn't ready. Her heart had been broken, and she was too scared to let anyone come close to it just yet. Charis understood that all but too well. She had wounds of her own that were yet to heal.

She gave her friend a gentle, reassuring smile and reached out to caress her cheek with her fingers. As her thumb gingerly brushed her lips, Morgana did not turn away. And her lips, too, curled into a tiny smile.

When Morgana once more took the lead, Charis willingly let herself be pushed back onto the soft cushions. Lying propped up on her elbows, she watched Morgana move her hand from her neck down over her chest to her belly. Her hands felt warm even through the fabric of her school robes, and Charis savoured the feeling. But her breath hitched in her throat as Morgana started to slowly unbutton her shirt, and Charis looked down, embarrassed.

Morgana's hand froze. 'Charis, sweetie, what is it?' she asked, sensing her friend's hesitation.

'... there is still a scar...' Charis started, feeling self-conscious. Yes, Madam Pomfrey had done a great job in healing her, but she was left with a thin, silvery scar a few inches long across her left breast. It made Charis feel ugly, and she could not bear it if Morgana recoiled from her in horror.

Morgana cupped her friend's cheek in her hand and smiled gently. They both carried scars from this year, both inside and out. And they were both afraid that anyone would see them. Blue eyes looked deeply into green, and both pairs reflected the fear of rejection.

'I don't care about your scars, Charis,' Morgana murmured, stroking her friend's cheek gently. 'To me, you are beautiful.'

Morgana never saw Charis blink furiously as they embraced each other. How could the Ravenclaw have such a low opinion of herself? Had she not noticed how the boys looked after her in the Great Hall, not least of all her best friend Jack? Did she not know how many girls envied her for her blonde hair, her bright green eyes and the soft curve of her hips? Did she really think herself ugly? But then, since the incident with Lucius, Morgana had been feeling the same about herself, too. She did not want anyone to look at her. That was why she only wore trousers these days and had thrown out almost every piece of clothing that was not black. If no one noticed her, no one would approach her. If no one approached her, no one would come close.

But Charis was close, and Morgana knew that Charis would never hurt her.

She freed herself from her friend's arms and sat back on her heels, and, summoning her courage, Morgana began to slowly unbutton her own shirt, never once taking her eyes off of Charis. There would be no barriers between them now, and Morgana hoped that Charis understood that she was making herself both physically and psychologically bare.

Charis swallowed dryly as she watched Morgana shrug off her shirt and discard it to the floor. The black lace of her bra contrasted sharply with her ivory skin and the swell of her breast looked warm and inviting. But Charis didn't dare reach out to touch.

'Don't be afraid, Charis,' Morgana implored her as she herself reached forward and stroked her friend's hair.

'I've never... not with a girl...' Charis mumbled, feeling embarrassed at her inexperience.

'I know,' Morgana answered gently. 'It's OK. We can stop if you want.'

Morgana held her breath. It wasn't the sex she was after, but the closeness. She hadn't let anyone touch her since her last night with Lucius, and now both her body and her soul were crying out for caress. If Charis turned from her now...

To Morgana's relief, Charis shifted closer and tentatively ran her fingers down her bare arms. Her touch made Morgana shiver with pleasure, and once again she offered a small smile to Charis, who returned it gladly.

Slowly, Morgana once again attempted to undo the buttons on Charis' shirt. This time she felt no resistance. Carefully, she slipped the thin white cotton from her shoulders, revealing a deep blue satin bra against pale skin. She let her hands glide down over Charis' body, all the way from her neck and over her breasts and belly. Then she paused and looked up at Charis, seeking silent permission to go on, and found her friend looking back at her with eyes full of longing.

She let her hands wander upwards again until they reached Charis' full, heavy breasts, and then leaned forward to place a soft kiss between them.

Charis hardly dared to breathe. Her hands now awkwardly traced up and down her friend's sides, wanting to touch her more, but not sure how. What if she did something wrong? But her worries were all but forgotten as Morgana's tongue snaked from her pink lips, making small circles between Charis' breasts while her hands softly kneaded them through the deep blue satin.

Morgana's touch was so gentle, so unhurried, and feeling more relaxed and a little braver, Charis reached around Morgana's body and let her hands glide down over her bottom.

Suddenly, Charis heard a sharp snap and felt her bra come undone. How Morgana had managed that without the use of her hands, Charis had not a clue. She looked surprised for the briefest of seconds, but when she heard Morgana giggle, Charis continued to caress Morgana's bum some more through the material of her trousers.

She could feel Morgana's lips on her breast now. They were soft and warm, grazing the skin delicately. Charis made a little happy sighing noise in response and began to tug impatiently at her trousers, wanting to feel her friend's skin against hers.

For a second, Morgana froze. Charis tugging at her clothes awakened memories in her which she did not want to remember. But this was different. Charis was not Lucius. Charis was not tugging at her trousers in order to take something she was not willing to give. This was something completely different. This was something she had never experienced with Lucius. This was about sharing emotions. This was about loving, and being genuinely loved in return. This was about two best friends. This was about Charis and Morgana.

Once more, Morgana sat back on her heels, this time taking Charis' hands and guiding them towards the buttons of her trousers. With nimble fingers, Charis unbuttoned them and then looked up with a shy smile. Morgana, too, smiled and then slipped off the sofa to step out of her trousers. When she returned, Charis had already removed her skirt.

The two friends looked at each other. Despite them having been close for so many years, living in different common rooms had kept them from ever seeing each other in anything else than their school robes.

Why, in Merlin's name, would Charis ever think she was in any way ugly, Morgana wondered. Her breasts were large and full, her skin was soft and pale, and her ample curves were smooth and feminine. She was beautiful.

Morgana was too absorbed in her thoughts to fight Charis when the Ravenclaw pulled her by the hips towards her, so she came to straddle one of her thighs. When Morgana realised what had happened, she smiled at her friend. Who would have expected such a brave move from her?

Charis' hands carefully snaked from Morgana's hips up her back, tracing little circles, before effortlessly snapping open the black bra. Lissom fingers eased the straps down Morgana's arms, and Charis admired the breasts she had freed. She just had to touch them. Gingerly, she cupped them with both hands. Morgana's breasts seemed very different to her own. Perky, with tiny little brown nipples. They were so soft and warm. And Charis was entranced by them.

Morgana smiled at her friend's gentle touch and placed her left hand on Charis' right one. 'It's alright,' she whispered. 'They're not made of glass.'

While Charis explored her breast, first with her fingertips and then with her palms, Morgana let her hands trace down her friend's side. At the waistband of the knickers, she paused for a second, but Charis was too busy to protest. Boldly, Morgana let her hands slide under the blue fabric and gently squeezed Charis' bottom.

Charis, meanwhile, cupped Morgana's breasts and slowly leant forward. Her nose had long since filled with Morgana's sweet scent, and she now wanted to see if her skin tasted as just as sweet. Carefully, she lapped at the nipple with her tongue.

Morgana inhaled sharply. She had not thought that Charis would be so brave and had therefore not been prepared for the sensation that Charis' touch produced. As Charis started to suck gently on her nipple, a soft moan escaped Morgana's lips, and she tightened her grip around Charis' bum, pulling her closer. Then she withdrew her hands.

'May I touch you?' she asked.

Charis abandoned Morgana's breast and looked up at her, a slightly puzzled look on her face.

Morgana smiled and let her hands glide from Charis' bum over her lips and to her front. 'There?' she clarified.

Charis blushed slightly. She had felt the blood pulsating in her core for a while now, and she longed to be touched. But somehow, she felt embarrassed at the same time. Exposed, yet wanting to be exposed simultaneously.

Morgana placed a tender kiss on Charis' flushed cheeks and let her fingertips softly brush against her sex through her knickers. She was in no hurry, and as much as she longed to give Charis pleasure, she would wait until her friend was ready.

She lowered her head and started nibbling at Charis' ear. By the time she was suckling her earlobe, Charis' breathing had become heavy, and Morgana could feel that her knickers had become damp.

'Yes,' Charis breathed. 'Yes, please touch me. Please, do.'

Gently, Morgana pushed the blue fabric aside, and covered Charis' sex with her hand. She felt a freshly-shaven slit and heard Charis moan softly as she gently parted her lips with her fingers, all the while nibbling at her neck.

Charis shivered with pleasure as Morgana's fingers brushed her most sensitive spot, and she wrapped her arms around her friend, closing her eyes and burying her face at her shoulder.

Morgana felt Charis' hot breath against the skin of her neck, and the little gasps and moans encouraged her to apply more pressure to her friend's clit, and she started to rub it softly, feeling Charis' hips rock towards her in the same rhythm.

Charis whimpered in disappointment as Morgana's fingers abandoned her clit and was just about to beg her friend to continue touching her as she felt two fingertips being pressed against her entrance.

'Do you want me to?' Morgana whispered softly in her ear.

Charis nodded. 'Can I touch you, too?' she asked. Somehow, she felt as if she needed to ask for permission.

'You don't have to,' Morgana breathed and started rubbing Charis' clit with her thumb.

Charis moaned. 'I want to.'

Trying to keep her hand from trembling, Charis delicately wriggled her fingers inside Morgana's knickers, tracing her slit with a featherlike touch. She was both surprised and delighted to find it shaven. As her fingers made contact with Morgana's clit, Charis heard her friend exhale sharply, and then did the same as she felt Morgana's fingers slide inside her.

For some moments, Charis continued caressing Morgana's clit but lost focus as Morgana's fingertips found that special spot inside her. She arched her back and moaned deeply, thrusting her hips against her friend's hand.

'Oh, God,' she whimpered as Morgana started making beckoning movements with her fingers inside her and at the same time applying pressure to her clit. Charis had no idea how long she would last.

She came undone with a moan and a shudder that seemed to shake her whole body. And Morgana withdrew her fingers from her, but still continuing rubbing her thumb softly against her friend's clit.

'Sweet Charis,' Morgana breathed, caressing Charis' back with her free hand. 'Sweet, sweet Charis.'

Still breathing heavily, Charis looked up at her friend and then down at her hand that was still in Morgana's knickers. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'You distracted me.'

Morgana smiled. 'It's alright.' It really was. Giving pleasure to her very best friend had been the most satisfying thing she had done in months. She would have been more than happy to just wrap Charis in her arms now and hold her, just hold her.

But Charis had other plans. She leant forwards and started nibbling at Morgana's collarbone while her fingers once more started drumming against Morgana's clit.

Morgana willed herself to relax. She had been with girls before, at the orphanage, but she had never allowed a girl to touch her in such a way. Only one person had ever touched her like this. But him, she did not want to think of now.

Charis' fingers were now swirling circles around Morgana's swollen clit, and she heard her friend breathing heavily and felt her digging her fingers into her shoulders. And she urged her onwards, swirling faster and applying more pressure.

As her orgasm hit, Morgana buried her face as Charis' neck. The sensation was almost too much to bear. She hadn't managed to make herself peak for months, and now her whole body was tingling, and her heart was racing. And Charis held her close, gently stroking her.

The two girls held on to each other for a while, rocking softly and saying nothing. Morgana was so happy that it hurt, and she did not know if she wanted to laugh or cry. And Charis suddenly felt like she understood what the phrase sexual healing meant. What they had both shared was indeed a form of healing, she decided as she lay warm and contented in Morgana's arms. Never before had they been as close as they were now, or shared something so deep and intimate. They had opened up to each other physically to provide comfort from the emotional pain that surrounded them.

After a while, Charis felt Morgana shift in her arms and felt something warm and soft around her shoulders. She noticed that Morgana had pulled up her school robe from behind her and had wrapped it around her shoulders. She also noticed a muscle twitch at her friend's jaw.

'Are you OK?' Charis asked, a tone of concern in her voice.

'Yes,' Morgana replied, freeing herself gently from her embrace and grabbing her clothes. 'I'm OK.'

'You sure?' Suddenly, Charis felt uncertain. Had she done something wrong? Was Morgana angry with her?

But as Morgana turned towards her again, her features were soft, and the look in her eyes was gentler than ever before.

'Yes, Charis. I am sure,' she whispered and caressed her friend's cheek with her fingers. Their eyes locked, and for the tiniest of moments, Charis thought Morgana was going to kiss her. But instead, Morgana caressed her lips with her thumb, and a sad smile appeared on her face.

'Will you promise me something, Charis?'

Charis blinked fiercely. She had never seen Morgana like this, so soft, so gentle, so vulnerable.

'Anything,' she whispered.

'Don't be angry with me when I walk away,' Morgana said silently, a pleading look in her eyes. 'And don't be sad. I don't regret this. I really don't.'

'Me either,' Charis breathed. There was a lump in her throat that made it difficult to speak.

And the shaking breath that Morgana took told her that her best friend felt the same. 'Charis, I...' There was so much Morgana wanted to say, but she couldn't find the right words. She had never been good at expressing her feelings, and what she was feeling now was almost impossible for her to grasp.

Thankfully, Charis understood. 'You don't have to say anything, Morgana,' she said. And she meant it. Instead, she wrapped her arms around her friend.

'I'm sorry I cannot give you what you deserve, Star Sister,' Morgana whispered, almost too quietly for Charis to hear. And Charis pretended that she had not heard. Maybe, this would make it easier for Morgana.

Once more, Morgana caressed Charis' cheek. 'I will miss you,' she said.

'I will miss you, too.' The tears were now streaming down Charis' face, and she did not even try to hold them back. She knew that Morgana would understand why she was crying, just as she understood why Morgana was unable to shed her tears.

'Will I see you tomorrow?' she called after her friend as Morgana had reached the door. It was a silly question to ask, but she needed some kind of reassurance.

Morgana turned to look at her friend. 'Breakfast's at eight, little Ravenclaw. I'll make sure to sit where you can see me from your table.'

Once more, Morgana smiled at Charis and then softly closed the door behind her.

Epilogue

Chapter 41 of 41

Two girls. Two Houses. One obsession.

In their final year at Hogwarts, two very different girls face their own battle with the continuing rise of the Dark Lord, encountering along the way shattered friendships, broken hearts, a charming blond Death Eater with a twisted plan, and a secret that could rock the foundations of the Wizarding world. Once more, the stern Potions master will have to do the impossible and offer his protection. Will he succeed?

Set during Harry Potter and The Order Of The Phoenix and mostly canon compliant.

Albus Dumbledore sighed as he looked out of his office window and over the Great Lake, glinting in the bright early summer sunlight, and stroked his beard thoughtfully. What a year! What a year, indeed.

His reinstatement as Headmaster of Hogwarts had come not a moment too soon. Umbridge's far from pedagogic teaching methods had certainly disrupted most of the students' DADA lessons, reflected in some very disappointing OWL and NEWT grades in the subject. All apart from those who had been involved in Harry Potter's extra-curricular group, that was, and a couple of diligent students that had practiced on their own.

Ah, Harry. Once again, the boy had shown himself to be as headstrong as his father and yet carried ever more weight on his young shoulders in another trying year. The Occlumency lessons had been doomed to failure from the very start, of course, but Dumbledore had to be seen to be doing something to protect the boy. And as for the DA... Dumbledore smiled as he watched a flock of Thestrals circling the treetops of the Forbidden Forest. A reckless idea, yes, but an idea worthy of a Gryffindor. To see such overwhelming support from pupils from differing Houses was just what had been needed to combat the iron fist of Umbridge's leadership and to unite Hogwarts from within, just as the Sorting Hat had mentioned in its song. To be sure, Harry's father would be proud of him for his involvement in the resistance. His godfather, too.

At the thought of Sirius, Dumbledore gave another sigh. That was the biggest hardship Harry had to bear, without a doubt. Harry, he was pretty sure, would face Voldemort a thousand times over if it meant he could bring Sirius back from beyond the veil. It was so cruel for the boy to lose the closest person to a family member he had ever known, in such a barbaric way. They had only had a few short years together, snatching time here and there at Grimmauld Place. Sirius had been one of the few links between Harry and his parents and had simultaneously been like a brother and a father to him. Sirius did not deserve such a death. He had battled valiantly, like a true Gryffindor.

Sirius was being mourned by another family member, of course. Charis Byrne. The knowledge that Bellatrix Lestrange had killed him had certainly shocked the girl deeply. Charis, like Harry, had deserved more time with her new-found relative. And, like Harry, she had also suffered great hardships in the last year, as had her friend, Morgana. But Dumbledore knew there would be much more sacrifice and suffering to bear by all before the war ended.

Charis and Morgana had shown themselves to be resilient and brave, experiencing things that no seventeen-year-old should face. And the Order needed all the help it could get in the battle against Voldemort. The two girls were certainly worthy candidates for future membership. Not only had they already shown their allegiance to the light, but their future careers at the Ministry would also make them useful allies. Morgana would start her Auror training in a few weeks' time, and Charis, with the full backing and recommendation of her proud Head of House, would be starting out at the Department of Mysteries. Dumbledore had heard that she wanted to become an Unspeakable, but for now he was sure she would be thrown into the deep end on a massive clean-up operation.

The Department of Mysteries had indeed been in a sorry state when Dumbledore, Harry and the others had finally left. Hundreds, if not thousands, of prophecies had been smashed and were in need of retrieval. The Time Room had had many rare and precious instruments destroyed, and the sheer amount of damage done to the place was staggering. Yes, Dumbledore thought, there was plenty of work to be done there alright, and Charis would no doubt work hard to help build the department back up again and be privy to sensitive and most likely useful information along the way.

Morgana would also put her all into her Auror training, of that Dumbledore had no doubt. She had a sense of justice and cool logic that should make her a fine Auror, and she would be working alongside other Order members. As for her ties to the Malfoys, they would come in handy as well.

Yes, joining the Order should be a natural step for both girls and very useful for the Order.

Dumbledore reached forward for his speckled quill and began scratching away at a piece of parchment, addressing it to Morgana and sealing it with his own personal phoenix crest before writing an identical letter to Charis and sealing it in the very same way. Then he opened the top drawer of his desk and carefully placed the two letters inside. For now, the girls needed to rest. They would be called back to war soon enough.

* * *

With a brisk wave of her wand, the last of Charis' clothes folded themselves neatly and landed in a pile on top of the tidy pile of books in her trunk. She double-checked her bedside cabinet, just to be sure, but it was already cleared and empty. Then she closed and locked her trunk with another flick of her wand as Lily mewed from her wicker basket on the bed.

With a sigh, Charis looked around her now-empty dorm. So this was it, then. She was finally ready to leave Hogwarts.

Except she wasn't ready. Not really.

She was scared. Scared of leaving the comfort and safety of the wonderful Scottish castle; scared of a future with Voldemort's spectre looming over it; and, mostly, she was scared of growing apart from her best friend.

The evening she and Morgana had spent together in the Room of Requirement had been in her thoughts almost constantly over the last few weeks. No matter what they had gone through before, this had moved their friendship on to an even deeper level. But it felt so poignant, so meaningful, that it almost felt like a goodbye.

Charis did not want to say goodbye, either to her friend or to this chapter of her life. And she did not want to say goodbye to Snape, either.

Several times over the last week she had hovered near the entrance of the dungeons, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Potions master to apologise and take farewell. But her throat had gone dry and she had not been able to make herself take the steps that led down to his study. What if he shouted at her, or dismissed her with sarcasm and cruelty? Charis didn't think her fragile heart could take yet another rejection from him, and so she had retreated back to the sanctuary of Ravenclaw Tower with her heavy heart full of unsaid sentiments and goodbyes.

I'm being silly, she thought to herself. She should be looking forward to the rest of her life: to an exciting job at the Ministry, her own place in London and the freedom to be truly independent.

But the confirmation of Voldemort's return made her feel frightened, and the knowledge of Sirius' death at Bellatrix's hands made her feel vulnerable and fearful of a second attack.

We're all in danger now, she reminded herself. Pure-blood or not, the only thing it came down to was whether you supported Voldemort or whether you didn't. The time had come to choose sides. Charis' allegiance was clear and would have been regardless of her near-death experience at the hands of her psychotic cousin. But she could not let the death of Sirius pass without meaning. She had to pick herself up and try to embrace the future, to try and do whatever she could to make her own stand against the Dark, no matter how scared she was.

Stashing her wand in her robes and picking up the wicker basket that contained her sweet little white cat, Charis took a deep breath, looked around the room once more and then left Ravenclaw Tower for the last time.

Meanwhile, her best friend sat on her bed in the Slytherin dormitory. She was the last student left. Not that it was in any way difficult for Morgana to leave the place that had been home to her for the last seven years. She had broken her ties with Slytherin House a long time ago. Well, not with Slytherin per se. She was still proud of her Sorting, but most of the people in her House she wanted nothing to do with. Only her Head of House would she keep in good memory. In his own special way, he had been kind to her. And Morgana was grateful for it.

No, leaving the dungeons was easy. What made Morgana lag back was the fear of having to say goodbye, to Hogwarts, to a more or less secure life and to her best friend. Surely, Charis would want her to share a compartment with her on the train. Surely, Charis would want to hug her goodbye at King's Cross. And as much as Morgana loved her friend, she feared that she would not be able to bid Charis farewell in the way she deserved.

What they had shared in the Room of Requirement had changed everything. Morgana had bared her soul that day, and what she had seen had scared her. All the emotions that had welled up inside her had been too much to handle. And she had recoiled and hidden away. She had not avoided Charis; her heart had not allowed her to. But whenever possible, she had snuck out of the castle and walked along the shore of the lake, alone with her thoughts.

The creaking of the hinges of her trunk made Morgana look up. 'Silvy, leave it alone. I did pack everything.'

The little elf blushed. 'Silvy just wants to make sure.'

'I know you do.'

Morgana smiled at her elf as the little creature once more dived into the trunk to make sure she had really packed everything. She had told Silvy that she would not have to come along to London and that she could stay at Hogwarts if she wanted to, where she had other elves to socialise with. But Silvy wouldn't have it. She would come along to London and move into the little flat that Morgana had rented right at the corner of Diagon and Knockturn Alley. Flat was stretching it, though. It was a room with a tiny window, let by a crazy old witch who talked to herself and smelled of lavender. A dodgy place, but it would have to do for now. Morgana couldn't afford anything else, and once Auror training started, she would move into one of the Ministry-owned flats further up Diagon Alley.

Wistfully, she thought of the promises she had been given: a flat in Diagon Alley and all the riches money could buy. Would Lucius have kept his promises if she had carried their child to term? Or would he just have taken the babe and gotten rid of her?

Morgana sighed. She knew she should not be having those thoughts. But she couldn't help it.

'Miss Morgana will miss the train,' Silvy suddenly piped up. 'Miss Morgana must leave now.'

Morgana smiled at the little elf and got up from her bed. It was certainly high time to leave. And she was late enough to be sure that she would be the last student to leave and able to take farewell of the castle on her own.

Despite it being early summer, Snape wrapped his black cloak tighter around himself. The wind seemed icy cold on top of the Astronomy Tower. But he could stand the cold. What he wanted to see from up there was worth getting pneumonia for.

He peered down onto the ground. There they were, the students of Hogwarts, making their way towards Hogsmeade from where the train would take them all home. They walked in small groups: Slytherins far away from Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws in between; the Gobstones club and the Charms club; the former members of the Inquisitorial Squad, the DA. But none of those groups was of any interest to Snape. What he was looking for was a mop of blonde hair.

After a while, he spotted her. She was walking beside a tall boy, most probably Jack Morrissey, carrying a wicker basket. Trust Charis to not send her beloved cat ahead with all the other animals on Hagrid's cart. Of course she would carry the little creature to the station. Snape couldn't help but smile. Charis was certainly one of the sweetest students Hogwarts had ever seen.

She had done well in her exams, of course. As expected of a diligent Ravenclaw, she had achieved high marks in all her subjects. But what had impressed Snape the most had been her DADA skills. He had been supervising another pair of students during the practical exam but had kept an eye on Charis from the other side of the Great Hall. He had seen her defensive spells, and he had seen her Patronus. She had not been able to keep the graceful black panther in shape for more than a couple of moments, but it had been enough to make the examiner clap his hands and Snape to hide a smile.

He was almost a little disappointed that Charis had not come down to the dungeons to say goodbye. But then again, what had he expected? After all that girl had been through over the last couple of months, why would she even spare a thought for her dour Potions master, who certainly had not treated her in the best of ways? And how would he have reacted if she had come down to see him? As he always did, most probably; instead of telling her what she truly meant to him, he would have sneered at her and called her sentimental. So maybe, it was just as well that they had not said goodbye to each other.

He would most likely see her soon again, anyway. If Dumbledore stuck to his plan to invite Morgana to join the Order of the Phoenix, it would certainly not take long until Charis would join as well. It would take a braver and smarter man than Albus Dumbledore to keep the two Star Sisters apart.

Snape once more scanned the groups of leaving students. But this time, he was looking for short, red hair. When he found her, she was walking at the back of a group of Slytherins; head bent and cloak billowing in the wind.

How many times had he also left the castle like that, Snape wondered, with his eyes firmly on his shoes and no one to walk with? If she wanted to, Morgana could walk with Charis and Jack, Snape was certain of that. But most probably, she had chosen to walk alone. Just as she had chosen to be on her own over the last couple of days. Ever since the morning in Dumbledore's office, Morgana could be seen walking through the grounds by herself, and her thoughts had always seemed to be far, far away. She wasn't looking forward to leaving Hogwarts, Snape knew that. She had not even smiled when he had called her to his office to tell her that she had been accepted to Auror training. How many dark memories were keeping her from smiling, Snape wondered. And would she soon find a happy memory strong enough to complete the only task she had failed during her practical DADA exam, producing a corporeal Patronus?

Snape sighed in relief as he saw Charis and Jack fall back and eventually come to a halt. He even allowed himself a tiny smile as Charis thrust the cat basket at Jack and opened her arms to embrace her Slytherin friend. And his smile broadened as he saw Morgana return the hug instead of struggling. Those two girls were good for each other, Snape knew that. And it was important that they did not grow apart, even now when they were leaving school and were each about to start a life of their own.

'Professor Snape, sir?'

Snape looked down at the little elf that was tugging at his cloak. 'Have you been successful, Silvy?' he asked.

Silvy nodded eagerly. 'Silvy has wrapped both mirrors carefully and has put them between socks in Miss Charis' and Miss Morgana's trunks. Silvy has not been seen by anyone.'

'Good. Very good.'

The elf bowed low to Snape, smiling happily at the praise of a job well done, before Disapparating with a pop.

Once more, Snape let his gaze wander towards the two girls. He had not been able to tell them he was sorry for his lack of control or his inability to protect them. He had not been able to let them know how important they were to him. And he had not even had a chance to say goodbye. He would soon see them again, for sure. He would not be their teacher any longer and they not his students. But still, he would feel responsible for them.

Snape smiled again as he saw the girls walk side by side through the gates. They might not be able to spend every day together from now on, but at least the mirrors would help them keep in touch. And a third mirror, which lay safely in the bottom drawer of his desk, would enable him to keep an eye on his two girls.

END OF PART ONE

As it is time to say goodbye to the Star Sisters and their Potions master, it is also time to say Thank You to a couple of people:

We would like to thank J.K. Rowling for having created the Potter universe and for her acceptance of the phenomena of Fan Fiction. She has given us the perfect playground and lets us use the toys without fear of reprove.

We would also like to thank our busy beta, Apple Blossom. We hope that we didn't distract her too much from her studies. It was her that gave us the courage to post this to a wider audience in the first place.

Last but not least, we would like to thank our readers and faithful reviewers. It is you who have made this all worthwhile and spurred us on to write over two hundred thousand words, more than we had ever imagined when we first began.

Snape and the girls are now taking a well deserved summer break, while sevs_starsisters take out their notebooks and start scribbling away on part two of their story. So if you want to know what life has in store for the girls, what important tasks they will have to carry out for the Order and, maybe most importantly, if love will blossom, keep your eyes open for the next instalment.