

Shooting Stars

by sevs_starsisters

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

I: The Gathering Storm

Chapter 1 of 37

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Chapter I: The Gathering Storm

Charis Byrne yawned widely, disturbing the little white cat that had been sleeping peacefully on her lap. The cat in turn voiced her protest at the rude awakening with a delicate little mew, followed by a yawn of her own. Charis stroked the cat's silky fur and adjusted the Ravenclaw-blue Snuggie around them both. It didn't seem quite right to be all wrapped up in the warm fabric in the middle of July, but the weather was dismal; it was chilly, and the thick mist outside made it almost impossible to tell what time of day it was.

Charis had been back at her parents' house in Somerset now for about two weeks, and as much as she missed Hogwarts and her friends, she had been in desperate need of a break after what had felt like a relentless few months.

This Saturday afternoon, she had been watching "'Allo 'Allo!" repeats on Muggle television with her father and had realised that she'd actually missed television and the cosy silence of watching it with her parents. Her father was now snoring gently on the sofa, his grubby hands folded across his beer-belly. Charis couldn't help but smile. A few pints at the pub at lunchtime were always enough to make him sleep like a baby all afternoon.

Charis yawned once more. It seemed to her that she'd done very little apart from eat, sleep, and watch television since she got back from Hogwarts, but her mother had told her that she needed the rest. Her mother wasn't wrong. What with the stress of the NEWT examinations, the shock of her newfound Wizarding heritage, the terror of an assassination attempt, the news of Harry Potter coming face-to-face with Lord Voldemort at the Ministry and her cousin Sirius' death in the following fight, and the pain of her complicated love life, Charis had not had much time to rest in her final year at Hogwarts. Having the chance to relax at her parents' therefore had been worth more than all the Galleons in Gringotts.

Slowly, back in the comfort and safety of the Muggle world, she'd eventually been able to shake the post-exam stress and had even got her head around being related to the Blacks, one of the oldest and darkest Wizarding families in Britain. And as much as she wanted to ask her father questions about his side of the family, the side that had married into the Blacks, Charis felt she could not. Her father had always become sullen and withdrawn when talking about his own parents. From what she had managed to gather, her father had had a bad relationship with her grandfather, and Charis herself had never known her grandfather as he'd died before she was even born. As a result, Charis had many unanswered questions, and she felt she could not discuss her Wizarding roots with her parents without upsetting them. Charis also did not want to confess that she'd almost been killed by one of their relations. She didn't want to think how angry that would make her father. And so, she held her peace, pretending all was well and normal in her magical life.

The attack on Charis' life had left her badly shaken, though, as had the death of her cousin, Sirius, whom she'd met only once, and her poor heart was still bruised from

being broken. The news that Lord Voldemort was gaining power more quickly than ever had made her even more fearful for her life. And yesterday, she had received a letter that had only added to her pile of worries.

Charis was due to start at the Ministry of Magic as a trainee Unspeakable at the beginning of September, grades permitting. Professor Flitwick, her Head of House, had personally written a letter to her new boss with a glowing reference. However, the chaos at the Ministry a few weeks ago had rather changed those plans. The Hall of Prophecy was a mess, and the whole of the Department of Mysteries was in disarray. The Ministry had therefore written to Charis asking if she could start as soon as possible, in order to help with the massive clean-up operation.

Charis herself was of two minds about this, and had so far not replied to the letter. As much as she was pleased that the Ministry were keen to have her on board already, even before she had received her NEWT grades, and she was excited about starting her first job, another part of her was sad about cutting her vacation short. She might not have been doing anything particularly exciting over the last few weeks but she'd loved spending time with her parents and the break from reality it had offered. Charis was not sure if she felt ready to become a "grown up" just yet and be plunged headlong into the working world, especially now there would undoubtedly be dark times ahead for witches and wizards. And then there was accommodation to sort out, and work robes to buy, not to mention returning to the place where Sirius had been killed... Charis just wasn't sure she had the energy for it. It was easier just to eat, sleep and watch television, and not think about any of it. She felt safe in the Muggle world.

Charis shook her head. She knew that was not the right attitude. She should be jumping at the chance to have her independence at last and forge a career for herself. And as for feeling safe in the Muggle world, she knew that this was nothing but an illusion. If Lord Voldemort returned to power, no one would be safe. She couldn't just hide away forever and pretend none of it was happening. She needed to stand up and fight if the time came; at the very least, for Sirius. Sighing, she decided that she would reply to the Ministry's letter tonight, letting them know she would be prepared to start as soon as she had found accommodation.

There was another reason that Charis was reluctant to rejoin the Wizarding world, however. And that reason was her best friend, Morgana. They'd not been in touch since saying goodbye from the Hogwarts Express a fortnight ago. Charis knew Morgana had been busy ever since getting settled in her flat in London and getting ready to pursue a career of her own at the Ministry, as an Auror. Charis had been hoping to receive a letter from Morgana with her new address by now, but so far she'd received nothing. Charis could not help but feel a little hurt by this, and wondered if their "incident" in the Room of Requirement had changed their friendship once and for all.

No, Morgana is just busy, Charis told herself, toying idly with the silver star that lay habitually at her throat. She had made herself and Morgana an identical pair of star necklaces back at the start of their seventh year and, apart from a brief spell when she and Morgana had fallen out, neither of them had ever taken it off. Since their first year, they'd referred to each other as the Star Sisters, and indeed for most of their years at Hogwarts they had been closer than any siblings. But the last year had brought jealousy, competition, arguments and strife. Both Charis and Morgana had had their own burdens to bear. And at some points, Charis had feared that she had lost her best friend forever.

Charis held up the little silver star and watched as it reflected the evening sunlight. She wondered if Morgana still wore her necklace, too. And she also wondered if she and Morgana would call each other the Star Sisters ever again.

* * *

Swiftly, a dark-clad figure slunk around a corner in Knockturn Alley, unnoticed by anyone. There weren't many people out on the street that close to dawn, and the few people who did frequent the dark alleys and shady shops of Knockturn Alley at such an ungodly hour knew better than to put their noses in other people's business. And so the young woman who was hiding her red hair and pale face under a heavy hood wasn't bothered by anyone and was once more able to leave Knockturn Alley without having been recognised. Just as well. Alastor Moody would most probably not approve of one of his trainee Aurors-to-be spending her nights in the shiftiest neighbourhood of the Wizarding world.

Once back in Diagon Alley, Morgana Belakane Vanished her hooded cloak and headed for the bakery where a bag of freshly baked croissants was already waiting for her. The shop owner had been surprised at her early visit a fortnight ago, when she had showed up for the first time. Now he had become used to her and found it quite sweet that a seventeen-year-old girl would get up so early to buy breakfast for her landlady, even on a chilly Sunday morning, when other girls her age were barely home from the pub yet. Little did he know, of course, that Morgana had been up for most of the night, lurking in the shadows of Knockturn Alley, eavesdropping on whispered conversations and desperately hoping she would hear anything new about Lucius Malfoy.

Lucius' trial had been held ten days ago, and he had been shipped off to Azkaban with the other Death Eaters that had been caught at the Ministry. The trial had been held behind closed doors, and while the *Daily Prophet* had published all the details about the other sentences, they had not written much about Lucius. And now Morgana was desperate to find out for how long Lucius had been put away and if his trial had been about the incident at the Ministry only. She, if anyone, knew that Lucius Malfoy had more crimes to atone for.

With a fake smile, Morgana thanked the shop owner for the croissants and headed towards the run-down building at the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley where she was renting a room. Her heart was heavy that morning. She had heard that Lucius had been sentenced to several years in Azkaban, and although she knew that he deserved it, Morgana couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He had been good to her once, and she had loved him. She still did. Why else would every piece of her broken heart still ache for him?

'Morgana, is that you?'

Morgana closed her eyes and sighed. She had hoped that her landlady would still be asleep so she would have time to gather her thoughts. By Merlin, it was five-thirty in the morning! But Madam Nutkins was already up. Just as the owner of the bakery, she, too, had grown used to Morgana bringing breakfast.

'You are such a good child,' Madam Nutkins exclaimed as she appeared in the door that led to the kitchen. 'Getting up before dawn to please your poor, old landlady.'

Morgana managed to magic yet another fake smile onto her lips. Her alibi was once more waterproof. Not that she was answerable to the old woman. She was, after all, of age and merely renting a room here for some weeks. But her landlady was a sweet woman and would certainly become very worried if she learnt of Morgana's nightly excursions. And Morgana didn't want Madam Nutkins to worry. In fact, she didn't want anyone to worry for her. She was doing alright, she told herself.

'The kettle is already on,' Madam Nutkins announced and took the paper bag from Morgana's hand. 'Go get changed.'

Morgana suppressed a grin. Madam Nutkins had this crazy rule about not wearing outdoor clothes in the kitchen or the sitting room. A couple of days ago, she had even given Morgana a hideous, purple housecoat and huge woolly socks which she expected the girl to wear in the flat. 'Cosy,' she had said, and Morgana had done her best not to roll her eyes and to resist the urge to rent another room. Not that she could have afforded one anyway.

Staying with Madam Nutkins was overall a good deal. Morgana's room was cheap, although somewhat shabby. But the roof kept the rain out, and the bed was warm and comfortable. The old witch had tea ready at five-thirty every night and insisted on Morgana eating with her, which meant one warm meal for free every day. Indeed a good deal. And so Morgana played by the rules, even if it meant wearing a housecoat.

Back in her room, she was greeted by a somewhat grumpy house-elf.

'Miss Morgana should not do that,' Silvy piped. 'Miss Morgana should not put wards on the door.'

Morgana looked down at the little creature. She had finally convinced the elf that clothes were better than tea-towels and pillowcases, but the elf's taste in fashion made her sometimes wish she hadn't. Today, Silvy was wearing neon-green slacks and a pink children's T-shirt with hideous kittens on it.

'The wards are not for you, Silvy, you know that,' she explained once more. This seemed to become a habit, just like the buying of croissants. 'You know you can leave whenever you want.'

'Silvy will not leave Miss Morgana.'

Morgana sighed at the elf's sniffing tone. No matter how many times she tried to explain to Silvy that her living conditions were now different, that she was free and could do whatever she wanted, the little creature was so used to being a mere piece of property that she did not know how to handle her freedom. Hence, when Morgana left her room and warded the door from the outside, Silvy would stay in the room, waiting for her mistress' return. Silvy didn't understand that Morgana didn't mean to lock her in but warded the door to keep everyone else out.

'Madam Nutkins is in the kitchen, Silvy,' Morgana pointed out. Today she was not in the mood to argue with the elf. 'Why don't you go and make yourself useful?'

The word useful did the trick, as usual. Silvy beamed, bowed and disappeared with a crack, leaving Morgana alone in her room.

Silly little thing, Morgana thought affectionately. The little elf had no idea how much she meant to Morgana. And if Morgana told her, Silvy would probably burst into tears. Hence, Morgana held her peace. It seemed rather crazy anyway to tell an elf that she was one's best friend. One's only friend. Ever since she had left Hogwarts, Morgana had not spoken to anyone she had known from school. Her House mates, she cared little about, and Charis was at her Muggle home, far away from any Floo. Morgana could have written a letter, of course, and she had even started one. But all she had been able to write had been 'I miss you'. And that had seemed far too soppy to send.

Morgana's hand went automatically to her throat, and her fingers closed around the star-shaped pendent she was carrying on her necklace. Charis had put a spell on Morgana's and her own star a year ago. Back then, all the girls had to do was to close their fingers around their stars and think of one another to make the stars glow. But Morgana's star had not glowed for a while now. Most probably, the charm was wearing off. Either that or Charis wasn't thinking of her at all anymore. Maybe, she wasn't even wearing her necklace anymore.

Morgana sighed. She would understand if Charis were angry. After all, Morgana had promised her to send an owl as soon as she had settled into her new home. But she hadn't. And she had to admit that the true reason for her not writing to her best friend was not just the lack of words. There was a war coming, a war in which Muggle-borns like Charis were a target; the whispers in Knockturn Alley were quite clear about that. And Morgana hoped that if Charis thought that there was no one waiting for her in the Wizarding world, not even her best friend, she would not return but stay in the Muggle world and thus be safe, for a while at least. Morgana did not want to be the reason for Charis to return. If something happened to the sweet blonde Ravenclaw, Morgana would not be able to live with the guilt. She already had one innocent life on her conscience.

Stubbornly, Morgana blinked back the tears that were burning in her eyes and started removing her outdoor clothes, all of them of the deepest of black. She had not worn any other colour since the day she had taken off her emerald green Slytherin scarf. The black colour helped her to become invisible. And today was one of those days when she really did not want to be seen by anyone. But she also felt like making her old landlady smile and would therefore wear the ghastly, purple housecoat.

Once she had pulled it on, Morgana reached under the fabric and pulled up Charis' necklace. She always wore it visible. It was the least she could do. The second necklace she wore, however, she always kept carefully hidden under her clothes. The snake pendent was not for anyone to see.

* * *

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away in the Headmaster's office situated atop a turret in the magical castle of Hogwarts, Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore had troubles of their own to contend with, and they were not about breakfast. Snape had just finished a very complex spell over the Headmaster's cursed hand. The hand itself was blackened and wizened and looked like it belonged to a dead person. Snape withdrew his wand, wincing and wrinkling his not inconsiderable nose.

'Are you quite sure you're in no pain, Headmaster?' he asked, his mouth set grimly.

Dumbledore looked up at his soon-to-be ex-Potions master over the brim of his half-moon glasses, his blue eyes twinkling. 'Now, now, dear Severus, do I detect a note of real concern in your voice?' He smiled.

Snape huffed impatiently. Trust the old man to not take the news of his impending death due to meddling with a cursed ring seriously!

'My concern is to whether or not you are going to drop dead within the next two months,' Snape replied icily. 'It was foolish and irresponsible to try and break that curse on the ring alone!'

Dumbledore's mouth twitched at this, and he inclined his head slightly.

'Mind you,' Snape continued, his lip curling, 'if you did drop down dead, it would at least save either Draco or me the inconvenience of killing you ourselves.'

'I have no intention of dropping dead any time soon, Severus,' the Headmaster replied calmly. 'There are still many things I have to show young Harry. And as we have discussed before, you will HAVE to kill me, when the time comes. I need you to become Voldemort's most trusted, most loyal follower once more. Not only will Voldemort trust you but everyone else will therefore believe you're his man through and through.'

Snape looked away from the old man. Of course, there was no other way. Of course, he'd have to slip into Draco's shoes and complete the task himself. But it didn't mean that Snape had to like it, even if he'd fantasised many times about blowing the meddling old man to smithereens.

'Bellatrix had her doubts about me,' Snape confirmed, 'but once I had taken the Vow with Narcissa, even she was convinced of my loyalty.'

'Very good, Severus. Who would have thought that dear Bella's idea would ever turn out to be good for the Order? The Unbreakable Vow. Ingenious! It really does save us rather a lot of hassle in the long run. And if I am to be killed, I would rather it be at the hands of someone I trust implicitly, rather than poor young Draco.' He smiled benignly at the younger wizard.

'Yes. I am almost as thrilled with the prospect of taking your life as you are, Headmaster,' Snape replied dryly, glowering. The phrasing "poor young Draco" had struck a nerve. Did Dumbledore not care about him, Snape wondered. Did it simply not matter to the old man what becoming a murderer would do to Snape and his soul?

'My only wish, however, is that I could get it out of the way and do it right now,' Snape added in a sour tone. 'One wrongly pronounced spell, and that hand of yours will kill you within a couple of days.'

'That would be most inconvenient, Severus,' answered Dumbledore, deliberately missing the point. 'Draco must be given the chance to prove himself before his master. We will have to let him try. Do you have any idea yet about his plans?'

'It's too early to say. The boy is stubborn; he will not accept my help. He feels it is his task and his alone. He wants to bring the name of Malfoy back in the Dark Lord's good books after Lucius' mistake with the prophecy.'

Dumbledore inhaled slowly through his nose. 'If only there were someone in Slytherin house who we could trust, someone who could get close to Draco and inform us about his plans.' He cocked his head to one side, as if thinking very hard.

Snape, however, narrowed his black eyes suspiciously. He'd been expecting something like this. But he stayed silent, watching the headmaster beadily.

Dumbledore stroked his beard before continuing. 'A girl, perhaps? I hear Draco is rather fond of Miss Parkinson, but a girl of her character is not what I had in mind.' The Headmaster looked directly at Snape now, his face so innocent that not even butter could have melted in his mouth. 'You wouldn't happen to know of anyone, would you? Someone who could get close to Draco during the summer?'

Snape knew full well who Dumbledore was getting at, but hell would freeze over before he would play along with his insidious little game. 'No idea, Headmaster,' he said lightly instead.

Dumbledore, however, did not give up easily. 'Someone young,' he continued musingly. 'Someone we know is on our side. Someone cunning and trustworthy.'

'There is no one within Slytherin house that fits that description, Headmaster,' Snape snapped, losing patience. 'You know as well as I that the flanks of Slytherin House have been filled with the offspring of Death Eaters for years.'

'With certain exceptions,' Dumbledore replied calmly, his eyes twinkling once more.

Once again, Snape stayed silent, a black scowl etched on his stern features.

'I've spoken to Alastor Moody earlier today,' Dumbledore informed him brightly, changing topics. 'It seems that he is planning to be especially hard on this year's Auror trainees. I hope they're up for the challenge. Merlin knows we need good people on our side.'

Snape narrowed his eyes once more. The old man was infuriating! He was beating around more bushes than a frisky Bowtruckle! 'If you have something to say, Headmaster, I suggest you come out and say it!' he hissed.

Dumbledore merely gave Snape another twinkling, innocent look at this whilst Snape glared at him coldly.

'Tea?' the old man asked mildly, picking up a huge white teapot. He could almost hear Snape's teeth grinding in frustration.

'What of Horace Slughorn, Headmaster?' Snape asked pointedly, flatly ignoring the Headmaster's hospitality and taking a leaf out of Dumbledore's book. He, too, could change topics in the blink of an eye. 'Have you managed to coax him out of retirement yet?'

'I have my plans, Severus. I will be offering him some bait.' Dumbledore poured himself a large cup of tea, setting the teapot down on his desk delicately.

'Bait?' Snape scoffed. 'It will take more than crystallised pineapple to get Slughorn back inside Hogwarts.'

'Oh, my bait is a little bit bigger than crystallised pineapple,' the old man smiled contentedly, now adding milk into his tea from a small white milk jug.

'Well, you'd better get a move on because, as many and varied as my talents are, I cannot be expected to teach two classes simultaneously next year!'

'Do not worry, dear Severus,' Dumbledore replied, adding two sugar cubes into his tea and stirring methodically. 'I am very well aware of the fact that you will have your hands full with teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts.' He paused. 'Remember, Defence only.'

Snape shot Dumbledore a look so fierce it could have shamed a Hippogriff. 'What are you implying, Headmaster? That I will teach first years how to conjure the Dark Mark?' he asked in a low, silky voice.

'I am just saying that you have to be prepared in case you get, how shall we say, tempted.'

'Tempted,' Snape repeated in a cold, sarcastic voice. 'Well, now you come to mention it, it has been a while since I've thrown *Drucio*.'

And if you keep this up, old man, I'll hit you with one right between the eyes she thought savagely.

'You will have your chance to cast an Unforgivable Curse on me soon enough, Severus,' the Headmaster said calmly and took a sip of his tea.

'And what a delightful day that will be,' Snape snapped in response.

'Meanwhile, I suggest you focus your energy on other things. For example, do an old and fragile man a favour and carry a letter to the owlery for him, would you?'

Old and fragile, my foot, Snape thought sourly. 'Anything else you need, Headmaster? Would you like me to run you a relaxing lavender bath? Or a foot rub, maybe?'

'Those tasks I entrust a house-elf with. That letter, however, is rather important to me.' His tone was serious, now.

Wordlessly, Snape extended his hand. Why he was even playing along, he did not know. The Hogwarts house-elves could be trusted with any kind of tasks. Any of them would make sure that this letter ended up in the owlery and was carried off by the best owl available. Any elf would guard that letter with their life. Hence, it was more than clear that Dumbledore wanted Snape to know for whom the letter was destined.

'I appreciate it a lot, Severus,' Dumbledore said, smiling, and started rummaging in the top drawer of his desk, eventually producing two letters. He read both addresses, weighed the letters in his hands and then put one back into the drawer. The other one he reached out towards his new Defence teacher. 'Our most trustworthy owl, if you please.'

Snape just stared at the letter, making no effort to take it. He had been right then. The old puppet master had taken up the strings again.

'Is something the matter, Severus?' Dumbledore asked, placing the letter on to Snape's outstretched hand. The hand twitched, and the letter landed on the desk, the address clearly visible to both men.

'Headmaster,' Snape started. 'surely you cannot be thinking of asking the Belakane girl to spy on Draco Malfoy?'

'Come, now, whatever are you thinking of me?'

Snape bit back a reply. Dumbledore, that manipulating old bastard, would sell his own grandmother if it helped him with his plans.

'I want to warn you, Headmaster, that sending Morgana to Malfoy Manor would be foolhardy in the extreme. She and Draco can't stand each other. The whole operation would be counter-productive, not to mention risky for a trainee Auror.'

Dumbledore looked intently at Snape, who felt the muscles in his neck tighten. He had not meant to blurt out the girl's first name. Nor had he meant to sound that protective. But it was too late now.

'Trust me, Severus,' Dumbledore explained, 'I have not made my choice on a whim. I have my reasons for sending Morgana. But for the plan to succeed, I am afraid that I will once more have to ask for your assistance. I need you to talk to Narcissa.'

'And tell her what?'

'I need you to tell her that Morgana's Auror training is nothing but a cover. Tell her that Voldemort is very interested in the girl. Tell her the girl needs to be groomed, to be taught how to behave like the pureblood she is. This will, of course, appeal to Narcissa's motherly instincts, and it will also present her with a chance to do something that makes Voldemort happy. Merlin knows the Malfoys are desperate to be able to reclaim their status within Voldemort's closest circle. As for Draco, Narcissa will tell him to play nicely. And even he will understand that fighting with one of Voldemort's favourites is not a good idea.'

'Headmaster,' Snape was doing his best to keep his voice low. 'Surely, you cannot mean that you want me to recommend Morgana to the Dark Lord as a possible Death Eater?'

'This is exactly what I want you to do, Severus. Voldemort will be pleased. He thinks the girl is lost to his ranks after Lucius' faux pas.'

'The girl has been through enough!' Snape growled through gritted teeth. Now he did not care anymore if Dumbledore noticed how protective he felt.

'The girl is a young woman now. She is tough, and she wants to prove herself.'

'By being thrust into the Dark Lord's jaws? Headmaster, think what you are saying!'

'With any luck, Morgana will never even meet Voldemort,' Dumbledore replied, sounding as calm as if he were talking about the weather. 'If Morgana plays her part well, she will be out of the Manor in no time.'

'And what if she fails, Headmaster? What if she cannot coax any information out of Draco before he returns to Hogwarts? What if he has not even formed a plan yet by the first of September? Do you not think that it will look suspicious if the girl just disappears from the Manor?'

Once more, Dumbledore smiled an annoyingly calm smile. 'Severus, you know Narcissa better than I do. Don't you think that in these harsh times, with her husband in prison and her son on a dangerous mission, she would like to have a girl to come over for tea once in a while? A girl she can turn from a tomboy into a young lady? And do you not think that Narcissa will treat Morgana just as nicely as Lucius once did?'

Snape fought the urge to vomit. Certainly, Lucius had been ever so charming to Morgana. He had showered her with gifts and stolen away her heart. But he had also used her in the most despicable way.

'I am not happy about this, Headmaster,' Snape managed to grind out through gritted teeth.

'Neither am I, Severus.'

Snape inhaled deeply through his nose. Once again, Dumbledore was forcing him to weave yet another lie and to tell that lie to the Dark Lord. Once again, he was forcing him to put another life in danger.

'Is there really no other way?' he asked, knowing already what the answer would be.

'Show me another way, and I will gladly take it.'

Anyone else would have been fooled by the pained expression on Albus Dumbledore's face. But Snape saw right through him. Snape knew that Dumbledore had made up his mind. He would send Morgana to Malfoy Manor, with Snape's help or without. And all Snape could do to protect the girl was to play along.

'This letter contains an invitation to Grimmauld Place,' Dumbledore explained, picking up the letter and once more holding it out towards Snape. 'If Morgana does not come, or if she turns down my proposition, I will not force her. The decision is hers.'

'You know she will say yes,' Snape hissed. 'You know she will want to do her bit to bring down the Malfoys. She loathes Draco for the way he has treated her best friend. And I think the word *loathing* does not even start to describe her sentiments towards Lucius. So what you call a choice, Headmaster, is yet more bait, isn't it?'

'This is war, Severus,' Dumbledore replied coldly, and any trace of a smile or a twinkle in his eyes had now vanished. 'I like it as little as you, but sacrifices have to be made if we want to win. And win we must.'

A/N: Dear reader,

We are very pleased that you have taken the time to read our latest chapter. We are slowly but surely getting used to holding our quills again and hope that we will soon have a new chapter ready for you.

We thank you for your support,

sevs_starsisters

II: An Unexpected Gift

Chapter 2 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter II: An Unexpected Gift

The door of the owlery was flung open so vehemently that even the most serene of the school owls took flight with a terrified screech. The poor birds weren't used to somebody almost blasting the door off its hinges, especially not in the middle of the summer. And although they were used to noisy students who would come storming in like a horde of centaurs during the school year, they certainly expected more from the Hogwarts staff. One of the oldest owls, a majestic Great Grey, gave the intruder an indignant look, but even she soon averted her big yellow eyes. Had she met Snape's furious gaze any longer, she might just have fallen from her perch as if hit by the Killing Curse.

And the owl had acted wisely. Cursing someone or something wasn't beyond Severus Snape at the moment. *Avada Kedavra* especially wasn't far from his mind. But even in his foulest of moods, he knew that innocent owls were the wrong target. If anyone in the Hogwarts grounds deserved to be blasted away, then it was Albus Dumbledore.

He extended his left arm to call for an owl and waited. He was very well aware that he had startled the birds and would not have been surprised if none of them had come flying. But after only a couple of moments, there was the sound of wings beating the air, and on his outstretched arm landed a tiny, barely six-inch tall, red-tinged Eurasian Pygmy. Snape couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from twitching. What a coincidence that the only red owl at Hogwarts would answer his call to deliver a letter to a red-haired witch.

He placed the owl carefully on the bird bar and started to tie the letter around the bird's disproportionately large leg. He deliberately took his time. He didn't want to send this letter away. He didn't want Dumbledore to turn Morgana into a spy. She had been through enough. And being sent to Malfoy Manor was certainly not what the girl needed now.

The girl? Dumbledore was right, of course. Morgana was no child anymore. During her last school year, she had been forced to grow up faster than anyone would have

expected. She had been thrown into a gigantic game of wizard chess and had been used like a pawn by Dumbledore as well as Lucius Malfoy. And he, Snape, her Head of House and mentor, had let it happen. Because, for some reason that was beyond his understanding, he still had wanted to believe that Dumbledore knew what he was doing.

He picked up the owl to carry it outside. Morgana lived in London now, and for a moment, Snape considered whether the journey would be too long for the tiny bird. But the animal had been so eager, and Snape didn't have the heart to untie the letter and give it to another owl. The little one would manage, he told himself. With any luck, it would get to London before nightfall.

He looked after the owl as it took off into the cloudy summer sky. It was a stubborn little bird, just as stubborn as the young woman it was delivering its letter to. And Snape secretly hoped Morgana would keep the owl for a while and then use it to send a letter a bit further south still to Somerset. Because there was another girl who had also been on Snape's mind this morning: Morgana's best friend, Charis Byrne.

Charis, too, had been through a rough time in her final year, some of which Snape himself had been the cause of. He supposed Charis was resting with her Muggle family before starting her own career at the Ministry of Magic, and he almost wished she would stay with the Muggles and not come back to the Wizarding world at all. Not that Muggles were in any less danger than wizards and witches in these dark times, but staying away from the Wizarding world would at least keep her out of the direct line of fire. But as he knew Charis Byrne, she would not hide away in the Muggle world. She had been hurt badly due to her so called impure blood status, and now she would certainly want to prove that she could do anything a pureblood could. And, by Merlin, she would surely succeed. But still.

He would never admit it to anyone, of course, but Snape was worried about his two girls. They had come to mean more to him than any other students, and he felt highly protective of them. The thought of them being thrown head first into danger, into a war, didn't appeal to him at all. And while Charis and Morgana had been at Hogwarts, they had at least had each other. Now, Snape wasn't sure if they had each other's support anymore.

He had seen a distance grow between the girls during their final year at Hogwarts. They had both been wrapped up in their own personal problems, and jealousy and misunderstandings had driven them even further apart. But in the end, after they had both been hurt in ways no teenage girl should ever be hurt, they had for some weeks seemed inseparable again. But then, once more, something had happened. Morgana had withdrawn, and Charis had appeared not to have either the strength or energy to make her friend come to her, or had for some reason chosen not to. What that reason might have been, however, Snape did not know.

The girls had embraced each other when they had left the castle on their last day of school and walked to Hogsmeade together. Most probably, they had shared a compartment on the train back to London, but as much as Snape knew, they had not been in contact since. Silvy would certainly have informed him of any activities, just as she had informed him about the fact that Morgana was not spending her nights in her room. The little elf was incredibly fond of her new mistress, and for some reason, she saw Snape as some sort of ally. Snape thought that this either had to do with the fact that the elf had seen him protect Morgana at Malfoy Manor or that the elf presumed he'd been somehow instrumental in setting her free. He had used the ally to his advantage and had made the elf smuggle a pair of enchanted mirrors into the girls' trunks. This only seemed to reinforce to the little elf that Snape was someone to be trusted.

He had seen the girls admire the two-way mirrors in the display window of Dervish & Banges when he had escorted them to London. He had also heard them talking about how useful those mirrors could be once they had left Hogwarts and were unable to see each other every day. But the set had been too costly, and the girls had not bought the mirrors. Little did they know that their Potions master had returned to Dervish & Banges the next day.

But the mirrors had not yet been activated; Snape knew that. He checked the third mirror regularly, the one that was safely tucked away among his private possessions and which he'd charmed to work with the pair from Dervish & Banges. But he'd never caught as much as a glimpse of either a pair of green or a pair of blue eyes. So, for the time being, all he could do was hope that Silvy would remember his order to mention to her mistress that there was a birthday present hidden in her trunk.

* * *

'Mistress. Mistress.'

Morgana shot off from her pillow. She had not meant to fall asleep. She had just meant to lie down for a while after Madam Nutkins' far too heavy dinner. But obviously, she had fallen asleep, and now somebody had woken her with a start. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her wand was clutched in her hand, and she was ready to throw a hex at her attacker. But there was none, of course. It was just her little house-elf, who had been tugging persistently at her sleeve.

'Sorry, Silvy,' Morgana muttered and put down her wand. With her now free hand, she affectionately patted the elf on her head. The poor thing looked terrified.

'Silvy made something for Mistress,' the little creature piped, her bottom lip wobbling slightly.

'Don't call me Mistress, Silvy,' Morgana pointed out for what seemed the millionth time. She had never seen Silvy as a servant, but the elf didn't understand that. And once more, the little creature cowered as she was chided.

'What have you made for me, Silvy?' Morgana asked, smiling and trying to sound as kind as possible. The elf had been through enough at her former master's house. She deserved better than to cower and be afraid that she would be punished for any kind of mistake.

'Silvy has made a cake for Mistr... for Miss Morgana.'

Out of thin air appeared what looked like an over-sized chocolate muffin, with pink topping and colourful sprinkles. It looked so sweet that Morgana's teeth ached just from looking at it.

She was just about to ask Silvy why she had baked a cake when the elf produced a candle and made it float onto the very top.

'Silvy wishes Miss Morgana a very happy birthday,' the elf squeaked and started to sing loudly and very falsely, but with a passion that made Morgana smile broadly.

She had never been one to make a big deal out of her birthday. At the orphanage, birthdays had been acknowledged with an extra piece of toast for breakfast and a shiny apple, which she had always given away due to her dislike of said fruit.

The first birthday that had been worth remembering had been her eleventh. She had received her Hogwarts letter, along with a letter that had carried the Malfoy crest. Mr Malfoy Lucius had let her know then that he had opened an account at Gringotts for her the day her parents had disappeared and that he would finance her education at Hogwarts. Back then, she had believed that he was doing this out of the goodness of his heart. Old pureblood families always looked out for one another, he had told her.

'Miss Morgana must blow out the candle and make a wish.'

Silvy's voice ripped Morgana out of her memories, and she did as the elf asked and blew out the candle. As for the wish, she had none. Not one that could be put in a simple sentence, anyway. There were so many things she wished for. Love and happiness, and a cure for her broken heart. But most of all she wished that she could re-live the last year of her life with the knowledge she had now. She would not fall for Lucius, she would not trust Dumbledore, and she would never break ties with her best friend.

'Now, Miss Morgana must open her present,' Silvy announced, her voice even more high-pitched than usual from excitement. 'It's in Miss Morgana's trunk.'

Frowning slightly, Morgana once more did as she was told, expecting to find a homemade token of admiration from the little elf. To her surprise, she found a parcel between her socks.

'Did you put this here, Silvy?' Morgana asked, picking up the parcel. She was wary of beautifully wrapped gifts nowadays, having received one too many that had meant trouble.

But the elf nodded vigorously. 'Yes, Miss. Silvy put it there. Silvy thinks Miss Morgana will like it.'

With slightly trembling fingers, Morgana unwrapped the parcel, one eye still on the elf. The little creature seemed on the edge of bursting with pride and excitement.

'A mirror?' Morgana asked. Why on earth would Silvy give her a mirror?

'Not just any mirror, Miss.'

Morgana turned the mirror in her hand. It looked familiar, but she couldn't place it somehow. It looked expensive and old. Silvy wouldn't have stolen it from Malfoy Manor, now would she?

'Silvy hopes Miss Morgana will like the mirror,' the elf repeated. 'Silvy knows how much Miss Morgana misses her best friend.'

Morgana's eyes widened as she recognised the mirror she was holding in her hand. It had been part of a pair, and she and Charis had admired them in the window of Dervish & Banges the day Snape had taken them to London. They would have loved to buy them, but twenty-five Galleons had been too high a price for either of them to afford. And now Silvy had...

Morgana's head snapped up, but she did not get a chance to ask the elf how on earth she had been able to buy the mirrors. The spot where Silvy had been standing only seconds ago was empty; the cake was perched on the writing desk and the mirror lay still in Morgana's hand. Now all she had to do was to call for her best friend.

* * *

It was almost midnight, and Charis lay fast asleep in her cramped little bedroom at her parents' house. She slept soundly and dreamlessly. The house was quiet, as her parents were also sleeping. Nothing was stirring, not even a mouse. Nor, indeed, her little white cat, who was curled up at the bottom of Charis' bed.

But then, a small shuddering noise broke the silence. It started as a slight rattling in the depths of Charis' still not yet unpacked trunk. Charis didn't stir. Then the rattling became louder, increasing in volume and strength until it turned into a rumbling. Something big seemed to want to break out of the depths of the trunk, which was now bouncing on the floor.

Charis woke with a start, clambered for the light switch of the lamp beside her bed without finding it, her eyes struggling to get used to the dark and her heart hammering in her chest. Terrified, she watched her trunk juddering in the faint moonlight. It was an eerie sight.

'Boggart,' Charis whispered in a fearful voice and started fishing for her wand in the top drawer of her bedside cabinet, all the while never taking her eyes off her trunk.

What would her Boggart turn into if it managed to break out of her trunk, Charis wondered. She hated spiders with a passion, and some months ago, her Boggart would certainly have turned into a huge tarantula. But now? Would it turn into a Death Eater? Would it turn into Bellatrix Lestrange? Or would she see herself, hunched and elderly, her eyes haunted from a life of loneliness and isolation?

Bracing herself, Charis crept towards the rattling trunk. She desperately hoped the noise wouldn't wake her parents. Her dad was a shift worker, and he would go mad if his sleep was interrupted. She needed to get rid of the Boggart quickly before it had a chance to wake up the whole house.

It had been a while since she had cast the *Riddikulus* charm, however. Would she still be able to? What happened to a person who failed to turn their Boggart into something funny?

Gripping her wand in one hand tightly, Charis bravely took the last steps towards the trunk, reminding herself that she had achieved some of the highest DADA marks of the year. She knew how to cast *Riddikulus*. She would vanquish that Boggart. The spell already forming on her lips, she opened the trunk.

'*Riddik...*'

But there was no Boggart rising from the depths. Instead, there was a beautifully wrapped parcel bouncing up and down among old robes and textbooks.

Puzzled, Charis Levitated the parcel onto her pillow where it now lay quite still, waiting to be unwrapped. Charis, however, was wary. She wouldn't put it past some people to have planted something nasty in her trunk. The little weasel Draco Malfoy, for example, was high up on her list of suspects. But how would he have been able to access her trunk? Boys could not access the girls' dormitories.

Charis finally turned on the light and eyed the parcel suspiciously. It looked harmless enough now. Maybe it was alright to open it.

A well-placed spell made the blue wrapping paper dissolve into thin air and the box open up. Gingerly, Charis peered inside and caught sight of a beautiful silver mirror. And peering out at her from the mirror was the reflection of her best friend, Morgana Belakane.

'Morgana,' Charis whispered in astonishment.

The Slytherin in the mirror grinned, and a mischievous twinkle appeared in her blue eyes. 'Do you always open your birthday presents in the nude?'

With a whimper, Charis realised that she wasn't wearing any clothes. Despite it being a rainy summer with temperatures far below average, she was still sleeping in the nude. Quickly, she pulled the bed covers over her. Morgana had seen her naked before, but still Charis felt uncomfortable. She had never been a skinny girl, and since she had returned to her parents' house, she had eaten far too much greasy food and exercised far too little.

Once covered, she picked up the mirror and eyed it in admiration.

'It's even more beautiful than I remember it,' she breathed. Then her brow furrowed. 'Did you buy this?' she asked Morgana. 'How the hell did you afford it?'

'I can't afford something like that,' Morgana stated. 'I wasn't the one who bought it.'

'Then who?' Charis asked, once again feeling uneasy. Maybe she shouldn't have unwrapped the parcel after all.

But Morgana didn't seem worried. In fact, she was smiling.

'Someone who's about two-and-a-half feet tall with bat-like ears, huge eyes and an annoyingly squeaky voice,' she declared.

Charis' jaw dropped. 'Silvy? No way!'

'Yes, way,' Morgana replied. 'Turns out she hid my birthday present in a pair of socks.'

'And she got one for me, too?' Charis was already welling up. 'How adorable.'

Morgana, however, who had never been one to be easily moved or show her emotions, rolled her eyes. 'There wouldn't be a point in owning a two-way mirror if there weren't a sister piece somewhere, right?' she stated drily.

Charis quickly blinked away her tears. 'I have your present here, you know,' she declared. 'I just didn't...'

I just didn't know where to send it she thought. She didn't own an owl, and could hence not just tell the bird to go find Morgana in London somewhere. And since Morgana hadn't contacted her, Charis hadn't known where to send the present. But she didn't want to tell Morgana. She didn't want to accuse her of not getting in touch.

'Did you have a good birthday?' Charis asked instead. 'How's London? Tell me everything!'

Morgana squirmed a little. She did feel slightly guilty about not having contacted her best friend. But she tried to convince herself that her reasons had been more than valid.

'Never mind about the present. You know I don't like to celebrate my birthday,' she replied. 'And London is... well, wet. It's been raining every day since I got here. And when it's not raining, then there is fog as thick as the fumes in the Potions classroom.'

'And how's the Ministry?' Charis wanted to know.

'I haven't started yet,' Morgana informed her. 'I'm to go there on Monday for some tests. Looks like the good grades and a letter of recommendation aren't going to guarantee anyone a spot among the Auror trainees. We're going to have practical tests, a physical and oh, joy a psychological evaluation. I'm so screwed.'

Charis giggled. 'Silly you. You'd do just fine. My start date has been moved forwards, you know. They want me to start as soon as possible. I'm really nervous!'

'You'll do just fine, too,' Morgana pointed out. 'With your grades... piece of cake. You'll make Head of Department in a couple of years.'

Charis blushed. 'We'll have to do lunch all the time,' she suggested. 'It will be so good to see you. I've missed you.'

Quickly, she lowered her gaze. She knew how much Morgana hated to talk about feelings. And to be honest, she felt a little embarrassed having admitted that she had missed her best friend. But to Charis' utter surprise, Morgana admitted that she had missed her, too.

Silence settled over the two rooms, the brightly illuminated one in Somerset and the dark one in London. Both girls were lost in their own thoughts, both contemplating just how much they missed each other. But neither breached the topic again.

'How are your parents?' Morgana asked after a while, the sound of her voice making it quite clear that she didn't really care. But Charis, too, was glad for a change of topics. She didn't want to talk about her feelings right now, not through a pair of mirrors. She wanted to tell Morgana in person when they met.

'Oh, same old,' she said. 'Mum's letting me sleep as much as I want, and Dad and I have watched loads of crap TV together. It's been nice just resting, though, to be honest. But what about you? Where are you living?'

'I'm renting a room at the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. It smells of bat droppings and cat pee, but the roof is tight and the bed is warm. And my landlady knows how to make a decent stew.'

'Do you feel safe there?' Charis asked, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. She didn't like the idea of Morgana staying so close to Knockturn Alley.

But the Slytherin seemed oblivious. 'What do you mean, safe?'

'Well, you know,' Charis started tentatively. 'Knockturn Alley can be pretty dodgy.'

'It's not like I am camping down there,' Morgana replied, her voice just a bit more aggressive than she had intended. She didn't want Charis to worry. And worry she would if she knew that Morgana had spent more nights wandering about in Knockturn Alley than sleeping in her own bed.

But Charis seemed to sense something. 'Do be careful, alright?' she begged. 'Don't go looking for trouble.'

To that, Morgana said nothing, and once more, their conversation fell dead, as neither of them knew what to say.

This time, it was Charis who broke the silence.

'I met up with Jack last week,' she told Morgana. 'You'll never guess! He's only been accepted on an apprenticeship to be a Curse Breaker in Egypt! He'll get a Portkey at the end of August. He said we should come and visit!'

'Egypt?' Morgana asked. 'Wasn't one of the Weasley brothers working there?'

'Yeah, I think so,' Charis answered. 'It sounds so exciting, all those old tombs and treasures. You know how much Jack loves History of Magic. He can't wait to start.'

'I bet he'll have a good time,' Morgana said. 'Surely, even mummy-infested pyramids are calmer than the Ministry will be.'

Charis nodded. 'I know. That's why I'm so nervous. Part of me is dreading working there. There is so much damage done to the Department of Mysteries. It's going to be a huge clean-up operation. That's why my start date has been pulled forwards.'

'So you'll be playing maid?' Morgana grinned. 'Want me to send Silvy along with you?'

'As long as she brings her chocolate croissants. You will thank her for me, won't you? For the present?'

Morgana nodded. 'I will. Guess I'll have to buy her a pair of socks now. She'll explode with happiness.'

Both girls giggled, and for some moments, everything just seemed like old times.

'It's been really good to speak to you, you know,' Charis said later. 'I've been worried about you.'

'Why would you be worried about me?' Morgana asked.

'Because you're my best friend,' Charis replied. 'And you live near Knockturn Alley in a house that smells like bat droppings.'

And I feel like you're slipping away from me Charis added in her mind. But she didn't say it out loud.

'Well, you didn't know that, did you?' Morgana asked.

Charis bravely put out her chin. 'Had I known, I would have worried even more.'

'Silly little thing,' Morgana snorted. 'Just as cute as ever. When are you arriving in London, you think?'

'Soon. I have robes to buy, flats to look at.'

'Are you planning to rent something on your own, or will you be staying in one of the Ministry flats?'

'I'm thinking the easiest thing is to stay at the Ministry flats for now, then look properly for something when I have time. They don't look too bad, according to the brochure.'

Morgana shrugged. 'Yeah, guess they're alright. I received a welcome letter from the Auror department the other day, saying that I could stay in one of their flats, too. But I don't know.'

'We could live together!' Charis exclaimed, looking all excited. 'How awesome would that be?'

'Awesome?' Morgana cocked an eyebrow. 'You sleep in the nude. Besides, you'll be bringing your cat, won't you?'

As on cue, the little white cat that had been sound asleep at the foot end of Charis' bed mewed.

Morgana grinned. 'Hi, snake bait.'

Lily walked forward and sniffed the mirror, mewing.

'She missed you,' Charis pointed out. And Morgana couldn't help but smile.

They talked for a while longer, making plans for lunch and flats and promising each other that they would catch up soon. And they surely would have talked until the early hours of the morning had not a tiny, reddish owl landed on Morgana's windowsill, carrying a roll of parchment addressed to Morgana Belakane, the smallest and darkest room at the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, London.

III: The Letter

Chapter 3 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter III: The Letter

'Do you know what time it is, you silly bird?' Morgana muttered as she opened the window in order to let in the small red owl that was so eagerly pecking against the glass. 'Just because you're a nocturnal animal doesn't mean you have to deliver letters in the middle of the night.'

She picked up the owl, holding it carefully in both hands. The tiny bird was cold and quivering.

'Who made you a delivery owl, anyway?' Morgana asked, her voice suddenly much softer, and carefully placed the trembling owl onto her night stand. 'You can't be more than six inches tall. This letter is almost as big as you.'

Reminded of its task, the little owl dutifully stretched out its leg, and Morgana quickly untied the letter, not yet caring enough about it to check whom it was from. Her eyes were still on the little owl. It looked so cold and in need of warming up.

'Do you like chocolate cake?' she asked, beckoning towards the oversized muffin Silvy had gifted her with. She had cut off a piece but only eaten half of it. The rest was still lying on a plate.

The little owl started to hoot, flapping its tiny wings expectantly.

'I guess that's a yes.'

Morgana laughed and put the plate with the unfinished slice of cake in front of the owl. At once, it started to eat with an appetite that suggested that it had flown across half of Britain.

'Enjoy your snack, little birdie,' Morgana said and patted the owl on its red-feathered head with her left hand while picking up the letter with her right. 'Let's see what cruel soul sent you on a trip to London in this weather.'

She recognised the handwriting at once, and any trace of a smile disappeared from her face. Why would Albus Dumbledore send her a letter? Surely, this wasn't just a birthday card.

With shaking fingers, she broke the red wax Hogwarts seal and unfolded the thick, yellowish parchment.

Dear Morgana,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and good spirits upon leaving Hogwarts and at last forging your own way in the world.

You are surely enjoying the bustle of Diagon Alley and looking forwards to starting your training as an Auror. Most certainly, you are very busy, and I hope you will forgive an old man for disturbing you. I am not intending to steal much of your time, but there is a proposition I would like to make. Therefore, I would like to invite you back to Hogwarts for tea this Sunday afternoon. I realise this is rather short notice, but I anticipate your time will be taken up with work soon enough, and what I have to discuss with you is very important.

If you would be so kind as to accept my invitation, you will be able to Floo directly to my office by using the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron at two o'clock on Sunday afternoon. Tom, the owner of the pub, has been informed. All you will have to do is to tell him that you wish to see me, and he will grant you access.

There is no need to send the owl back. If you fold the left upper corner of this letter backwards, I will be informed of your acceptance. One of my more ingenious ideas.

Hoping to welcome you to my office soon,

Albus Dumbledore

Re-reading the letter, Morgana sank onto her bed, absent-mindedly patting the owl with her free hand. A proposition? What kind of proposition could Albus Dumbledore have for her? His letter sounded pleasant, no doubt, but Morgana was wary. The last time the Headmaster of Hogwarts had had a proposition for her, he had started off by asking her what she would do if she had the means to save many by sacrificing one. It had sounded so noble. And she had realised too late that the thing to be sacrificed

would be her very soul. Whose bastard child would he want her to carry this time? And why the urgency? Dumbledore had said that what he had to discuss with her was 'very important'. What was so important that she had to meet with him tomorrow?

The owl clicked her beak, and Morgana looked up from her letter. There wasn't a single crumb left on the plate, but still the little bird seemed to want more. Morgana cut off another slice of cake and placed it on the plate.

'Eat, birdie,' she said. 'You deserve it. Shame on Dumbledore for making a tiny thing like you fly all the way from Hogwarts to London.'

Her eyes returned to the letter. Dumbledore had caught her unawares back in January. When she had left his office that evening, she had not understood that she had never had a choice. He had decided about her fate long before she had come to see him. He wouldn't do that to her once more.

With her jaw set, Morgana folded back the left upper corner of the letter, signalling to Dumbledore that she had accepted his invitation and that she would indeed be meeting him tomorrow afternoon. She would have tea with him and listen to whatever proposition he had. But she would not let him trick her once more. This time, she would be prepared.

* * *

Sunday afternoons were usually quiet at Hogwarts, but during the holidays they had a peaceful, almost ecclesiastical feel to them. Albus Dumbledore found that serene Sundays were often his most productive day of the week. Far from being a day of rest, it was actually a time when some of his best ideas and plans were formed. Order out of calm, so to speak.

The old wizard was now sitting at his desk in his office at Hogwarts, scribbling away on a piece of parchment with a huge, golden quill. Fawkes, his phoenix, was snoozing on his perch, his head under his wing. The only sounds to be heard were the whirring of the strange silver instruments that adorned the room, the portraits of former headmasters and headmistresses snoozing gently in their frames, and the crackle of fire in the enormous hearth.

But then, at exactly two o'clock, there was a hiss as the flames rose high in the grate and turned bright, emerald green, announcing the arrival of a guest travelling by Floo. Dumbledore looked up from his parchment to see a red-headed witch stepping out of the fireplace, brushing ashes off her robes.

'Ah, Morgana. Perfectly on time, as usual.' Dumbledore beamed whilst putting his papers away in the drawer of his desk. 'Come in, come in. Do have a seat.'

'Who knew punctuality would be a Slytherin trait?' Morgana smiled tightly, not altogether comfortable with the situation. But she took a seat opposite her former headmaster with as much ease as she could muster.

'I'd expect nothing less of a soon-to-be trainee Auror,' Dumbledore replied good-naturedly. 'Would you like something to drink? Tea? Dandelion and Burdock? Or, now you're of age, maybe something stronger?'

'Tea would be just fine, Professor. I don't drink alcohol,' Morgana answered quietly. As if she would let Dumbledore give her alcohol to cloud her judgement. Actually, she wasn't even sure if she should drink his tea.

Dumbledore inclined his head, then conjured a tea set impressively from thin air with a quick wave of his wand.

'Thank you for coming to see me at such short notice,' the old wizard began, sending a rattling cup and saucer floating over the desk towards Morgana, who managed to catch it without spilling a drop. 'I realise you must be very busy in the lead-up to your new job.'

'I welcome the distraction, Professor. Going jogging twice a day to be able to pass the physical exam isn't exactly what I call an exciting pastime.'

Dumbledore smiled at this. 'Ah, the hoops they make you jump through. Just procedure, of course. If Alastor was forced to take that test now, they'd never let him be an Auror.'

'To be honest, sir, I am more worried about the psychological test,' Morgana confessed. She didn't like the thought of some Ministry counsellor probing around in her psyche.

'Again, I'm not sure Alastor would pass that if he were in your shoes.' Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled characteristically over his half-moon spectacles. 'Although, it would be fun, I am sure, to test him. Constant vigilance.'

Morgana gave another tight smile and looked around the office. It felt like only yesterday she had last been in here, and yet like a whole lifetime had passed simultaneously.

'Didn't think I'd ever come back here,' she said quietly, watching Fawkes snoozing on his perch.

Dumbledore watched the young witch for a few moments in silence as she took a sip from her teacup. No matter what Snape thought of him, he was not heartless, and he did not like putting Morgana in yet another potentially dangerous situation. But she was perfect for the task at hand.

'Well, I can see you are anxious for me to cut to the chase and tell you why I really asked you here today,' he started.

'Yes, sir,' Morgana replied, placing her teacup back down on the desk with a rattle.

'Please, call me Albus.'

Morgana inclined her head politely. 'Albus.' Then, after a moment, 'That is weird, you know.'

'Yes, it is rather a strange name,' Dumbledore conceded. 'One of many, I'm afraid. My mother could not decide on just one name and so saddled me with no less than four forenames. I often think life may have been easier if she'd called me Brian to begin with.' He smiled benignly.

Morgana smiled back. The thought of a wizard called Brian was indeed a funny thought. 'I meant, calling you by your first name is weird, sir. Albus, I mean.'

'Well, you are no longer a student. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to call me sir, headmaster or professor,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'And we are far too acquainted for you to call me Mr. Dumbledore. Just call me plain old Albus. Everyone knows where they are then.'

'I'll do my best.'

Dumbledore smiled once more, knitted his fingers together and peered over his glasses. 'So, I was cutting to the chase, was I not?'

'You were trying.'

The old man took a deep breath before beginning, gazing at the young witch in front of him with his piercing, sparkly-blue eyes. 'The reason I have called you here is because I want to make you a proposition.'

'You mentioned that in your letter,' Morgana stated, her eyes now slightly narrowed. It was time to start being careful, then. After all, the last offer Dumbledore had made had turned her life upside down and had almost broken her sanity.

'As you may know, the Order of the Phoenix are part of an organised resistance against Voldemort.'

Morgana nodded.

'The Order needs brave, talented people, now more than ever, in order to thwart him,' Dumbledore continued. 'You, Morgana, have shown bravery in the face of adversity many times over the last year. Indeed, you directly helped the Order at great personal risk. And your very choice of career shows me that you are undoubtedly a very courageous young woman.'

'Is this a recruiting interview, Albus?' Morgana cut in. Why didn't the old man just say what was on his mind instead of covering her with flattery?

'No. There is no interview, Morgana,' Dumbledore replied gently. 'I want to ask you to join the Order of the Phoenix officially. You, if anyone, have shown me you have exactly the skills to fight against the Dark. We could not have made as much progress without your help last year.'

'Me? Order material?' Morgana almost snorted. 'A gullible young witch that fell for the first Dark wizard she met?'

'Older and more experienced witches have fallen for the charms of Lucius Malfoy,' Dumbledore replied calmly, graciously ignoring the muscle that twitched in Morgana's jaw at the very mention of Malfoy's name.

'Are you telling me I am to be trusted?' Morgana asked hoarsely. She didn't trust herself these days, let alone anyone else putting their trust in her.

'I trust you implicitly, Morgana,' Dumbledore answered, once more peering over his half-moon spectacles. 'I know you have what it takes. You would not have chosen to become an Auror if you did not believe you were strong enough to take on the challenge. And I would not be asking you to join the Order if I did not think you were ready for it.'

Morgana absent-mindedly toyed with the hem of her robe. Part of her knew that what Dumbledore was saying was true. And joining the Order would give her the chance to vanquish her demons. But the other part of her still resented the old man in front of her for what he had put her through last year.

Dumbledore, however, could see that the young witch was torn in making her decision.

'I realise this is a shock, Morgana,' he said quietly. 'You do not have to give me your answer straight away. You have much to think about. Please, take as much time as you need before giving me your answer. I want you to think it through carefully.'

But Morgana could not stop her suspicions getting the better of her. 'If I join the Order... IF... What would you want me to do?' Dumbledore had asked awful things of her before. Why should she think she would have it any easier this time?

'Each Order member is asked to do things related to their own line of work or their strengths,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'Mostly, this involves collecting information. We have members from all aspects of the Wizarding world and the Ministry. Knowledge is power, after all.'

'One would think that Slytherins wouldn't be the first choice for the Order,' Morgana commented cynically.

'Well, one could think that. But you know as well as I that to judge a whole group from the behaviour of a few individuals in that group is morally wrong. We are lucky enough to be blessed with one brave Slytherin in the Order. I am hoping with you joining we can double that total.'

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled as he saw the flash of comprehension in Morgana's eyes.

Snape was in the Order, of course. How could she have forgotten? As much as she hated to admit it to herself, joining the Order seemed more appealing knowing that her former Head of House was also a member. Working alongside him in the Order would make them equals, something they had never been before. Maybe he would look at her differently now.

Morgana took a deep breath. 'I'm honoured by your offer, Albus, and by your trust. I'll think about it.'

Dumbledore smiled graciously. 'Thank you, Morgana. That is all I ask of you. This is your choice and your choice alone.'

Morgana nodded. 'Was there anything else?'

'Just to wish you the very best of luck on Monday, not that you'll need it.'

'Oh, I'll need a lot of luck.'

Morgana rose and was already on her way to the fireplace when she stopped suddenly. 'Sir... Albus, I mean? This might seem odd to you, but...'

'Go on...'

Dumbledore encouraged, his fingers once more knitted together.

'Would it be alright for me to make a detour to the dungeon before I go? I kind of didn't want to be here at the end of term and didn't really say goodbye to the place properly.'

The old wizard smiled kindly. 'Of course, Morgana. Take your time. The Slytherin common room is not sealed over the summer. You should be able to enter without a password. Do you know your way to the kitchens from there? You can use the fire in the kitchens to Floo home afterwards.'

'Yes, I do know the way to the kitchens,' Morgana laughed. 'Don't tell me you don't know how many times Charis and I nicked some food from there for a midnight snack!'

Dumbledore looked innocent. 'I don't know what you mean.' His lips twitched with a playful smile.

Morgana could not help but grin. 'I'll be in touch, Albus. Whatever my decision is.'

'Very well. Take care of yourself, Morgana. And thank you for hearing me out.'

He watched carefully as the young witch left his office, closing the door quietly behind her. The wheels were in motion. And Dumbledore already knew what Morgana's decision would be.

* * *

Morgana rolled her eyes at herself as she out of sheer habit laid her hand against the cold cellar wall and opened her mouth to give the password that would allow her to enter the Slytherin common room. Dumbledore had said that the wards weren't activated during summer.

Indeed, she was granted access without the password, and moments later, she found herself standing in the dungeon-like room that had been her home for seven years. There was the green leather sofa which she had spilled ink on in her first year, and on the shelf behind it, the skull she had once let drop onto Crabbe's head, pretending that she'd had a sneezing attack while practising Levitation. Everyone had laughed then, even Crabbe. The idiot had thought that everyone was laughing about Morgana's inability to levitate a skull. He had never understood that people had been laughing at him.

Ah, true Slytherin spirit, Morgana thought with a sneer, wondering for the umpteenth time if the Slytherin common room had ever seen true friendship among its inhabitants. She, for one, sure hadn't.

During her first two years at Hogwarts, Morgana had rubbed along with her House mates just nicely. In fact, she had enjoyed the competitive attitude in her House and

been encouraged by it to always give her very best. And only once or twice had anyone ever mentioned the topic of blood status. It had not seemed that important. But that attitude had changed when Draco Malfoy had come to Hogwarts. The little ferret had brought a huge, very old-looking book with him and had presented it to the entire House on his very first night. The book had contained family trees of the most ancient and esteemed Wizarding families. He had showed off his own ancestry and then carefully examined his House mates, one after the other. Those who hadn't been able to prove that their line was just as old as the Malfoys', or even worse couldn't prove their pure magical descent at all, were sneered at and told to sit down. That night, a clear line had been drawn in Slytherin House, a line that separated purebloods from the rest. Morgana, of course, had held a place on the 'proper' side, the pureblood side, but she had never liked her new status. She had not been brought up with the luxury of a pureblood home. She had not been taught the same values as the likes of Malfoy. And so she hadn't cared. But her attempts to make friends with her other House mates, the half-bloods and the Muggle-borns, had been met by sneers from the purebloods and suspicion from the others. And so she had learnt to keep to herself, silently ignoring the snide remarks and fearful looks.

All of a sudden, Morgana couldn't remember why she had wanted to visit the Slytherin common room. The place held not a single good memory and was best left forgotten. There were better places to visit. The Astronomy Tower, for example, or the Room of Requirement, where she had spent many hours with her best friend. But once Morgana had left the Slytherin common room, her legs didn't carry her up the stairs, but deeper into the darkness of the dungeons. Outside the heavy oak door that led to Professor Snape's study, she finally fell dead in her tracks, almost expecting the door to be ripped open and Snape to come striding out, chiding her for loitering outside his office. But Snape wasn't there, of course. He certainly had better things to do than hang around at Hogwarts during the summer holidays. And so the door remained firmly shut.

Morgana sighed and let herself fall against the cold stone wall, closing her eyes for a moment. Had Snape been there, she would not have known what to say to him anyway. It would probably have been awkward to see him, considering that Morgana had never said goodbye to him at the end of term. He would have deserved a goodbye, she mused now. And a thank you for all he had done for her. But Slytherins were awful at expressing their gratitude, and they were even worse at accepting it. No, she wouldn't have said thank you had her mentor been here now, Morgana concluded. And she wouldn't have apologised for not having said goodbye either. But she would have asked for his advice. Merlin knew she needed it.

She had stepped into Dumbledore's office with the conviction that she would listen to him, listen only, and then tell him that she had no intention of doing anything for him ever again. She had done enough, suffered enough and lost enough. But somehow, Dumbledore had managed to confuse her, and she was now actually considering his offer. After all, the Order of the Phoenix were fighting the Dark Lord. And the Dark Lord had to be defeated.

But what would Dumbledore make her do for the Order, Morgana wondered. He had talked about each of the Order members being given tasks that were related to their line of work or their strengths. He couldn't have any need for her in her role as an Auror, Morgana thought. He had Moody and Tonks. Surely, that was enough. As for her strengths, what kind of strengths did she have anyway?

Dumbledore had also said that Order members collected information. What kind of information did she have access to? She had no influential friends, no contacts, nothing. Who would she spy on?

Morgana pushed herself off the wall, shaking her head. She was worthless for the Order, in her opinion. Dumbledore must know that, too. So maybe, him inviting her was a kind of atonement, a way for him to say that he was sorry for what he had put her through?

Frowning, Morgana started walking. Suddenly, she did not want to be in the dungeons anymore. She wanted to be outdoors and breathe fresh air, let it fill her lungs and empty her mind. And she wanted to talk to her best friend.

Her hand went to her throat, and her fingers closed around the silver star on her necklace, despite her knowing that the charm wasn't working anymore and that Charis would not heed her calling for her. But somehow, the mere knowledge of Charis wearing an identical necklace gave Morgana comfort. Not long now. Soon, Charis would come to London, and Morgana would be able to pour her heart out. Now she could only hope that she would have the courage to do so.

IV: New Beginnings

Chapter 4 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter IV: New Beginnings

On Thursday of the following week, Charis was finally hurled from the stasis of her quiet, lazy Muggle existence and back into the frenetic hubbub of the wizarding world. The peaceful Somerset countryside was replaced with the hustle and bustle of London streets, and the sound of birdsong switched for that of traders hawking their wares. Charis had initially been feeling quite nervous about visiting London as she'd never gone there on her own before. Now she chided herself for her nerves; she was of age and a full-grown, fully qualified witch now after all. But she still couldn't stop the queasy feeling in her tummy as if a nest of Nargles were resting there. Her future very much started here, and as much as she wanted to embrace it, something was holding her back, too. She didn't feel like a grown-up at all, not really. She still felt like a little girl; a girl who wanted to be protected and sheltered from the world, not thrust back into it with no idea what she was doing.

The Ministry of Magic had arranged a Portkey for her, and nervously she had taken a Wellington boot at nine o'clock from the leafy seclusion of Dunwear Ponds. Portkeys weren't Charis' favourite means of transportation. Whereas she had once admired the brilliancy of the invention, Portkeys nowadays filled her with a feeling of dread. No wonder, really. The last time her hands had closed around a Portkey, it had thrown her right into the arms of Bellatrix Lestrange. But the Wellington boot was safe, of course, and it brought Charis straight into the Ministry-owned flats located not far from Diagon Alley.

It was there she was greeted by an ageing but friendly Greek wizard named Mica Dimesto, who took much pleasure in showing her around the cosy apartments that were to let. They were clean and safe, if not particularly spacious, and pets were welcomed. Each apartment consisted of a bedroom, kitchen, lounge and bathroom, and they each had their own tall, narrow Floo. They were also sparsely furnished, a bed and a sofa were provided, but everything else would need buying. Charis nearly balked when she heard how many Galleons per month the cheapest flat went for. Once again, her naiveté about the situation was clear. She had no idea if it was a good deal or a bad one. But she did not have the luxury of time to shop around for a better price, and so, charmed by a little flat in the eaves with a small round window in the lounge, she signed a six month contract on the spot and was told she could move in at any time from now and that the first month's rent would automatically be deducted from her first Ministry pay packet. She was presented with a copy of the contract and a fat, shiny brass key and left the building feeling decidedly more grown-up and optimistic than she had going in.

Charis had managed to secure a flat after just over an hour of being in London and felt jubilant at her luck. She had her induction with the Ministry at two, which gave her several hours in which to shop and spend her birthday money. Of course, she stopped off at Gringotts first to fill up with Galleons, and then she went straight to Madam Malkin's in order to buy some new robes for school.

Madam Malkin herself was a kind, squat witch, who fussed and cooed over Charis when she'd spoken of her new job and her desire to look the part.

'You'll look like a professional in these, dear,' Madam Malkin told Charis as she held up a particularly beautifully cut set of pretty, teal-green robes. 'They're self-ironing and temperature-adjusting, so you don't have to worry about getting too hot in summer or too cool in winter. They bring out your eyes, too.'

Charis felt somewhat akin to a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis when she viewed herself in the robes for the first time. She'd worn dress robes before, of course. But they were for an occasion, to be worn for one night only, whereas these robes would be what she would be wearing every day from now on. It felt strange. As a Muggle-born, the only time Charis wore robes was at Hogwarts. Buying her work robes was another symbolic act on the road to becoming what she thought was a "real" witch.

Charis eventually settled on the green robes as well as some in royal blue and purple and a black travelling cloak, and buoyed by her purchases, and on a roll, she paid a visit to Madam Pimpernelle's Beautifying Potions. Half an hour later, she came out with a little vanity case full of creams, lotions and potions. *Well*, Charis thought to herself, *there was no point buying new robes to look the part if her hair was a mess and she had pimples*. In all honesty, she had been feeling very unattractive and plain for quite some time. Snape's rejection had hit her hard, and the experience with Morgana in the Room of Requirement had left her feeling confused about their friendship. The result of this meant Charis had taken very little care in her appearance during the last few weeks at school, not having the energy or desire to bother with make-up or styling her hair when she'd had so many other things on her mind. And returning home to her parents had given her plenty of time to comfort-eat, which had piled on a few pounds and made her feel even more unattractive. The poor diet also showed on her complexion, which was usually clear and smooth, but now bore red spots on her chin. All in all, Charis felt like she should be walking around with a brown paper bag over her head with eye holes cut out, such was her dislike of her appearance.

But a new job meant a new start and with that, a new look. It was time for her to pick herself up and start looking like a real witch, Charis decided, even if she didn't actually feel like one yet. She would dress the part and hoped that by doing so, it would also make her act the part.

By now, Charis' stomach was telling her it was time for a lunch break, and so, laden with bags, she chose a café with brightly coloured umbrellas over the tables outside and perused the menu, feeling for all the world like a sophisticated young woman as she ordered salmon en croute. She savoured the delicious lunch and watched the weird and wonderful wizards and witches going about their daily business. Yet she noticed that the atmosphere had changed since her last visit to Diagon Alley. The street was much less busy than it usually was, and no one seemed to take time to browse in the shop windows and instead seemed almost furtive and in a hurry. Charis supposed the various wanted posters of suspected Death Eaters that were leering down from every available space did little to make the place feel welcoming.

Charis didn't linger, either. As soon as she had finished her lunch, she requested the bill, paid up and set off for the Ministry. It wouldn't matter if she was early, and she would rather be an hour early than one minute late.

The letter she had received from the Ministry had suggested that she arrive in what Charis thought was an extremely unconventional way. Rather than by Floo or Portkey, the letter held explicit instructions to find what looked to be abandoned public toilets just off Charing Cross Road, which was not far, as The Leaky Cauldron led out to the adjoining Tottenham Court Road.

As Charis bustled through the busy Muggle London streets, trying to manoeuvre herself and her many bags through the crowds, the butterflies in her stomach began to flutter around once more. What if she messed up her induction and they decided she was not suitable to work at the Ministry? What if she hated her boss? What if working at the Ministry placed her in more danger somehow?

Charis frowned as she spotted the disused public conveniences up ahead. Why on earth would she mess up? She was fully qualified for her job. And her boss was surely a very nice person. But she had always had a very overactive imagination when it came to fearing the worst. Most probably, that was one of the reasons she had not been sorted into Gryffindor, Charis supposed. So, for what felt like the hundredth time that day, Charis gave herself a stern talking to, told herself not to be silly and slowly approached the shabby loos.

Subtly, so as not to arouse attention, she backed up towards the entrance little by little, pretending to squint at her map, until she was standing in the doorway. Then, after a furtive glance around, she disappeared inside.

The loos were grim. There was the constant drip, drip, of a leaking tap echoing off the grubby tiled walls, and the cubicle doors were etched with years and years of graffiti. However, each of the doors, although marked "Vacant", stood firmly closed, despite Charis trying them all. Only when she caught sight of a coin slot near the door locks did she remember the strange Ministry-marked coin she had been sent along with her letter.

Fumbling in her pockets, she pulled out the coin and pushed it into the slot. The cubicle door sprang open and Charis entered. The door automatically shut behind her and she heard the click of the lock which she presumed now displayed "Engaged". Charis was not sure what she had been expecting to see inside the cubicle, but it was certainly not a plain old toilet. Cautiously, she peered forwards. The bowl of the lavatory had water in it. It was, by any means, a normal looking loo. Charis quickly checked her letter again. According to the instructions, she'd have to flush herself in!

Charis wrinkled her nose. For some reason, she had presumed that the flush mechanism would be in place but there wouldn't be an actual toilet in the cubicles, or that if there was, there would be no stagnant water in the bowl. But it appeared she was expected, on her first day at the Ministry, to climb inside a loo, get her shoes and trousers covered in bog water and arrive looking dishevelled and disgusted. *Couldn't they have thought of an easier entrance*, Charis thought to herself as she gingerly stepped up on to the toilet seat. Maybe it was some kind of test, to see if she was tough enough? Of course, she could Scourgify herself on arrival, but the thought was still disgusting.

Resting her hands on the back wall to steady herself, she dangled her right foot into the toilet bowl. To her surprise, although the tip of her shoe passed through the water, when she pulled it out again it was completely dry. Encouraged by this, Charis submerged her whole foot and sure enough the water did not penetrate her clothes. Well, that was one thing. But trying to get both feet into a toilet bowl was very awkward indeed. After a few moments of rearranging herself and her bags, still using the back wall to keep her balance, Charis reached one hand up to the flush and after a deep breath, pulled it hard.

Immediately, she felt herself being squeezed as though through a tube of toothpaste, a very similar sensation to Apparition. But then the sensation changed, and suddenly she was spinning and being jostled from side to side, with flashes of light whizzing past her. Charis found she could not keep her eyes open, the motion was making her nauseous. She closed her eyes firmly and gripped hold of her bags tightly, petrified they would be ripped from her from the force of the motion.

After what seemed like five minutes but could only have really been about thirty seconds, the spinning motion began to slow and eventually stop. And before she knew what was happening, Charis emerged from a curtain of emerald green flames and stepped from an ornate fireplace into a large, tall, impressive-looking hall. Looking around, she saw that the high ceiling was peacock blue with golden symbols moving over it, and the floor was covered in polished dark wood.

In front of Charis in the middle of the hall was an area seemingly full of rubble which was fenced off by sheets and scaffolding. Charis supposed this was more collateral damage from Harry Potter's fight with Voldemort here just a few weeks ago. There were various witches and wizards hurrying about their business, holding pieces of parchment and frowning in concentration. Charis was delighted to see a flock of paper aeroplanes, which had been charmed to fly, swoop into the nearest lift and jostle for position with some rather annoyed-looking occupants.

'Excuse me? Are you Charis Byrne?'

Charis turned to see a tall man with long, fair hair tied neatly into a ponytail and kind blue eyes. He was dressed in rather smart-looking grey robes. She supposed he was in his mid-forties by the little smile lines around his eyes. He held out his hand for Charis to shake.

'Grindling Gibbons. I'm the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies, and so I guess, technically, that makes me your new boss.'

He smiled as Charis shook his hand and greeted him politely in return. Charis had a good feeling about him, although she couldn't put her finger on why.

'We'll have to sign you in to the security desk before I can show you around. They'll need to keep hold of your bags and register your wand whilst your here. Just standard procedure, nothing to worry about,' Grindling added quickly seeing Charis' face fall at the possibility of being parted from her wand. He could not, of course, know that

Charis' original wand had been snapped in two by one of the Darkest witches alive only a short time ago and that Charis had not let her new wand out of sight once since she had acquired it.

After passing through a set of golden gates, the Watchwizard at the security gate checked Charis with a strange instrument called a Probity Probe, issued her with a shiny visitor's pass and registered her wand. He placed her bags in a little locker for safe-keeping, and then she and Grindling were free to finally descend to the Department Of Mysteries on Level Nine.

Charis' heart was thumping with nerves as she was led through a black door and into the gloomy, circular, many-doored Entrance Chamber and finally into the Hall Of Prophecy itself. She gasped at both the enormity of the room and the enormity of the damage that had befallen it. There were still rows upon rows of damaged shelves, and here and there were piles of broken glass and damaged orbs.

Grindling looked more than a little apologetic as he explained the scale of the damage and what Charis' role would be in helping to get the Hall Of Prophecy back to normal. 'There are new prophecies coming in every day; that's the problem,' he confided. 'So, we're struggling with the backlog and trying to clear up the mess and reorganise the prophecies again.'

Charis understood her role would be critical if not especially taxing, but she was eager to start and show her lovely new boss just what she could do. She was determined that she would work hard to get the Hall Of Prophecy back on track and couldn't wait to get stuck in. She would therefore be starting first thing on Monday.

She left the Ministry feeling optimistic and happy from her induction and more positive about her future than she had in weeks. It might seem like a small thing, cleaning up the mess from You-Know-Who's attack. But Charis felt it was an act of defiance; her own small way of fighting back. Little did she know then that her job at the Ministry would be more involved in the resistance than she could possibly imagine.

* * *

Two hours later, Charis had made her way back to Diagon Alley for a celebratory ice cream at an unusually quiet Florean Fortescue's, where she had arranged to meet Morgana. She was dying to tell her friend all about her productive day. But since Morgana hadn't seem to have arrived yet, Charis decided to go ahead and have her pick at one of the many delicious treats that the ice cream parlour had to offer.

It was always tricky trying to decide what to have. There was so much to choose from! Ice Mice. Frozen Pumpkin Pasties. Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Ice Cream. Decisions, decisions, decisions. Charis' mouth was watering from the mere sight of all the sweet things, but a part of her was wondering if she should have ice cream at all. She had been eating all sorts of the wrong food lately, after all, and had gained a couple of pounds. But she felt excited about her new job, and there was no better way to celebrate than with a delicious dessert. Dieting could wait.

'What can I get you, lovely?' Fortescue beamed at her from across the counter, his striped waistcoat stretched across his rather large paunch.

'Er...' Charis hesitated. Blueberry or Vanilla?

Mr. Fortescue raised his eyebrows in an understanding sort of way as Charis continued to deliberate. 'Take your time,' he said. 'And should you regret your choice, you can always come back tomorrow.'

Charis smiled, and after some moments, she finally made her decision. 'A Blueberry Bat, please.'

Just as she had made her choice, a low, drawing voice came from right behind her.

'I knew you'd go for the bat. So predictable, Miss Bryne.'

Charis spun around, only to see her best friend Morgana standing there with her arms folded across her chest, cocking an eyebrow and with a distinctly devious look on her face.

'They have chocolate bats, too, you know,' Morgana told Charis wryly. 'Dark chocolate. Should be right up your alley.'

But Charis didn't care if Fortescue sold solid gold bats which could poop rainbows. Her best friend was here, and she had missed her deeply. Without even thinking, she threw herself at Morgana in a hug.

Instinctively, Morgana tensed up, but awkwardly wrapped her arms around her friend nonetheless. 'Easy, lassie!'

'Oh, I've missed you!' Charis exclaimed, hugging her friend even tighter.

'Something for your friend, Miss?' Fortescue asked, smiling even more broadly. 'Now you can take two of each and split them.'

With the attention of the shopkeeper on them, Morgana tried to wriggle free from her friend's grip. 'Ice, I'd say. To cool this one down.' She smirked, but really she was not at all comfortable with that public display of affection.

'Make that two bats, please.' Charis grinned at Fortescue before turning back to Morgana. Her eyes narrowed, and she looked her friend up and down critically.

'You look... different. Have you been working out?'

Morgana wrinkled her nose in a characteristic display of distaste. 'How long have you known me? I don't work out.'

'You've lost weight, anyway,' Charis pointed out.

'I simply don't sneak off to the Hogwarts kitchen anymore to steal food,' Morgana replied, wanting to end the topic of her appearance. She had one hot meal a day and a croissant for breakfast, but besides that she still didn't eat much. Her appetite had disappeared about a month into her pregnancy, and both to her and Madam Pomfrey's confusion, it had never returned. Combined that with her training for the Auror physical examination and her late night excursions around Knockturn Alley, and it was no wonder she had lost weight. But Charis didn't need to know about any of this. Charis mustn't worry.

Charis, in turn, looked down, embarrassed. 'I've put on a bit. I'm sure you can tell.'

Morgana had noticed her friend's curves were a little more round than they had been at school, but to her Charis now only looked more womanly. The curves suited her just fine.

'So?' she asked, as so often not aware of her friend's self-consciousness. 'You're still cute, aren't you?'

Charis smiled at her friend as the shopkeeper handed over the ice creams. She paid the man, and the pair took a seat by the windows, a spot which once would have been ideal for people-watching. Nowadays, however, there didn't seem to be too many people out and about in Diagon Alley.

'It's quieter here than I was expecting,' Charis started. 'Diagon Alley has really changed. And all those wanted posters everywhere are just creepy.'

'Well, since Amelia Bones and Emmeline Vance got killed, everyone is nervous,' Morgana answered matter-of-factly. 'And there are some who are quick to cash in on people's fears. Look at the toothless old guy on that stall over there.'

Charis looked over her shoulder and saw a man in shabby robes with matted hair. His "stall" appeared to be a table draped in an old curtain, with an open suitcase on top.

Inside the suitcase glittered objects of silver and gold.

'Protective amulets, he's selling,' Morgana went on. 'Reckons they repel Dark magic. Can you believe some people are dumb enough to buy them?' She snapped the head off her bat with relish.

Charis could not help but grin at her friend's pleasure. 'Watching you with that bat, you're like Ozzy Osbourne.'

Morgana looked puzzled. 'Who?'

Charis shook her head. Morgana frequently failed to understand her Muggle references, due to her upbringing in the wizard world. 'Don't worry. So, tell me about the Ministry! I am so excited after my induction, I can't wait to start!'

'The Ministry is a big, gloomy building. But why would you ask? You've just been there for two hours yourself. You should know,' Morgana answered obtusely.

'I meant about the Auror stuff, silly!'

Morgana grinned. 'Well, let's say the real Alastor Moody is even crazier than the impostor that taught us for a year. He tried to poison us all during our briefing lunch.'

'What?' Charis exclaimed in shock, nibbling at the wing of her bat.

'He succeeded with two,' Morgana continued. 'Needless to say, they aren't accepted to the program.'

'Let me guess: Constant vigilance?'

Morgana sighed. 'Indeed. Seriously, he's crazy.'

This time, it was Charis' turn to grin. 'Looks like you two will get along fine.'

'Ha, cheers! But you might be right. According to the psychological evaluation, I have severe trusting issues and anger management problems.' Morgana rolled her eyes theatrically. 'Your friend's a nut case.'

'Well, that's no surprise. You could have told them that.'

'Who? Docile little me?' Morgana looked mock-offended. 'I'm insulted.'

'course you are.' Charis grinned again and nibbled delicately at her bat once more.

Morgana narrowed her eyes, crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. 'So, how was your salmon?'

Charis frowned. 'How did you know I had salmon for lunch?'

Morgana smirked in a rather self-satisfied way. 'I've been following you ever since you left Madam Malkin's. You bought three robes. Rather nice ones, by the looks of things.'

Charis' mouth dropped in surprise.

Morgana looked at her nails casually. 'Then you went to Primpernelle's and bought a vanity case full of lotions and potions.'

'So that's what they're teaching you,' Charis exclaimed, not really sure whether she was impressed or creeped out by Morgana's confession. 'How to freak out your friends!'

Morgana laughed. 'I am determined to achieve best grades in Stealth and Tracking. Unless Moody poisons me before the exams, that is.'

'Judging by that performance, you'll be top of the group.' Charis smiled. 'You sound like you're enjoying it, anyway.'

'It's a nice change from sitting in a stuffy classroom,' Morgana admitted. 'A little more "hands on", if you know what I mean.'

'I think it's going to be a while before I get to do any good stuff at work,' Charis replied. 'I've been given my assignment already.'

Morgana looked surprised. 'You have? Can you tell? Or is that classified information?'

'It's what I imagined. A clean up operation. But no, I can't really say much more, I'm afraid.' Charis looked apologetically at her friend.

Morgana shrugged. 'That's alright. I'll find out eventually.'

Charis put her finished lolly stick down and licked her lips. 'Hmm. That bat was delicious.'

Morgana, meanwhile, had only eaten half of her bat. 'Yeah, it was alright,' she replied, less than enthusiastically.

Charis once again felt self-conscious of her weight and shifted uncomfortably. But Morgana didn't seem to notice her friend's discomfort.

'So, what's up for tonight?' she asked instead. 'Where are you staying?'

Charis grinned broadly. She had been saving her best news for the right time, and this was it. 'Guess who got herself a flat this morning?'

Morgana was amazed. 'You didn't?'

'I did! It's more Galleons than I care to think about, but it's gorgeous. One of the Ministry ones. It's right in the eaves, so it has cute sloped walls and a little circular window in the lounge.' Charis was practically levitating with excitement. 'I have the key, but there are no furnishings or anything yet. I guess I will have to Transfigure my clothes into a blanket tonight.'

'Well, you know, Silvy would love it if she could treat you to a chocolate croissant tonight,' Morgana said softly. 'Or for breakfast tomorrow.'

'You mean, stay with you?'

Morgana smiled awkwardly. 'Yeah. If you'd like to. Mind you, the place smells of cat pee...'

Charis didn't have to think twice. 'I'd love to! Would your landlady be okay with that?'

Morgana nodded. 'She only ever says: no boys!'

Charis snorted.

'Really, I doubt she'll mind,' Morgana continued. 'But we'll have to share a bed. The room's too tiny to conjure a couch.'

'That's okay. It'll be like a sleepover.' Charis' face lit up with inspiration. 'Hey, we can try out my new potions from Madam Primpernelle's!'

'Ewww, that's girly stuff!' Morgana moaned. She tended to shy away from all things girly if at all possible.

Charis was not put off, however. 'Well, your complexion might not need pampering, but mine sure as hell does. Look at these zits!'

'Oh, don't be silly,' Morgana scoffed. 'Who cares about your zits?'

'I look like a spotted dick,' Charis complained.

'Hm, tasty!' Morgana answered, licking her lips.

Charis grinned. 'So, what are we waiting for? Shall we go back to Chez Belakane?'

'Chez Belakane, the one and only place in London where you get cat pee and bat droppings all at once,' Morgana commented with a sneer. 'But hey, you like cats, and you like bats. You'll absolutely love it.'

It was a short walk, as Fortescue's was situated only a few houses away from the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, but the short distance was enough to give anyone a picture of the current mood in the wizarding community. Of course, so close to the darkest alley in London, there were more shifty traders that sold protective amulets and knock-off Sneakoscopes than anywhere else, and the wanted posters hung side by side.

'Will they ever catch them?' Charis asked quietly, rooted to the spot in front of the wanted poster of Bellatrix Lestrange. Even on a photograph, the woman looked insane and endlessly dangerous. And Charis had to fight very hard not to burst out in tears. She had not talked about Bellatrix's attack on her with anyone for the whole summer. There was no point in telling her parents. Her mother would only worry herself sick without being able to do anything, and her father didn't want to hear anything about witches and wizards at all. And so Charis had kept her feelings to herself. She had also kept quiet about the death of her cousin, Sirius Black.

'Our best people are on it,' Morgana replied, positioning herself between her friend and the picture of the deranged witch, directing her gaze towards the other side of the street. 'See the old man over there, the one with the hunch?'

Charis nodded.

'That's one of the Ministry's best Dark Wizard catchers.'

'THAT man?' Charis exclaimed in disbelief. 'How old is he? A hundred-and-thirty?'

'Forty-three, to be precise,' Morgana explained. 'He isn't only good at catching, he is good at disguising, too.'

'How many Aurors are there out in the field?' Charis asked.

'A few. I think I spotted Tonks somewhere around here earlier. But I could be wrong. One never knows with Tonks.'

'Tonks?' Charis had to think about the name for a moment. 'Oh, that was that cool witch at Grimmauld Place.'

Morgana nodded. 'She's a Metamorphmagus.'

'Awesome. You've met her again?'

'Yeah, she's one of the young Aurors who's taking care of us newbies. She's a good laugh.'

'Don't you get too friendly with her,' Charis joked. 'You're my best friend.'

To that, Morgana snorted. 'No worries, kitten. I'd never make friends with a Hufflepuff. But come on now. We don't want to be outside when darkness falls.'

V: Friends Reunited

Chapter 5 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter V: Friends Reunited

Snape narrowed his dark eyes, contemplating the liquid in his cut crystal glass by the dim light from the three candles that stood on the rickety table next to his armchair. Dark red, almost blood-like.

He swirled the glass for a solid ten seconds, helping the wine vaporise some of its alcohol and release its natural aromas. He watched as the legs from the wine tricked down the inside of the glass then took a quick whiff to sample the bouquet. Cherry, rum and raisins.

He brought the glass closer to his nose and inhaled deeply, detecting a note of sandalwood.

Once more, he swirled the glass, letting the aromas mix and mingle before sniffing once more. Vanilla, and just a hint of dark chocolate. This was promising to be an excellent wine indeed.

Finally, he took a taste. Just a small sip. He let it roll in his mouth. Not too heavy, not too sweet. Just right. He started noting dried fruit. And again, there was the sweetness of cherries.

He swallowed, closing his eyes for some moments. The aftertaste lingered on his palate, and he could taste the remnants of the wine on the back of his mouth and throat. It felt as if a delicious piece of chocolate were melting in his mouth.

Opening his eyes again, Snape once more contemplated the blood-red colour of the wine. There were many things that could be said about Lucius Malfoy, most of which weren't especially flattering, but he did have a fine taste in wine. This particular vintage had been a birthday gift from Lucius, and Snape had been waiting for the right time to open it.

The summer had been busy for Snape so far, pulled between the Order and the Dark Lord like never before, and so he'd not had much time to relax. Today, however, he'd finally had a chance to put his feet up and had decided to celebrate Lucius' incarceration with his own bottle of, no doubt, eye-wateringly expensive elf-made wine.

'To good health, my friend,' Snape toasted aloud to no one, raising the glass into the air. 'May you rot in hell for all the sins you have committed.'

Or in Azkaban prison, Snape did not really care. For the time being, he was just glad Lucius was locked up and out of the way. The blond wizard had been the cause of enough misery over the last year alone to be locked up forever, in Snape's opinion. But unfortunately, Lucius sitting in Azkaban didn't make his deeds undone. Nor did it bring any relief to the ones who were left behind, the ones who were still suffering, such as Lucius' wife and son.

Snape's eyes travelled across the room and came to rest on the very spot where he had made the Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa a fortnight ago. He would, as he had promised, do everything in his power to protect Draco from harm. But he doubted that it would be of any use. The Darkness would forever leave an imprint on the boy's soul, and even if he managed to keep him from committing a murder, Snape doubted that Draco's soul could ever be fully healed.

And all this because Lucius had messed up. All this because he had lost control.

All of a sudden, the wine tasted bitter in his mouth, and Snape put the glass down on the table beside his armchair, knocking over the small, delicate silver mirror that was propped up against two books. Carefully, he picked it up.

The mirror had been activated a week ago. The charm he had placed on it had informed Snape about that. And the same charm had told him that Charis and Morgana had used their mirrors on several occasions over the last seven days. But so far, Snape had failed in catching as much as a glimpse of either a pair of green or blue eyes in his mirror. It looked as if the girls had developed a liking for midnight conversations, a time during which Snape was either fast asleep or kissing the hem of the Dark Lord's robes. Hence, Snape had so far no idea how his two girls were getting along. But at least, they appeared to be talking.

He was just about to put the mirror back onto the table and give the wine another chance when the glass clouded. It seemed as if a mist were creeping under the mirror's frame, tinting the glass green and blue. His Alert Charm. His girls were using their mirrors at this very moment.

'Really, Charis. I'm standing about two feet away from you. We don't need the mirrors,' Snape heard Morgana say in an exasperated tone.

'I just want to see how I look to you when you're talking to me,' Charis insisted.

She produced her own mirror from the vanity case in her handbag and propped it up on the bedside cabinet, right beside Morgana's. Then she positioned herself on the bed so she was right in front of one of the mirrors. When she craned her neck, she could see her eyes peering at herself in the other one.

Snape held his own mirror up, surprised to see the girls together. This had to be a good sign. He peered forwards, watching the scene before him intently.

'Genius!' Charis exclaimed. 'Whoever came up with those mirrors should be awarded the Nobel Prize.'

'The what now?' Morgana asked and flopped down on the bed beside her friend.

'Never mind.'

Snape couldn't help but smile. Maybe, Morgana should not have dropped Muggle Studies after all.

Picking up his glass again, he reclined in his chair, making himself comfortable. He had missed listening to Charis and Morgana. They had always had such interesting discussions over their cauldrons in his class, and he'd always enjoyed hearing them laughing and joking together. They were unlikely to discuss potions now, Snape was aware of that, but he couldn't resist eavesdropping. Just for a while, he told himself, to assure himself that everything was alright between his girls.

'So, ready for some pampering?' Charis asked, looking expectantly at her friend with her lovely green eyes.

Morgana, however, wrinkled her pretty little nose. 'Do we have to?' she asked, sounding almost whiny. 'It's so... girly!'

Charis giggled. 'Last time I checked, we ARE girls. Unless you've done some weird gender charm...' Playfully, she plucked at Morgana's top as to check if she still had breasts.

'Oi! Those are mine!' the Slytherin exclaimed and slapped her friend's hand, which resulted in yet another giggle.

Snape sipped at his wine and unconsciously crossed his legs.

'Right, what to try first? Primpernelle's Pimple Popper? Or Squeaky-Clean Skin Potion?'

Charis' eyes were glittering with excitement as she surveyed all her beauty products. But Morgana seemed reluctant. She had retreated towards the head of the bed and was now leaning with her back against the headboard, with her arms crossed in front of her chest and a slight scowl on her face.

'Pimple Popper? Sounds disgusting.'

Charis took off the lid of a mauve lotion and inhaled deeply. 'Mmmm! Smell this one. It smells like Honeydukes!'

'I doubt you're supposed to eat it,' Morgana replied haughtily.

Snape snorted in amusement. So typical. Charis had always been to use Morgana's word *thegirly* one of the two. Gentle, feminine, sensuous. She had always enjoyed sweet smells. Her favourite perfume at school had carried the scent of roses. Morgana, meanwhile, had always appeared affronted at anything explicitly feminine, preferring musky smells and trying to hide her femininity behind cropped hair and trousers. But she was still a young woman underneath all her bravado, Snape mused, and a striking one at that.

'Oh, look!' Charis exclaimed, ripping Snape out of his thoughts. She had obviously tested some lotion on her hand. 'It makes the skin glow, like a Veela!'

Still, Morgana seemed unimpressed. 'That can't be good,' she commented drily and snatched the lotion from her friend. 'For baby smooth skin,' she cited from the label. 'Now, who wants that?'

'Me!'

As if Charis needed a lotion for that, Snape thought. As far as he could remember, her skin was smooth as silk, soft and warm. Just like her lips. And her kisses had been warm and gentle.

Snape groaned. As much as the memory of his intimate encounters with Charis excited him, he still felt guilty about how he had treated her. He had toyed with her, used her and then pushed her away. For her own good, he'd tried to convince himself. He would never be able to give her the kind of love she wanted from him. And so he had advised her to stay away from him. But he couldn't help but wonder if he'd broken her heart that night.

In their room in London, the girls were unaware of their former Potions master's remorse. Morgana had smeared some of the lotion onto Charis' nose and was now grinning broadly.

'Glowey nose,' she said in a baby voice. 'Rudolphus would be jealous of that nose!'

'Who?' Charis asked, a puzzled look on her face.

'Rudolphus. Isn't that the name of the reindeer that pulls Father Christmas' sleigh?'

Charis collapsed in a fit of giggles. 'It's Rudolph, silly! Really, you should not have dropped Muggle Studies!'

Morgana's aim was perfect. The pillow she threw at Charis hit the Ravenclaw right on the side of the head and made her topple off the bed, where she lay for quite a while, unable to get up because she was laughing so hard. When she finally clambered back up, after being given a helping hand by Morgana, her eye was caught by a dark red tin.

'Silky Skin For Saucy Sorceresses.' She raised an eyebrow. 'Now, that sounds interesting!'

'Saucy?' Morgana questioned, sounding insulted. 'Whatever are you implying, Miss Byrne?'

'That you and I are witches of the night, my dear,' Charis replied theatrically.

'Thought for a moment you said creatures of the night,' Morgana replied lazily, stretching out her hand for the tin. 'This stuff better not make us sparkle.'

Charis moved up the bed and made herself comfortable beside Morgana, trying a bit of the lotion. 'Wow, feel this!' she urged. 'It's so smooth!'

'Baby's bottom all over again, eh?' Morgana asked, rolling her eyes, but changed her mind once she had tried the lotion herself. 'Wow!' Then she looked at her friend. 'Shame to waste all that stuff on our hands, though, don't you think?'

Charis looked confused for a moment, but already Morgana had plan.

'Silvy!'

In a fraction of a second, the little elf appeared with a loud crack, at once bowing so deeply that her nose touched the floor.

Morgana ignored the ostentatious display of servility. 'Silvy, dear, do you think you could get hold of two bath robes and comfy slippers?'

'Yes, M-Miss Morgana,' the elf stuttered. 'Anything else M-Miss Morgana wishes for?'

'No, thank you, Silvy. That would be all.'

The elf disappeared with another crack, and Morgana huffed. 'I wonder if she'll ever learn.'

'Learn what?' Charis asked.

'Not wanting to call me mistress. She almost chokes when she calls me something else.'

'Naw, she can't help it,' Charis defended the elf, not noticing the dark look on her friend's face as she was distracted by Silvy returning with two satin robes, one green, one blue.

Snape, however, had noticed. And he could understand Morgana's sentiments. Mistress was an ambiguous word, especially for Morgana. It must be more than awkward for her to be called mistress by an elf which had once belonged to Lucius Malfoy.

Charis nipped off to the bathroom to get changed in privacy while Morgana stayed in the room. This was her home now, after all. Of course, she would get changed in her own bedroom. She had, naturally, no idea of the prying dark eyes on the other side of her mirror.

Just like Charis had earlier, Snape noticed that Morgana had lost weight. She had been exercising, alright. Her stomach was flat, her butt firm and her breasts perky. And as much Snape tried to, he was unable to look away. Just as he had been unable to look away that afternoon at Malfoy Manor, almost a year ago. And he had to admit that he was disappointed when Morgana pulled her robe around herself. Quite why she seemed so keen to quash her femininity was beyond Snape. She was a very nubile young woman, and he could feel his body beginning to respond to the sight of her flesh.

As Morgana once more settled on her bed to idly play with some of Charis' tins and phials, Snape buried his face in his hand. What was he doing? He had purchased the mirrors so the girls could keep in touch and so he could keep an eye on them and be able to step in should they be in any kind of danger. And now, when he was watching them for the first time, he was growing aroused at the sheer memory of their bodies. How deep could one sink? He would be frequenting Persephone's Palace with Avery in Knockturn Alley next if he kept going like this.

He was just about to do the decent thing and turn his mirror over when Charis entered the room, and her giggle made him look once more.

'I saw in your bathroom mirror that my nose is still glowing. It's just too cute.'

'It sure is,' Morgana agreed and patted the bed beside herself for Charis to sit down. 'What do you want to try next?'

'Well, when I mentioned that I am about to work at the Ministry, Madam Primpernelle recommended this,' Charis replied and pointed at a tiny, cream-coloured bottle. 'She said it releases muscle tension and makes the skin smooth and glowing at the same time.'

'A miracle potion,' Morgana pointed out, smirking, and uncorked the bottle. 'Now, where is Milady aching?'

'Now that you mention it, my shoulders are aching. I guess my shopping bags were too heavy. Would you mind?'

'Anything for you, my dear.'

Morgana gave a dramatic bow that rivalled Silvy's, and Charis giggled, shrugging her robe off her shoulders. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, right in front of the mirrors, and Morgana came to kneel behind her, already warming the potion between her hands. Snape couldn't believe his eyes. For seven years, he had watched Morgana avoid any kind of physical contact, and there she was now, offering to massage her friend's aching muscles.

'Mmm, this stuff smells yummy, too,' Charis commented after a while.

'So do you.'

Snape saw shy smiles appear on the girls' faces, and could see a tenderness in Morgana's touch which he hadn't expected. He watched as her hands glided almost effortlessly over her friends smooth skin, and saw how Charis' robe had lowered just enough for him to see the succulent pale orbs of her breasts peaking over the top.

He crossed his legs once more. The sight of Charis' soft skin combined with Morgana's lover-like touch was arousing him no end. He knew it was wrong, to be watching

such a private moment like a voyeur, but he could not tear his eyes away from his two girls.

'You still use that rose shampoo, don't you?' Morgana asked quietly.

Charis nodded. 'It's a Muggle brand,' she explained. 'I'll give you a bottle if you like it.'

'No, that's alright,' Morgana replied. 'I don't really like the smell of roses. But it sure smells nice on you.'

Roses and dark chocolate. Snape's breath caught in his throat. Morgana's Amortentia smelled of roses and dark chocolate, she had told him once. Did that mean...?

Snape noticed that Charis had closed her eyes and that her head had dropped towards her chest. She was obviously fully relaxed and enjoying her friend's touch.

'You're good at this,' she whispered.

Snape's eyes wandered to Morgana's face now. She looked relaxed as well, but there was something in her blue eyes Snape didn't really like. She seemed confused. And he couldn't help but wonder if she was contemplating the smell of her Amortentia, too.

Now she was running her hands down and up the side of Charis' arms, making the girl shiver slightly. Then her hands came to rest on Charis' shoulders, and Snape could see her move a little closer and bend forwards slightly, breathing ever so softly on Charis' neck.

The blonde Ravenclaw and Snape gasped simultaneously, and Morgana shrank back. Her hands, however, didn't leave Charis' shoulders.

Charis' heart had started to race in her chest. What Morgana was doing felt good, and the breathing on her neck had sent shivers of pleasure down her spine. She didn't want Morgana to stop, but at the same time she was confused about her feelings. She looked over her shoulder at her best friend and was about to speak when a loud crashing noise outside followed by screaming broke the tension.

Morgana was off the bed in an instant and at the window, pulling back the curtains for a better view. Just when she had snatched up her wand, Charis didn't know.

'What the hell was that?' Charis asked fearfully, pulling her robe around her and joining Morgana at the window.

Morgana opened the window and craned her neck to get a view, but all she could see were people fleeing, and the flashes of light that were the tell-tale signs of spells being cast. There were more muffled cries and shouts. It sounded like chaos down there in the street.

Then, on the corner of Knockturn Alley, Morgana saw some figures Apparate. They were dressed in black robes and wearing terrifying, skull-like masks over their faces.

'Death Eaters,' Morgana whispered, pushing Charis away from the window and pulling the curtains shut again. But she herself didn't retreat. Instead, she kept peering out into the darkness from a gap between the curtains.

'Death Eaters?' Charis repeated, feeling her throat become tight, and her stomach swooped with the thrill of dread. 'For goodness' sake, Morgana, get away from the window!'

'It's not us they're after,' Morgana replied calmly and slowly turned towards her friend. 'I think they've just entered Fortescue's.'

VI: Foray At Fortescue's

Chapter 6 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter VI: Foray At Fortescue's

'Fortescue's?' Charis' voice almost cracked with fright. 'Why are there Death Eaters at Fortescue's?'

'Aren't Death Eaters allowed to have a sweet tooth?' Morgana said drily, realising that her comment wasn't about to be received well even before she had finished talking. Charis most obviously wasn't in the mood for sarky comments. She had retreated onto the bed again where she was now clutching a pillow against her chest. Her green eyes were big as saucers.

Charis was afraid, Morgana could see that clearly. And who could blame her? She had experienced on her own body what gruesome deeds the followers of Lord Voldemort were capable of. She had every right to lose her nerve.

'They must hold a grudge against Fortescue for some reason,' Morgana said in a much softer voice now. 'Sounds like they are taking the place apart.'

There were indeed still sounds coming from the alley, even though the window was closed. The girls could hear explosions and shouting. And every now and then, someone screamed.

'Morgana, please, get away from the window,' Charis begged. She was being silly, she knew that. Morgana's room was on the second floor, far away from whatever was happening at Fortescue's. But still, Charis could not help but imagine a hex ricocheting off a wall down in the alley and hitting Morgana right in the back.

Snape, too, wished that Morgana would get away from the window. He wanted her back on the bed beside her Ravenclaw friend where he could keep an eye on them both. With her lingering by the window, she was out of sight, and Merlin alone could know what she was up to. For as much as Snape knew, she could be hanging out of the window to get a better look.

And indeed, Morgana was leading an inner struggle. The rational part of her brain was telling her to stay put and out of harm's way, but another part urged her out into the street. She wanted to see first-hand what was going on at Fortescue's and not just hear about it at the Auror briefing in the morning. She wanted to be where the action was. Do something. Make a difference.

What was it again the Ministry psychologist had written on her file a few days ago? *Prone to throw herself into potentially dangerous situations in order to prove herself?* Morgana sneered. Maybe the old codger had been right?

This evening, however, she wouldn't be going out; that was for sure. If she had been alone, maybe. But with Charis around? No, she would stay by her friend's side.

After a last peek through the gap in the curtains, Morgana returned to the bed, putting her wand down carefully beside her and looking at Charis with concern. Charis was shaking, clutching her pillow even more tightly to her chest.

'She... she could be out there right now,' Charis mumbled fearfully.

Morgana frowned. 'Who?' she asked, momentarily at a loss.

'B-Bellatrix Lestrange,' Charis whispered in hushed tones, her eyes darting to the window as if she expected the Dark witch to materialise out of thin air.

Bella is most probably out there firing hexes, Morgana thought privately. *She does not seem to like missing out on all the fun* But she could not tell Charis and risk upsetting her further.

'I'm sure the Aurors have arrived by now,' she replied instead. 'And you're up here, far away from everything. It's going to be okay.'

Charis bit her bottom lip, but she could not stop the tears from spilling down her cheeks. 'Why Fortescue?' she asked again. 'What could he possibly have done?'

Morgana merely shrugged, having no answers to give and feeling more and more uncomfortable. She had always hated tears, but what she hated even more was seeing her best friend so upset and being unable to comfort her.

'N-nowhere is safe anymore,' Charis sniffed. 'We could have been caught up in that. If we'd stayed another hour we could have been killed!'

'But we weren't,' Morgana replied, her voice a bit more impatient than she had meant it to be. 'We are up here. And they don't know.' Then she stopped, cocking her head. 'Listen, the noise has stopped.'

She was off the bed and making for the window in a second, her wand tightly clutched in her hand once more.

'Don't!' Charis exclaimed urgently. 'Please?' she continued weakly, pleading with her friend with her big green eyes.

Morgana sank back onto the bed. As curious as she was, she understood that Charis was upset. But still, she felt more than a little helpless and had the overwhelming urge to be doing something. Anything. Just sitting there in her safe little room would soon do her head in.

Snape, too, was on edge. When Morgana had jumped off the bed in order to run to the window, he in his turn had jumped off his chair and yelled, very much like Charis had done. But Morgana, of course, had not heard him. Thankfully, however, she had listened to her friend. And now his girls were both sitting in the bed once more, out of harm's way.

Or were they? Charis had been quite right. Bellatrix was indeed down there in Diagon Alley, causing havoc at Fortescue's so no one would notice that some hundred yards down the street, wandmaker Ollivander was being dragged from his home. What if Bellatrix grew bored of blasting apart ice cream tubs and started looking for fun in the neighbouring buildings instead?

'Don't be ridiculous,' Snape told himself. Bellatrix and the others had precise orders to return to the Dark Lord as soon as they had taken hold of Ollivander. And by now, the Aurors had certainly arrived at the scene. Bellatrix was not about to explore the neighbourhood.

'Shall I get us some tea?' Morgana asked eventually, glancing sidewise at her friend. 'Or something stronger, perhaps?'

'Don't... leave me...' Charis whispered. She felt silly for being so afraid, but the last thing she wanted was to be alone right now, even for Morgana to fetch a drink.

'Sweetie,' Morgana soothed, awkwardly patting Charis' arm. She didn't know what to do. The last time she had seen her friend in such a state was when she had woken up in the hospital wing after being attacked by Bella. No wonder she was terrified now; the sounds of the spells and the screams must be taking her right back to that horrible incident. And Morgana felt as helpless now as she had back then. Carefully, she extended her hand and gently patted her friend's blonde hair, hoping the little gesture would lend some comfort.

That was when Charis threw her pillow to one side and launched herself at her friend instead. She needed the physical contact, and she needed not to feel alone.

Morgana tentatively wrapped her arms around Charis, comforting her in the best way that she could. 'It's alright, sweetie,' she whispered, trying to sound rational. 'That the noise has stopped must mean that the Aurors have arrived and that the Death Eaters have gone.'

'I'm s-sorry... it's just B-Bella...' Charis started between sobs. 'I sometimes think... she might want to... come back and f-finish me off.'

Morgana's heart ached for her friend. 'Don't be sorry, kitten; it's alright to be afraid.'

From nowhere, a loud crack echoed around the room, and Charis flinched, burrowing her face into Morgana's chest and instinctively covering her head with her arms. But there was no Death Eater Apparating into the room. It was just a little elf.

'Silvy!' Morgana exclaimed, and Charis cautiously raised her head to see the trembling house elf standing before them.

'M-Mistress is safe! Mistress is safe! Silvy saw flashes and heard the bangs and thought Mistress was in danger!' The little elf twisted her hands in agitation.

Morgana had to resist rolling her eyes at the elf's overreaction. 'Have you seen what's going on, Silvy?' she asked, hoping to finally get some information.

'Dark wizards, Miss Morgana!' the elf piped up, her ears flapping animatedly. 'From nowhere, pop-pop-pop, all over Diagon Alley, in their masks. Silvy saw them drag the ice cream man out from the shop, but then Silvy got scared, and Silvy's only thought was for her mistress.'

'As you can see, I am alright, Silvy,' Morgana told her, trying hard not to sound annoyed. Couldn't the elf have stayed just a couple of more minutes?

Silvy peered disbelievingly at Charis. The blonde witch looked anything but alright. But Morgana nodded in the affirmative. 'Would you mind if I send you on an errand, Silvy?'

Silvy unconsciously looked at the window. 'What would Miss like Silvy to do?'

Morgana could sense that the little elf was afraid she'd send her back outside. From her former master, Silvy could not have expected any better. Lucius Malfoy may indeed have been cruel enough to send the trembling elf out into the street once more, but of course Morgana was not.

'Please, go to the kitchen and see if Madam Nutkins still has that Firewhisky hidden behind the rice.'

The look of relief on Silvy's face was palpable. 'Yes, Miss!' she cried and promptly Disapparated with another crack.

'And here I was hoping the former elf of a Death Eater would have stronger nerves,' Morgana muttered to herself before releasing her hold on her friend. 'Come on, kitten. Sit up straight. Deep breaths.'

Charis sat up, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand just as Silvy returned, clutching a dusty-looking bottle.

'Thank you, Silvy. Did you bring a glass?' Morgana asked.

The little elf beamed proudly and produced two glasses from her pockets. But Morgana just took one, poured a healthy measure and handed it to Charis. 'Drink,' she instructed firmly.

Charis gave her friend a watery smile and took a glug of the deep amber liquid. Her first reaction was to wince, but after swallowing, she admitted, 'Actually, this stuff is okay.'

She took another swig as Morgana looked on, amused. 'Any better?'

Charis nodded gratefully. The burning and warming sensation of the Firewhisky did indeed seem to spread some kind of comfort through her, and she felt calmer.

'Now, if you'll excuse me for just a few moments, I'd very much like to look out of that window!' Morgana told her friend, leaving the bed and approaching the curtains. This time, Charis did not object.

Morgana opened the curtain just a tiny bit, just enough to see down to the street below. It all seemed quiet now. Encouraged by this, she pulled the curtain back fully in order to get a good look.

'There's a whole squad of Aurors standing on the street,' she told Charis.

'Is Moody there?' Charis asked. She'd only met the real Mad-Eye Moody once, at Grimmauld Place. But the impression she had of him, from that short encounter combined with what Morgana had told her about the man today, made her trust him fully. Having him down there in the street made her feel much safer.

'Can't see him,' Morgana answered, now standing on tiptoes and craning her neck. 'He might be inside.'

After another uneventful minute, Morgana closed the window, scowling slightly. She didn't know what she had expected, but ten Aurors seemingly aimlessly standing around outside Fortescue's had certainly not been it. Turning back towards her friend, she saw Charis rub her neck.

'You know, I put a lot of hard work into those shoulders of yours,' Morgana pointed out, giving Charis a reproachful look. 'And then you go and tense up again.'

'Can't believe I need another massage already,' Charis smiled in response.

Morgana crossed her arms in front of her chest. 'Ask nicely,' she teased.

'Pretty please with sugar on top?' Charis mock-pouted.

Morgana laughed. That had been the sign she needed to know that Charis would be all right. Relieved, she addressed her elf.

'Silvy, please go to bed. We'll be fine.'

'Yes, Miss,' the elf piped. 'Silvy hopes Miss Morgana and Miss Charis will go to bed soon, too.'

Morgana shrugged. 'If Charis keeps drinking like that, she might just pass out. Would you mind putting the bottle back to where it belongs, Silvy?'

'Yes, Miss.'

Charis grunted in frustration as the elf reached out her tiny hand to take the glass from her.

'No more,' Morgana admonished firmly. However, Silvy, ever the good elf, poured Charis another glass before Disapparating.

Charis giggled. 'I love Silvy.'

'Only because she gives you booze,' Morgana answered curtly. She had turned her back on Charis once more and was looking almost longingly out of the now closed window.

'You want to be out there, don't you?' Charis asked, watching her friend carefully.

With a swift motion, Morgana pulled the curtains shut firmly and whirled around to face her friend. 'No,' she stated, jaws clenched and her eyes slightly narrowed. She was frustrated with herself. She knew very well that she had no business whatsoever down in the alley.

'Liar.' Charis smiled.

Morgana felt a flash of annoyance that her friend was right. She DID want to be out there. She wanted to be involved. But still it grated on her.

'Call me liar once more, and I'll take away your booze,' she replied snippily.

Charis stuck out her chin defiantly. 'Try.' And with that, she downed the whole glass in one.

Morgana shook her head. 'You shouldn't have done that,' she told Charis. 'You have only eaten a Blueberry Bat since lunch. How do you think two glasses of magical whisky will become you?' In truth, she was irritated at herself for goading her friend. If she'd held her tongue, she might have persuaded Charis not to have drunk the second glass at all. She hated it when people became intoxicated. They tended to do things they normally wouldn't.

Charis merely hiccupped in response.

'Oh, dear,' Morgana sighed wearily. Obviously, Charis' empty stomach and the tension had made the alcohol do its magic even faster than she had anticipated.

'Mmm, maybe I need a lie down,' Charis said woozily after another flurry of hiccups.

'You think?' Morgana replied, crossing her arms disapprovingly in front of her chest.

Charis snuggled down on the bed, hiccupping softly to herself. 'I'm all warm,' she slurred happily.

Morgana couldn't help but smile. She may not like drinking, but her friend did look cute. 'Isn't feeling warm a good thing?' she asked.

Charis hummed in retort.

Morgana crossed the room and sat beside Charis on the bed, patting her head gently and still smiling. And Charis smiled back, draping an arm over Morgana before sighing, 'I'm glad you're here to protect me.'

Morgana shook her head. 'Go to sleep, silly.'

'I love you,' Charis murmured, her eyes shut and gently squeezing Morgana's hand.

Morgana, in her turn, frowned. 'Only drunks and children,' she muttered softly. Carefully, she made sure the blanket covered her friend properly as Charis fell asleep holding her hand.

After a few minutes, Charis' breathing became deeper and regular, and Morgana hoped that the Ravenclaw's dreams were as far away from Death Eaters and jinxes as they could possibly be.

Once again, she gingerly patted her friend's blonde hair and then sat quite still, just watching Charis while the smile on her lips broadened and a warm glow spread inside her.

Snape, too, sat watching. He had sat down in his chair again, leaning forwards slightly and idly tracing the rim of his wine glass. He was mesmerised by what he saw in his mirror.

He had always known that the bond between Charis and Morgana was one of the strongest kinds. They had always been closer than best friends; so close that they could have been sisters. Maybe, not even sisters were that close. What would happen if they lost one another? Would they be able to survive each on their own? Or did the bonds of friendship extend into something far deeper, something akin to... love?

Suddenly, Snape's finger froze in mid-movement. He had tried to drive a wedge between those two girls. He had meant to test their friendship for their own sake, he had told himself and had consequently driven them apart. But thankfully, their friendship had lived through the trial, and now it seemed as if the girls harboured more than sisterly feelings for each other. Had their intimacy not seemed to border on far more than friendship before the disturbance had interrupted their evening of pampering? Had not Morgana's touch resembled one of a lover? And had not Charis leant in to said touch as if it were the most natural thing in the world?

Snape clenched his fist. He was ashamed to admit it even to himself, but seeing his girls in such a position stirred his arousal no end. And had they not been disturbed, had Morgana continued with her caresses, Merlin knew what would have happened then. Snape couldn't help it; he was attracted to them both.

Thank heavens that they were not at Hogwarts anymore. If he had to see them every day, he would not be able to keep away from them. He had tasted Charis already. She had been so sweet, and the untainted love she held for him had worked like a drug. He had gone back for seconds and thirds, taking more of her and playing with her affections, not out of wickedness but because he had been weak. Consequently, he had hurt her. He had never meant to. And to see her cowering on the bed like a trapped animal in fear of Bellatrix LeStrange and the memory of the torture she had endured at the hands of the Dark witch with his own spell... The guilt that gnawed at his stomach made him feel nauseous.

A sudden movement in the mirror ripped Snape out of his thoughts. Morgana had withdrawn her hand, and she wasn't smiling anymore. Instead, a frown had appeared on her brow once more, and her blue eyes were filled with confusion.

No wonder, Snape thought. Morgana had never been one to carry her emotions on her sleeve. She had always been hiding behind a cold exterior, a shield thick enough to not only keep her protected from the emotions of others' but also to keep her own feelings safely locked away. She had lowered that shield just once, just long enough to be hurt and have her heart shattered into a million pieces. It would be a long time until she would ever let someone come close.

'Don't let Lucius destroy your future, Morgana,' Snape whispered, very much aware that she would not hear him. 'Don't let him turn your heart into ice. And, Charis, forgive the fool who has hurt you.'

Those two girls were too young to be hurting the way they were. They should be out dancing and laughing. They should be flirting with young men and being told how beautiful they were. Instead, they were both hiding. At least they had each other. This thought alone gave Snape some comfort. But still, he hated himself for the role he had played in both his girls' fates.

He watched Morgana leave her friend's side and once more disappear from his view. He heard a chair being dragged across the floor and a window being opened. And he didn't need Silvy to tell him this time that Morgana would spend another sleepless night. He knew she would be sitting by the window from now until the early hours of the morning, contemplating the events of the evening and fortifying her mental walls.

No, Morgana would not sleep tonight, just as little as he would, Snape knew that. He poured himself another glass and sat back in his chair, hearing nothing other than Charis' gentle breathing and, every now and then, the rustling of fabric as Morgana shifted in her chair. He'd be keeping an eye on his girls, Snape promised himself. And not just tonight. He'd be looking out for them until the day he had atoned.

VII: Morgana's Decision

Chapter 7 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter VII: Morgana's Decision

Morgana let her gaze wander towards the huge clock hanging on the wall of the Entrance Hall of the Ministry of Magic. A quarter to six. As so often, she was early. Sometimes, she wondered where she had picked up that habit.

Well, she thought to herself, *better make the best of those fifteen minutes. No time like the present to practice observation techniques.*

Silently, Morgana slipped into the shadows of the hall, memorising her surroundings and the people around her. Moody had said that he would soon test them on a situation like this. They would be given ten minutes to study a room full of people, and then Moody would ask them questions. 'What colour was the shirt of the wizard with the green hat? Which door was used the most over the last three minutes?' Most trainee Aurors found such tests tedious to say the least, but Morgana quite enjoyed them. It was quiet work and required both skill and brains. Today, however, Morgana found her focus slip, and after some minutes, she gave up completely. Instead, she started thinking about the events of the previous evening and was suddenly glad that she was early for her meeting with Tonks. She had quite a few things to mull over. It had been a long day and an even longer night.

She had been sitting by the window for quite some time, until long after midnight, in fact. At first, she had managed to convince herself that she was keeping an eye on the happening down in Diagon Alley. What if more Death Eaters arrived and the Aurors were taken unawares? She could warn them then, help them or inform the Ministry. But no more Death Eaters had shown themselves that night, and as the last sounds from the alley had died away and the darkness had become too impenetrable to even make out the Aurors still standing guard outside Fortescue's, Morgana had to admit to herself that there were other reasons for her still being awake.

The Death Eater attack right outside had not upset her as much as could have been expected. Certainly, she was wondering why Fortescue of all people had been targeted, but the attack itself had not been any surprise. 'Constant vigilance,' Mad-Eye Moody drummed into his trainees about a hundred times a day, and with every right. Attacks like the one on Fortescue were something everyone would soon have to become used to. No one was safe anymore. Morgana knew that, and she was prepared.

Other things that had happened that evening, however, she had not been prepared for. She had not been prepared for whiff of roses that had come from Charis' hair. She had not been prepared for the memories it had awoken. And she had most certainly not been prepared for her own reaction. Had the Death Eaters not attacked, Morgana did not know what she would have done. Maybe she would have kissed Charis. Maybe she would have made love to her. Maybe she would just have held her in her arms. But when the Death Eaters had attacked, they had made a racket and broken the spell. And later, when she had wrapped her arms around Charis to console her, Morgana had felt utterly confused and scared. Yes, scared, she had to admit that to herself. She had been terrified. Not by the Death Eaters outside, however. She had been quite confident that they'd clear off as soon as they had carried out the deed they had planned. But the thought that she and Charis had been at Fortescue's only hours earlier, that they could have been caught up in everything and that Charis could have been hurt... that thought had scared Morgana beyond belief.

'Wotcher!'

Tonks' voice ripped Morgana out of her thoughts, and she greeted the young Auror, almost grateful for the woman turning up early. Who knew where her thoughts would have carried her otherwise.

'Ready to go?' Tonks asked cheerily.

'More than ready,' Morgana replied. She had been ready all day, ever since she had sent the tiny, red tinged owl to Dumbledore in the early hours of the morning, telling him that she had thought about his offer and that she wished to speak to him. He had replied before breakfast, informing her that Tonks would meet her at six and escort her. Where they would be going, he had not said, of course. One could never know if an owl was going to be intercepted. But Morgana was certain that she and Tonks were heading for number twelve, Grimmauld Place. And indeed, a few minutes later, she and Tonks Apparated into a familiar-looking London street, which was lined with tall terraced houses.

'You've been here before, right? You know how we get it?'

Morgana nodded. When she had come here with Snape and Charis, Snape had given them each a piece of parchment which had said: The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London. Once they had memorised the address, he had incinerated the parchments and then told them to focus on their destination. Then a battered door had appeared out of thin air between numbers eleven and thirteen, and the houses either side had begun to shift, just as they were now, making way for another building which seemed to squeeze its way to the foreground.

'Good little witch,' Tonks commented with a grin. 'I messed up horribly the first time I was supposed to make the building appear. It took us hours to get in afterwards. Moody almost wrung my neck.'

Happily, she began to trot up the front steps as Morgana followed in her wake. At the top, she paused to look around furtively.

'All clear,' she said with a wink and tapped the door with her wand. There was a clatter of a heavy chain and the clicks of many locks, and then the door creaked open.

The hallway was as dimly lit and gloomy as it had been on Morgana's last visit; so much so that Tonks, unable to see properly, stubbed her toe on the elephant leg umbrella stand and nearly went flying.

'Ow! Bloody thing!' Tonks gave the elephant leg a kick, which sent it crashing down on the floor.

The screech that followed the noise was deafening. 'Scum! Filth! Half-breeds! Begone from this place! The most ancient and noble House of Black...'

A door flew open at the end of the corridor, and rushing out came Remus Lupin. Ignoring the two young women, he made a dash for the screaming portrait of Walburga Black and, with what seemed like an enormous effort, he managed to pull the curtains shut again.

'Ooops.' Tonks grinned sheepishly at Morgana and then turned towards Lupin with an apologetic look on her face. 'Sorry.'

'Should have known.' Remus shook his head and leaned on the door jamb. He sounded exasperated, but the amused twinkle in his eyes gave him away. Obviously, he didn't find Tonks' clumsiness all that annoying.

'Wotcher, Remus,' Tonks said quietly with a small, apologetic smile. 'You remember Morgana?'

The wizard smiled broadly at Mad-Eye Moody's newest protégée. 'I do indeed. She makes a nice breakfast, as I recall.'

Morgana smiled back at her former professor. She had always liked him and had been one of the few Slytherins to appreciate his classes. And he had been nice to her the previous night she had spent at Grimmauld Place. When he had caught her sneaking into the kitchen before sunrise, he had not sent her back to bed but instead made her a cup of tea and talked about the weather. He had even given her some pointers on how to improve her Patronus charm, a charm which she, despite her best efforts, had still not mastered properly. Maybe, if she asked him, Remus would help her once more?

'Ugly bleeding thing,' Tonks muttered under her breath as she waved her wand in order to set the umbrella stand back upright.

'It is quite ugly indeed,' Morgana agreed. 'Why doesn't anyone throw it out?'

'We tried, once,' Remus confided. 'Kreacher, the house-elf that lives here, made such a racket that we had to put it back again.'

'That elf is one turnip short of a casserole,' Tonks whispered conspiratorially, stashing her wand back into the waistband of her jeans. 'Is Albus here yet, Remus?'

'Yes, he's in there.' Remus pointed at door that led to the lounge. 'He refused to budge when good old Mrs Black started screaming, as he's having chocolate cake. Molly was here this morning, you know.'

'Ah. So that would be why YOU are here then.' Tonks smiled fondly at the shabby werewolf.

'I do have a soft spot for chocolate cake,' Remus admitted. It looked for a moment as if he were about to smile back at the young Auror, but in the last moment he seemed to change his mind. Instead, he looked down, scratched his head and shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

Tonks' face fell. 'I suppose we shouldn't keep Albus waiting,' she pointed out. 'Go on through, Morgana. Remus and I will be in the kitchen if you need us.'

'Actually,' Remus started half-heartedly, avoiding the young Auror's eyes, 'I was just about to leave.'

'Oh, I see.' Now Tonks sounded thoroughly disappointed.

'Then again, there IS more cake in the kitchen,' Remus mumbled after a few moments of awkward silence. 'We could always...'

'Have a piece?' Tonks exclaimed. She smiled, and it lit up her whole face. 'Yes, of course. I'd love to! It's my favourite.'

'Well,' Remus continued, still busily avoiding eye contact with Tonks, 'I'd better put the kettle on then. See you later, Morgana.'

'Yeah, see you later, pickle!' And with that, Tonks followed Remus through to the kitchen with somewhat of a spring in her step.

Morgana looked after Remus and Tonks as they walked towards the kitchen, wondering idly if anything was going on between the two. There seemed to be some kind of attraction between them. The smiles Tonks was giving Remus were certain proof of that. But what had Remus' wand in a knot? Why was he acting so... so cold? Even a callous Slytherin could see that he liked Tonks. Why was he being so awkward?

Well, they were adults, Morgana told herself. And their problems weren't any of her business. She had quite a few problems of her own to deal with. Shaking her head, she turned and knocked smartly on the lounge door.

'Come in?'

Morgana unconsciously took a deep breath before entering the lounge, where she saw Albus Dumbledore sitting on a tatty, chintzy armchair, smiling broadly, with cake crumbs peppered all over his long, white beard.

'Good evening Professor D... um, Albus.' Morgana grinned with embarrassment. She still didn't feel close enough to Dumbledore to be calling him by his first name. But he had insisted during their last meeting.

'Morgana, welcome, welcome!' Dumbledore smiled and opened his arms wide in greeting. 'It's wonderful to see you again. Please, do take a seat.'

As Morgana carefully sat down, Dumbledore continued with the pleasantries. 'Can I interest you in some of Molly's finest cake? You would be doing me a favour if you had a slice. I'm afraid I may well eat the lot unless someone helps me.'

'You mean Remus actually left some?' Morgana gasped in mock-surprise. The playful banter between Remus and Tonks had given her the impression that her former professor was somewhat of a cake monster.

Dumbledore laughed heartily. 'Remus and I do like our cake; it cannot be denied.' He set about cutting off a large slice of cake and sent a plate and a huge cup of tea soaring over to Morgana.

'How are you?' he asked, smiling. 'How is the Ministry treating you?'

Morgana accepted the tea and cake, resting the plate gingerly on her lap. 'The Ministry is fine. Hard work, but good fun. But I'm starting to understand why Alastor Moody is called *Mad-Eye*.'

'Yes,' Dumbledore agreed, 'his methods are somewhat... unconventional, shall we say. But his record speaks for itself.'

He paused and took an unhurried swig of his tea. 'I'm glad you're settling in at the Ministry. Tell me,' he started, looking over the top of his half-moon spectacles meaningfully, 'how was the mood there today? I'm sure the Auror office has been busy cleaning up in Diagon Alley. I assume you have heard about the Death Eater attack.'

Morgana put down the tea cup she had just lifted up. 'I saw it happen. *We* saw it happen, Charis and I,' she clarified.

Dumbledore raised his bushy white eyebrows in surprise. 'You were there when the attack took place?'

'We were in my room,' Morgana answered a little defensively. 'Fortescue's is down the street. And those Death Eaters weren't operating too smoothly. Even a deaf man would have heard them.'

'Merlin's beard!' Dumbledore exclaimed. 'It is lucky you and Charis were out of harm's way. But it wasn't just Fortescue who was targeted, unfortunately.'

'I heard they got Ollivander,' Morgana said quietly. 'Rumours spread fast.'

Dumbledore nodded sadly. 'Yes, they did. It seems no one and nowhere is safe now. And yet there are still those who refuse to believe that Voldemort is back, despite irrefutable evidence to the contrary.'

'Sometimes the truth is too scary to believe in it, I guess,' Morgana pointed out.

'Ignorance and apathy are yet scarier still,' the old wizard replied sagely. 'Inaction will not defeat Voldemort.'

Morgana nodded pensively, crumbling some cake between her fingers. 'You believe he can be stopped? Voldemort, I mean?'

'Absolutely. Voldemort takes many things for granted, and that will be his downfall eventually.' Dumbledore sipped his tea calmly, maddeningly failing to elaborate further.

Morgana watched him with a calculating gaze. For all his faults, Dumbledore was a great wizard, and if he believed Voldemort could be vanquished, then it must be true.

'Albus,' Morgana started, becoming more and more aware that Dumbledore would not be the one to mention the Order first. 'You were the one to send me a letter in the first place about joining the Order. Now, tell me: what do you want me to do? What can I do to help bring Voldemort down?'

Dumbledore looked at the young trainee Auror in front of him, his blue eyes twinkling with a steely determination. 'Every man and woman who offers their services to the Light is another blow to Voldemort's rise. Every scrap of information we can gain about his plans takes us one step closer to foiling them. And everyone who joins the Order will be an absolute keystone in bringing him down.'

Morgana crossed her arms. Not for the first time, she had a feeling her former headmaster had a plan already.

'As I said to you before, each Order member has a unique type of information they can provide. And you are no exception, Morgana.'

Morgana narrowed her eyes. She hated the fact that Dumbledore never cut straight to the chase. 'There are already Aurors in the Order, so I doubt you will want to have Ministry related information from me. I also doubt you want me to spy on my landlady. And cake is Molly's business. So? What do you want from me?'

Dumbledore put his teacup down before continuing. 'You have links with a family who, despite the incarceration of the father, still sits on Voldemort's right hand side.'

Morgana felt her heart skip a beat. She couldn't believe what the old wizard in front of her was suggesting. 'You have to be joking.'

'I'm afraid I am quite serious,' Dumbledore replied, peering once again over his spectacles.

'The Malfoys? You want me to give you information about the Malfoys?' Morgana felt her mouth going dry. With Lucius in Azkaban, she had thought, somehow even hoped, that she would never again be involved with the Malfoys.

'That is correct,' Dumbledore confirmed. 'Just because Lucius is serving time in Azkaban does not mean that the Malfoys are now useless to Voldemort. Quite the opposite, in fact.'

Morgana could not help but flinch when the name Lucius was mentioned. The wound was still fresh, and she had still not come to terms with her feelings towards the blond wizard. She had loved him once.

Locking her emotions away, Morgana sat up straight. 'And what exactly do I have to do with this? How do you want me to get hold on information about the Malfoys? In case you have forgotten, Draco and I are not exactly friends. We're not owling on a daily basis. And Narcissa...'

Morgana broke off, swallowing dryly. *I slept with her husband* she thought. *Narcissa has always been kind to me, and I have deceived her. How can I ever look her in the eyes again?*

'You were sponsored by the Malfoys growing up in the orphanage,' Dumbledore explained, either not noticing Morgana's anguish or ignoring it completely. 'They are currently in social disgrace, and it would help them to look good if they were to continue charitable acts whilst Lucius is in prison, such as becoming reacquainted with their former beneficiary. Plus, you are a pureblood. If the Malfoys are seen to extend the hand of friendship to a vulnerable pureblood, it may also make them look good in Voldemort's eyes. And this is desperately needed as a result of Lucius' many mistakes and imprisonment.'

Morgana snorted. 'Are you trying to tell me that you're sending me to Malfoy Manor to make the Malfoys look good?' she asked, unable to stop the sarcastic tone in her response.

'No, I am not,' Dumbledore replied patiently. 'I am explaining the reasons why the Malfoys will accept you without question. And in the mean time, you will be able to get your feet under their table and provide us with information as to life inside the Malfoy residence. For example, I have a feeling it is only a matter of time before Voldemort himself makes Malfoy Manor his permanent residence. And as for Draco... Let us just say the boy is embroiled deeper than any of us could have imagined. Now this is the kind of information that no one else in the Order is able to provide. It's crucial.' He paused, his blue eyes fixed on the red-haired witch. 'Will you do it?'

Morgana stuck out her chin. 'Spy on the Malfoys? Albus, when it comes to Draco, I have no limits whatsoever. I dislike him enough to spread the information of whether he still sleeps with a teddy bear whilst wearing Babbity Rabbity pyjamas. But Narcissa... Narcissa has been nothing but kind to me. Spying on her doesn't feel right.'

Dumbledore took a deep breath, weighing his response carefully. 'Narcissa is aware that her family are in way over their heads. But there is little she can do to change the situation,' he said delicately. 'The purpose of spying on the Malfoys is not to bring the Malfoys down; it is to bring Voldemort down. And taking Voldemort down is the only way that the Malfoys can be saved. Because, believe it or not, I believe that Draco and Narcissa *can* be saved.'

The old man looked hard at Morgana, watching the young woman as she considered her answer. And she looked right back at him unflinchingly.

Trust a Gryffindor to turn espionage into something noble she thought to herself as she crushed more cake between her fingers. But Dumbledore's arguments were valid, no doubt. Narcissa was no Death Eater, and despite the woman's upbringing, Morgana doubted that Narcissa would have ever gotten involved with the Dark Lord had it not been for her husband. And Draco... well, Draco was a conniving little ferret. But he, too, had never had a choice. No one had a choice with Lucius around; Morgana knew that all but too well.

Could Draco and Narcissa really be saved when all of this was over? Morgana wondered silently. *Was there still enough Light within them to save them from the Dark?*

Then, quite suddenly, Morgana Belakane made her decision. She wouldn't do this for Dumbledore and definitely not for Draco. She would do it for Narcissa's sake and her own. Narcissa didn't deserve to live in shame just because her husband had fallen from grace. And maybe, somehow, Morgana hoped that helping Narcissa would clear her own conscience. She owed Narcissa for having had an affair with her husband.

'When do you want me to go?' Morgana asked quietly.

'It will take some arranging, of course,' Dumbledore replied. 'You cannot simply turn up at Malfoy Manor out of the blue. You would have to be invited, but we can see to that. I would imagine, all being well, you may get an invite sometime in the next month or so.'

'Draco will throw a fit when I show up,' Morgana replied ruefully, silently hoping that her invite would arrive after Draco had returned to school. But somehow, she doubted that she would be that lucky.

'You will have to try hard to repair the bridges between you and to hold your tongue,' Dumbledore advised. 'Can you do that?'

Morgana arched an eyebrow and stared defiantly at her former headmaster. 'I'm Slytherin, Albus,' she pointed out. 'I will do anything to achieve my goals. And if the information I can give you will help to bring Voldemort down, then this is my goal. I'll hold my tongue. Or bite it off if need be.'

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. This was the acceptance he had been waiting for.

'Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Morgana Belakane,' he smiled serenely. 'It's a pleasure having you on board.'

VIII: Change For Charis

Chapter 8 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Sorry we left you waiting. Real life, you know ...

Chapter VIII: Change For Charis

'Morgana, don't. Please don't go outside.' The Ravenclaw desperately pleaded with her friend, her green eyes full of fear as she grabbed Morgana by the arm.

'Don't be silly, Charis,' the Slytherin scoffed back, shaking herself free of Charis' grip with annoyance. 'I'm just going to have a look.'

'But there are Death Eaters out there. They'll hex you on sight.'

The redhead merely narrowed her eyes in response to this. 'Then I'll have to make sure they don't see me, right?'

'Morgana, please. Don't go!'

But Charis' pleading was in vain. Morgana simply walked past her, rolling her eyes, and was out of the door in a matter of seconds. And Charis, terrified by the prospect of coming face to face with Bellatrix Lestrange but too scared for her friend to let her go alone, followed suit.

Upon leaving the house, they were met by thick, acrid smoke. The whole of Diagon Alley seemed to be in flames. People were running for their lives, yelling and screaming, but Morgana didn't seem to care. Determinedly, she walked down the alley, towards the inferno that once had been Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, and Charis followed at her heels.

'Go back,' Morgana demanded. 'You should not be here, Charis.'

'Neither should you,' Charis argued. 'If you're going, I'm going with you.'

Morgana stopped and turned, fixing her friend with an icy cold stare. 'You should not be here,' she repeated slowly.

Charis opened her mouth to speak, but found herself unable to. The scene that was unfolding in front of her eyes worked like a full Body-Bind Curse, and she couldn't speak, nor move, nor run away. All she could do was stare at the two figures which were emerging out of the smoke and flames. One was a man, tall and blond, with silvery-grey eyes that glittered triumphantly in the light of the fire. The other was a woman with dark hair and heavy-lidded eyes. They approached Morgana from behind, and she did not even flinch when the blond wizard wrapped his arms around her. Instead, she let her head fall to the side, and her eyes fluttered shut for a moment as the wizard planted a tender kiss on her neck.

'Well done, dearest heart,' Lucius whispered into Morgana's ear. 'Now Bella finally has a filthy Mudblood to play with. And you and I will be calling the Dark Lord.'

Charis' scream of terror never left her lips, and the last thing she saw before the world around her exploded in a jet of green light was the Dark Mark on Morgana's arm.

* * *

Charis shot off her pillow, stifling her cry with both hands. But it was too late. She had screamed already, and by the looks of her bedsheets, she had been thrashing around, fighting her nightmare for quite a while. And even now, when she was wide awake, her heart was pounding in her chest, and every muscle in her body was tense. She was cold and sweaty at the same time, and she could have sworn that her throat was itching from smoke. But in fact, her throat was sore from screaming.

Hugging her pillow tightly to her chest, Charis rolled up under her blanket once more. Would it always be like this from now on, she wondered fearfully. Was she doomed to wake up screaming every night for years to come?

'It will all be fine,' she told herself. After all, the attack on Fortescue's had only taken place four days ago, four very hectic days ago, during which Charis had barely found the time to catch her breath, let alone to process everything that had happened that night. No wonder she was having bad dreams.

She had returned to Somerset on Friday morning, when she had finished her packing and sent off everything to her new flat in London with the help of some very handy spells she had found in a little blue book called *A Hundred Spells to Make Moving Less Painstaking*. Her room, however, she had cleaned the Muggle way, as not to upset her father, who still wasn't too keen on his daughter moving away to London and living as a witch.

That night, Charis had fallen asleep the moment her head had hit the pillow and slept soundly until shortly after midnight when her little cat Lily had happened to brush against a stack of books on her way to the window, making the top-most book land on the floor with a thud and waking her mistress. Charis had not been angry with the little ball of fluff, of course, especially not since the little animal had managed to give itself quite a fright, but going back to sleep had seemed almost impossible as her heart was racing in her chest like a stampeding Hippogriff. And when she finally had gone back to sleep, she had dreamt of books that came crashing down upon her. And then the books had turned into bricks falling from the tumbling walls of what had once been Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour.

Due to the lack of sleep, Charis had spent the Saturday in some kind of daze, and every undertaking had seemed to take at least double the amount of time it normally did. And by the time Charis had boarded the Knight Bus that would take her to London on Saturday night, she was barely sure if she had taken farewell of her parents or turned off the lights in her room.

The conductor of the Knight Bus, Stan Shunpike, had been helpful enough, Levitating Charis' trunk into the bus and holding Lily while Charis fished around in her pockets for the exact fare. He had also let her pick her bed and given her a hot water bottle for free because he said she had such pretty eyes. But if Charis had hoped for a calm night and some well-needed sleep, she had been sadly mistaken. The ride had been bumpy, to say the least, and Stan had seemed unable to shut his mouth for even a second. But what had been most annoying and had kept Charis from sleep had been his stories about the attack in Diagon Alley and abduction of Florean Fortescue. Listening to Stan, one could have gotten the impression that he had been there and seen everything with his own eyes.

Sunday, then, had not held any free time either. Charis had spent most of the day pottering around her flat, unpacking and trying to get everything in order, moving the little furniture she owned from one side of the room to the other and then back again, trying to make up her mind on where everything should be, and had it not been for Lily's pitiful meowing in the middle of the afternoon, Charis would surely have forgotten to go out to buy cat food, dinner and some tea and toast for breakfast. But once she had returned, she had been too tired to eat, and Lily had ended up with a big bowl of spaghetti Bolognese instead while Charis had more or less passed out on her bed.

And there she was now, still not rested after ten hours of sleep, her heart still racing in her chest after her nightmare, and a big knot in her stomach. Today was her first day of work! And she was an utter mess!

Having no idea what time it was, Charis gave a small scream and jumped out of bed. What if she had overslept? What if she was late for work? On her first day! They would send her home right away! Merlin, what was she supposed to do?

With her glasses slightly askew and her hair standing out in all directions, Charis frantically searched for her watch, not even noticing the little house-elf that stood in her kitchen until the elf gave a little polite cough. For a split second, Charis' heart stopped.

'Silvy didn't mean to frighten Miss Charis,' the little elf piped up, shuffling her tiny feet uncomfortably. 'Miss Morgana instructed Silvy to have breakfast ready and leave again before Miss Charis awakens. Silvy couldn't foresee that Miss Charis would wake up early.'

'Early?' Charis asked, all the tension seemingly leaving her mind and body at once. 'I haven't overslept?'

'It is seven-thirty, Miss,' Silvy informed her. 'Miss Morgana said that Miss Charis doesn't have to be at the Ministry before nine. If it is convenient with Miss Charis, Silvy will finish making breakfast while Miss Charis has a shower and gets dressed.'

Thirty minutes later, Charis sat in her kitchen, wearing her new royal blue robe with her hair straightened and pampered with Primpernelle's best lotions and potions. Madam Primpernelle was a miracle worker; Charis looked healthy and glowing and not like a young woman who'd had very little sleep for the best part of a week. Silvy had dutifully Disapparated before Charis had returned from the bathroom, and Charis was now trying to enjoy a sumptuous breakfast while Lily was lapping up a saucer full of milk.

'It was nice of Morgana to send us Silvy, wasn't it, Lily?' Charis asked her little cat, not really expecting an answer. 'It's nice to know that someone is looking out for us.'

When would she see Morgana again, Charis wondered. Their goodbye on Friday morning had been rather hasty, since Morgana had wanted to get to the Ministry as soon as possible in order to get first-hand information on what exactly had happened at Fortescue's. And Charis had not had the courage to ask her friend to linger, nor had she had the courage to mention any of the feelings that had been raging in her heart.

Had she imagined the *moment* between them before the chaos broke out in Diagon Alley? Or would something more have happened between them had they not been disturbed?

Charis took a sip of coffee and tried to block such thoughts. She would never know for certain unless she confronted Morgana, and second to marrying Filch, right now that was the last thing she wanted to do. She knew that Morgana hated to talk about feelings. And if there hadn't been anything that is, if Charis had indeed imagined

everything she did not know how Morgana would react if she mentioned the incident. To be honest, Charis did not want to find out. Their friendship seemed so fragile. And Charis felt that she couldn't afford to lose her friend. Not now.

Sighing, she pushed a mushroom around her plate. She had managed to eat at least some of the deliciously prepared breakfast, but in truth the knot that was still lodged in her stomach was making it difficult to finish the meal. Deciding that it would be a shame to let it go to waste, she fed some of the bacon to Lily and put the rest in the refrigerator. She didn't know when she would return in the evening, and having some leftovers ready which she could magic into a nice sandwich didn't look like that bad of an idea.

In the lounge, Charis double-checked her bag. Keys. Wand. Purse. The mirror. She was ready.

'That's it then, Lily,' she called to the little cat that had devoured the bacon like a hungry lion and was now making herself comfortable on the huge fluffy pillow under the window. 'Be a good kitty, okay?'

With a handful of Floo powder in her clenched fist, Charis stepped in front of the fireplace and took a deep breath. The overwhelming tide of nerves that swept over her almost made her retch. Was she really ready for this? Was moving to London the best move for her? And was getting a job at the Ministry of Magic a mistake? After all, her cousin Sirius had been killed at the Ministry just a few short months ago in the very department she was going to be working in, and Voldemort himself had led the Ministry's infiltration. Plus, the recent attack on Fortescue's showed that Wizarding London was no longer a safe place to be. And then there was the job itself. Was she cut out for it? What if she couldn't do it and got it all wrong and made a mess of it? What if the Ministry had made a mistake in hiring her and she really shouldn't be working there at all?

A million thoughts whizzed through her mind, a million worries that had culminated from her final year at Hogwarts and beyond. She felt her outstretched hand starting to shake, and squeezing her eyes shut, she took some more deep breaths in order to calm herself. She shouldn't be feeling this way. She should be excited! This was it; her life started here. She was a bona fide witch with her own flat and a job at the Ministry. But standing at the edge of her fireplace felt like standing on the edge of a cliff, and she needed to be brave and jump. Beyond it lay her future, and there was no turning back now.

Looking over her shoulder, Charis caught sight of Lily. The little cat was basking in the morning sunlight, already fast asleep, seemingly oblivious to her mistress' distress. Or did the cat think that there was nothing to worry about? Did Lily have so much confidence in her mistress that she could go to sleep in a blink of an eye?

'I can do this!' Charis said out loud, and steeling her nerves, she bravely walked forwards, threw the glittery Floo powder into the grate and stepped through the emerald flames, right into her future.

IX: Mysteries Manifold

Chapter 9 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter IX: Mysteries Manifold

Charis stepped out of the large fireplace into the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Her heart was pounding, and as she felt a little dizzy from the journey by Floo, Charis kept close to the wall, willing her breathing to slow down and taking in her surroundings.

There had only been a few witches and wizards hurrying about their business the last time she had been here, but today, the Atrium was as busy as a nest full of Billywigs; there were dozens of witches and wizards jostling past her, all rushing to their respective workplaces with the frown of Monday morning deeply etched on their faces.

Charis craned her neck, desperate to catch a glimpse of a familiar face. It certainly would have felt reassuring. But alas, none of the witches bustling by had short, flaming red hair.

Oh, well, Charis thought, steeling herself. *Morgana sent me Silvy this morning. That must mean she's thinking of me*

Furtively, she touched her star necklace and then pushed herself away from the wall to make her way to one of the lifts at the back of the Atrium.

It was quite a squeeze in the lift, and after having pressed the button for Level Nine, Charis' nose was unfortunately lodged in a very tall wizard's armpit for most of the duration. How uncomfortable and utterly humiliating! Charis could feel herself blushing, but there was little that could be done. She was standing with her back to the wall and the tall wizard right in front of her, and he didn't seem to be interested in moving an inch, not even after most of the other passengers had gotten off at their respective levels. Agonisingly, he himself didn't leave the lift until Level Eight, by which time there was just Charis and a little old witch with frizzy white hair and bejewelled spectacles left, who gave Charis a sympathetic sort of look before departing towards the steps that led to Wizengamot on Level Ten, below.

At the dark and gloomy Entrance of the Department of Mysteries, Grindling Gibbons was waiting to meet Charis. He was once again wearing smart, grey robes, and his hair was again tied back in a ponytail. And his eyes shone just as kindly as they had during their first meeting.

'Good morning! Welcome, Charis. How are you feeling today?'

'I'm a little nervous, to be honest,' Charis admitted, and Grindling smiled.

'Understandable,' he said. 'But there's no need. I promise I'll take good care of you today. Did you have breakfast?'

Charis nodded.

'Good, good!' Grindling beamed. 'We can get started right away then. Now, there are three ways to reach the Hall of Prophecy; last time, we walked through the Time Chamber, remember?'

Once again, Charis nodded. The Time Chamber had been largely covered with sheets and was filled with Unspeakables casting repairing charms on the broken timepieces.

'Today,' Grindling went on, 'I am going to take you through the Space Chamber, a personal favourite of mine. But first, I need to show you the charms needed to access the Hall in each of the three ways. Now, the funny thing about these charms is that once you've mastered them, you will feel like you have forgotten them.'

'Excuse me?' Charis frowned, and Grindling smiled.

'It seems strange, doesn't it? Let me explain: unless you are heading for the Hall of Prophecy and are at the verge of casting one of the access spells, you will not be able to remember them. You won't be able to convey them to anyone. You cannot talk about them, and you cannot write them down. They are like dreams, you see. You know you have them in your mind, but the harder you try to remember them, the more distant they seem. Do you understand?'

Still frowning, Charis started to nod slowly. 'It's a security measure then?' she asked. 'So no one can make me tell them about the spells?'

'Exactly!' Grindling seemed pleased. 'And what's even better: as you are unable to remember the spells outside these premises, the information cannot be made accessible by any means. Not by Veritaserum, not by Legilimency... We're all covered. Now, let me show you how to access the Space Chamber.'

Charis watched attentively, taking mental notes of Grindling's every move, gesture and word. And after he had shown her thrice, she got to try it herself and managed to enter the Space Chamber on her second attempt. And funnily enough, she had not the faintest memory of how she had done it once she stepped into the room. Actually, at first, Charis feared that she had messed up. She couldn't see anything, and there was a strange sensation, familiar to the feeling of Apparating but not quite as intense, and Charis thought that it must be some kind of security measure that transported trespassers away. But after some moments, Charis realised that she was floating, and that the chamber around her was actually filled with tiny pinpricks of light.

'Those are stars,' Grindling explained, floating up beside her. 'And we're weightless, just as we would be in outer space.'

He took Charis by the hand and swirled her around so she came to face the solar system that was suspended in the middle of the room, with the light from the sun the brightest object. Charis could not help but gaze on in wonder; Astronomy had, after all, been one of her favourite lessons at Hogwarts, and the room was very beautiful.

'Now, Charis, could you try and make out the constellation of Ursa Major, otherwise known as The Plough, for me, please?'

'I can try,' Charis replied, her voice a little shaky. She was feeling a bit overwhelmed, but despite the odd feeling in the bit of her stomach, her Ravenclaw brain rose to the challenge.

'There it is,' she said after a few moments and pointed. 'Ursa Major looks almost like a big frying pan. Once you've found Ursa Major, it is very easy to spot Ursa Minor nearby, which looks very much like a mini-frying pan. Polaris, the North Star, is part of the constellation Ursa Minor. It's on the very tip of the "handle" of Ursa Minor.'

Abruptly, Charis stopped and blushed. She had just realised that she had given her boss a lecture on constellations. Grindling, however, smiled.

'This is why I like having trainees from Ravenclaw House. You can think for yourself. Of course, you finding the North Star would have been your next task because that's where the exit door is. Now, after you.'

Blushing even more but at the same time pleased with herself, Charis led the way towards the North Star, finding it surprisingly easy to move in weightlessness. It was almost like swimming, an activity which Charis had always loved. Now, she had a feeling that the Space Chamber would most probably be her favourite way of entering the Hall of Prophecy.

'Welcome to work,' Grindling said cheerfully once they had exited the Space Chamber and entered the Hall of Prophecy. It was illuminated by dim blue fire, which emitted from candle brackets lining the walls but didn't seem to lend any warmth to the room. In the excitement of her induction, Charis had never noticed how chilly the place actually was, and after only a few moments, she felt her hands grow cold and stuffed them into her pockets, at this moment extremely grateful for her temperature-adjusting robes! Still, she felt herself shuddering, but knew it had little to do with the temperature.

'You'll get used to it,' Grindling said in a friendly and encouraging tone, almost as if he had been reading her mind. 'When I started working here, I found the darkness and gloom rather depressing. But after some weeks, I realised that it wasn't all that bad. In fact, I find the glow of the orbs is quite soothing nowadays.'

They walked past rows and rows of shelves, many of them damaged or even empty of any orbs, and Charis realised just how much damage had been done here and how much work lay ahead of her.

'Now, before you can start repairing and logging prophecies, Charis, you will have to consent to taking the Unspeakable Vow,' Grindling explained. 'Unspeakables, as you know, are so named because they are forbidden to reveal any of the secrets they have learned to anyone who has not been privy to them. Therefore, each worker has to take the Unspeakable Vow. It's quite similar to the Mimbewimble Jinx. Do you happen to be familiar with that?'

Charis couldn't help but giggle. Mimbewimble rendered a person inarticulate, and she and Morgana had quite some fun with that particular jinx during the last weeks of their sixth year. Especially when they had realised that certain Slytherin students no names mentioned were just as inarticulate once the jinx was lifted as they were while still under its influence. Oh, the grunting!

She read her Vow from an ancient looking piece of parchment, as certain of all the runes as if the text had been written in the Latin alphabet. And she could tell that Grindling was impressed. Had he been a Hogwarts teacher, he would certainly have awarded her House points.

Then, he took an orb from a nearby shelf and handed it to her.

'Now, Charis, once I am out of earshot, I want you to peer into the globe and carefully listen to the prophecy stored inside it. Take your time, and once you know it by heart, I want you to come to me and tell me all about it. I do love a bit of nice gossip in the morning.'

He smiled, and once Charis had taken the orb from him, he started to walk away. 'I'll be in aisle sixteen,' he called over his shoulder. 'Come find me once you are done.'

Charis looked after him for some moments. He was such a nice man, and his kind eyes and smile made Charis feel so at ease. And now that he was walking away from her, she felt almost a little forlorn. But that was silly, of course. He'd just be some aisles away from her.

Shaking her head at herself, Charis concentrated on the orb in her hands, peering at the figure inside it. It was an old woman, wrapped in shawls that were decorated with strange signs and symbols. Her eyes had rolled back into her head, and her voice was drawling and distorted. She spoke of a man born from the loins of a dragon who would rise to power under the shadow of the cross and the crescent moon and be slain by the same sword that had helped him win his throne.

Charis listened to the prophecy four times, desperately trying not only to learn it by heart but also to understand it, but on her fifth attempt, she realised that there was no point in trying. She was not meant to understand the prophecy. It was not her task. So she carefully put the orb back onto the shelf where Grindling had taken it from and headed for aisle sixteen.

'Well, then,' Grindling greeted her, smiling. 'Do tell.'

'The prophecy was made by an old woman,' Charis started.

'And?' Grindling pressed on.

'She spoke about...'

What followed was a trail of grunts and noises which would even have made Crabbe and Goyle look like a couple of geniuses, and Grindling's smile turned into an amused grin.

'Looks like the Vow is working,' he said, and handed Charis a glass of water which she accepted gratefully. Her mouth suddenly was very dry, and there was a distinct taste

of old dishrag on her tongue.

'Congratulations,' Grindling went on. 'You have now taken your Vow and are officially a trainee Unspeakable. On the downside, we're now running out of excuses not to work.'

He gestured for Charis to follow him, and they made their way to the back of the hall. There stood a huge, table-sized leather-bound ledger.

'Every prophecy that has ever been here,' Grindling explained, 'is documented in this ledger along with its location in the hall, such as the shelf number and row number. Only I, the Keeper, and the Unspeakables working with me in this case, you have access to this ledger. Now, many of the memories which were stored within the shattered prophecy orbs are lost forever. But as they were all duly noted in the ledger, the prophecies can be written out on a slip of parchment, sealed inside a glass orb and placed back to where they used to be on the repaired shelf. That way, the prophecies can still be retrieved by those they are made about and all is not lost.'

He looked at Charis apologetically. 'I know this is not the most exciting of tasks, but it requires a high level of concentration and a methodical mind. I think you'll do just great with it.'

Indeed, Charis found that she soon got into a routine of doing the work, and as the day went on, she got quicker and quicker. Grindling, who himself was concentrating on storing the new prophecies that were coming in and clearing the backlog, was pleased with her progress and was confident that with her help, the Hall of Prophecies would be back to normal in the space of a few months. And when they left the hall for the day, he told Charis that he was very much looking forward to working with her again the next day. Charis, in her turn, blushed and wished her boss and mentor a quiet and relaxing evening. Merlin knew that she was very much hoping to have one herself.

* * *

Charis returned to her little flat feeling tired yet confident that she'd achieved a lot. She hadn't made any serious mistakes, had not broken anything or said anything stupid, and Grindling had even praised her a fair amount of times. And she, too, was very much looking forward to working with him again the next day. He had promised to show her around the department a bit more and introduce her to some of its secrets.

As she stepped out of the grate, Charis was immediately greeted by frantic mewing. She hurriedly petted and fed her hungry cat before fixing herself a leftover breakfast sandwich. Then she kicked off her boots and took off her robes, making herself comfortable in the sofa wearing nothing but her knickers and bra. Living on her own certainly had its advantages, she thought and sunk her teeth into her sandwich, intending not to leave the sofa until it was time to go to bed. Halfway through the snack, however, both her meal and her quiet evening were disturbed by a frantic tapping on the round window in the lounge. Puzzled, Charis left the half-eaten sandwich and went to investigate.

A large grey owl sat hooting urgently on the windowsill, a letter tied carefully to its leg. Charis frowned. Who would send her a letter, she wondered.

Carefully, she removed the letter and let the owl nibble on her sandwich while she herself opened the thick, yellow parchment and began to read.

Dear Charis,

I hope this letter find you well and would like to offer my sincerest apologies for disturbing you on what must be the end of an exhausting first day at work. However, there is something very important I wish to speak to you about this evening, and I hope you could spare ten minutes of your time for an old man. If you could Floo to my office at Hogwarts as soon as possible, I would be immensely grateful.

Yours fondly,

Albus Dumbledore

Charis stared at the letter, her heart racing. Why was the Headmaster of Hogwarts writing to her? And what could be so urgent that he needed to speak to her as soon as possible, face to face, in his office?

Charis immediately started to imagine the worst. Could there have been a mix-up with her NEWT grades? Maybe she hadn't achieved the high results after all and there had been a terrible mistake? Could it affect her job at the Ministry? Was that why Dumbledore was so insistent on seeing her tonight?

Forgetting all about the owl that had now demolished the rest of her sandwich, Charis started buzzing around her little flat, picking up her robes from the floor and getting her boots back on while her heart was racing in her chest and a million of thoughts racing through her mind. And when she stood in the grate, ready to throw the Floo Powder and call out her destination, she actually had to look down to check if she was indeed wearing her robes and that her boots were on the right feet. She was feeling so confused that forgetting to get dressed didn't seem so far-fetched.

As she stepped out of the fireplace, brushing soot from her robes, Dumbledore hurried to meet her, his hand stretched out in salutation. He looked very calm.

'Charis! Welcome! Welcome back to Hogwarts!'

Charis walked forwards, a frown of concern on her face. 'Sir!' she blurted out. 'Is everything alright? Your letter sounded extremely urgent!'

'Dear Charis, forgive me,' the old wizard began, secretly pleased that the girl had responded as quickly as he had hoped she would. 'I did not mean to startle you. What I have to discuss with you is indeed urgent, but everything is alright.'

He smiled benignly as he gestured for her to sit.

'Have you had dinner?' he asked conversationally as Charis made herself comfortable on an armchair.

'Yes, I've just grabbed a sandwich,' Charis replied, just now becoming aware that more than half of her dinner had ended up in the owl's tummy. But it didn't matter.

'A sandwich?' Dumbledore exclaimed. 'Now that won't do. Let me send for something from the kitchen. A salad, maybe?'

'Thank you, sir, but I'm fine,' Charis replied, politely but firmly. Yes, she was hungry but doubted that she would be able to eat anything now. And in truth, she very much wanted to know what she had been summoned here for. But she was not rude enough to interrupt the old wizard's display of hospitality.

'A nice toffee then?' Dumbledore picked up a box of Honeydukes finest from his desk. He had obviously been having some himself, judging by the amount of empty wrappers that littered his desk.

Charis eyed the box. She knew she should start eating more healthily. But Honeydukes toffees were really very good.

'Well, maybe one won't hurt,' she decided after a moment and smiled as she took a fat toffee from the proffered box.

'Sugar is like balm for the soul, I always say.' Her former headmaster smiled broadly in response. 'Now, something to drink maybe? Tea?'

'Just water would be good, if that's okay?' Charis was rather thirsty from all the rushing around that evening. Also, holding onto a glass would give her shaking hands something to do.

'Water it is.'

Dumbledore conjured a jug with ice cold water and two glasses.

'How was your first day?' he asked whilst busying himself with pouring the water.

Charis was a bit confused about why the old wizard was asking such seemingly superfluous questions after having pointed out the urgency of this meeting in his letter, but she answered them with good grace anyway.

'It was good, thank you. There is a certainly much to do... I can't really say much more than that, I'm afraid.' She remembered her Unspeakable Vow from earlier and looked up apologetically. 'I'm not allowed to.'

Dumbledore looked at Charis over his half-moon spectacles whilst sending the glass of water over to her with a wave of his hand.

'I understand, of course. I hope the whole situation didn't seem too overwhelming.'

'I'd be lying if I said things weren't a little hectic at the moment, sir,' Charis replied, catching the cold glass carefully. It was slippery with condensation.

'The amount of damage at the Ministry must be tremendous.'

'It was a bit of a shock seeing the damage for myself,' Charis agreed. 'Just thinking that You-Know-Who himself was the cause of it is awful.'

Dumbledore nodded slowly. 'It must be especially hard for you to work at the Department of Mysteries after all that has happened there.'

He gazed at Charis knowingly, and she got the feeling his blue eyes were X-raying her. Unable to hold the old wizard's gaze, she looked down at the desk.

'I did consider whether working at the Ministry might be the wrong thing to do,' she confessed. 'But then I decided that Sirius wouldn't have wanted me to put my life or my job on hold. But yes, I think about him every day...'

She trailed off sadly, not knowing what else to say, and took a sip of the cold water to alleviate the hot lump that had now formed in her throat.

'Your feelings are natural, Charis, and nothing to be ashamed of,' Dumbledore said. 'Sirius was a great man, and it saddens me, too, that we have lost him so early.'

He paused, lacing his fingers together in front of him. 'However, as you said, he wouldn't want any of us to put our work on hold. He would want us to keep on fighting the Dark. And this, Charis, is why I asked you to come here tonight, on such short notice.'

Charis carefully placed her water on desk and looked up at her former headmaster expectantly. She knew that what was coming next was at the heart of the matter and in all likelihood would take her by surprise.

Dumbledore took another sip of his ice cold water and seemed in no hurry whatsoever to continue, even though Charis was now waiting with baited breath.

'Charis, when you visited Grimmauld Place, you met a couple of people there, remember?' he said eventually.

'Yes, sir,' she confirmed.

'They, like Sirius, have dedicated their lives to fighting Voldemort and to setting the Wizarding world free once more,' he continued, seeing Charis flinch at the use of the Dark Lord's name. But he went on regardless. 'They are good men and women, the best I could get, but still, we are in need of new blood; we need people with connections. Every witch or wizard who decides to join our cause is yet another blow to Voldemort. And every piece of information we can gain yet another weapon against him. So I ask you now, outright: Do you want to help us bring Voldemort down, Charis?'

Charis' mouth suddenly went very dry. 'Are you asking me to join the Order of the Phoenix, sir?'

'Indeed I am.' Again, his bright blue eyes seemed to be searching hers like an X-ray, and it was hard to maintain eye contact.

Charis inhaled, a little shocked at the proposition.

'I am asking you, first and foremost, because you are an intelligent, brave young witch, Charis,' Dumbledore explained. 'And you know first-hand what Dark witches and wizards are capable of. You know how important it is to stop them.'

But Charis was still struggling to see just why Dumbledore wanted her to join. 'But, sir, what could I possibly do to help the Order?'

'Ah, there are many things,' Dumbledore explained. 'Every Order member has unique, useful abilities or connections. Every member can provide us with certain information. You, Charis, would be our link to a part of the Ministry no other of us has access to,' he pointed out.

'But... as a trainee Unspeakable...' Charis interjected. 'I am bound by oath not to reveal information. In fact it is impossible for me to.'

Dumbledore, however, was well aware of the charms that Unspeakables were bound by.

'Of course, I am not asking you to spy on your employer, Charis. Far from it,' he clarified. 'I am just hoping that you, having insight in both the Order's business and your own work, could make certain, ah, helpful connections on the information you are privy to.'

'Well, I... I could try, sir,' Charis replied doubtfully. She was by now highly uncomfortable.

'I am not asking you to make your decision tonight, Charis,' Dumbledore went on. 'In fact, I do not want you to make your decision tonight. Sleep on it, think about it.'

Again, the old wizard peered over his spectacles at the young witch in front of him. Just like with Morgana, he was certain that this Star Sister wouldn't turn his offer down either.

'I am honoured you asked me, sir,' Charis replied, plucking up the courage to speak her mind. 'But I'm still not sure if I would be useful to you in any way.'

Dumbledore smiled serenely at this. 'Let me be the judge of that, Charis. If nothing else, I am sure certain people in the Order will appreciate your company.'

Certain people in the Order? Charis couldn't help but blush. She had met some of the Order members, yes, but the only one she really knew the only one she knew *intimately* was Snape. Would he appreciate her company? And just how much did Dumbledore know? Highly embarrassed, Charis once more lowered her gaze.

'I would like to invite you to tea on Sunday,' Dumbledore proposed, 'Just to meet everyone. I do not, however, expect you to have made your decision by then.'

'That would be nice, sir,' Charis said quietly. The thought of seeing Snape again both terrified and excited her in equal measure, and her stomach gave a little flip of anxiety.

'I hope Molly will bake a cake,' Dumbledore went on. 'And Charis, please don't call me sir. It makes me feel so old. My name is Albus.'

Charis smiled. 'That will take some getting used to.'

'Many people say that. It's an unusual name, I am aware of that. You may use Percival or Wulfric or Brian, if you prefer.'

Charis could not help but giggle at this, and temporarily, the feeling of anxiety evaporated. 'No, it's not your name,' she explained. 'Just having to get used to not calling you sir will be strange.'

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to smile. 'And here I was, believing all these years that it was the name Albus people had problems with.'

He studied the young witch for a few moments before continuing. 'You must be tired. The first day in any new job is always draining.'

'It's been a long day,' Charis admitted, fighting the urge to yawn.

'It certainly has. Forgive an old man for making it even more tiresome. I won't keep you any longer. But do come to tea on Sunday. No strings attached, just tea. And cake, I hope.'

Once more, he smiled, and this time his blue eyes twinkled over his half-moon glasses.

'I will, Albus,' Charis promised. 'I'll look forward to meeting everyone.'

And with that, she got up to leave and crossed over to the huge fireplace in order to Floo home. But just before she went to take a handful of Floo Powder, she remembered something.

'Oh, should I presume this invitation is to remain confidential?'

Charis was bursting to tell her best friend Morgana and was hoping that Albus would be able to read between the lines with this question. But the old wizard turned her down.

'Yes, confidential, if you please,' he instructed, knowing perfectly well what Charis meant. But he didn't want her to know that Morgana had already joined the Order. Not yet, anyway.

'The Order runs in secret,' he explained, 'and no matter how tempting it is to share with one's best friend, I am afraid you cannot.'

Charis nodded her understanding, even though it seemed as though this was yet another secret she had to bear. 'Very well, sir... I mean, Albus. I will see you Sunday.'

'Sunday it is.' Dumbledore beamed broadly. 'I will send you an escort.'

Before she broke out into yet another blush, Charis bade her ex-headmaster goodbye and Floo'd home to the sanctuary of her flat, and once she stepped out of her fireplace, her dizziness had little to do with the means of transportation. Instead, it was due to the thrill of expectation running through her.

Certainly, Dumbledore wouldn't send a stranger to escort her. He would send someone he could trust and someone *she* could trust. It had to be Snape. It just had to be!

With her head still spinning from excitement, Charis made her way to the bedroom, her Ravenclaw mind already calculating the minutes until she would see her dark, brooding Potions master again.

X: To the Manor Drawn

Chapter 10 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter X: To the Manor Drawn

It was Sunday morning. Sitting in the elegant drawing room of Malfoy Manor, Severus Snape couldn't help but muse over the different activities he had filled his Sunday mornings with during the course of the years.

When he had been little, his father had always insisted on dragging him to church. 'To make a good impression on the neighbours,' he had always said. How heading straight for the pub after the service had made a good impression on the neighbours, however, young Severus had never really understood. But he had always enjoyed being sent home after church because whilst his father had been at the pub, spending the dole money, his mother had taught him magic.

Then at Hogwarts, he had spent most of his Sunday mornings in the library, at first studying with Lily during the first couple of years and then all alone, reading up on the Dark Arts, after the unfortunate incident by the lake. And once he had turned seventeen and had received the Dark Mark, he would spend his Sunday mornings in the Forbidden Forest, showing hexes and curses to aspiring Death Eaters and enjoying their admiration.

As an adult then, he had spent most of his Sunday mornings alone. While other men his age slept off their hangovers or shagged their sweethearts senseless, he, Severus Snape, was hiding in the darkness, either in the dungeons of Hogwarts or behind drawn curtains at Spinner's End, wishing that the day would pass quickly.

And this Sunday morning, his task was to lie to one of his oldest friends and at the same time to lay the first brick for a road that would very likely lead a young woman straight to hell. And there were people who claimed that Sunday mornings were the best time of the week. Snape almost snorted and doubted that he would ever have what people referred to as a nice Sunday.

Sighing, he looked around the drawing room. He had sat there countless times before, patiently waiting for an elf to inform him that he was now granted the honour of meeting the lord of the manor. And as always, everything in the room was immaculate and sumptuous: the thick Persian rug, the opulent Fabergé-style ornaments; even the velvet drapes that adorned the large French windows were pristine and certainly worth more than most wizards' yearly salary. But Snape knew that although the grandeur remained the same, life was very different for the Malfoys these days: Lucius was locked up in Azkaban and his wife and son were left to fend for themselves. And as glad as Snape was to see Lucius behind bars, he felt bad for Narcissa and Draco. He knew all too well that Lucius' failures reflected upon his family and that they weren't worth a Knut in the eyes of many Death Eaters nowadays, even for all their wealth and privilege. And the Dark Lord took pleasure in humiliating them as his latest project du jour. Not even Bellatrix, once the Dark Lord's favourite, was spared. She, too, was suffering his displeasure now. After all, her sister had made the mistake of marrying a man who was unable to live up to the Dark Lord's expectations.

But the one who was suffering the most was Narcissa. Not only was her husband in Azkaban but now her son was in danger as well. And as any loving mother, she was ready to commit the most desperate acts to protect her child. That had been more than evident when she had come to Spinner's End and begged Snape on her knees to protect her Draco. How much must her pride have suffered that day? And how could Snape have refused? He had known Narcissa for many years, and in all that time he had never once seen her lose her poise. The fact that she had wept and clung to him as though pleading for her life had shown how much pain she was in and how great her love for Draco was. And her tears had shaken Snape's very core and awoken an anger in him he had not felt for quite some time. Was Lucius even aware of how much suffering he had caused? Could Lucius rotting away in Azkaban really make up for it?

The sound of the door opening shook Snape from his thoughts, and as he rose, he came face to face with the lady of the manor herself. Snape was surprised; he had expected an elf.

Narcissa was dressed in a fine silver robe, her platinum blonde hair falling like a sheet down her back. She looked, if possible, paler and more delicate than ever. She, too, seemed surprised, but nonetheless happy to see her visitor.

'Severus! How lovely to see you.' She stepped forwards, concern etched on her pretty face. 'Is everything alright?'

Snape was taken aback by Narcissa's question. If anything, he should be asking her if she was alright.

'Is it not custom for friends to come by every now and then?' he asked instead, deflecting her question.

Narcissa gave a small smile, and it seemed to Snape that it had been a long time since she had smiled properly. It was almost as if she had forgotten how.

'Of course, Severus. It is good to see you. It's just that I rarely get company these days, since...'

Narcissa trailed off sadly.

Since Lucius has fallen from grace, Snape finished the sentence in his mind. He could imagine that not many people wanted to associate with the Malfoys nowadays. Followers of the Dark Lord were afraid to displease their master, and members of other highly regarded Wizarding families did not, of course, want to mix with the family of a man who was carrying the Dark Mark and sitting in Azkaban.

Uncomfortably, Snape cleared his throat. He had not come here to make Narcissa feel bad.

'You look well,' he offered, merely for something to say. He supposed Narcissa hadn't received a compliment in quite some time, even though she deserved to be showered with praise on a daily basis. She was undoubtedly a beautiful witch, and even with the strain her family was under, she always looked like a lady.

Narcissa inclined her head and accepted Snape's compliment gracefully.

'I admit I do not feel that well. I find myself walking from room to room at nights, looking for Lucius but not finding him. And during the day, I can sit for hours in his office, waiting for him to come home...'

She broke off and shook her head as if to rid herself of her ghosts, and Snape shifted his weight from one foot to the other, genuinely at a loss of what to say. He severely doubted that Narcissa had revealed this to anyone before, not even her own sister. Thankfully, he was spared having to say anything by Narcissa regaining her composure.

'Forgive me,' she said, straightening up. 'Where are my manners? Can I get you a drink?'

'Are you having anything?' Snape answered, hoping that she would. Maybe a drink would be good for her and put her at her ease.

Narcissa smiled. 'Well, I know how fond you are of elf-made wine. We have... I have,' she corrected herself quickly, 'an Amarone which I have been saving for some pleasant company. Would you care to join me?'

'I would love to, Narcissa,' Snape replied. It was not often that he was referred to as being pleasant company, especially by a beautiful witch. He wouldn't have turned her down even if she had offered him vinegar.

Once more, Narcissa smiled briefly before summoning an elf. 'Tomassi Amarone 1989 and two glasses,' she instructed. 'The French-cut crystal.'

And the elf bowed deeply and Disapparated immediately with a crack.

Snape had been around the Malfoys long enough to no longer be impressed by the luxury with which they surrounded themselves as everyday normality, but he knew that today Narcissa was making an extra special effort for him. The French-cut crystal glasses had been a wedding gift from Lucius. Narcissa didn't bring them out for just anyone.

The elf swiftly returned with the wine and made a show of pouring, letting Narcissa check if it was corked or not and then, at her approval, poured a glass for each of them and then stepped aside to await further instructions.

'You can leave the bottle,' Narcissa told the elf, her voice cold and matter-of-fact as was expected of a witch of her background. And the little elf once more bowed deeply and then left the witch and wizard alone.

With the elf leaving, Narcissa's shoulders once more slumped ever so slightly, barely noticeable for anyone who didn't know her. But Snape noticed, and hence, he was not surprised as there was once more the tiniest of trembles in her voice as she spoke again.

'I suppose we should make a toast. This is, after all, a very fine wine.'

'And what shall we toast to?' Snape asked, watching his hostess carefully. If she started crying now, like she had done at Spinner's End, he would not know what to do. But to his surprise, Narcissa smiled.

'To pleasant company,' she proposed. 'May it always be there when we need it the most.'

Snape charged his glass and smiled back at Narcissa before taking a sip. Black cherries and velvet rolled across his tongue, followed by a sweet vanilla finish. He didn't want to estimate how much the wine was worth, but it was certainly up there with some of the best vintages he had ever sampled at Malfoy Manor.

Narcissa took a subtle sip and settled on the sofa, clutching the stem of her glass tightly.

'Severus,' she started, 'about the Vow...'

Snape shook his head. 'Narcissa, don't.' For him, there was no point going over it. It was done, they couldn't change it; the die was cast.

'I have been torn up with guilt ever since that night,' Narcissa whispered, her blue eyes full of anguish as she was looking up at him. 'I had no right to ask that of you.'

'You asked me for help, and I offered it gladly,' Snape replied. 'The Vow was just... an unfortunate side effect.'

This was partly true, and it had worked in Dumbledore's favour in the end. Narcissa, of course, was not to know this.

'Oh, Severus, I had no one else to turn to,' Narcissa carried on, the words tumbling from her lips like water burst from a broken dam. 'I am indebted to you. We are indebted to you.'

'As I said at Spinner's End,' Snape interrupted her, sitting down beside her, 'I am sure that the Dark Lord intends me to do the deed in the end. If me doing it means Draco will be saved... Narcissa, you know I care for the boy. And I care as much for you.'

Black eyes looked deeply into blue, and Narcissa put her hand on Snape's. The depth of his honour would have been astonishing to those who did not know him as well as she did.

'You are a true friend, Severus. I will never forget what you have done for me and my family.'

Snape had to resist the reflex to pull back. He was not used to being touched, especially not in an intimate, emotional way. But he resisted. The warmth of Narcissa's slender fingers felt pleasant against his skin.

'I would like to do more for you, Narcissa,' he announced. 'For you and Draco,' he added, realising that his words could be misinterpreted.

'I am touched beyond words,' Narcissa whispered, not able to stop the tears of gratitude and emotion welling in her eyes. And Snape graciously feigned enormous interest in the tapestry at the wall to give her a moment to compose herself.

'Forgive me,' she added. 'You have already done so much.'

'All I have to offer is a suggestion,' Snape clarified. 'The rest will be up to you.'

'And what is your suggestion, Severus?' Narcissa asked quizzically.

'The Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa,' Snape started, well aware that he was stating the obvious. But he needed some moments to gather his thoughts. 'Lucius lost him the Prophecy, and you and Draco are now suffering his anger. I think, however, that there is a way to please him.'

'There is?'

Once more, Snape looked away. The glimmer of hope shining in Narcissa's blue eyes made his heart ache.

'New followers are needed in the ranks of the Death Eaters,' he elaborated. 'And the most prized additions would have old, pure blood. You, Narcissa, have the chance to introduce a new follower to the Dark Lord. A follower he will be only too glad to welcome into the fold.'

Narcissa could not see where Snape was going with this. Her son already bore the Mark; surely Snape didn't mean that she should take it also?

'Can you think of no one?' Snape pressed.

Narcissa frowned, her pretty face screwed up in concentration but in vain. Everyone she knew socially was already a supporter or follower of the Dark Lord in some form or other. Eventually, she shook her head.

'Have you and Lucius not sponsored an orphan for the last sixteen years?' Snape probed carefully. He didn't want to be the one to utter Morgana's name. If Narcissa said it first, maybe, hopefully, he could somehow block the feeling of guilt that was gnawing at his intestines.

Thankfully, Narcissa caught on. She gasped and looked at Snape as if a Lumos charm had been cast in her mind.

'Morgana Belakane! Yes, we supplemented her education! But we have not been in touch since last summer.'

'She has left Hogwarts with some of the best grades in Slytherin House,' Snape explained, feeling more than a little proud. 'Now she is out in the big and scary world for the very first time and might be in need of some guidance. Female guidance, to be precise. The girl turned out to be somewhat of a tomboy. I am sure, however, that can be remedied.'

Like Snape had hoped, Narcissa's mothering instinct immediately came to the fore. He knew how much she had always longed for a baby girl. For some time, he had even brewed fertility potions for her, but to no avail.

'Oh, the poor thing,' Narcissa lamented. 'I should have had more of an input whilst she was growing up. But Lucius was insistent that I keep her at arm's length.'

Snape fought hard not to sneer. One had to hand it to Lucius; he had laid out his plan well and made sure that Morgana never grew too close to Narcissa, even at an early age. Of course, he couldn't have his wife and his mistress-to-be become best friends.

'Maybe I can make up for lost time,' Narcissa mused and then paused, looking back at Snape, her eyes once more shining with hope. 'Do you really think this will please the Dark Lord?'

'The Belakanes are one of the oldest Wizarding families in Britain. There is not much left of the family fortune, but the name still means something. And besides, if you help to win over the girl to our side, if you help the prodigal daughter to find her way back home, it will mean that the other side loses a valuable member,' Snape pointed out. Then he screwed up his face. 'Do not ask me where I went wrong as her Head of House, but rumour has it that the girl is playing with the idea of becoming an Auror.'

'An Auror?' Narcissa repeated with astonishment. 'A girl from such stock should be looking to marry an equal and carry on the bloodline, not running around with the likes of that lunatic Mad Eye-Moody!'

The very notion of a pureblood witch from one of the oldest wizarding families having to take a job instead of looking to marry into society filled Narcissa with horror. The reason for Snape almost choking on his wine was another, however. Narcissa had no idea of how close the girl had come to carrying on the bloodline. And of course, she did not know that the one who had fathered the child had been no other than Lucius himself.

'I see you are catching on,' he then pointed out. It was all going according to plan; Narcissa believed that he was offering her a lifeline and was holding onto it for dear life. Whether he liked it, however, Snape was not sure.

'Invite the girl,' he suggested. 'Befriend her, and make a lady out of her. When she is ready, present her to the Dark Lord. He, I am sure, will find someone for her to marry. And you, as her fairy godmother, will receive all the praise.'

Once again, Narcissa was nearly moved to tears. 'Severus, how can I ever repay you?'

Snape cocked an eyebrow. He certainly could come up with a reward or two if he put his mind to it, but for now, he held his peace.

'Another glass of that wine would be nice,' he replied with a smirk.

Narcissa smiled and willingly obliged. 'If there is ever anything I can do for you, anything at all...'

Once again, she rested her dainty, porcelain hand on Snape's.

'I know, and I appreciate it, truly,' Snape replied, not sure whether it was the wine or Narcissa's touch that made his heart beat faster. 'But I must warn you, Narcissa,' he added to distract himself, 'there is a slight problem.'

'There is?' Narcissa withdrew her hand, and her face fell.

'Morgana and Draco.... Let us say that for both being members of Slytherin House, they have been quite hostile towards one another.'

To put it mildly, Snape added in his mind. Morgana had punched Draco right in the face at the breakfast table, and had he not intervened, she would probably have torn him limb from limb.

'Ah, yes,' Narcissa said. 'I seem to remember there was a disagreement between the two last year. Do you happen to know why?'

'The girl has quite a temper. And young Draco does not always know when it is better to keep his thoughts to himself. I believe there was some name calling involved.' Not to mention Draco calling the girl who had carried Lucius' child a Bloodtraitor, Snape thought privately. But Narcissa, of course, had no idea.

'I am sure it is nothing that can't be rectified. You know how teenagers can be.' She smiled at Snape, who nodded sagely. 'I must see to it that she comes for dinner with Draco and me soon, see if we can't put those disagreements to bed.'

'I suggest you talk to Draco first. Under no circumstances must he say or do anything to alienate her,' Snape warned.

'Of course,' Narcissa agreed. 'She is too valuable for that. She could be the key to getting us back on the Dark Lord's good side. Draco has enough to be going on with. I am sure a spat with a housemate is the least of his worries, and he'll be able to put it behind him.'

'You can find Morgana in Diagon Alley,' Snape advised. 'She is staying at Madam Nutkins'. I assume you remember the old bat?'

Narcissa wrinkled her pretty nose. 'What on earth is the girl doing staying at that godforsaken place? We will have to rectify that!'

'She will be ever so grateful. I am certain of that, Narcissa.' Snape raised his glass. 'Another toast, I think. To the future.'

'To the future!' Narcissa repeated, the clink of glasses sealing their oath.

XI: An Orderly Tea – Part One

Chapter 11 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XI: An Orderly Tea Part One

Whilst Snape toasted with Narcissa for the second time, there was a knock on the door of a little flat not far from Diagon Alley, which Charis answered hurriedly. She had been waiting all morning. In fact, she had been up since eight a very ungodly hour in her book and ready to leave since about nine-thirty, pampered with Madam Primpernelle's best products and wearing her new royal blue robes. Now her handbag stood beside the door, her travelling cloak lay neatly folded on top of it, and her shoes stood ready to be slipped into. Yes, Charis would be ready to leave in a heartbeat. She thought it best to be prepared. Dumbledore had forgotten to mention what time exactly her escort would be arriving, and as Charis was still hoping that Severus Snape would be the one picking her up, she knew that dawdling on her part would not be acceptable. Severus was not a patient man. Surely, her being ready would impress him. Maybe he would even notice her new robes.

However, when Charis opened her door, there was no sign of the Head of Slytherin, no billowing black robes and no enchanting onyx eyes. Instead, there was a man in shabby grey robes, thinning light brown hair and kind eyes.

'Charis Byrne,' the man said in a soft tone, 'my favourite Ravenclaw.'

'Professor Lupin! I wasn't expecting to see you!'

To her own surprise, Charis' smile was genuine. Yes, she was disappointed not to be greeted by the Potions master but by her former Defence teacher instead, but she had always liked Professor Lupin, and he had awarded her a fair amount of points during his year at Hogwarts. In fact, Charis thought that she had not learned more from any other Defence teacher than she had learned from Lupin.

'Professor?' he smiled. 'I don't even want to think about how many years it has been since I taught you. It's Remus. And I am your escort.'

Charis could not help but grin as her former teacher gave a mock-bow. 'It's good to see you, Remus.'

They shook hands cordially, and once more Remus smiled. 'Sorry, I didn't bring any flowers,' he said apologetically. 'I was asked to pick you up on rather short notice. I do, however, have some chocolate. Rumour has it you prefer that to flowers anyway.'

He winked, and Charis blushed. If she hadn't known better, she'd say that her former Professor was flirting with her.

'Then again,' Remus carried on, 'we should not spoil our appetites. I am prepared to bet my wand that Molly is baking her famous carrot cake as we speak.'

Charis' stomach gave a rumble. She had been too nervous to eat a proper breakfast. And carrot cake had always been one of her favourites.

'Shall we, then?' Remus asked and offered her his arm. 'We will have to travel by Side-Along Apparition, as the place we are visiting is not exactly, um, public. I hope you do not mind.'

'No, no! Not at all,' Charis answered and took his arm. It felt muscular under her hand, and for a moment, Charis was surprised. She had never thought of her Defence professor as a physical, male being. He had just been her professor. Nothing more and nothing less. But now...

He pulled her a bit closer. Not surprisingly, he smelled of chocolate. But there was also the smell of pipe smoke and a slight hit of something sweet which Charis couldn't really define.

'On three, then,' Remus announced, and Charis tightened her grip around his arm. 'One. Two. Three.'

* * *

The entrance hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, was just as gloomy and unwelcoming as Charis remembered it from her first visit, but the feeling in the pit of her stomach couldn't have been more different. The last time she had walked down the dark corridor that led to the drawing room, she had been excited, curious and dying to know why Dumbledore had summoned her and her best friend to the home of Sirius Black, one of the most wanted wizards in Britain. At the start of the evening, she had not yet known that Sirius was her cousin, and that she like him belonged to the noble and ancient house of Black. Now she knew, and she also knew that she would never see her cousin again. Her stomach clenched, and she found her sight clouded with tears.

Remus was striding on down the corridor. Obviously, the drawing room was not his goal, but Charis couldn't make herself walk past the door. It stood ajar, and she could just about make out the tapestry on the wall. There wasn't enough light in the room to see it clearly, but Charis remembered certain details very well: where Sirius' name had once been, there was now a big, scorched hole. He had been blasted off the family tree years ago. As had his great-uncle, Marius Black, Charis' great-grandfather.

'Charis?'

Charis turned her head. She had not heard Remus come back. But now he was standing right beside her, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

'It's a shame you didn't get to know Sirius,' Remus said, his voice low and consoling. He seemed to know exactly what was going through Charis' mind. 'He was a great man.'

'It seems a bit silly,' Charis confessed. 'I only met him once. I didn't know him. And still I miss him.'

Remus nodded. 'I know. I miss him, too. He was quite a pain at times: stubborn, moody, and a bit arrogant. But still, he was one of my best friends.'

Charis looked into the wizard's eyes. He looked truly sad, and Charis felt a stab of guilt. She had not meant to tear open his wounds.

'I wish I had known him better,' she said quietly.

Remus nodded again. If Charis had hoped he'd offer to tell her more about her cousin, she had hoped in vain. But somehow, she understood. It was too early.

Then Remus removed his hand from her shoulder and straightened up. 'We better get our acts together,' he stated. 'If we show up in the kitchen with blurry eyes, we will have to answer a lot of questions.'

He produced a slab of chocolate from his pocket and held it out towards Charis. 'For medicinal purposes only,' he declared as she broke off a piece. 'Molly must never know.'

Charis smiled feebly and nibbled at the chocolate. It was sweet and creamy, and to her surprise, it really did her good. Her tears dried, and the odd sensation in her stomach dissolved. And after some moments, she was ready to follow Remus into the kitchen, where they were met by the delicious smell of freshly baked cake and a beaming Molly Weasley.

'Charis, how lovely to see you again,' she said, her chestnut eyes twinkling with welcome as she ushered Charis through to be seated. 'And look at you in those lovely blue robes. You must be making a great impression at the Ministry. Do you like Grindling? Arthur tells me he saw you two having lunch together. Oh, he is such a lovely man, Grindling. Is he being nice to you? I hope he is not giving you dull tasks like getting coffee and such things.'

Molly chattered on, and Charis answered her questions gladly. Molly had such a warm and gentle personality and seemed so joyful that Charis almost forgot that she had been at the verge of tears only a couple of minutes ago. However, she saw another side of Molly a few moments later, namely when Remus tried to steal a piece of cake.

'Don't you dare touch that cake, Remus Lupin!' she screeched. 'It hasn't cooled yet, and it's meant for tea. You'll have to wait like everyone else!'

For a moment, Remus looked like a beaten dog, and that was apparently enough to soften Molly's heart. 'I'll make you a cup of tea and a sandwich,' she announced. 'Merlin knows you need feeding. And you, Charis, you can have your tea in the sitting room. Dumbledore is waiting for you there. Second to last door on the left. I'll be bringing some cake, soon.'

It was with certain reluctance that Charis left the kitchen. She liked Molly, and she liked Remus, and somehow she would have liked to stay with them. But of course, she was here on Dumbledore's invitation. Letting him wait would be rude.

Second to last door on the left, Charis reminded herself as she walked down yet another dark corridor. There were no portraits on the walls, but still she had the uncanny feeling that someone something was watching her. She frequently looked back over her shoulder and did therefore not notice the tall man exiting the sitting room and bumped right into him.

'Oh, my god, I am so sorry,' she spluttered, but the man just smiled down at her.

'No harm done, Charis,' he said in a deep and booming voice.

Surprised that the man knew her name, Charis took a step backwards and looked up at him. 'Oh, Mr Shacklebolt!' she exclaimed.

'When was the last time you have been called Mr Shacklebolt, Kingsley? At school?'

Albus Dumbledore appeared in the door, smiling and his blue eyes twinkling behind his spectacles.

Kingsley laughed. 'Probably when Minerva put me in detention. It's Kingsley, dear,' he said, turning back to Charis and extending a huge hand. 'We're all on a first name basis here. Makes things easier.'

They shook hands, and Charis couldn't help but feel a little bit proud. Kingsley Shacklebolt was well known at the Ministry. He was an important and awe-inspiring wizard. Calling him by his first name was a big thing and would take just as much getting used to as calling Professor Dumbledore Albus.

'I hate to be leaving before Molly serves the cake,' Kingsley announced, 'but I fear I have no choice. Work calls. Albus, I'll see you on Wednesday. And you, Charis, I assume I'll see you around the Ministry. Good day to you.'

Charis and Dumbledore bade Kingsley goodbye, and as he disappeared into the darkness of the corridor, Dumbledore guided Charis into the sitting room where he pointed towards a squashy old armchair opposite.

'Do have a seat, Charis,' he offered and settled on the sofa himself where, judging by the way the pillows seemed to fit perfectly around his backside, he had been sitting earlier.

'How have you been?' he asked.

'Really well, thanks, sir. I mean, Albus! I love living in London, even though I haven't had the chance to really go sightseeing. And the Ministry is such a fascinating place. Everyone has been so nice to me, and there is so much to learn!'

Dumbledore smiled. 'Grindling tells me you are doing a very good job. Ah, no need to worry. I am not spying on you. Grindling and I are old friends. We meet for tea now and then. Talking of which...'

He raised his hand, and pot and two cups appeared seemingly out of thin air.

'Milk?'

Charis accepted her cup with a smile and settled back in her chair. It was every bit as comfortable as it looked.

They talked for a while, about the weather, the tea and Charis' new robes, and when the door opened and Molly came bustling in, carrying a tray and tightly followed by Remus, Charis could for the life of her not tell how long she had been there. It could have been just twenty minutes or maybe three hours. She really didn't know.

'Cake, anyone?' Molly asked as she put the tray down, placing herself strategically between the cake and Remus, who could easily have been mistaken for a little boy on Christmas morning. Most probably, it would not have surprised anyone if he had started jumping up and down with anticipation.

'Oh, yes please!' Charis replied. The cake looked lush, and the smell emitting from it was just divine.

'You will have to fight Remus.' Dumbledore chuckled. 'I don't know where he puts it.'

'Hollow legs,' Remus explained. He had by now outsmarted Molly and was already happily munching away on a huge piece of cake.

Molly handed Charis a plate and Dumbledore put a generous slice onto it, and moments later they were once again sitting comfortably in their chairs, enjoying what according to Charis was the most delicious carrot cake ever made.

Then the door opened once more, a little less gently than before, and stomping in came no other than Alastor Moody.

'Thought I smelled cake,' he growled and approached the table, only acknowledging the people in the room with a curt nod.

'You have to forgive Alastor's lack of manners,' Dumbledore commented, his eyes twinkling mischievously. 'It's hard to resist Molly's cake.'

'They're like Veelas in baked form,' Moody muttered and let himself fall onto a chair with a slice of cake in his hand.

'Ah, Charis Byrne. Nice seeing you again,' he said, his eyes boring into Charis. 'Heard quite a bit about you lately.'

Charis swallowed. She was now starting to wonder if the senior staff at the Ministry got together in the pub in the evenings and discussed the new employees.

'Only good things,' Moody added gruffly, as if he had sensed her growing uncomfortable. 'And from reliable sources only.'

'Talking of your sources, Alastor,' Dumbledore butted in. 'Weren't you supposed to be arriving with company?'

'Aye,' Moody replied. 'The chits are in the kitchen. Tonks is attempting to play nurse.'

'Nurse?' Molly looked alarmed. 'What happened?'

'A little accident, nothing serious.'

'Coming from you, this could as well mean that the girl has had her leg ripped off by a Chimaera. I better go and check.'

'Trust Molly to behave like a mother hen,' Moody grumbled as Molly had left.

'Does she have reason to worry?' Dumbledore enquired, sounding quite concerned himself.

Moody shook his head dismissively. 'Just a little burn. Tonks took care of it. She might be the clumsiest witch alive, but she does know how to cast proper healing spells. And I think the girl likes her.'

'It's not hard to like Tonks,' Dumbledore commented. 'I think you will like her, too, Charis. Oh, you have already met, of course.'

'Yes, we have,' Charis agreed. 'During my last visit here. She's a good laugh.'

'I would advise you to keep far away from Tonks. She is rather accident prone.'

The low, slightly growling voice that came from the door sent a shiver down Charis' spine, but it was nothing compared to the iciness that engulfed her when she looked up and locked eyes with Severus Snape, who had entered so silently that no one had noticed. There was a dark scowl etched into his face, and his eyes reminded Charis of dark tunnels that led to a place no one wanted to go.

'Pro... Professor Snape,' she stuttered. 'Nice... nice to see you.'

'Miss Byrne.'

Charis managed to keep a gasp from escaping her. Oh, how she loved to hear him say her name. And how she longed for him to call her Charis.

'Cake, Severus?' Remus offered.

'I think not,' Snape replied and strode across the room, positioning himself beside the fireplace where he folded his arms in front of his chest and looked generally sour.

'Molly will get into a huff if you don't take a piece, Severus,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'Just humour her, please, for all our sakes?'

If possible, Snape's scowl turned even darker. 'I do not see why I should start eating cake today of all days, Dumbledore.'

'Well, it's a special occasion,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'You know why Charis is here, don't you?'

Snape sneered. 'Yes, I do know why Miss Byrne is here. And I am still advising against her admission to the Order, just as I advised against the admission of Miss Belakane.'

Charis almost dropped her plate. 'Morgana is in the Order?' she blurted out. 'She didn't say a word.'

'Of course not, Charis,' Dumbledore said kindly. 'Like you, Morgana has been asked not to speak of the Order.'

Charis nodded. She understood the need for secrecy, of course, but still it bugged her that Morgana had not said anything. How long had her friend been a member of the Order, she wondered. Had she already been given a task? Had she been meeting and working with Severus? And why had Morgana been the first to be asked to join?

Hundreds of questions started to pop up in Charis' mind, but she didn't get around to thinking about them as there was the sound of breaking china and the upset voice of Molly Weasley coming from the other side of the door.

Remus grimaced. 'I hope Tonks only dropped the tea set and not the second cake.'

As if on cue, the door opened.

'Wotcher, everyone,' Tonks greeted them all. 'Hope we won't need more than three more cups. Happened to drop one. Saved the cake though.'

Remus quickly rose to take the cake off the tray and carry it to safety. And sure enough, when Tonks turned away from the table where she had put down the tray, she managed to bump against the table, and not even Alastor's lightning fast reaction could stop the three remaining cups from falling to the floor.

'We better fix this before Molly comes back,' Remus suggested and pulled his wand, but he didn't have the time to cast Reparo before the door opened again. To his and Tonks' relief, however, Molly's glare was directed towards Moody.

'Nothing serious? Just a little burn? The poor girl could have lost her hand!'

She scolded Moody like a little school boy, and everyone except Snape recoiled slightly, busying themselves with the shattered cups. Snape, however, seemed to enjoy the show.

'Molly has sent Morgana upstairs to have a lie-down before dinner,' Tonks whispered to Charis. 'Up the stairs and the first door to the right. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you. And here, take some cake with you.'

And without anyone noticing, Charis slunk out of the room, carrying a plate with two pieces of cake and heading for the upper floor. She and Morgana certainly had a lot to talk about.

XII: An Orderly Tea – Part Two

Chapter 12 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XII: An Orderly Tea Part Two

Charis sneaked out of the lounge clutching a plate with a fat slab of carrot cake on it, her mind still buzzing with so far unanswered questions. It didn't seem right that she and Morgana had both been invited to join the Order of the Phoenix but hadn't shared this exciting news with each other. Of course, Charis well understood the need to keep the Order a secret, and like herself, Morgana had certainly promised Dumbledore not to speak of it to anyone, not even her best friend.

She crept along the gloomy hallway and then carefully made her way up the stairs, noticing the grotesque, shrivelled heads of deceased house-elves on plaques lining the wall. She had seen them before during her first visit to Grimmauld Place, and at the time Sirius had explained to her that every house-elf that had ever served the House of Black had had their head chopped off and mounted on a plaque. Charis had found the whole idea more than grisly, and now, in the dim light, when the shadows made the heads appear even more ugly and monstrous, Charis couldn't help but grimace in revulsion. The idea of beheading house-elves was horrid enough, but mounting their heads on the wall? Disgusting! Absolutely disgusting! Yet she couldn't make herself look away.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps behind her made her spin around, and she nearly dropped her plate with shock. She was now facing an elf that was, if possible, even more repulsive than those on the wall, with bloodshot eyes, a bulbous nose and white hair growing out of his ears. But even though he was standing right in front of her, he didn't seem to notice her. Instead, he was gazing almost fondly up at the dried heads.

After a moment, Charis found her voice. 'Excuse me... D-do you live here?' she asked politely.

'Kreacher has served the most noble house of Black since the day Kreacher was born,' the elf replied in a croaky, bullfrog-like voice, still avoiding Charis' eyes. 'So had Kreacher's mother.'

'Kreacher?' Charis repeated. 'I... my name is Charis... It's nice to meet you,' she added unsurely.

'The Mudblood talks to Kreacher as if she thinks he'd want to speak to her,' Kreacher muttered miserably whilst beginning to polish a plaque with the dirty, ragged towel he was wearing as clothes. Or at least, Charis thought it was a towel. The piece of fabric was in such a bad state that it was hard to tell.

'If my poor mistress knew what kind of filth is walking around in her house... Mudbloods, bloodtraitors and freaks.'

Charis was so shocked by the elf's open display of hostility that she decided she had to get away from the foul being as quickly as possible. 'Um, I'm trying to find my friend. I'll just be going, then....,' she said hurriedly, scrambling up the stairs.

'The Mudblood is calling a pureblood her friend,' the elf continued muttering, rubbing the plaque with such force that it began to rattle on the wall.

Charis, in her haste to get away from the wretched elf, turned sharply at the top of the stairs, but to her utter surprise, Kreacher called out after her.

'Not that way, Miss...' He made a strange choking sound, almost as if he really didn't want to address her, but then hustled up the remaining stairs and gave Charis the tiniest of bows. 'Kreacher will show the way.'

Charis was now even more stunned by the elf's change of attitude. 'Oh! Thank you, Kreacher. That's very kind of you,' she replied, hoping to stay on the elf's good side.

'Kreacher is bound to serve the house of Black,' he grumbled quietly, shuddering, before making his way down the corridor.

Charis followed him, frowning at first, but then suddenly realising what his words meant. As she was a descendent of the Blacks, Kreacher was bound to serve her, too! Although he clearly wasn't very happy about it, as he seemed to share his previous owner's view on blood status. But still, he had no choice.

The elf extended his hand to a door, giving a funny sort of half-bow. 'Your friend is in here,' he rasped.

'Thank you, Kreacher,' Charis answered sincerely. Having to serve such vile witches and wizards for so long must have been difficult for the elf, and his hostility was understandable. If she was nice to him now...

But Kreacher was already shuffling off back down the corridor, murmuring once more to himself. 'Mudbloods and bloodtraitors all messing about in Mistress' house, and Kreacher has to serve. The shame, the shame...'

Watching the elf disappear from sight and pondering on his plight, Charis eyed the door in front of her. It had seen better days, like so much else in the house: the doorknob seemed to be slightly loose and the paint was peeling off the dark wood. In all, the shabby state of the door stood in contrast to the highly polished, little sign that read:

Do Not Enter

Without the Express Permission of

Regulus Arcturus Black

Charis narrowed her eyes. The name rang a bell, and she was sure that Sirius must have told her about Regulus when he had shown her his family tree, but for the time being, Charis couldn't place the name. Making a mental note to check the tapestry in the drawing room later, she knocked lightly on the door. She could hear hurried footsteps and a slight thud, which sounded like someone obviously making their way to the bed.

'I am lying down, Molly!' came Morgana's exasperated voice.

'It's not Molly,' Charis called back. 'Can I come in?'

She heard more steps before the door opened a tiny bit. One blue eye peered out in surprise.

'Charis?!'

Morgana opened the door fully now, and Charis couldn't tell if her friend was pleased to see her or not. She hadn't exactly expected Morgana to wrap her arms around her, as the Slytherin was not the type who hugged and showed emotions on a whim. But a smile wouldn't have been too much to ask for, would it?

'What are *you* doing here?' Morgana asked, clearly perplexed.

'I could ask the same,' Charis grinned and stepped into the bedroom. It was shabby and dark. Once, it had probably been a very opulent room. But these days, the emerald and silver pelmet was tattered, the wallpaper faded, and the carpet looked as if it had seen better days. Still, the room was clean, and the bed looked comfy.

'I asked first,' Morgana demanded, closing the door and then crossing her arms in front of her chest. Charis noticed that her left hand was heavily bandaged.

'Albus invited me to join the Order. And by the looks of it, he asked you, too.' She looked down at Morgana's hand. 'Are you alright? What happened to your hand?'

'Nothing. Molly likes to mother me, that's all,' Morgana replied dismissively. 'Anyway, what do you mean, Albus invited you to join the Order? When?'

'He sent me a letter on Monday asking to meet with him. Imagine my surprise! At first, I thought he was going to tell me that there had been a mix-up with my grades, or something, but he enquired about my job, and we talked about Sirius and You-Know-Who. And then he asked if I wanted to join the Order of the Phoenix and invited me for tea today to give my decision.' Charis paused. 'I assume you have experienced something similar?'

Morgana nodded quickly. 'I joined the day after you stayed the night, after the attack on Fortescue's,' she explained, carefully omitting the fact that she had been invited to join already on the night of their shared birthday.

'It's been a week ago since we spoke to Dumbledore then,' Charis idly realised. 'And we haven't spoken to each other since. Time's surely racing away! Remember when we had the time to spend the whole afternoon playing Gobbstones? And now look at us! Both busy having jobs and both of us in the Order. Well, this is fun!' Charis smiled. 'I brought you some cake.'

Morgana accepted the cake but placed it carefully down on the nightstand without a second glance. She wasn't entirely convinced that the word *fun* was the best word to describe their current situation.

'Have you accepted Dumbledore's offer yet?' she asked.

'Not yet... it's why I came here today.'

Morgana opened her mouth to speak, but Charis beat her to it. She might have barely seen her friend since they left Hogwarts, but she knew Morgana well enough to sense when the Slytherin was about to make an objection. And when it came to joining the Order, Charis was not going to let anyone talk her out of it. Hence, she changed subjects.

'Have you seen that house-elf, Kreacher?'

Morgana nodded.

'He's foul!' Charis continued, confident that she had distracted her friend. 'He called me a Mudblood earlier, but I think he's bound to serve me because I'm related to the Blacks!'

Morgana's eyebrows creased faintly at the word *Mudblood*. She had once given Vincent Crabbe a black eye for using that word. A house-elf should be even easier to punish.

'Make sure he doesn't poison your food,' she replied dryly, following Charis' anxious look towards the cake before grinning. 'Anything Molly makes should be fine, though.'

'The cake is great! You should try it,' Charis enthused, but Morgana only gave a half-shrug in response.

'Anyway, how are you? How's work?' Charis continued, still determined to not let Morgana come back to the subject of the Order.

Morgana sat down on the bed, which gave a worrying creak. 'Work's good. Moody is a nutter, though. Two more trainees have quit, and one was brought to St. Mungo's the other day. At that rate, there won't be any of us left by Christmas.'

At this news, Charis could only look worriedly at her friend's hand.

'Burnt,' Morgana said matter-of-factly, answering Charis' unasked question. 'Wasn't fast enough to block a Scorching Hex.'

'Ouch.' Charis was sincerely sympathetic. Her work may not be exciting, but at least she wasn't risking injury in the Department of Mysteries. She supposed a falling prophecy might hurt, but it was nothing compared to the very real danger Morgana was facing as a trainee Auror.

Morgana, however, merely shrugged. 'It stung. But I was told off, big time!'

Moody had told her off for quite a few things that day, some trivial, some more serious. Their first argument had arisen over the fact that Morgana still refused to move into one of the Ministry-owned flats. Moody liked his trainees to stay in close proximity to the Ministry and each other, but Morgana claimed that she couldn't leave Madam Nutkins. The old lady had grown accustomed to company, Morgana claimed, and she told Moody that she was responsible for buying breakfast while Madam Nutkins was in charge of dinner every day. Just why she was out buying croissants at the crack of dawn, however, Morgana omitted and with it her true reason for not giving up her room at Madam Nutkins: nightly excursions to Knockturn Alley would be virtually impossible if she lived in a Ministry flat, and Morgana was not ready to give them up. In fact, she had spent every night in the shadowy alley that week, slinking in and out of seedy bars and shifty shops, and now the lack of sleep was beginning to take out its

toll, and she had a hard time focusing on her training. Moody had noticed, of course, and decided to teach her a lesson. Had he expected Morgana to be able to block his Scorching Hex, he would have aimed for a body part more vital than her left hand. But he had known that she would be too slow and made his move accordingly, scorching her left hand and bruising her ego and thus making sure Morgana would be focused the next day.

'What about you?' Morgana asked, shifting the topic on to her friend. 'How was your first week?'

'It's been okay,' Charis began, wary that she couldn't speak too much of her line of work. 'I'm not exactly solving the mysteries of the universe yet, but there is a lot of work to do. My boss is really nice.' At this, she blushed slightly, and Morgana, sensing gossip as keenly as a snake sensed its prey, patted the space on the bed beside her, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. 'Oh, do tell.'

Charis grinned and took a seat beside her friend. 'Well, he's very handsome. Sandy hair. Kind twinkling eyes. Has a way of making you feel at home, do you know what I mean?'

Morgana couldn't deny that the man sounded very nice indeed. 'Single?' she enquired.

'I don't know, actually,' Charis admitted.

'Shouldn't be hard to find out.'

'Bet he isn't,' Charis murmured, fiddling with the bed sheets nervously. She hadn't thought of Grindling in that way before. But now Morgana mentioned it...

'What about you?' she asked. 'Any hotties on Auror training?'

Morgana raised a sardonic eyebrow. 'Apart from Moody?'

Charis couldn't help but giggle. 'Yeah, a real catch that one! I've heard he can do things with that eye... that would make you scream like a banshee!'

She burst into laughter again as Morgana made groans of disgust at the very thought.

'You're sick and twisted,' she stated, her pretty little nose screwed up in revulsion.

'I thought that was your job?' Charis bit back immediately, and she didn't even mind when Morgana playfully swatted her arm in retaliation. This was just like the good old times.

'It's good to see you again,' Charis smiled. She missed this: the cosy camaraderie, the messing about.

'It's good to see you, too,' Morgana agreed. 'But, Charis... Think carefully about joining the Order, I implore you. Dumbledore can be very persuasive. Don't let him talk you into something you don't want to do.'

Charis felt a warm glow at the concern from her friend. But as far as she was concerned, Morgana's fears were unfounded. 'You don't have to worry, Morgana. I've thought it through.'

'Have you? Do you know what he wants you to do for the Order?'

'Not exactly,' Charis confessed. 'It'll be something to do with where I work, I presume.'

Morgana narrowed her eyes suspiciously. 'And that doesn't sound fishy to you?'

'Not really, no,' Charis replied. 'The Order needs eyes and ears everywhere,' she reasoned.

'Be careful,' Morgana said quietly.

Once more, Charis felt a rush of affection for her friend. 'Again, I could say the same to you,' she smiled, looking down at Morgana's bandaged hand.

Morgana shrugged and was trying to make up her mind whether to tell Charis about the task Dumbledore had set her when the creak of a floorboard out on the landing made her draw her wand. But she quickly stowed it away again, as she noticed Charis' slightly shocked expression.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Occupational habit. Constance vigilance, you know. Bet it's just Kreacher, polishing his mother's plaque.'

Charis screwed up her face, and the girls talked for some moments about the abomination of mounting chopped-off heads on plaques. Neither of them even suspected that the person who much to his chagrin had made the floorboard creak was none other than their former Potions master, Severus Snape.

'Seriously, though, don't worry Morgana,' Charis soothed, picking up the thread again. 'We've both made the right decision. Don't you think?'

Out on the landing, Snape scowled. In his opinion, the girls had made the worst decision possible, and he would do everything in his power to make them change their minds, even if it meant hurting them. Better him hurting their feelings than some Death Eater harming them physically. Mindful of not making another sound, he continued to listen at the door.

'I thought you hadn't made yours yet?' Morgana asked. She knew it was useless to try and talk Charis out of something once her mind was made up. Still, it didn't mean she had to like the idea. And just like Snape, she would do her best to make Charis change her mind and thus keep her out of harm's way.

'I've made it,' Charis informed her. 'I just haven't told Albus yet.'

Morgana sighed heavily. It was too late then. Charis had made up her mind. 'He must be desperate if he wants the likes of us to join,' she said instead, trying to hide the fact that she was upset.

Charis raised her eyebrows. 'The likes of us? Two hot Hogwarts graduates with great grades?'

'Hot? Speak for yourself.' Morgana felt the word hot would be the last way to describe herself at the moment. Neurotic, damaged, plain. But definitely not hot.

Snape, on the other hand, agreed with Charis. He had always appreciated Morgana's curves, and from the little he had seen of her when he had observed her through his mirror a little over a week ago, he concluded that she didn't have to be ashamed of her body either.

'Come on, sexy Slytherin,' Charis grinned, elbowing her friend gently in the ribs. 'Even I've noticed how toned you've become. Wish there was a spell to get rid of my excess fat, though.' Now it was her turn to sigh.

'That's not excess fat,' Morgana declared. 'Those are very feminine curves which you can be proud of.'

Charis giggled.

'Surely, your boss has noticed.'

'He's very sweet to me,' Charis confided. 'But he's lovely to everyone. He's such a decent man.'

'There aren't many of those out there,' Morgana replied, just a little bit more gloomy than she intended. 'Maybe I should consider my options and turn gay.'

Oh, for crying out loud! Snape decided that he had heard enough now, and with a curt knock on the door, he made the girls aware of his presence. Getting friendly with Grindling Gibbons and becoming a lesbian! What on earth had Molly put in the girls' cake?

'Quick, lie down,' Charis hissed, immediately thinking it was Molly knocking on the door, wanting to check up on her newest patient. And Morgana, not too keen on being told off by Mrs Weasley, did as she was told, amidst much creaking of the bed.

Once Morgana looked suitably settled, Charis crossed the room and opened the door. But instead of Molly, she was greeted with the stern, imposing figure of Snape, who was now looking at her like something he'd just scraped off his shoe. Charis could not help but gasp; Snape was the last person she'd expected to show up.

'I hate to break up this giggle party,' he sneered imperiously, fixing Charis with one of his blackest stares, 'but Dumbledore wants to see everyone in the kitchen now.'

'Uh, thanks, um, sir,' Charis muttered. She didn't know how to address him; Severus still seemed too informal, despite their shared intimacy and the fact that everyone else in the Order was on a first name basis. He was no longer her professor, but she was sure he would not offer an alternative.

Sure enough, she wasn't wrong. 'You'd be advised to come straight away,' Snape carried on. 'Some of us have better things to do than hang around this hovel all day.'

And with no further ado, he turned on his heel and billowed off down the corridor.

'Charming as ever, that one,' Morgana noted, hiding the disappointment she felt from Snape's lack of acknowledgement. One would have expected that he would at least have said hello. After all, they had not seen each other since their last day at Hogwarts.

'Did you know he was here?' she asked.

'I saw him earlier,' Charis responded. 'I didn't think he'd be staying for tea, though. He already turned down Molly's first cake. I hope he won't have a face like a bulldog chewing a wasp when he tries the second one.'

'Would it really surprise you if he does?' Morgana asked in a sour tone. So Charis had already spoken to Snape? Wasn't that just typical?

'Not really,' Charis answered with a sigh. 'But I don't want it to put me off my cake.'

Both girls laughed at this, even Morgana, realising that it didn't really matter whether Charis had already met Snape. Judging from the mood he seemed to be in, not having met him didn't seem like that bad an option.

* * *

Charis followed Morgana through into the kitchen, and the pair were faced with various Order members looking up at them expectantly. Lupin was sitting next to Tonks, who had Moody on her left. Dumbledore, meanwhile, was at the head of the table whilst Molly busied herself with pouring tea for the assembled mob.

'Come in, come in, girls! Sit yourselves down, that's right,' she fussed. 'Another slice of cake, I think! Girls your age need to eat.'

'Looks lovely, Mrs Weasley,' Charis grinned as the Weasley matriarch pushed a slice of chocolate cake towards each of them. Morgana, however, merely smiled weakly.

'Molly, dearest, call me Molly,' Molly trilled, clearly enjoying the praise about her culinary abilities. 'I'm sorry I cannot offer any dinner tonight, but I need to get going soon. Lots of hungry mouths to feed at the Burrow.'

Everyone was now sitting around the table, happily sipping tea and munching on cake. Everyone, that was, apart from Snape. There was a space laid for him, complete with a steaming teacup, but he seemed to have vanished. Strange, he'd had almost half a minute's head start. He should have arrived in the kitchen before the girls.

'Now, where is he moping about?' Molly asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

She did not seem to notice that Snape had appeared in doorway soundlessly, with the stealth of a panther.

'I do not mope, Molly,' he said in a low voice.

Molly blushed furiously. 'I didn't mean that, Severus,' she replied 'I... I just didn't want your tea to go cold.'

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled over his half-moon glasses as he extended his hand in welcome. 'Have a seat, Severus.'

Snape hovered for a moment, then swept across to the free seat and sat down. He lifted the proffered cup of tea, but when Molly pushed a piece of cake towards him, he said, 'I will have to decline the cake, I'm afraid.'

'Now, Severus, I implore you once more to have some cake,' Dumbledore admonished jovially. 'It's a special occasion, after all.'

Snape cocked an eyebrow. 'That *special occasion*,' he said mockingly, 'is still no reason for me to be eating cake.' In his opinion, this was most definitely no reason to eat cake.

'Ah, Severus. Good food is a joy to share with good friends.' Once more, Dumbledore's eyes twinkled benevolently at the stern man before him.

Snape, however, sneered at the word *friends*. 'So, we are now about to have two giggling youngsters in the order, then?' he hissed.

Giggling youngsters? Charis looked hurt at this comment, and Morgana clenched her jaw, wondering just what had gotten Snape's wand in a knot. He had never been cordial, but today, he seemed straight-out foul.

'Tactful as usual, Severus,' Remus said lightly, before turning to the girls. 'Ignore him.'

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes had all but gone now. 'That was particularly uncalled for, Severus,' he said carefully. 'As you know, Morgana is a trainee Auror, and Charis is now working as an Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries. Quite responsible jobs for giggling youngsters, wouldn't you say?' he asked mildly, fixing Snape with a penetrating stare over the top of his spectacles.

'My concern is for the safety of these rookie Order members, Dumbledore,' Snape replied, his nostrils flaring.

At first, Morgana felt a wave of gratitude towards her former Head of House. He was worried about her and Charis and didn't want to see them hurt. But as he continued glaring at Dumbledore, not once even casting a glance in either her or Charis' direction, Morgana grew annoyed. Did Snape think that they weren't up for the task? What was it that kept him from believing that she and Charis could fight against Dark witches and wizards in general and Voldemort in particular? Was it the same reason he'd had when he had tried to persuade her to not become an Auror but pursue her original idea of becoming a potioneer? And why could he not just tell them why he thought they were so useless?

Dumbledore, however, answered Snape's protest quite calmly.

'Yes, I know, Severus. And even though your advice against their admission came with the most noble of intentions, the fact is that the Order needs these girls. But the decision to join or not remains, of course, entirely their own.'

He raised his teacup and toasted towards Morgana, as to acknowledge her decision, and turned then to Charis, smiling kindly. 'And you are, by all means, entitled to decline.'

Charis felt the weight of all eyes on her as she spoke. And one pair in particular she could feel boring into her, but she would not look at Snape. He was not going to talk her out of this, just as little as Morgana had been able to. Her decision was final. And if Snape thought that she didn't have what it took to be of any use for the Order, she would prove him wrong.

'Well, sir Albus,' she said, weighing every syllable. 'It would be an honour to join the Order of the Phoenix.'

'Are you quite sure you know what you are letting yourself in for?' Dumbledore asked, as if to prove a point to Snape. 'There will be a time when we may ask you to do things at the Ministry that could go against the vows you have taken. We may ask you to spy, even to lie. But it will always be for the sake of reaching our goal: the defeat of Voldemort.'

Charis nodded. 'I understand, sir.'

'Well then, Charis, I ask you once more: Have you reached a decision?'

Again, everyone's gaze was fixed on Charis as she replied, 'It would be a great honour to join the Order of the Phoenix in the fight against... You-Know-Who.'

Dumbledore smiled serenely. 'In that case, welcome to the Order, Charis Byrne! And now, let us raise our teacups for a toast! To friends!'

'To friends,' everyone repeated, raising their cups aloft. Everyone except Snape, that was, who looked like he'd just lost a Galleon and found a Knut.

XIII: The Prisoner of Azkaban

Chapter 13 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XIII: The Prisoner of Azkaban

The sky was a gun-metal grey, with storm clouds churning overhead. There was no escape from the bitter wind, which seemed to blow from all angles. The sound of the sea echoed around the walls that enclosed a bare scrap of earth that was called a graveyard. But there were no headstones, no flowers; the fog lay thick on the ground, and Morgana wondered if it was really only the wind she heard howling or if it was the moaning of lost and tormented souls. What an utterly depressing place! Not that there were any cheerful graveyards in the world, but this one surely took the prize.

'Everyone here, then?' Moody growled as the last trainee appeared out of thin air, clutching onto his Portkey as if it were a security blanket.

'Welcome to Azkaban, ladies and gentlemen,' Moody continued, for a moment almost sounding like the host of a sightseeing tour. But after having given everyone in the group a scrutinising look, he became serious. Today's field trip was anything but a walk in the park.

'Remember that we will need to stick together. If you lose the group, send red sparks into the air. I will see them, no matter how far away you are. And I will come and get you. Try not to panic while you're waiting for me, otherwise the Dementors will think you're a prisoner. Well, they don't really think. They'll just sense that you're a human being in distress and will come swooping down on you. And then you might just end up in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's. Or, in the worst case, here.'

He made a sweeping motion across the graveyard, and several of the trainees shuddered.

'The best thing you can do, actually, is conjure your Patronus,' Moody advised. 'It will be even harder than during the training sessions as Dementors tend to make people lose faith in their happy memories, but I know that each of you can do it! If I didn't believe in you, I wouldn't have brought you here.'

Again, he looked around the group, letting both his eyes rest on each trainee for a couple of moments, and Morgana returned his gaze, unblinkingly. But if she weren't so stubborn and hell-bent on making a good impression, she would have told Moody that she didn't feel up for the task. Unlike him, she had not much faith in her Patronus. Already at Hogwarts, she'd had difficulties with that particular charm, and even now, after they had done little else all week than practice for their little field trip to Azkaban, it still took her two or more tries to succeed most of the time. But Moody believed she could do it. And Moody must know best.

'We'll start with a tour of the cells so you'll get an idea of the kind of scum that is housed here,' he informed them, now stomping towards an iron gate which looked like the entrance to hell. 'You'll get used to the screaming after a while. Now, come on, no dawdling.'

They trooped after him in twos, always a rookie with a trained Auror by his or her side, just as they had been instructed. Morgana paired up with Tonks, and together they made up the end of the line behind Dawlish and Jacob Bloom, a thin, blond youngster whose skin was so pale that he could easily be mistaken for a ghost. Surely, he would pass his Stealth and Tracking exam with flying colours. No one ever noticed him.

'Get used to the screaming, my foot,' Tonks mumbled. 'Last time I was here, I had a headache for three days afterwards. Okay, the bottle of tequila I shared with a friend the night before might have had something to do with it as well, but don't tell Moody.'

Morgana smiled feebly. She liked Tonks a lot. The young Auror was a good laugh and always tried to cheer her up. And Merlin knew she needed cheering up in this place!

It had been cold in the graveyard, but as they entered the prison, the temperature seemed to drop below freezing point, and several trainees seemed to want to turn around.

'I never said it was a holiday camp in here,' Moody addressed them. 'And I am fully aware that some of you will be feeling like owl droppings by the time we leave. But you need to see where Dark wizards go once you have caught them. This is as much a part of the wizarding justice system as the Wizengamot. And if you're very lucky, you won't have to come back here too often.'

They made their way down a first dark corridor, passing several cells. In some, the prisoner was rolled up on the floor, unmoving; in others, the prisoner sat rocking on the

floor or was pacing back and forth. Most of them were quiet, and none of them seemed to notice that they had visitors.

'That lot have been here for a while,' Moody explained. 'Lost their minds, most of them. Now, as you know, only two people ever escaped the prison: Barty Crouch, Junior, in 1982, and Sirius Black, in 1993. Crouch was smuggled out by his father, and Black was able to escape by changing into his Animagus form of a dog. Now, can anyone tell me why the Dementors didn't notice?'

'They can't tell the difference between different persons,' one of the trainees answered quickly.

'Exactly,' Moody confirmed. 'So once again, this is why it is so important that we stay together. If the Dementors find you wandering around on your own, they will think you're a prisoner who managed to get out of their cell. Now, what crimes earn you a sentence here?'

'The use of the Unforgivable Curses.'

'Good. What more?'

'Being a follower of You-Know-Who.'

'Right. All of the above.' Moody seemed pleased. 'As you've noticed, the building is laid out in a pyramid form, with cells along each of the three outer walls. Now, always two pairs together, I want you to take a leisurely stroll around one of these walls. Take a good, hard look at who is behind the enchanted bars. Try and imagine what grisly crime they committed to end up here. And remember, if you get separated, send the distress call. Pronto. Is that understood?'

All muttered a yes and started to walk off in different directions, Morgana and Tonks together with Dawlish and Bloom, all four holding their wands aloft in order to spread as much light around them as possible by means of Lumos. The warm glow, however, didn't seem to help much.

'You never really get used to it, you know,' Tonks said quietly after a while. 'The gloom, the cold. I don't even want to imagine how it feels to be locked up here.'

They had now reached a corridor a bit higher up where the prisoners were much more active than in the first. They were rattling at the bars of their cells, shouting and screaming, some of them throwing themselves against the stone walls as if trying to knock them down. But of course, the walls did not budge, and all the screaming did was produce the headache Tonks had mentioned before.

'Poor sods,' Tonks commented. 'If you didn't know they deserved to be here, you could almost feel sorry for them.'

'Are you sure everyone deserves to be here?' Morgana asked, and Tonks turned towards her with an expression of surprise on her face.

'What do you mean?'

Morgana shrugged. 'There is no such thing as a flawless system. Some of the people here might have been wrongfully accused.' She leant in and dropped her voice to a whisper. 'We both know your cousin didn't deserve to be here.'

Tonks opened her mouth to speak, but before she got a chance to, there came a scream from further down the corridor, followed by a blast, hurried footsteps and Dawlish's agitated voice:

'Come back here, Bloom! He isn't going to hurt you. Bloom!'

'What's happened?' Tonks asked once she and Morgana had caught up with Dawlish. He was alone.

'That prisoner here grabbed Bloom by the arm. I stunned him immediately, but the kid got spooked and ran off.'

'Not good,' Tonks commented. 'We better go find him, or Moody will have our heads.'

'Shouldn't we send the distress call?' Dawlish asked.

'Sure, if you want Moody to know that you lost your trainee.'

Dawlish pulled a face. He was already on Moody's bad side and had no desire to slip down even further on the man's list of favourites. So without further comment, he set off after Tonks who was already running down the gloomy corridor. Neither of them noticed that their second charge, Morgana, was lingering by the cell seemingly fascinated by the stunned prisoner. She recognised him, despite his filthy clothes and unshaven face. She couldn't remember his name but was quite certain that she had seen his face in the *Prophet*. He was one of the Death Eaters that had been caught in the Hall of Prophecies.

Morgana swallowed drily. She didn't know if there was a system to which prisoner ended up in which cell at Azkaban, but if this Death Eater was here, then there was a possibility that Lucius wasn't too far away. She raised her wand. The cell to the right was empty, and the two to the left occupied by females. No blond mane, no Lucius.

Then the stunned Death Eater stirred, and Morgana realised the temperature dropping. Surely, the Dementors must have sensed the disturbance and were now approaching to find its cause. Her standing here all alone was not a good position to be in.

'Nox,' she whispered, hoping that the darkness would lend her cover as she hurriedly made her way down the corridor after Bloom, Dawlish and Tonks. But already after a short way, she was confronted with a problem: the corridor was parting in two, and she had no idea which way to turn.

She swore under her breath. Surely, she hadn't lost that much time. She should still be able to see Tonks and Dawlish or at least hear their footsteps. But both corridors were deserted and silent. The two Aurors could have gone either way.

Furtively, Morgana glanced back over her shoulder. She could see a couple of Dementors hovering outside the stunned Death Eater's cell, but they didn't seem to have noticed yet that she was lost. At least, they didn't look like they'd come swooping down at her any time soon. And thus Morgana decided to ignore Moody's clearest order and try to find her way on her own. If she sent red sparks up into the air now, the others would have to come to her rescue, and that would mean they would have to abandon their search for Bloom. And who knew what kind of trouble he was in?

Unable to figure out whether Tonks had gone left or right, Morgana placed her wand flat on the palm of her hand. *Point Me*, she whispered, and the wand started to rotate, finally coming to a hold with its tip pointing down the left-hand corridor.

'So, that's north,' Morgana said to herself, and set off down the other corridor, once more clutching her wand firmly in her right hand. She didn't know if heading south was the right choice, but she had to give it a try. If she didn't find Tonks or any of the others, she could always turn back and go north.

The cells in that corridor were all empty, and the eerie silence made Morgana move with uttermost care. She didn't dare make a sound lest she drew attention to herself, and she didn't cast the Lumos Charm either. It took her eyes therefore a while to grow accustomed to the semi-darkness, and it wasn't until she had walked past several cells that she realised that the corridor was a dead end. *How convenient*, she thought. Now she knew for sure that Tonks and Dawlish had run the other way.

She had just turned around when the tiniest ray of sunshine fell through one of the miniscule skylights in the ceiling high above her. It wasn't a bright light, but since it had been as good as dark only moments before, Morgana couldn't help but turn away in order to shield her eyes. And as she blinked, she caught sight of movement in the very last cell. There was a man pacing, moving just as silently as she had been. His clothes were dirty and torn, his shoulders slightly slumped and his hair dishevelled. But no matter how little he resembled the always well-groomed and impeccably dressed lord of the manor, there was no mistaking Lucius Malfoy.

Morgana covered her mouth with her free hand to muffle a gasp. She had known, of course, that Lucius was in Azkaban and had been prepared to catch a glimpse of him on her tour, but she had not expected to meet him like this, not on her own. Now her first impulse was to turn and run, run away from him and leave him behind. But her feet weren't moving and her eyes unable to look away.

He was pacing his cell like a trapped animal. To and fro, he walked, to and fro, and Morgana wondered if he did it to keep warm, or if it was merely for something to do. Or if Azkaban had broken his spirit already, that he wasn't even aware of his actions. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him, and despite her better judgement, she took a step forwards.

'Lucius?'

She called his name softly, yet it still echoed around the bare stone walls. And Lucius stopped and looked up in surprise, staggering backwards slightly as he caught sight of her.

And what a sight she was to behold, her pale face contrasting sharply with her black clothes and her flaming red hair the first speck of colour he had seen in weeks, mesmerizing him just as much as the thin ray of sunlight behind her. Surely, this couldn't be, not in this place, where there was nothing else than fear and despair. She could not be here.

'Mor... Morgana?' he croaked, not daring to say more or raise his voice lest the vision disappear just as it had disappeared from his dreams so many nights to be replaced by nothing but suffocating darkness.

But just hearing Lucius call her name sent a shudder down Morgana's spine, and it was with great effort that she kept herself from whimpering. How she had missed the sound of his voice. How she had missed him looking at her as if she were the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes upon. How she had missed *him*.

Slowly, she stepped closer.

'Morgana,' Lucius repeated, encouraged by seeing her coming closer and hearing the rustling of her robes. This wasn't a dream. This wasn't his mind playing tricks on him. She was really there, right in front of him, almost close enough to touch. But what was she doing here?

He approached the iron bars and somewhat fearfully raised his gaze. He couldn't see any Dementors, but for the very first time since he had been brought here, he could make out a piece of blue sky through one of the skylights. He blinked. For five weeks, he had not been able to make out anything but clouds and grey skies through those mocking holes. Was this it? Was this the day he would be a free man once more? Had she come to his rescue?

'Morgana,' he whispered for the third time, closing his hands around the iron bars. 'I knew you would not forsake me.'

But to his disappointment, Morgana stopped at an arm's length away from the bars. She could have touched him if she wanted to, and Lucius could reach out and touch her. But instead, they both stood motionless, gazing at each other.

Lucius was a pitiful sight. The spell that had always kept his cheeks and chin smooth was fading, and the stubble was unwashed. There were dark circles under his eyes and lines disfiguring his handsome face. But Morgana did not see any of it. She could only see his eyes, those grey eyes that had always been filled with love and desire whenever they had fallen upon her. And today, they were filled with hope.

'Dearest heart,' Lucius began, sensing that Morgana was reluctant to approach him. 'How much I have missed you. How much I have longed to see you, to touch you.'

Morgana tried to smile, but her face seemed frozen. And as she tried to swallow, she noticed her throat being filled by a big lump that prevented her from speaking. Instead, she reached out and let her fingertips trail over Lucius' grazed knuckles.

He inhaled sharply. He had not experienced any physical contact with another human being for the last five weeks, and her tender touch made a warmth surge through his body that had nothing to do with the rays of sunlight that were now illuminating his cell. Her touch was giving him life. It was giving him hope.

'Have you missed me, too?' he asked, resisting the urge to grab hold of the hand that was caressing him. He couldn't afford to frighten her. If he made his move too quickly, she would withdraw and disappear, and with her his chance for freedom. If he played his cards right, he would be out of Azkaban by mid-afternoon.

'More than you can imagine, Lucius. Every day without you is a day in hell.'

They both flinched at the sound of her voice; Lucius because he had not been prepared for it to be just as hoarse as his own and Morgana because she could not believe that she had just spoken those words out loud. She was not supposed to miss him. She was not supposed to feel sorry for him. She was supposed to hate him for all that he had done. But she found herself unable to.

'Beloved,' Lucius whispered, moving his face closer to the bars, never once breaking eye contact. 'I am begging for your forgiveness. The knowledge that you're hurting, that you're hurting because of me, is more painful to me than any cruelties the Dementors can come up with. Please, forgive me.'

'What are you begging forgiveness for, Lucius?' Morgana asked, her throat now so tight that every uttered syllable caused her pain. 'For lying to me, for using me?'

'No, beloved. No!' Lucius interrupted her. 'This wasn't me. It was... It was the power, Morgana. I thought that the Dark Lord could give me power. But all he did was turn me into a monster and put me in this godforsaken hellhole. Morgana, please. Forgive me. I never meant to hurt you.'

No, he never had. Morgana had tried to convince herself of that ever since the moment she had left him sleeping in the tower room at Hogwarts. He had not meant to hurt her that night, she had told herself a million times. He had been drunk, and he had been angry, and she had been the one who had made him angry. She had deserved to be punished that night.

But had Lucius not hurt her long before that?

'I love you, Morgana,' Lucius added, pouring his very soul into his words. He needed her to believe him, like she had almost a year ago. 'I always have.'

Morgana saw her hand shaking, and she feverishly tried to blink back the tears that were welling up in her eyes and obscuring her vision. *Be strong now*, she told herself. *Don't let him fool you once again. Free yourself from him.*

'You have never loved me, Lucius Malfoy,' she said slowly, feeling that every word she spoke undid a stitch in the bond that had once been woven between her and the man in the cell. 'You never even cared for me. From the very first day you sent gold to the orphanage so they could buy me new robes, you only thought about yourself and hoped that my family name would help you achieve the glory your own name denied you. You used me. And I was foolish enough to fall for you.'

'No. No, Morgana! That's not true!' Lucius exclaimed, and in a desperate attempt to keep Morgana from turning away from him, he grabbed her hand. To his surprise and utter satisfaction, she did not withdraw.

'I loved you,' he reaffirmed. 'I would have given up everything for you. My wife, my family... It was the Dark Lord who turned me into a fiend.' He looked crestfallen, like a wounded puppy, and as he carried on, his voice was shaking. 'I never meant to hurt you.'

Morgana slowly shook her head, unable to break eye contact and unable to pull away her hand.

'You planned it all, Lucius,' she said. 'You and no other.'

'How can you say that?' Lucius asked, his voice cracking. 'I am suffering here, Morgana. Suffering for all I have been forced to put you through.'

'What about my suffering, Lucius? What about all the sleepless nights, all the uncried tears? What about the child that was never born? Do you really think some weeks in here make up for what you have done to me?'

Lucius swallowed. If Morgana thought that he did not regret the loss of their child, then she was wrong, so incredibly wrong. Losing that child had lost him everything. He knew that he had not ended up in Azkaban solely because he had failed to retrieve the Prophecy. The Dark Lord was powerful enough to free him if he wanted to. But the Dark Lord had decided that Lucius needed to be punished for having lost him his heir and was now not lifting a finger. In fact, Lucius was convinced that the Dark Lord had meant for him to fail and end up behind bars, just to teach him a lesson.

'I will never forgive myself for the loss of our child, Morgana,' he whispered, and the lonely tear that rolled down his cheek was one of the few honest tears Lucius Malfoy had ever cried.

'I would do anything to be able to go back in time and make things undone, Morgana,' he assured her. 'I would prefer the Dementor's Kiss than to live another day knowing you will never forgive me.'

Morgana whimpered, and the tears she had so stubbornly fought for months were now rolling down her face, one by one, in a stream that seemed unstoppable.

'It's myself I cannot forgive, Lucius,' she brought forth, 'for loving you when I know I should hate you.'

That was when Lucius Malfoy made his move. Tightening his grip around her hand so she could not pull away, he sneaked his free hand through the bars and took hold of Morgana's chin, pulling her closer until their lips met. She stiffened at first and tried to pull away, but after a few moments, he felt her sinking into his kiss, and he knew that he had won her over, yet again. He was certain of it.

Morgana felt herself tremble and had to hold onto Lucius' hand as not to fall, so weak were her knees. His lips weren't as soft as she remembered them, and he smelled of anything but expensive cologne, but his kiss was just the same, just as passionate, just as demanding, just as breathtaking as ever. She could do nothing else but moan and press herself against the bars of Lucius' cell. His kisses had awoken a fire that she had thought extinguished. And now the only thing that could keep her from bursting into flames was to be close to him, to feel his body against hers and his hot breath on her skin. She all but forgot where she was and who she was kissing. But Lucius had not forgotten where he was, and he had not forgotten who he was kissing. Just as little as he had forgotten that Morgana was carrying a wand. It was all going according to his plan.

He struck as quickly as a snake, pulling her left hand through the bars and making it impossible for her to move away as he snatched her wand from her.

'Love and hate, Morgana,' he whispered into her ear, still keeping a firm grip on her hand, 'are just two sides of the same coin, are they not? You may try to hate me, but you will never forget me and never stop loving me. Because no one else can make you feel the way I do. Isn't that so, dearest heart?'

Morgana never had time to react or think about Lucius' words. Mere seconds after he had taken her wand, the sunlight disappeared and the corridor was plunged into darkness, not gloom as before, but pitch black, impenetrable darkness. And with the darkness came the cold.

'No. No!' Lucius exclaimed and stumbled backwards, thus releasing Morgana's hand. 'Not the Dementors! Not now!'

But they were approaching. Not one or two, not ten. Morgana was unable to make out how many they were. She just felt her insides freeze to ice as they increased in numbers and drew ever closer.

'My wand, Lucius,' she whispered. 'Give me back my wand.'

'No,' Lucius croaked. 'No! I need it to... I have to...'

'Give me my wand, Lucius,' Morgana repeated slowly, reaching out her hand through the bars of the cell. 'You do not know how to conjure a Patronus. Give me my wand, now. Or we will both die.'

After what seemed like an eternity, she heard him move in his cell, felt his ragged breath against her cheek and his sweaty hand thrust her wand into hers. And without even once looking back at him, she spoke the incantation.

'Expecto Patronum!'

Nothing happened, and she tried again.

'Expecto... Expecto Patronum!'

Nothing. Not even a feeble shield of light. And the Dementors drew closer.

Exhausted and freezing, Morgana sank to her knees with her back against the iron bars, just to notice that Lucius, too, had sunken down and was clutching onto the bars right behind her.

'I have loved you, Lucius Malfoy,' she whispered. She really had. And as he had pointed out, she probably always would. And now that she was facing the Dementors and most probably death, she could admit it without shame.

Lucius shifted behind her, and as she felt his breath on her neck, unnaturally warm compared to the icy air that was now engulfing them, she thought that she heard him whisper that he had loved her, too.

For a third time, she raised her wand and spoke the incantation, but as her Patronus took form, Morgana knew that it would not be able to save them. For a Patronus to be strong, one's happiest memory had to be true, yet hers was nothing but a bittersweet dream.

XIV: The Dark Patronus

Chapter 14 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XIV: The Dark Patronus

Careful to make as little noise as humanly possible, Charis crept down the entrance hall at Grimmauld Place. It had been a long Friday, wrapping up a busy week, and she was in no mood to endure the yelling and screeching of the portrait of Mrs Black. In fact, she was not really in a mood to be socialising either, and would very much have liked to spend the evening on the sofa with a good book. She had even turned down Grindling's invitation for a pint. But when Arthur Weasley had waited for her in the Entrance Hall of the Ministry, telling her that Molly was at Grimmauld Place, preparing lamb stew, she had not been able to resist. Lamb stew was one of her favourite dishes and turning down a home cooked dinner wasn't something Charis did. After all, she had been too tired to cook all week, and her dinners had mostly been made up of sandwiches and ready-bought salads from the Ministry cafeteria. So being tired would not stand in the way of that stew, as far as she was concerned. And besides, she was hoping that several other Order members would come to dinner as well: Morgana, first and foremost, and maybe Remus, whose company Charis had enjoyed very much the previous Sunday. And dare she hope maybe Snape would come, too.

After having knocked on the door, she slunk quietly into the kitchen.

'Oh, Charis! How lovely! Arthur said he'd bumped into you, and I was very much hoping you would come. Come on, sit down, sit. How has your day been? Would you like something to drink?'

Charis smiled fondly at Molly as the latter busied herself with pouring pumpkin juice into a glass. She was such a kind and loving woman.

'I've been busy,' Charis admitted. 'There is still so much to do in the Hall of Prophecies. Those Death Eaters made a right mess out of it.'

Molly grimaced. 'So did some of my young ones, I'm afraid,' she said apologetically. 'And I know what kind of mess they can produce. You should see some of their rooms.'

Charis giggled. If Molly knew how her room had looked when she had been a teenager. 'And how has your day been, Mrs Weasley?' she asked in order to change subjects.

'Molly, dear. Call me Molly. I've been busy, too. I'm taking Ron, Ginny, Harry and Hermione to Diagon Alley tomorrow to buy their school supplies, which means I won't be able to do anything around the house. So I had to do the washing today and charm the chicken feed.'

'And still you come here to cook for the Order.' Charis felt a bit guilty about this. Surely, Dumbledore could have a Hogwarts elf prepare a nice dinner. Or the Order members could cook together. That would be a lot of fun. Charis suppressed a laugh. The thought of Snape in a pink apron like the one Molly was wearing was just too precious.

'Don't be silly, dear,' Molly said. 'I like to cook for the Order. You are all very busy people and need feeding.'

'Hear, hear.'

Both Charis and Molly turned to the door where they caught sight of Remus. He was smiling broadly and was craning his neck to see what was cooking on the stove.

'Molly,' he started, not giving up his spot by the door. 'How come Charis is allowed in the kitchen while I am banished to the lounge?'

Molly gave him a stern look. 'Because you pick at everything whilst I am cooking, and it drives me potty! Honestly, I swear you do have hollow legs! You never stop eating.'

Charis eyed her former professor furtively. He must have hollow legs indeed. He certainly didn't look like a man who was eating constantly. Then again, maybe he didn't get much to eat apart from what he got from the Order headquarters. Judging by the state of his robes, he didn't have much gold in Gringotts.

Remus, too, seemed to disagree with Molly's comment and put on a pout which could have belonged to a spoiled five-year-old who was told that he wouldn't get any more sweets. And it was all it took to soften Molly's heart.

'Don't worry, Remus,' she said in a soothing tone. 'There is chocolate cake for dessert.' Then she turned to Charis. 'I am begging you, dear. Take him and his puppy eyes out of my kitchen before I start feeding him!'

'And where should I take him?' Charis asked, feeling that she didn't know her way around the house yet.

'The drawing room,' Remus suggested at once. 'That's where Sirius hid his liquor.'

'Remus, really!' Molly exclaimed. 'You're setting such a bad example. Why don't you two go back to the lounge? The chairs there are comfortable, and you'll be able to relax a bit before dinner.'

'If Molly thinks that sending us back to the lounge will keep me from setting a bad example, then she's sadly mistaken,' Remus whispered as he and Charis left the kitchen. 'I brought some wine with me. Maybe we should sample it? Would be a shame if it turns out to taste like vinegar and spoils everyone's dinner.'

But the wine was as far from vinegar as it could get. It was a very nice wine, at least as far as Charis could tell. She hadn't had a lot of experience when it came to nice wine, but she did like the bottle Remus had brought. She detected black currant, blackberry and just the slightest hint of chocolate and coffee.

'Oh, this is lovely,' she commented, and Remus was just about to top up her glass when a low, drawling voice from the door announced that they were not alone anymore.

'I was not aware that the Order was now holding wine tasting evenings.'

Snape looked like he was in his worst mood ever. The darkness of his scowl rivalled the black colour of his robes, and his eyes were as cold as ice.

Charis wanted to recoil and hide somewhere, but Remus bravely faced Snape. 'Didn't you hear it on the grapevine?' He grinned, but Snape continued scowling.

'Maybe a glass of wine would do you good as well, Severus,' Remus suggested.

Snape eyed the bottle suspiciously. 'I am not sure this plonk is meant for drinking.'

'If there's alcohol in that bottle, I'll have some no matter how it tastes.' Tonks had just entered the room, Moody at her heels, and she was making a beeline for the wine. 'What a day!'

'What?' Remus asked drily, pouring Tonks a glass. 'Didn't you enjoy your little fieldtrip to Azkaban?'

Tonks vehemently shook her head. 'Worst visit ever, we ended up...'

'No one wants to know, Nymphadora,' Moody interrupted her rudely. 'Wouldn't want to spoil people's appetite, would you?'

Tonks defensively raised her hands. 'Don't rip my head off, will you, Alastor.' Then she took a gulp of wine before asking, 'Got anything stronger?'

Remus shook his head, smiling, and Tonks settled on the sofa, patting the empty space beside her. 'Get over here, Charis,' she said. 'We girls should have a toast. To the weekend and *men who treat us nicely*.'

As Charis toasted with Tonks, and while she listened to the young Auror explaining what exactly her idea of men who treat us nicely was, she could feel a set of eyes boring into the back of her head. And she didn't have to turn around to know whose eyes they were. Only Severus Snape had a gaze so intense that it could be sensed from across the room. Why he was staring at her, however, Charis didn't know. He had no reason to be angry with her. They had barely spoken. But still, she had the distinct impression that he'd rip her into pieces with his bare hands if she dared turn around and look at him.

'Um, excuse me,' she piped up as Tonks was done reciting the qualities of men. 'I was under the impression that Morgana would arrive with you.'

Tonks opened her mouth, but once again, Moody didn't let her talk. 'Sent her upstairs,' he growled. 'To freshen up and get some rest. Lil' chit hasn't been herself today. Couldn't even conjure a strong Patronus.'

Snape's eyebrows shot up. He didn't like what he was hearing. Morgana had always had trouble with the Patronus charm. That she was still not able to perform it properly was worrisome to say the least.

Charis, too, reacted to the news. 'Not being able to conjure a Patronus almost did Morgana's head in before the DADA exam. She was quite glad that she wasn't asked to by her examiner.' Then her green eyes widened in shock. 'Oh, my god, you visited Azkaban today! Did Morgana run into a Dementor?'

'Nothing to worry about,' Moody grumbled. 'Most trainees are unable to conjure a Patronus when they visit Azkaban for the first time. Those ruddy Dementors hovering around make it damn hard for them to concentrate on frolicking kittens and flowery meadows.'

Charis snorted. Obviously, Moody didn't know Morgana too well yet. The day she thought of frolicking kittens would be the same day You-Know-Who showed up in a pink tutu. But then again, just what was her best friend's happiest memory? Charis didn't know.

'Molly's chocolate cake will sort Morgana out,' Remus suggested. 'Chocolate always helps soothe any residue shock from the Dementors. Chocolate in general and Molly's chocolate cake in particular.'

'Chocolate is not the answer to everything, Lupin,' Snape hissed, shooting the werewolf a look that should have turned him into a whimpering puppy dog. Remus, however, was once more not intimidated.

'It might not be the answer to everything, but it makes life a little sweeter.'

'And one's thighs bigger,' Charis added woefully, glancing furtively into Snape's direction. But she received no reaction.

Remus, however, laughed heartily. 'Nothing wrong with your thighs from where I'm standing, dearest.'

Charis blushed, and Snape rolled his eyes. He'd had just about enough of the inane chattering. And before anyone really noticed, he had stomped out of the room. Moments later, Molly showed up instead.

'What did you do now?' she asked, glaring first at Remus and then at Moody. 'Severus was in a bad mood when he arrived, but now...'

'Whatever do you mean?' Moody enquired.

'I ran into him in the hall and... well...' Molly broke off and started fiddling with her apron. *Upset* is not a word I'd use to describe Severus' frame of mind, but...

'Pissed?' Tonks suggested.

'Cranky?' Remus added.

'Murderous?' Moody gave his five Sickles worth.

'Worried,' Molly ended her sentence, making Tonks almost choke on her wine and Moody's magical eye pop out of its socket.

Remus lifted the bottle. 'Have you been drinking?' he asked, but Molly wasn't in the mood.

'Seriously, can't you all just be nice to him?'

'I didn't say anything,' Charis murmured somewhat miserably. She hated the idea of having said anything stupid that Snape could have misinterpreted as a gibe.

'Of course, you didn't say anything,' Molly reassured her and then rounded on Remus, Tonks and Moody once more.

'I know it's not easy being cordial with Severus, as he is no innocent lamb himself. But he's under a lot of pressure now that he has to be at You-Know-Who's beck and call. Give him a break. Now, if one of you would be so kind as to come and help me set the table. We'll be... let's see... you four, Morgana, Dumbledore, me... Set the table for seven. I don't think Severus is going to stay now,' she added, clearly disappointed.

'Has he left?' Charis asked, feeling quite as disappointed as Molly sounded. They had just been joking around. Surely, Snape was tougher than that. He couldn't have taken Remus' bickering seriously. But then again, maybe the stern Potions master was more sensitive than he let on.

'No, dear. He hasn't left. Not yet, anyway,' Molly replied. 'I think he went upstairs.'

'He better not trample around like a herd of Hippogriffs,' Tonks muttered. 'Morgana deserves some rest.'

'Rest?' Molly looked around, first now realising that Morgana wasn't in the room. Then she rounded on Moody like an angry mother dragon. 'What did you do this time?'

'I didn't do anything!' Moody assured her. 'Chit got a bit spooked at Azkaban. Nothing to worry about.'

Molly, however, didn't buy Moody's version. She stepped closer towards him, fixing him with an angry look. 'Dragging children to Azkaban...' she hissed. 'They should lock you up in there for a couple of nights. Would do you some good.'

'Now, Molly, don't be too hard on Alastor,' Remus tried to mediate. 'His trainees have to see the worst of the worst. It's better they encounter Dementors while he is there to back them up rather than alone in a dark alley one night, right?'

Molly backed off, and Moody looked relieved. It almost seemed that the Auror feared Molly Weasley more than any Dark wizard.

'Charis, dear,' Molly then said, and Charis winced involuntarily. But Molly was, of course, not going to yell at her. 'Would you mind helping me set the table now?' she asked instead. 'And do set a plate for Severus as well. Just in case.'

And muttering under her breath, saying the words pervert, psychopath and eye loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, Molly retreated into the kitchen, Charis close behind her, both of them very much hoping that Severus would indeed stay for dinner.

* * *

About half an hour later, the sound of Molly trilling 'dinner's ready' echoed from the kitchen to the gloomy stairway where Snape was hovering on the topmost stair. Had anyone seen him, they might have thought that he was admiring the shrunken elf heads on the wall. But he was, of course, doing no such thing. Instead, his eyes flicked

towards the first door to the right. It was closed, locked, most probably, and no matter how much Snape strained his ears, he could not hear a single sound coming from inside the room. And if he hadn't known Morgana Belakane better, he would have guessed that she had heeded Moody's advice and was resting. But he did know her and assumed therefore that she was most probably pacing the room, pondering her mistakes. If she had made a mistake, that was. All Moody had divulged was the fact that Morgana had been unable to conjure a strong Patronus. Of the reasons for that or why she had even needed a Patronus, Snape knew nothing. He had been hoping, however, that he would find out. But now Molly was calling for dinner, and still Morgana didn't emerge from her room.

Snape huffed impatiently. What had he expected? Of course the girl would stay in her room, brooding. That was what Slytherins did best. He himself was an expert on it. But he was also aware that brooding seldom did any good.

Taking a deep breath, he swooped up the last step and rapped curtly on the door, just to find it being ripped open from the inside in the very same moment. And it was only due to his fast responsiveness that Morgana didn't bump into him.

'Oh, sorry, Professor,' she mumbled and took a step backwards, her eyes firmly on her shoes and nervously fiddling with the bandage on her left hand.

'Professor?' Snape cocked an eyebrow. 'You are aware, Miss Belakane, that you are not at Hogwarts and thus not my student anymore?'

'Yes, I am aware of that, sir.'

'Good. Because if you still were my student, I would deduct ten points from you for being late for dinner. And another five for not looking up at the person who is talking to you.'

Morgana hesitated for a moment, Snape could see that clearly, and he mentally prepared himself for tears. But when she lifted her head to look at him, her face looked quite calm, and the only thing that betrayed her was the slight puffiness around her blue eyes. *No surprise there*, Snape thought. Not really. Morgana would rather be caught dead than openly display that she was upset. Stubborn little snake.

Crossing his arms in front of his chest, Snape looked down his nose at her. 'Just to make it clear, Miss Belakane, I am not here to fetch you for dinner. You are old enough to go down to the kitchen on your own. I do, however, want to speak to you about your Patronus. Or should I say, the lack thereof.'

He saw a muscle twitch at her jaw, and a second later, Morgana had once again cast down her eyes. Snape had obviously struck a nerve.

'What happened at Azkaban today?' he asked, his tone suddenly quieter, if not to say gentler. If Morgana really had been crying, then the matter at hand was most probably more serious than her not having done her homework on Patronuses.

She stood quite still now, didn't fidget nor move in any other way. But the rhythm of her breathing changed, and Snape waited patiently until she was ready to talk.

'I... I lost contact with my group,' she started eventually. 'Tonks, Dawlish and another trainee. I tried to find them but ended up in a dead-end corridor.'

'Was it there you encountered a Dementor?' Snape enquired.

Morgana shook her head. 'No, I was quite alone there. The cells weren't occupied, apart from the last one.' Then her voice turned into a whisper. 'That was Lucius' cell.'

Snape's nostrils flared. But of course! Lucius Malfoy. Trust the man to cause trouble even when he was locked up.

'Do tell me that you turned on your heels and let him rot there,' he growled, hoping against hope that Morgana would give him an affirmative answer. But instead, she once more shook her head.

'I don't know why I stayed. Or yes, I do know. For a moment it felt good seeing him locked up, and I wanted to tell him that he deserved every minute he spent there, but then... then...'

Morgana drew a shuddering breath. She felt so stupid now, and she was angry with herself for having let Lucius get into her head into her heart yet again.

'You know he can talk Bowtruckles out of a tree,' she tried to excuse herself. 'He... he tricked me. He got hold of my wand. And then the Dementors came. I don't know how many they were. Everything turned cold. I turned cold. And when Lucius gave me back my wand... I couldn't conjure my Patronus, not properly anyway. It was too weak to keep them away.'

'And where was Moody during all this?' Snape was fighting hard to keep his temper. What had Moody been thinking, sending youngsters on a sightseeing tour in Azkaban? Something had been bound to happen.

'He stepped in,' Morgana declared. 'So did Tonks and Dawlish and the others. They saved my life.'

Snape inhaled deeply and quietly counted to ten.

'It was foolish of me to talk to Lucius, I know that,' Morgana continued, a note of regret in her voice. 'But I hadn't been prepared to encounter him. Not like this.'

'Of course you weren't prepared!' Snape thundered, now losing the self-control he had been fighting so hard to keep. 'That damn fool Moody!'

'It wasn't his fault,' Morgana tried to excuse her instructor. 'He did step in. He did save me.'

'Don't sound so grateful,' Snape hissed, causing Morgana to flinch. 'He should not have exposed you to such a situation in the first place. I am going to have words with that stump-legged, one-eyed dunderhead.'

To that, Morgana gave the tiniest of laughs and finally raised her head. To Snape's relief, he saw the shadow of a smile linger on her face.

'We better get downstairs now,' he pointed out. 'Molly will be serving our heads on platters for dessert if we keep them waiting for dinner any longer. Which, no doubt, would be a great disappointment for Lupin. He is expecting chocolate cake.'

Morgana's smile grew broader, and Snape, considering his mission to be completed, set off down the stairs. On the first landing, however, he paused and swirled around, coming eye to eye with Morgana, who was still standing on the stairs.

'What form does your Patronus take, Miss Belakane?'

Her smile faded. 'A peacock,' she mumbled.

'Excuse me?' Snape asked unbelievably. Surely, the girl had not just said...

'My Patronus takes the form of a peacock,' Morgana repeated, her voice loud and clear this time. But she was unable to hold Snape's gaze. She was too ashamed. She knew very well what the peacock stood for and why it wasn't strong enough to protect her. What she once had thought to be her happiest memory had turned into a nightmare, but still she was unable to fully let go of it.

Snape sighed. He, too, knew what the peacock meant, and he didn't like it one bit. But the girl in front of him had been through enough that day. He would not give her a lecture now. And with a little luck, she understood herself why her happiest memory had failed her.

'Dinner is getting cold,' he said curtly and once more turned and continued descending the stairs, Morgana tight at his heels.

* * *

'Finally!' Molly exclaimed as Snape entered the kitchen, closely followed by Morgana. 'Morgana, sit beside Charis,' she instructed. 'Severus, opposite. Come on now! Sit!'

Charis looked up at Morgana as her friend slipped into her seat. She was if possible paler than usual, and her otherwise proud posture was slightly hunched. And the way Snape was looking at her... His whole body language suggested that he was furious: the deep line between his eyes that were slightly narrowed, the flared nostrils... But when he looked at Morgana, he seemed... what word had Molly used? Yes, he looked worried.

'You okay?' Charis mouthed silently. She didn't want to draw anyone's attention to her friend, but still she wanted to show Morgana that she cared.

Morgana nodded quickly whilst Snape took his place between Molly and Tonks.

'Now, it looks like Albus isn't going to make it for dinner tonight,' Molly announced, unable to keep the disappointment from her voice, 'so that means there's plenty for everyone. We're having lamb stew, mash and carrots,' she told the expectant table. 'Plates, please.'

One plate after the other zoomed magically into her hand, and she piled them high with delicious-smelling food before sending them zooming back.

'Remus brought wine which I was hoping to serve with the meal, but someone drank it!' she said, giving a firm look at Tonks, Remus and Charis, who all gave guilty grins in response. They had indeed emptied the bottle once Molly had left for the kitchen, not caring how Moody had muttered.

'There's only three large glasses in a bottle,' said Tonks matter-of-factly. 'It's nothing, really.'

'Well, to make up for our little indiscretion, I'll just go outside, Apparate to my place and pick up some more,' said Remus, standing quickly. 'Any preferences, anyone?'

Molly tutted in annoyance. 'Please, be quick, Remus!'

Sure enough, barely a minute later Remus returned with two more bottles of wine and a flagon of pumpkin juice.

'There we are, then. Those of you who aren't as decadent as the rest of us, help yourself to juice.' He grinned and then walked around the table to pour wine for those that partook.

Snape eyed the bottle suspiciously before accepting, but then noticed the elf made crest and raised an eyebrow instead. 'Well, well, Lupin. Elf-made wine? Come into some money, have we?' he asked silkily.

'Stole it,' Remus replied coolly, now filling up his own glass.

Molly gasped incredulously. 'Remus, you didn't! From where?'

'Now that would be telling,' Remus answered with a wolfish grin.

Molly muttered something barely audible about being ashamed whilst everyone else took a swig.

'Ahhh! The sweet taste of illicit wine,' Tonks quipped.

'As much as you are enjoying the wine, will you please start eating!' said Molly fretfully.

'You don't 'ave 'o 'ell me 'wice,' replied Moody, his mouth already full of mash.

Snape frowned disapprovingly. 'Hope you choke on it,' he muttered under his breath.

'This is great, Molly,' Charis confessed. 'I love your mash. It's so smooth and creamy!'

Molly beamed happily and looked expectantly around the table, obviously waiting for more praise.

'Yeah, top tucker as usual, Molly,' Tonks agreed.

'Will you please divorce Arthur and marry me instead?' said Lupin theatrically.

At this, Molly laughed girlishly, a blush creeping on her cheeks.

'Morgana, you alright, dear?' she then asked.

'Yes, Molly. Delicious lamb, really.' And it was. But Morgana had no appetite for it. She found it hard to swallow, and any food in her mouth seemed to grow into a big lump as she chewed. But she couldn't tell Molly that.

's good,' Moody muttered, shovelling more mash in his mouth.

All eyes were now on Snape. He rarely stayed for something to eat at the Order headquarters over the summer, preferring to dine alone, but tonight Dumbledore had specifically asked him to stay. Trust the old coot to not even turn up for the meal! Snape couldn't deny that Molly's cooking was indeed excellent, though, so maybe the stew alone was worth him staying. And it seemed he was now required to play along with complimenting the chef. Well, he'd humour Molly, he decided.

'The stew is nicely balanced; neither too overpowering nor too weak. The mash is smooth and the carrots perfectly seasoned. Ten points to Gryffindor.'

He hid his smirk as everyone around the table sniggered, and Molly's blush deepened further.

'What's wrong with just saying: it's good?' Moody asked sharply, obviously disliking the fact that Snape had the skills to make the description of Molly's cooking sound as delicious as the actual food tasted.

'Well, Alastor, some of us appreciate the subtleties of flavour and are able to express that in more depth than merely saying it's good,' Snape retorted.

Molly was beaming hard now, and her cheeks were crimson.

'Bloody show-off,' Moody grumbled, reaching for his wine glass.

Snape, meanwhile, speared a piece of lamb fiercely whilst glaring at the craggy Auror.

'I thought it was a lovely thing to say, Severus,' Molly said, her eyes bright with happiness. 'You are welcome here for dinner any time.' She smiled fondly at him.

Charis subtly watched Snape eat as Remus talked about some scam Mundungus Fletcher was involved in. *He's even measured and graceful when he eats*, she thought wistfully. He cut his food into exact portions with deft strokes of his knife, in a very similar manner to how he cut his potions ingredients, and he chewed slowly. It seemed as if Severus Snape exercised control in every area of his life. But there had been a time when Charis had nearly seen him lose control, and indeed she had been the very

cause of it. Now she wondered if he still thought of their encounters, and whether he was excited by them. If only people knew how much passion lay behind those precise, fussy little buttons...

'For goodness sake, girl, will you eat already!' Moody growled suddenly at Morgana, making Charis snap out of her reverie.

'I am eating,' Morgana protested, demonstratively shoving half a carrot into her mouth.

'A carrot and half a glass of pumpkin juice, that's not what I call eating,' Moody barked. 'I need you to be fit!'

Morgana's jaw clenched, and swallowing that piece carrot seemed suddenly really difficult.

'You're saving yourself for the huge slice of chocolate cake, aren't you, Morgana?' Remus smiled, trying to diffuse the tension.

Morgana smiled faintly and nodded. She didn't want to disappoint Remus. Just as little as she wanted to disappoint Molly.

'Not everyone is a chocoholic like you, Remus,' Moody snapped. 'Eat meat, girl! Potatoes! Carbs are good for you,' he nagged.

Snape slammed his fork down on the table, making everyone jump. He'd had enough. 'Will you just LEAVE the poor girl ALONE?' he thundered.

Everyone looked at each other in shock.

'I wasn't talking to you, Snape,' Moody sneered.

'I want a word with you after dinner,' Snape replied in a low, dangerous voice.

'You can have a word with me right now!' Moody challenged, setting his own knife and fork down.

Snape stood quickly. 'To the lounge, please, Alastor. Now.'

'With pleasure,' Moody replied acidly, stomping out of the kitchen with Snape at his heel.

Once more, everyone else cast shocked glances at each other around the table, except for Morgana, who was resolutely staring at her plate. Snape had said he would talk to Moody, but she had hoped it would happen in a more civilised manner. Now it looked like there could be full-frontal warfare in the lounge.

Tonks scurried over to the door to eavesdrop. 'This is too good to miss,' she hissed in an excited whisper. But she didn't have to press her ear to the door. The heated voices carried all the way to the dinner table.

'It is clear to me, Alastor, that you have failed to protect one of your trainees throughout their apprenticeship,' Snape announced, his black eyes flashing. 'You have failed both physically and mentally, and I am close to reporting you to your superior.'

'I beg your pardon?' Moody answered indignantly.

'You heard me,' Snape ground out. 'First of all, Miss Belakane suffered severe burns through her lack of training last week, which should, incidentally, have been left to heal before she returned to work. Then you took her on a field trip to Azkaban, and instead of realising the girl was not mentally fit, you made her confront Dementors and prisoners when she was not ready! You might call that training, Moody, but I call that abuse!'

'You have got to be kidding me, Snape!' Moody roared in defence. 'The little chit has been distracted all week. If she'd been attentive, she would not have had any problem deflecting that Scorching Hex. I was teaching her a lesson. And why the Dementors turned to her is beyond me. If you want to shout at anyone, shout at that clumsy clot Tonks for leaving her on her own in the first place!'

But Snape wasn't letting Moody off the hook so easily. 'Your methods have been called unorthodox in the past, Alastor, but you have widely overstepped the mark and have cast a serious misjudgement this time. You allowed one of your injured trainees to continue working.'

'A little burn has never killed anyone,' Moody scoffed.

'You did not form a proper mental assessment before taking your trainee to confront Dementors,' Snape carried on, ignoring Moody's interjection. 'You have risked her health, Alastor. Not once, but twice. That is unacceptable.'

Moody looked like he was going to lay an egg in outrage. 'That girl has been properly assessed before she started training two months ago. You even signed her letter of recommendation. Are you telling me now that she is unfit to become an Auror?'

'No, Alastor. I am saying you did not perform the necessary checks before your little field trip. And for your information, if you ever let Miss Belakane step within a mile of Lucius Malfoy, I will ensure you will be hitherto known as No-Eye Moody. Do I make myself clear?'

Moody's scarred face rearranged itself into a look of puzzlement. 'Malfoy? What the hell has Malfoy to do with anything?'

'That is none of your business,' Snape hissed. 'But they are to be kept apart. Do you understand?'

'You are not giving me orders, Snape,' Moody growled, pulling himself up to his full height.

Snape leaned close into the Auror's face. 'I am not ordering you. I am TELLING you.'

'Are you threatening me, sonny?' Moody asked in a dangerous voice.

'I mean it, Moody,' Snape retorted with a low growl. 'If Dumbledore finds out you've been damaging one of his new recruits to the Order, he may not be as patient as I am. Now get out of my sight.'

Moody glared at the dark wizard. 'You spoiled my appetite anyway. And be assured that I will only touch your little protégée with silk gloves from now on,' he sneered.

Snape fixed him with a piercing stare that could shame a Hippogriff as he watched the Auror stomp his way out.

Snape returned to the dinner table in a flurry of black robes, slamming the door shut behind him so vehemently that it was a miracle that none of the paintings fell off the wall. Everyone looked shaken, but Morgana was still sitting rigidly in her chair, eyes firmly on her plate. Charis, on the other hand, could not help but look up in awe at her former teacher. He was known for being moody and short-tempered, but she had never expected him to stand up for someone as vehemently as he had just done for her best friend. And to Mad-Eye Moody of all people!

'It's unfortunate you had to hear that,' Snape said to everyone stiffly as he took his seat. A part of him was regretting that he hadn't cast Muffliato on the door. But another part was quite glad that everyone in the room now knew what he thought of Moody and his methods.

'Sorry, that was amazing!' said Tonks. She, too, had returned to her seat with her eyes wide and her mouth slightly open.

'It's good someone finally told him off,' Molly agreed.

'Here, Severus, have some wine.' Remus handed him a glass with a small smile.

Snape looked bemused at everyone's response as he took the wine from Lupin. Could they really be on his side for a change? What would be next? The Dark Lord telling him that he had decided to let off Potter?

'Don't get me wrong, I love Moody and all,' Tonks began, 'but he takes things too far. I tried telling him today, but he wouldn't listen. But he'll listen to someone like you.' She grinned at Snape.

'He better listen,' Snape sneered.

'Oh, I think he got the message alright. He's probably gone home for some Firewhisky and to lick his wounds,' Tonks replied.

'He was right on one point, though. You should eat something, Morgana dear,' Molly said gently.

Morgana lifted her eyes to Molly and smiled weakly. She did not know what to think. She was unspeakably grateful to Snape that he had stood up for her, but she was also scared about how Moody would take it. Would he be able to handle the whole thing like a professional, or would he make the rest of her training a living hell? Plus, she wondered, what would the people in the room now think of her? That she was a weak little girl who needed her former Head of House to protect her?

'How about you all go to the lounge, and I'll bring in the cake?' Molly suggested when everyone had cleared their plates.

At the prospect of Molly's famous chocolate cake, they all rose. Remus waved his wand, and the glasses and wine came bobbing through with him, and Charis and Tonks followed him, huge smiles on their faces. Snape, however, paused at the door, looking at Morgana, who was hanging back as well.

'You shouldn't have...' she said quietly so Molly wouldn't hear, looking up at her former teacher with big blue eyes. 'You didn't need to...'

She broke off, and Snape could clearly see that she was struggling to find the right words.

'Thank you, sir,' she finally said.

'You don't have to thank me,' Snape replied dismissively.

'I know I don't have to. But I want to.'

Snape nodded curtly at this. He, too, was at a loss of words now.

'Come along, come along! Cake coming through!'

Molly bustled out of the kitchen, sending a huge cake floating through the air with her wand. Snape cocked an eyebrow, and Morgana smiled, and together they made their way into the lounge as the cake wobbled on through in front of them.

Remus wolf whistled at the sight of the cake, which set Tonks off on a giggling fit.

'And the cake does not look bad either!' Remus joked, which caused Molly to blush again.

'Now then, Morgana gets to take the first slice, then Severus,' said Molly firmly, slicing up the cake.

Snape's eyebrows shot up again as Remus made a noise of disappointment.

Molly handed a piece each to Morgana and Snape. 'Come on, Severus, it won't bite you.'

Snape looked at his slice like it had a Doxy hidden inside.

'If you don't want it, I'll have it!' Remus piped up.

Snape narrowed his eyes. There was no way the werewolf would be touching his cake! He nibbled carefully at the corner. Chocolate cake wasn't normally his cup of tea, but this one was a pleasant surprise: it wasn't too overpoweringly sweet and melted on his tongue like butter.

'You like it?' asked Molly expectantly.

'It's very pure chocolate. No less than seventy per cent cocoa, I would say.'

'The man does have taste,' Molly beamed, clearly over the moon at Snape's praise.

Snape looked smugly at Lupin, taking puerile pleasure in the fact that he could out-wit him even when praising chocolate. He licked his fingers clean delicately, and it was all Charis could do to try not to drool.

'Ah, good evening everyone!' Dumbledore entered the lounge, smiling broadly. 'I'm sorry to have missed dinner. Lamb is one of my favourites, too.' He looked around, noticing the huge cake resting on the coffee table. 'Oh, I'm so pleased there is cake!'

'As if you have ever been to an Order meeting when there wasn't cake,' said Snape wryly. 'Unless Lupin had eaten it all, of course.'

Dumbledore chuckled at this. 'We should consider changing our name to the Order of Pastries.' But then his face became rather more serious. 'I met Alastor on the way out. Did he not get any cake? He seemed rather... unhappy.'

The old wizard helped himself to a huge slice of cake, looking approvingly at Tonks who'd snuggled up against Remus on the sofa.

'Severus here put Alastor right on a few things, and I don't think he liked it,' Molly explained.

'Did you now?' Dumbledore asked curiously.

Snape stayed quiet, a muscle flexing in his jaw. He really didn't want Dumbledore to hear of this. After all, he was one of the few people in the room who would understand why Morgana's Patronus failed right outside Lucius Malfoy's cell.

'He was wonderful,' said Tonks earnestly. 'Really took the wind out of Moody's sails.'

At this, Snape shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't used to being called wonderful.

'Seems like I missed quite a show,' Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling over his half-moon spectacles. 'But I am sure I will hear all about it in due time, won't I?'

'We are here for more pressing matters,' Snape answered. 'What did you summon us for this evening? You have news?'

'No, Severus, I have no news,' the old wizard responded calmly, wiping crumbs from his beard. 'I just wanted to make sure everyone got some cake today.'

Snape's face once more looked like thunder. The conniving old git made him waste an evening! Well, not waste, maybe. He'd have a chance to tell Moody off, something he had wanted to do for a long time. And it seemed that some people in the room appreciated his actions.

'It seems to me that while one Order member is home, raging, some others have taken some steps towards each other instead.' Dumbledore gave several people in the room a meaningful look. 'I would call that, an evening well spent.'

XV: Melting the Ice

Chapter 15 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XV: Melting the Ice

Charis had got back from Grimmauld Place an hour ago and was snuggled up on her sofa with Lily on her lap and a cup of tea in her hand. It had started to rain, and she found it quite cosy to listen to the rain drum against the window. But she was worried. Quite a lot had happened at the Order headquarters that evening, with Snape telling off Moody and Morgana's subdued behaviour, and even though everyone had seemed quite cheery after Molly's excellent cake, Charis had sensed that her best friend had been hiding something. And Charis thought she had been proved right by Morgana leaving rather hastily whilst everyone else had lingered in the kitchen, bidding each other farewell before leaving for their homes. Now Charis was hoping that her friend had returned home safely.

Suddenly, there was a faint humming noise coming from her bedroom. Lily heard it first and craned her neck, ears pointing straight up and the hair at her neck standing up. But she quickly seemed to decide that the noise was nothing to worry about and settled back down, stretching and closing her beautiful green eyes to go back to dozing. Charis, however, had no intention of staying put on the sofa. She knew the humming sound well, and she quickly put down her tea, shrugged her little cat off her lap and headed for the bedroom.

The humming was coming from her nightstand, and Charis' heart leapt with joy. She had most certainly not expected Morgana to make contact with her tonight, not after the Slytherin had barely said goodbye. But sure enough, the little mirror that was propped up against her lamp was vibrating slightly and thus producing the humming noise.

Charis flopped onto the bed in front of the mirror, and sure enough her best friend was peering out at her, looking pale and tired.

'Are you alright?' Charis asked, a worried note in her voice. 'You left without saying goodbye.'

'I know. Sorry about that,' Morgana replied, hoping her friend wasn't upset with her. 'I didn't feel like hanging around and have Molly mothering me anymore.'

'Molly cares a lot for you,' Charis pointed out. 'So do the others. Remus sends his greetings, and Tonks said she hopes you'll remember that you two have a dinner date tomorrow.'

Morgana gave a halfhearted smile. They were all very nice and kind, Molly, Remus and Tonks. Even Dumbledore had his moments. But still, Morgana felt uncomfortable. She did not want any of them to think that she needed to be taken care of. She could do that herself. Most of the time, anyway.

'Snape really went for Moody, didn't he?' Charis said, once more feeling in awe. 'He really told him what he thought about his methods. And I agree. I mean, Azkaban? After a month of training?' Then her voice became very soft. 'What happened there, Morgana?'

Morgana opened her mouth to speak but quickly closed it again and started gnawing at her lower lip, and Charis realised that her friend wasn't up to answering her question. Naturally, she regretted having asked. But to her utter surprise and relief, Morgana made a suggestion.

'Can I come over?'

Charis raised her eyebrows. 'Of course! Do you want to stay the night?'

Morgana hesitated. 'I'll have to be at the Ministry at seven. Physical evaluation. I'd be leaving very early, and I wouldn't want to wake you. It's a Saturday, after all.'

'It's okay,' Charis said quickly, seeing the chance of her friend coming over and pouring out her heart becoming fainter by the second. 'You can have my bed, and I'll sleep on the sofa. I bet I won't hear you leave.'

'We'll see, okay?' Morgana said, now regretting her idea of visiting Charis slightly. Sure, it would be wonderful to just sit and chat with her best friend, but stay the night? Morgana doubted she would sleep, and keeping Charis awake with her pacing was the last thing she wanted.

'Will you be using the Floo?' Charis asked.

'I'll have to check with Madam Nutkins if it's okay for me to use her fireplace. Should be alright. Otherwise I'll Apparate in.'

'Don't let me wait too long,' Charis chirped and then hurried to the lounge to tidy up a bit. She never noticed that Morgana's bedroom didn't disappear from the mirror. Obviously, Morgana had not bothered with tucking her mirror away, and therefore the connection was still active, very much to the pleasure of the owner of the third looking glass.

Just as the rest of the Order, Snape had returned home directly from Grimmauld Place. He had a lot to do before term started, and tonight was as good a night as any to draft lesson plans and prepare quizzes. He was, after all, in a hell of a mood, and who would be a better victim for that than second-year Hufflepuffs? They would be given a pop quiz during their very first lesson in September. But just like Charis, Snape was unable to put the evening's events from his mind. That Morgana had bumped into Lucius Malfoy made Snape want to wring not only Moody's neck but also Lucius', and the failing of her Patronus worried him no end. As did the shape of said Patronus. A peacock! Snape pinched the bridge of his nose in order to fight off a beginning headache. A peacock was the most unfortunate shape Morgana's Patronus could take. It was very clear that the magnificent bird represented Lucius Malfoy and the love the girl had felt for the man. And when he had broken her heart, he had cast a shadow over her happiest memory and thus crippled her Patronus. And although remembering her feelings for Lucius produced more sorrow than pain, Morgana was for the time being unable to move on. Hopefully, for the sake of her soul, she would learn how to let go soon. Otherwise, she would always carry a great sorrow in her heart, a destiny which Snape didn't wish upon his worst enemy. He knew how it felt. He, too, was holding on to a love that had brought him more heartache than joy.

'Good thing I did not have to walk. It's raining Crups and Kneazles out there.'

Morgana's voice carried from the lounge to the mirror in the bedroom and ripped Snape out of his thoughts. He could hear the girls quite clearly, but unfortunately, he could neither see them settling down on the sofa nor Lily crawling onto Morgana's lap with a little mew.

'I think someone's missed you,' Charis commented.

'Ruddy snake bait,' Morgana muttered, but she couldn't resist petting the little fur ball. She was quite surprised that an animal as sweet and innocent as this little cat wanted to be close to her.

'Looks like I don't have to be in at seven after all,' Morgana said after some moments. 'Moody's owl arrived just when I was about to leave. He wrote that I don't have to do the physical tomorrow.'

'I'd be jumping with joy if I were you!' Charis said, but Morgana seemed to think differently.

'I guess I am being let off because Snape told Moody I should be let off.' There was a slightly sour tone in Morgana's voice, and Snape scowled. If Moody was about to make life difficult for Morgana...

'Snape was right!' Charis countered. 'You shouldn't take part in the training while your hand is still healing. So I think you should follow Snape's advice. I mean, he was clearly worried about you, to have gone for Moody like that. And so am I.'

Morgana sighed and hugged Lily tighter towards her, and for anyone who didn't know her, this would have been quite a cute image. But for Charis, this was alarming. Morgana was not the type to hug a cat like a teddy bear.

'Looks like I don't have the nerves to be an Auror.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Morgana!' Charis burst out at once. 'Why would you say that?'

'An Auror who cannot even conjure a Patronus when faced with Dementors isn't up to the job. So maybe, Moody wants me to take the day off to reconsider my choice of employment.' Then she shrugged and looked at her friend with such a wretched expression that Charis barely could keep herself from hugging Morgana.

'Could I borrow a jumper? I'm freezing.'

Charis quickly nodded, frankly a bit relieved about the sudden change of topics. 'Sure, come on. I'll let you choose one.'

They headed for the bedroom where Charis opened her wardrobe.

Morgana wrinkled her nose. 'Got anything that is not blue?' she asked, in a tone that was so much like her old self that Charis could hardly believe she had sounded so sad only a few heartbeats ago.

'I do actually!'

'Bet it's purple, then.'

Charis giggled. 'Nope.' She stared rummaging around and finally fished out a big, baggy grey sweater. 'It's not sexy, but it's comfy!'

Morgana wrinkled her pretty little nose once again but accepted the sweater without any further comment. She was cold enough to have settled for Hufflepuff Quidditch robes. Still, she couldn't keep herself from having a nose in Charis' wardrobe for something nicer.

'And what, my dear, is this?' she exclaimed suddenly, holding up a pair of dark blue lacy knickers. 'Are we dressing up for someone?'

Charis promptly blushed, snatching the knickers from her friend who was now grinning broadly.

'Spill!' Morgana demanded and settled on Charis' bed, knees pulled up to her chest and arms wrapped tightly around them.

'Grindling has asked me out for a drink,' Charis answered quickly, so quickly that it was hard to hear what she was saying. 'But I don't know if he means a "drink" drink, or just a drink. So I thought either way, I should make an effort.'

Morgana's jaw dropped. 'You bought sexy underwear to wear for your boss?'

Snape's jaw, however, tightened to a point when he could hear his back teeth gnash. Grindling Gibbons? The Ravenclaw heart-throb who'd been the only boy handsome and wealthy enough to even outshine Lucius Malfoy when they had been at Hogwarts? Was this twit trying to make a move on Charis? And was she letting him?

'Well... not exactly...' Charis sat down beside her friend, with her eyes cast down and her hands fiddling with the sheer fabric. 'I'm not thinking he'll see them or anything. I just thought if it's a "date", then it would be nice to feel like I am on a date and dress up a bit, that's all.'

'Do you want it to be a date?' Morgana asked, and Snape snapped the quill he had been holding in two.

'Well, he's really nice,' Charis admitted. 'But he's my boss.'

'And bosses are by definition no dating material,' Morgana interjected. 'I mean, look at Moody...' She gave a theatrical shudder. 'Now, tell me all about Grindling.'

'Well,' Charis started, 'he likes classical music, and his grandmother was a Seer. So he's very interested in divination, hence him ending up working in the Hall of Prophecies. I'm not sure where he lives, but I have the feeling it's in a really nice part of London. He mentioned being by the river a lot. He likes self-made wine and wants to take me wine-tasting. He's sweet, witty and intelligent...'

'And you are smitten,' Morgana pointed out.

'He's my boss!' Charis wailed and turned a deeper shade of scarlet.

Morgana, however, smiled. Genuinely for what seemed to be the first time in months. Her Star Sister was falling in love. But what she thought was sweet and adorable was making Snape fume with rage.

'I'm sure you'll meet him soon.'

Morgana raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'I get to inspect your boyfriend?'

'He's not my boyfriend,' Charis proclaimed firmly. 'It's just nice to be able to spend time with a guy who's a little older, who's a bit more sophisticated and can have intelligent conversations. And he is very handsome... But I don't want to rush anything. And anyway, I might be all wrong! He might just want a drink!'

And Horklumps might fly, Snape thought, now crumpling up a piece of parchment without really noticing it. And if anyone should ask him about it, he would of course deny that the prospect of Charis Byrne dating was making him want to cast Unforgivable curses. But it was the dominant feeling in his chest at the moment, whether he liked it or

not.

'There's only one way to find out then,' Morgana suggested. 'Go have a drink with him and see where things are going.'

'He was in Ravenclaw, too, you know. At Hogwarts,' Charis informed her friend.

'A match made in heaven, then.'

Charis giggled. 'Well, it's a good job he wasn't in Hufflepuff. You wouldn't let me near him.'

Morgana smiled. 'I wouldn't stand in the way of your happiness, kitten. Even if he'd been in Slytherin.'

Snape frowned. Did Morgana really mean this? Both these girls had had nothing but bad experiences with Slytherin males: both had been used, and both had had their hearts broken. Yet still, they seemed to think that there was hope.

Charis yawned. 'Urgh, is that the time already?' she asked. 'Seems like we've just had cake.'

Morgana rose at once. 'I should be going home.'

'No!' Charis protested. 'You don't have to.'

Morgana hesitated for a moment, and once more her teeth went to her lower lip. 'Frankly, I don't want to go,' she confessed. The mere thought of spending the night alone made her shiver even more than she already did.

'Then stay here,' Charis suggested, patting the space on the bed beside her, and Morgana once more sat down.

'Feels like this day has been several years long.'

'You must be exhausted,' Charis said, giving her friend a scrutinising look.

'Freezing, if nothing else,' Morgana replied, wrapping her arms around herself.

'You can always bunk with me,' Charis proposed. 'For you, I'll even wear a nightie.'

She got to her feet and started rummaging in her wardrobe once more, eventually producing some pyjamas and a nightshirt.

'Pick!'

Morgana pointed at the pyjamas. 'If that's okay with you.'

'Sure,' Charis assure her. 'I'll just go and brush my teeth then.'

She went from the room, leaving Morgana sitting alone on the bed. Of course, the Slytherin had no idea that she was being watched, and therefore didn't bother anymore with sitting up straight and putting on a brave face. Instead, she slumped back against the headboard and closed her eyes for a moment. She was so tired that she could have cried.

'Asleep already?' Charis asked jokingly as she returned, wearing her nightie that was so short that it barely covered her bum. 'Quickly, go get changed and get back here so I can tuck you in.'

She looked after Morgana as the latter left the room. She could have sworn that the Slytherin had been swaying slightly and was therefore worried. Certainly, facing Dementors would suck the energy out of anyone, but still she could not stop thinking about that there was something Morgana was not telling her, something that had nothing to do with Dementors.

'There is a spare toothbrush in the bottom cupboard,' she called and then settled on the bed, stretching and yawning, completely oblivious to the fact that Snape sat watching her, unable to look away.

He was as good as mesmerised by her curves that were showing so clearly through the thin nightie. The last time he'd observed his girls, he had watched Morgana undress and been quite fascinated what he'd seen: the flat tummy, the firm butt, the perky breasts... But Charis, she was quite another sight: curvy, voluptuous, feminine. And Snape felt his body respond to what he saw and felt himself be absorbed in the memories of their previous encounters. She'd been hot and wanting, willing and so eager to do his biddings. He was quite sure that he could have her again if he wanted to. But he also knew that he must keep his distance. He had hurt her enough already.

'Warm enough?' Charis asked as the door opened and Morgana re-emerged from the bathroom. She had to be, as she was not only wearing the pyjamas but also the horrid sweater. She looked quite pitiful.

'You'll regret your offer to let me bunk with you,' Morgana pointed out. 'My feet are like ice blocks.'

'Aw, come here then, little icicle.' Charis opened her arms wide. 'I'll warm you up. Body heat is the best, you know.'

Snape watched as the two girls slipped under the cover, Charis shuffling around, trying to get comfortable, and Morgana lying quite still at the edge of the bed. She didn't seem entirely at ease.

Eventually, the lights turned themselves off, and Snape was just about to retire himself when he realised that Charis' room hadn't gone completely dark. There still was a stub of a candle burning in the window, throwing a little light on the scene, and he decided to linger for a little while longer, watching his girls.

'Are those your teeth chattering?' Charis suddenly asked and moved closer to her friend. 'Bloody hell, you *are* freezing!'

Instinctively, she threw an arm over Morgana and pulled her closer, and to everyone's surprise, the Slytherin did not resist. She tensed up a little at first, but she needed the warmth and wrapped her arm around Charis waist in turn, burying her face at her friend's neck.

'Roses,' she mumbled. 'You always smell of roses.'

Snape watched intently. When Charis had moved closer, he had fully expected Morgana to refuse the offered embrace and was now quite glad that he had been mistaken. Morgana needed her friend tonight, he was most certain of that. And he was endlessly relieved that she wasn't pushing Charis away.

Charis gingerly patted Morgana's hair. She could not for the life of her understand why her friend insisted on wearing it short. If she had red hair, Charis thought, she'd wear it long and charm it to fall in curls. That was how she had always imagined the beautiful and mighty sorceresses in the fairy tales her mother had used to read to her as a child. But that had been long before Charis had known that she herself was a witch.

'Are you getting any warmer?' she whispered softly, careful to keep her voice down in case Morgana had fallen asleep. 'I can fetch another blanket if you like.'

'No, it's okay,' Morgana lied. She was still freezing but suppressing her shudders. She didn't want Charis to get up to fetch a blanket. It felt far too good holding her in her arms. Gingerly, she nestled closer, nudging the side of Charis' neck with the tip of her nose.

Charis gave a little, sleepy sigh, and Morgana let her hand run down her friend's back, feeling the heat of Charis' body against her palm and imagining it filling her own body. She needed this now. She needed to feel the warmth of another human body against hers, to feel another one's heart beat against her own chest.

Charis arched her back like a cat being stroked as Morgana continued touching her, and as Morgana placed a first tender kiss on the side of her neck, Charis moaned softly.

And Snape sat rigid on the edge of his chair, barely daring to breathe lest he disturb the scene that was unfolding. His girls were embracing each other tightly now; hands were wandering and lips caressing soft skin; Charis was uttering small noises of delight, and Morgana's breathing was getting heavier as she intensified her ministrations and Charis started caressing her through her many layers of clothing. Both girls seemed to move deliberately, as if they knew exactly what the other one liked and needed, and Snape's eyes widened as he was hit by the thought of his girls having been lovers before. Had he not seen signs for that already when he had observed them through the mirror the first time? He shifted on his chair, suddenly acutely aware of his growing erection and the fact that he was intruding on something very private. But he was unable to avert his eyes.

In the bed, Morgana tried hard to relax. Lying in Charis' arms felt good, and she felt herself getting a tiny bit warmer with every touch, almost as if Charis were able to melt away all the ice that seemed to have wrapped itself around her. But she couldn't unwind. She was still freezing cold, and her hands weren't shaking due to nervousness but to cold and fear. Would it always be this way now? Would she never again be able to feel? Would she never again be able to receive love but only to give?

Once more, she buried her face at Charis' neck, breathing deeply as to keep herself from bursting into tears, and pulled her friend into an even tighter embrace.

Meanwhile, Charis grew bolder. She'd slid down the thick sweater and pyjamas top from Morgana's shoulder and was covering it with kisses, hoping to warm the cold skin. She felt her friend shudder slightly as she sneaked her hand under her heavy nightwear and hesitated for a moment, but as she felt Morgana relax, Charis dared moving her hand over the smooth skin of Morgana's back. But when she lightly dragged her nails down Morgana's back, the Slytherin inhaled sharply.

'Sorry,' Morgana brought forth, her voice quite hoarse. 'But I'm so cold this actually hurts.'

Charis stopped her ministrations and instead rested her hand flat against Morgana's back, feeling how her friend slowly but surely relaxed again.

'Maybe you should take a hot bath?' she suggested after a while.

Morgana lay quite still. She didn't want to leave Charis, didn't want to break off their embrace. But she was once more shivering and knew that Charis' touch wouldn't warm her, no matter how much she wished for it.

'Will you wait for me?' she whispered fearfully. It was a stupid question to ask, she knew that. This was Charis' home, and she wasn't going anywhere. But still...

Charis nodded and placed yet another tender kiss on her friend's shoulder. 'Take your time, sweetie,' she said. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

Reluctantly, Morgana slipped from Charis' arms and her bed, already missing the soft covers and warm embrace. But she knew it was for the better.

She didn't stay away long, having opted for a hot shower instead for a bath, but when Morgana returned to the bedroom, she found Charis rolled up like a kitten under the blanket. The little Ravenclaw was fast asleep.

Gingerly as not to wake her friend, Morgana sat down on the edge of the bed. 'I don't know what I'd do without you, Star Sister,' she whispered, just loud enough for Snape to hear. 'I don't think I would have made it through the night without you.'

'Stay, for goodness' sake, girl! Stay!' Snape yelled at the mirror, well aware that Morgana would not hear him. Thus were the enchantments he had put on the mirrors. He'd always be able to see and hear his girls whenever both their mirrors were activated, but whether they'd see or hear him, that was his to decide.

But Morgana did not stay, and Snape hadn't expected her to either. Instead, she pulled out her wand, producing a long silvery thread that curled into letters that on the ceiling above Charis' bed.

Didn't want to wake you, kitten. I'll get in touch tomorrow.

Sleep tight.

Love, Morgana

Then she left the room, and as Snape heard the characteristic swooshing noise of someone using the Floo, all he could do was hope that Morgana would be going straight home.

XVI: Voyeuristic Visitation

Chapter 16 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XVI: Voyeuristic Visitation

It was an agonising wait. Snape sat at the edge of his chair once more, peering intensely into the mirror in front of him, hoping that Morgana would show up in it. She had promised Charis to get in touch the next day, and Snape was certain that she would keep her promise, but how she would spend the night, he knew nothing of. Hopefully, she would return to her tiny room at Madam Nutkins' and have a more or less good night's sleep. But there was a risk that she might do something else. Snape doubted that she would head for a bar and drown her sorrows. She was not of that kind. But Knockturn Alley was right around the corner...

When the light finally came on in Morgana's room, Snape thought he'd been waiting for hours, whereas in fact it had only been a couple of minutes. Morgana had not made any detour apart from the quick visit to the kitchen to fetch a cup of tea, which now was being carried into her room by her little house-elf.

'Is Mistress sure that Mistress doesn't want a biscuit? Or a sandwich, perhaps?'

'Silvy, I've told you not to call me Mistress. And yes, I am very sure that I don't want a biscuit or a sandwich. I'll have my tea and go to bed.'

'May Silvy fluff Mist... Miss Morgana's pillow?' the elf offered after she'd put the cup onto the rickety nightstand.

'Silvy, please.' Morgana was fighting hard to keep her voice low and not lose her patience. Her nerves were lying bare, and it wouldn't take much more for her to start snapping at the elf. And that was something she didn't want to do. Silvy meant well, and she was so used to serving and taking orders that it was hard for her to understand that she didn't have to do anything.

'Go to bed, Silvy,' Morgana requested in the end. 'It's late. And I'd like you to make breakfast in the morning.'

The elf beamed. 'Yes, Miss Morgana. Silvy will make chocolate croissants and keep them warm until Miss Morgana wakes up.' She bowed deeply, and happy about finally having been assigned a task, the elf retired, closing the door firmly behind her.

Finally, Morgana thought with a sigh. She loved her little elf, but there were times when she preferred to be alone. And tonight was certainly one of those times, she decided, and carefully warded the door. No sound would escape from her room that night, and no unbidden visitor would be able to enter.

She moved silently around the room, opening the window to let in some air, closing the curtains and lighting some candles, and Snape lost momentarily sight of her, wondering what she was up to. He heard shoes being kicked off and the rustling of fabric, and when Morgana stepped back into his view, he couldn't help but gasp. She was completely naked apart from two delicate silver chains around her neck. Snape swallowed. What a sight she was to behold, with her fiery hair contrasting violently with her alabaster skin.

She pulled back the covers on the bed and lay down, but to Snape's surprise and his delight, if he were honest she didn't pull the blanket over herself. Instead, she lay flat on her back, quite still, with her eyes closed and her hands resting on either side of her. She was breathing deeply and regularly, and if Snape hadn't been distracted by the shadows the candles cast onto her pale skin, he would have noticed that her face looked more relaxed than it had done in weeks.

And Morgana was indeed feeling relaxed, much to her own surprise. She felt as if she were drifting somewhere in the borderland between being asleep and being awake, yet she was not even sleepy and her senses were still acutely aware of everything around her. She heard the curtains rustle in the night wind, saw the candlelight flicker in her mind's eye and caught the scent of one of the candles. It was the one on her nightstand, she knew that. It smelled of roses.

Without really thinking of it, Morgana moved her hands from the bed onto her body, exploring her arms, her neck, her chest and her belly. She wasn't cold anymore, and her touch didn't wake the slightest discomfort. Instead, she could feel her skin start to prickle, her nipples harden and a warmth spread through her which she had almost forgotten how to feel. She took a deep breath, letting her nose her whole self be filled with the scent of blossoming roses. Her left hand closed around one of her breasts, fondling it gently, while her right wandered down over her belly, coming to rest on her silky red curls.

Snape sat mesmerised. He had expected many things from Morgana that night: sulking, brooding; even tears. But this scene he could not have imagined in his wildest dreams. And as her breathing quickened, he noticed that his, too, had become laboured, and as she licked her lips, slowly and sensuously, he noticed how dry his own mouth had become.

Morgana moved her hands with utter care. She hadn't touched herself in such a fashion for quite some time, had neither had the urge nor the energy. But tonight, there was a fire burning inside her that could only be quenched in one way. She needed release tonight, she needed it urgently, but still she did not want to rush.

She carefully squeezed her left nipple between her fingers, imagining the touch of warm lips and a nimble tongue and moaned, and the sound seemed to vibrate through her whole body, sending jolts of pleasure through her core. But her free hand just caressed the inside of her thigh. She did not want to touch herself down there. Not yet. She wasn't ready.

Snape's hand, too, had wandered south, and while he stared at the mirror, unable to even blink, he pressed his hand against his crotch, instinctively pushing his hips slightly forward as to relieve himself from the growing pressure. He felt his cock grow harder by the second. Soon, he would have to release it if he didn't want buttons to burst from his robes.

Morgana spread her legs a bit wider, slightly rocking her hips. She could feel the blood pulsate in her core and knew that she was moist and ready. But still, she hesitated. She wasn't prudish, had never been, but something deep inside her seemed to keep her from touching herself properly, from giving herself what she needed and craved. Just what was keeping her, she did not know. But the feeling was disturbing, agonising, and she did all she could to block it. She once more squeezed her breast, started kneading it quite roughly, hoping the sensation would take her mind off things, but all it did was intensify the pulsating between her legs, and she could feel her muscles contract as if around the member of an invisible lover. By Merlin, how she longed to be touched, to be taken and be filled completely.

She couldn't wait anymore now. Her fingers moved quickly over her most sensitive spot, and she moaned loudly, squeezing her eyes shut and biting her lips, trying to enjoy the sensation that was threatening to overpower her. Her breathing came in gasps, and she arched her back, trying to press her hips against her hand which she knew wouldn't be able to give her what she needed so desperately.

And Snape sat panting, squeezing his throbbing erection through the fabric of his robes, wishing he could step through the mirror and position himself right between Morgana's thighs, plunge into her and make her moan for him like he knew she had moaned for Lucius once. Oh, how heavenly it would be to hear her call his name as he drove her to heights she had never known.

Then it was suddenly all over. Morgana felt as if she had been hit by a wave of icy water, and as she let her hips fall back onto the bed, she gave a sigh of frustration. She had come so close, so close to what could have been not only a sexual release but also an emotional breakthrough. But at the very last moment, just when she had felt every single muscle in her body contract, her mind had been invaded by the memory of steely grey eyes, and she had lost it all. Now her hand hung limply between her thighs while the other rested in her breast; her breathing had calmed down and she felt empty and alone.

All of a sudden shivering again, she pulled the blanket over her naked body and curled up like a cat hiding from a storm. She wouldn't cry, not tonight, no matter how miserable she felt. The best thing she could do now was empty her mind and force herself to go to sleep. She didn't even bother extinguishing the candles or close the window. The candles would burn down eventually, and the cold night air drifting in through the open window would hopefully swipe away all her ghosts and dark thoughts.

Snape stared, flabbergasted. He couldn't see into Morgana's mind and had therefore no idea what had happened. All he knew was that she had stopped her ministrations mere moments away from what certainly would have been a mind-blowing orgasm and that she had left both him and herself unsatisfied. Now she lay there, curled up and hidden from sight by her blanket, and he didn't understand.

He scowled and was just about to leave the room in order to finish what he had started under a warm shower in the privacy of his own bathroom when yet another moan issued from the mirror. But this one was not coming from Morgana. This moan was coming from Charis.

Snape refocused, and his eyes came to rest on Charis' sleeping form. She had kicked off her blanket and was now lying without cover in her bed. Her thin nightie had glided up, leaving her bare bottom exposed, and from the way she was tossing and turning and rubbing her thighs together, Snape deduced that she was having an extremely pleasant dream and decided to linger in front of the mirror.

Oh, what a delicious dream she seemed to be having. She was now lying on her stomach, moving her hips from side to side, every now and then sighing or moaning. And Snape let his hand glide back between his legs to once more take a firm grip around his erection that was still straining to break free from the confinement of his robes. And once more he wished he could step into the mirror. Surely, Charis would not mind if he pushed her nightie up and took her from behind, filling her tight pussy as he had done that night in the restricted section of the Hogwarts library. Merlin knew she had enjoyed it then.

The memory was too much, and Snape couldn't resist any longer. He undid his robes and freed his cock, wrapped his hand firmly around it and started stroking it with slow, deliberate movements, not once taking his eyes off Charis. Oh, she was making such delicious little noises.

'Hmmm, yes. That feels good.'

Well, well, well, Snape thought. *Looks like someone still hasn't given up their habit of talking in their sleep. This should be interesting*

'Yes, right there.'

Oh, he knew what she liked. Had he not made her howl with pleasure as he had struck her special spot over and over again while stroking her clit deftly until she had trembled beneath him, muffling her outcries with her hand? He tightened his grip around his cock. She had been tight, and when she had climaxed, her muscles had contracted so hard around him that he had almost come, that he had almost spilled his seed deep inside her. He had held back then, not wanting to give her that kind of power over him. But tonight, he would give in.

'Yes, right there, Grindling.'

Grindling?!

Snape almost choked and let go of his cock as if burnt. There he was, hanging onto the memory of Charis squealing and moaning as he pounded into her, and she was dreaming of another man? A little Ministry twit?

Snape gritted his teeth, feeling his cock grow limp. Charis moaning another man's name was a turn-off beyond belief, and an icy cold shower followed by a healthy measure of Firewhisky seemed suddenly very tempting. But then Snape's cunning Slytherin mind kicked into gear, and he decided to kill two birds in one stone. If he played his cards right, he would go to bed satisfied that night and when Charis woke up, she would think of no other man but him.

'Sectus,' he muttered, waving his hand at the mirror. He doubted that Morgana would emerge from under her blanket any time soon or that she would even think about looking in her mirror in the middle of the night. But in case she did, he had no desire for her finding him whispering to Charis. Neither of the girls must know about him owning a third mirror. Hence, he blocked Morgana. Should she look into her mirror, she would see nothing but her own reflection. Then he focused once more on Charis. She'd turned onto her back now, and Snape could make out a faint smile playing around her lips.

'Miss Byrne,' he whispered.

He saw her tense up and sat quite still for a moment. If she woke up, he would have to abandon his plan as to avoid being found out. But Charis didn't wake, and after a few moments, she relaxed again.

'Can you hear me, Miss Byrne?' Snape asked, once more closing his hand around his cock which was rapidly hardening again. The mere thought of what he was about to do was turning him on to no end, and as he heard a quiet, affirmative hum coming from Charis' lips, he started stroking himself once more.

'You should not be dreaming of throwaway nobodies, Miss Byrne,' Snape went on, his voice still not more than a whisper. 'You should be dreaming of real men, real men who know what a luscious woman like you needs. Real men who know how to fuck.'

'Yes,' Charis replied in a half-moan. She was obviously hearing him well.

And he was quite certain that she recognised his voice, too.

'You had wine tonight, Miss Byrne. You told me once that alcohol makes you amorous. Is that still the case?'

Charis murmured a yes.

'And do you still want me lay you down, kiss you and pin your hands against the side of your head and grind myself against you?'

'Yes.'

'But I cannot be with you tonight. I can only talk to you. Will you listen to me and touch yourself the way I cannot?'

'Mmm.'

Snape smiled triumphantly and stroked himself slowly yet firmly, closing his eyes for some moments as to enjoy the sensation.

'Touch yourself,' he whispered, and as he opened his eyes again, he saw that Charis' hand had obediently slid over her stomach and rested on her groin.

'Part your folds,' he instructed. He remembered that Charis used to be clean-shaven, that her folds were soft and that she was always hot and wet for him. His memory served Snape well; he was not disappointed.

'Yes, rub yourself there. Slowly, really slowly. Yes, good. A bit faster now. Yes, yes.'

He, too, picked up the pace, letting his hand glide up and down his shaft while his free hand cupped his balls, squeezing them slightly every time his hand slid down to the base.

'Now enter yourself,' he commanded, remembering how tight Charis had been, how hot and slick her flesh.

Charis gave a deep moan, and Snape's cock twitched in response.

'Do you remember how it felt when I entered you?'

'Big,' Charis murmured. 'You were so big... stretching me...'

'Did you enjoy it?'

'Yes. Oh, yes.'

Charis was working herself into a frenzy with her fingers hitting the special spot inside her, and as she started moaning in earnest, Snape started to stroke himself more feverishly, now concentrating on the tip of his cock.

'Yes. God, yes! Severus!'

Charis' back arching was the last thing Snape saw before he squeezed his eyes shut. His hand was moving up and down at a high speed now while his other was cupping his balls. His skin started to prickle, and he imagined the touch of warm hands and nimble fingers, soft lips and searching tongues. His mind filled with images of green eyes and red hair, and his ears filled with moans and sounds of delight. There were different voices, he was sure. Two at least. And they were both screaming his name.

'Severus! Severus, yes! Yes!'

He came undone with a deep growl and a shudder, spurting load after load of his seed into his hand, but he kept his eyes firmly shut, fearing that the sensation of his orgasm would overpower him if he opened them. He felt himself shivering with pleasure and continued stroking himself, slowly but firmly, all the while growling and moaning. It had not felt this good for ages.

His cock had already softened in his hand when Snape finally opened his eyes. He was feeling dizzy, and it took him some moments to focus on the mirror in front of him. Charis lay curled up in her bed with her hand resting on her hip and her fingers still glistening with her own juices. Her cheeks were rosy, and there was a blissful smile on her lips that suggested that she had enjoyed her "dream" quite a lot. And when Snape turned over the mirror and retired, he was quite certain that Charis would think of no other man than him when she woke up in the morning.

XVII: Friends and Foes

Chapter 17 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XVII: Friends and Foes

Charis woke in the early hours of the morning, shivering slightly and noticing that her nightie had moved up and that she was lying with her bottom bare. Drowsily, she groped for her blanket and had almost gone back to sleep when she remembered that someone else was supposed to be lying in bed with her. But as she rolled over, reaching out her hand, she found nothing but empty sheets. Confused, she sat up, looking around her bedroom. There was no sign of Morgana, and the sweater that she had borrowed was lying neatly folded at the foot of the bed. Had she gone to sleep on the sofa after all, Charis wondered and had already swung her feet out of bed when she noticed the silver letters that were hanging over her bed: *Didn't want to wake you, kitten. I'll get in touch tomorrow.*

At first, Charis was overcome with a feeling of sadness at the fact that her friend had left, but when she saw that Morgana had signed her little note with 'Love, Morgana', she felt a warm, fuzzy feeling in her chest. *Love* was not a word Morgana frequently used, not even when signing letters. Thus, those four letters meant quite a lot.

Smiling, Charis once more slipped under the covers and snuggled up tightly, deciding that it was too early to get up for a Saturday. And as she drifted off to sleep again, her mind filled with the memories of last night's dreams. Detailed, intense, hot memories.

Charis shot up, gasping and covering her mouth with her hands. Surely, she had not been dreaming that! But the memories were now clear in her head, as clear as if she were watching a film: She had been in the Hall of Prophecies, but instead of the usual bluish glow, it had been illuminated by candles like the Great Hall at Hogwarts, reflecting prettily off the glass globes. She had been stacking the orbs methodically in a row, humming a tune, when suddenly a pair of hands had slinked around and hugged her from behind. She'd dropped the prophecy in shock, only to find it was Grindling! She'd turned around, and he'd been smiling at her, his kind blue eyes twinkling in the candlelight. And then he'd kissed her! It had been electric, and before she'd known what was happening, they had started making love right there in the hall on an old desk.

But then, just like that, Grindling had disappeared, and Severus Snape had stepped out of the shadows, telling her that Grindling was *a throwaway nobody* and commanding Charis to touch herself, bringing her to an explosive climax!

Charis shuddered, if from pleasure or from shock, she did not really know. What did this dream mean? Was she falling for Grindling? Or had last night's wine and the knickers conversation with Morgana set the whole thing off? And why had she dreamt of Severus? She had tried so hard to forget about him, to make her heart move on. Did she still love him? Would a part of her always love him? Or was she, once more, confusing love with lust, just as he had told her on the night of Valentine's in the restricted section of the Hogwarts library?

Hugging her blanket tightly around herself, Charis lay down once more. She was feeling confused to say the least and rather lonely. And right now she wished that Morgana had stayed so she could snuggle up against her and feel, well, loved. But Morgana wasn't there anymore, and all Charis had to hug was her pillow and Lily when the little cat came trotting in after a while.

It was mid-morning when Charis awoke again, and this time, it was Silvy who tugged furtively at her blanket, carrying a plate with freshly baked chocolate croissants and telling her that Miss Morgana would meet her outside Flourish & Blotts in two hours' time.

* * *

It was now lunchtime, and Charis was waiting for Morgana outside a bustling Flourish & Blotts; the new school year was dawning, and it seemed that everyone had chosen today of all days to collect the items from their book lists. Charis didn't mind the crowds, however. Diagon Alley seemed like an unfriendly place to be on one's own these days, with posters of wanted Death Eaters leering down from every corner. Bellatrix Lestrange was sneering from the front of the apothecary on the other side of the street, and with a shudder, Charis retreated behind the shabby-looking stall that seemed to be selling all sorts of amulets. *Effective Against Werewolves, Dementors and Inferi*, the cardboard sign said.

Charis took yet another step backwards as the seedy-looking man who owned the stand rattled a handful of amulets at her and bumped right into Morgana, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

'Jumpy, aren't we?' the Slytherin asked and gave the stall owner a glare so vicious that the man shrank back. Then she took Charis by the arm and steered her friend away from the bookshop.

'Slept well?' she asked once they were out in the alley.

'I had the weirdest dreams,' Charis confessed. 'But yeah, woke well rested. You?'

'As well as one can expect after a day in Azkaban. Didn't exactly dream of kittens, either.'

They walked side by side down Diagon Alley, neither of them really feeling like continuing this particular conversation. Morgana didn't want to worry her friend by telling her that she'd had terrible nightmares and then lain awake for the better part of the night, and Charis didn't feel like telling Morgana that she'd had wild erotic dreams about their former Potions master. After all, Charis' involvement with Snape had been the partial reason for her and Morgana's friendship almost falling apart during their last school year. Now Charis didn't want to risk this again, not for a silly dream which surely had been induced by nothing else than too much wine and chocolate.

'Enjoyed the chocolate croissant?' Morgana asked finally.

'Yeah, it was lovely! Thanks! I wish I had an elf who'd cook me breakfast every morning.'

'You can borrow Silvy, you know. I leave for work at least one hour before you do every day, and she gets bored. I bet she'd love to come over and cook for you.'

'No, I couldn't.' The thought was tempting, Charis had to admit that, but borrowing Morgana's house-elf didn't seem right to her. After all, she had been one of the few people to actually wear one of Hermione Granger's S.P.E.W. badges for a while. And even though she knew that Silvy was free and staying with Morgana of her own free will, Charis couldn't accept her friend's offer. A chocolate croissant now and then was fine, but having the elf cook her breakfast every day, that wouldn't do.

'Have you noticed that we seem to be about the only people who are here voluntarily?' Morgana asked as they walked past Eeylops Owl Emporium, where a group of adults stood huddled together, obviously waiting for their children to emerge from the store with their new pets. They all looked anxious and harried, some even afraid, and they were talking in low voices, every now and then glancing over their shoulders, as if to make sure they weren't overheard by anyone.

'Well, the weather isn't exactly inviting to have a stroll. I think it might rain soon. Can't we go and have a cup of coffee somewhere?'

Morgana agreed, and they made their way down to the Cockatrice Café, past one or another shifty-looking witch or wizard who tried to sell them amulets and other lucky charms. They didn't buy any, of course, as they knew most of them were bogus, but they sympathised with the people who did buy them. Dark times were upon them, and people couldn't be blamed for wanting to protect themselves.

The girls chose a booth by the window, Charis ordering a cup of hot chocolate and Morgana some herbal tea and a biscuit, and they watched the people passing by for a while, each one absorbed in her own thoughts.

Suddenly, Charis pointed out of the window. 'Look, there's Molly!'

Indeed, there was Molly Weasley, bustling up the street behind a group of adolescents who were following after Arthur Weasley.

'Babysitting the Chosen One, of course,' Morgana commented with a sour tone. 'As if she didn't have enough children to take care of.'

'I think she likes Harry,' Charis said.

'Well, I don't.'

'Why not?' Charis asked, puzzled.

'Because he's a ruddy Gryffindor, that's why!'

Charis stared at her friend in disbelief for a moment, but then they both burst out into laughter. Morgana was not being serious, of course. In the five years Harry Potter had been at Hogwarts, she had spoken to him only on a handful of occasions, most of the time not saying more than hello. She had no reason to dislike him, apart from him being a Gryffindor. Then again, that was reason enough, and as Charis remembered, Harry had denied Morgana entrance to Dumbledore's Army due to the simple fact that she'd been sorted into Slytherin. Thankfully, however, Morgana didn't know that.

'I think I know that laugh,' came a voice suddenly from across the café, and the girls turned to see a tall, fair-haired man approaching them. As usual, his long hair was tied back neatly into a ponytail and his blue eyes were glittering kindly. He had just bought a cup of coffee and was holding on to it, obviously on the verge of finding a seat.

'Grindling,' Charis exclaimed, blushing vehemently, and Morgana cocked an eyebrow in amusement. So that was the Ministry worker Charis fancied. She gave him a quick yet scrutinising look. He was handsome and looked very friendly. No wonder Charis blushed every time she spoke about him.

'Grindling, this is my best friend, Morgana Belakane. Morgana, this is my boss, Grindling Gibbons.'

'Belakane?' Grindling said impressed and gave a little bow towards Morgana. Then he turned to Charis once more. 'You are associating with the elite. The Belakane name can be traced back for centuries.'

Morgana narrowed her eyes. She didn't like people commenting on her family name. Most of the time, such comments turned sooner or later into discussions of blood status. And that was a topic Morgana despised with a passion. After all, neither her family name nor her blood status had done her much good so far.

'Why don't you join us, Grindling? There are two empty chairs.' Charis offered, trying hard to get the memories of the night's dream out of her head. 'You don't mind, Morgana, do you?'

'No, not at all,' Morgana lied. She did mind, actually, but for Charis' sake, she would make an effort. Grindling had made a good first impression, after all. Maybe, his comment about her family had been nothing but small talk and he was in fact not interested in such things. She would give him a chance. She budged over and offered him her chair and then took to carefully scrutinising him from the side. He, however, seemed to have eyes only for Charis, who was sitting opposite him.

'Dreadful weather, isn't it?' he commented. 'The whole of Europe seems to be covered in fog. Last year, I made a short trip to France in the beginning of August, but there is no point this year. The weather is just as bad down there.'

'France?' Charis asked. 'Oh, I'd love to go there. Did you go wine tasting?'

'Indeed I did. My family owns a little cottage not far from Dijon. I go there quite a lot. You should come along one day, Charis. As you know, some of the best wines come from the Bourgogne region.'

Charis nodded eagerly, and Grindling turned to Morgana. 'Do you drink wine?'

'Not if I can avoid it,' she replied curtly. 'Don't care too much for the French, either.'

Grindling laughed and told her that his family also owned a summer house in Greece, and when he and Charis started discussing Greek wine and cheese, Morgana made a mental note to look up the Gibbons family as soon as she got into work on Monday. The guy smelled of money, old money, and that combined with his interest in her family name made an alarm bell ring in Morgana's head. Too many old, wealthy pureblood families were or had been involved with You-Know-Who. And Grindling seemed just the right age to have been around when the Dark Lord had risen to power the last time. He was in his mid-forties, Charis had said. Just like Lucius. But then again, Grindling was showing genuine interest in Charis, a Muggle-born. Surely, he wouldn't touch her with a long stick if he...

'Look, aren't those the Malfoys?' Grindling interrupted her line of thought, pointing out of the window, and Morgana froze. The term the Malfoys was in her mind associated with Lucius and Narcissa. But as she turned to look out of the window, she caught sight of just Narcissa and Draco. Naturally, she thought, chiding herself. She knew very well where Lucius was. And even if he had been released last night, he would be in no condition to be wandering around Diagon Alley today. The Dementors had not been kind on him.

'Oh my, Cissy surely has seen better days,' Grindling commented.

'You know Narcissa Malfoy?' Charis asked, and Morgana once more sharpened her ears. This could become interesting.

'Indeed I do,' Grindling confirmed. 'I was in the same year as Lucius back at Hogwarts. I met Narcissa now and then. I was even invited to their wedding.'

'But surely you would not have associated with Lucius Malfoy,' Charis said, a slight tone of disbelief in her voice. 'I mean, you were in Ravenclaw. And we know that Slytherins don't mix with other Houses. Present company excepted, of course.' She smiled apologetically at Morgana, who simply shrugged.

'Oh, we were both in the Slug Club,' Grindling explained.

'The what now?' Morgana asked.

'The Slug Club,' Grindling repeated, at first looking a bit confused by Morgana's question. Then he slapped his forehead. 'Forgive me. I sometimes forget how old I am. Of course, you wouldn't know what the Slug Club is. Horace isn't teaching at Hogwarts anymore. Horace Slughorn, that is. He was Potions master and Head of Slytherin before Severus Snape. He used to hold small gatherings, dinner parties and such, for some handpicked students, students of whom he thought they might have the potential of becoming something great one day.' He pulled a face. 'Ha, shows what abysmal judgement he had. I sure didn't turn out to be anything special.'

'That's not true,' Charis butted in, maybe a bit too hastily. 'I mean, you are the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies. That's quite special.'

'I think Horace would disagree,' Grindling replied, smiling at Charis. 'You see, the other members of his little club can always provide him with things he liked: Quidditch tickets, elf-made mead, crystallised fruit, everything thanks to their jobs. All I can offer him are... let's see... *mysteries*.'

He pronounced the word *mysteries* in a spooky voice that made Charis giggle, and even Morgana couldn't help but grin. Grindling was nice; there was no doubt about it. And he made Charis laugh and looked at her as if she were the most beautiful and smartest witch in Britain.

Morgana bit her lip. Lucius had once called her beautiful, talented, intoxicating... She felt her stomach lurch.

'Would you excuse me for a moment, please?'

She stood up, feeling at once that she had done so too quickly. The room was spinning, and she had to hold onto the back of her chair as not to fall.

'Are you alright, Morgana?' Charis sounded concerned. 'You're awfully pale.'

'Yeah, I'm fine,' Morgana claimed. 'I just need to, um, powder my nose.' And under that pretence, she left Charis and Grindling alone at their table.

'Sure your friend is alright?' Grindling asked once Morgana had disappeared into the ladies' room. He sounded sincerely concerned, and Charis didn't even try to fight the warm, fuzzy feeling that was spreading in her chest.

'She's had a rough couple of days at work,' she explained. 'She is training to become an Auror, you know.'

'An Auror?' Grindling sounded surprised but didn't pursue the subject any further. Instead, he locked eyes with Charis. 'How about that drink?' he asked. 'Have you thought about it?'

'Don't you think it's a little early in the day for a drink?' Charis smiled uncertainly. Oh, she had been thinking about this drink alright. And much, much more.

Grindling laughed. 'I didn't mean now. But maybe...' His eyes flitted momentarily out of the window. 'I... I am busy tonight, and... How about Tuesday night, after work? A pint at the Leaky Cauldron. Just a pint, as colleagues.'

Charis nodded. 'Yes, I'd love to.' She knew that quite a few Ministry workers went for a pint at the Leaky after work now and then. Surely, it was alright if she went there with her boss. Her boss, who she had dreamed about... Once more, she blushed, but Grindling didn't seem to notice. It looked like he was about to leave.

'I'm sorry I cannot stay longer,' he apologised. 'But as I said, I have a prior... engagement. You will take care of your friend, won't you, Charis? She did look pale.'

Charis nodded, and after they said their goodbyes, she followed Grindling with her gaze as he hurried out off the café and into the alley, where his dashing figure soon disappeared among the crowd. A pint on Tuesday then, she mused and started counting the hours.

After a few minutes, Morgana returned.

'Where's Grindling?' she asked.

'He had to leave,' Charis replied, blinking fiercely as to shoo away the last thoughts of the man. 'He was worried about you, though. So am I. Are you alright?'

Morgana drew a deep breath. 'Yeah,' she claimed once more and then shook her head dismissively. 'I had a rough day yesterday. I didn't sleep well, and I haven't eaten breakfast.'

'Then eat your biscuit, for goodness' sake!' Charis urged her. 'Look, it's chocolate. You know what Remus always says about chocolate.'

Under Charis' supervision, Morgana somewhat reluctantly stuffed the biscuit into her mouth, surprised that the chocolate did indeed do wonders for her blood sugar levels. The dizziness disappeared quite quickly but instead gave way to endless tiredness.

'Could we leave?' she asked after she had washed down the biscuit with some cold tea. 'I need some fresh air.'

They headed out, and Charis suggested she'd walk Morgana home. It was obvious that the Slytherin wasn't in the best shape, and Charis much to her bewilderment longed to be alone. She needed to gather her thoughts.

They walked quite slowly, and it took them therefore almost twenty minutes to reach Madam Nutkins' where they parted with the promise to get in touch later that day. Had they arrived five minutes earlier, they would have seen Draco Malfoy slink around the corner and disappear into the shadows of Knockturn Alley. But they did not see him, and they also didn't know that Harry Potter and his friends were following after him underneath Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

* * *

While his girls met up for a piece of pie at the Leaky Cauldron that very evening, Severus Snape stepped out of the fireplace in the drawing room at Malfoy Manor, feeling slightly puzzled. He had just finished his dinner when an owl from Narcissa had arrived, asking him no, begging him to come to the manor for a drink. She had not said why, but it had sounded urgent. And so he had Flooed in at eight-thirty sharp, just as she had wished.

Now, Narcissa was hurrying to greet him. She looked pale and tired but carried herself tall just as she always did.

'Severus, I am so glad you could come.'

'Are you quite alright, Narcissa?' Snape asked in concern. 'Your letter sounded urgent.'

Narcissa's shoulders slumped in defeat. 'Oh, Severus, it's... this has been a dreadful day...'

But before she could elaborate further, she was interrupted by the door opening. Draco stepped into the room, a sneer on his pale face.

'Mother, don't you think you are consorting with too many, um, gentlemen today?' he asked nastily.

Snape raised his eyebrow. How dare Draco speak to Narcissa in such a way! If his father were around...

'Draco,' he said pointedly, 'I am sure your mother does not appreciate your tone.'

And indeed, Narcissa flushed with anger at being humiliated by her son. But as it befitted a lady, she turned her back on him with enforced calm.

'My apologies, Severus. Draco has been acting like a spoiled little brat today. He has been very rude to Grindling as well.'

Draco scowled, and Snape had to hide his shock. Grindling Gibbons? Again? First Charis had lain tossing and turning and moaning for the man, and now Narcissa appeared to be fraternizing with him. What kind of conspiracy was this?

'Do you remember him?' Narcissa asked lightly. 'Ravenclaw, in the same year as Lucius. He was a member of the Slug Club. Old family, the Gibbons.'

Snape's jaw clenched. 'Yes, I do remember him,' he answered slowly. 'I did not realise you socialized with him still.'

'Oh, I ran into him at Diagon Alley today,' Narcissa clarified. 'And guess who he had just met? Morgana Belakane! Isn't the wizarding world a small place?'

Draco rolled his eyes and muttered something. It was hard to make out what he was saying, but it certainly wasn't polite.

Snape looked at Draco with a flash of annoyance. The boy was beyond insolent tonight.

'Is there something you'd like to say, Draco?' he asked smoothly.

'There are several things I'd like to say, *Professor*,' the boy hissed in response. As far as he had been concerned, his mother had been far too friendly with that Grindling. And both of them had seemed far too fond of that blood traitor Belakane.

'But you won't say anything,' Narcissa cut off her son, a steely tone to her voice. 'I've had it with you today, Draco. Go to your room and stay there!'

Draco didn't talk back but just gave his mother and Snape a dirty look and sulked off, slamming the door behind him.

'I am so sorry, Severus,' Narcissa exclaimed, and, it was all she could do to stifle a sob. 'I have never sent Draco to his room before. His father normally would, but...'

'I know Lucius' absence must be taking its toll on you both,' Snape replied, conjuring a hankie. He wasn't very good with overt displays of emotion, yet he did feel sorry for Narcissa. She loved her son dearly, he knew that. And with Lucius in Azkaban, the last thing Narcissa wanted was to be hard on her son and risk alienating him.

'We... we received an owl from The Magical Law Enforcement today,' Narcissa went on, her voice quivering. 'Lucius... He... Severus, they said he attempted to break out of his cell yesterday! Surely, he wouldn't have been that stupid.'

Snape was shocked. From the little information Morgana had conveyed, he knew of course that the Dementors had moved in when Lucius had taken hold of her wand. But that the whole incident had been interpreted as an attempt to escape, he had not known. He knew, however, how such an act was punished at Azkaban.

Awkwardly, he reached out and touched Narcissa's arm in an attempt at a comforting gesture.

'Narcissa... You must remember that Azkaban can do strange things to people... And Lucius is obviously missing you desperately to try such a thing.'

'The letter said he has been given "special treatment"... If they have thrown him to the Dementors... Oh, Severus! How much will Lucius be able to endure? Will I ever get him back?'

Narcissa was crying in earnest now, and Snape looked at the wretched witch in front of him, his heart aching for her. She didn't deserve this. And he wasn't sure that Lucius deserved her love and devotion.

'Lucius will not be subjected to the Dementor's Kiss,' he said gently but firmly. 'That punishment is reserved for murderers, and Lucius has done no such crime. But you must be strong, for him and for Draco. Thoughts of you both are what is keeping Lucius going at the moment, I am quite sure.'

And with that, he risked giving her arm a gentle squeeze.

'Oh, Severus, I feel so helpless!' Narcissa confided. 'I want to do something for Lucius. I want to beg the Dark Lord for forgiveness, but you know he shows no mercy. And your idea... Severus, I think it's unwise for me to invite Morgana here. You should have seen Draco's reaction when Grindling mentioned her.'

Snape nodded slowly. He was not at all surprised by this news; Morgana and Draco could not stand each other. Funnily enough, they never had, even before the words *Mudblood* and *blood traitor* had become fashionable in Slytherin House. Most probably, young Draco had boasted too much about his family and wealth upon his arrival at Hogwarts five years ago. That Morgana hadn't hexed him then was nothing short of a miracle. Certainly, a jinx or two would not have harmed the boy. But Narcissa most probably knew nothing of her son's snobbish behaviour at school or thought it perfectly acceptable, and Snape did not feel like casting a bad light on the boy.

'It is unfortunate that Draco cannot forget the... *incident* between himself and Miss Belakane,' he began tactfully, pretending that the incident at the breakfast table was the only issue they'd ever had. 'However, the girl is key in getting the name of Malfoy back in the Dark Lord's favour.' He pretended to consider their options for some moments. 'Term time is starting soon,' he finally said. 'You will have ample opportunities to speak to Miss Belakane without Draco's involvement. Be patient.'

Narcissa nodded, obviously relieved that her friend understood her dilemma. Then her eyes flicked to the door through which Draco had left.

'I fear for him, Severus. What if he gets up to something stupid? What if he gets hurt in the attempt to fulfil the Dark Lord's wishes?'

Snape looked down at the trembling woman before him; she seemed just as desperate now as she had been on the night he had agreed to make the Unbreakable Vow.

'I have sworn to protect him, Narcissa,' he pointed out. 'And I will protect him, vow or no vow. I will not let him get hurt.'

'Oh, Severus.' The last bit of Narcissa's self-control crumbled, and she did not even try to contain her sobs as she leaned her head against Snape's shoulder, and he gingerly wrapped an arm around her delicate frame, feeling so terribly sorry for her. If there were only something he could do to help.

'It saddens me that you are being punished so.'

His words were like balm on her soul, and Narcissa clung to Snape for a few moments, sinking into his tentative embrace. This was exactly what she needed right now, physical contact with another human being.

'Could you stay?' she asked quietly after a few moments, looking up at him. 'Just for a while? Have a drink? I'd rather not be alone right now.'

And as Snape looked into her big blue eyes, he knew he could not refuse. What choice did he have? Who else could she turn to now, but him?

'Of course, Narcissa. I will stay.'

He stayed until after midnight. In the beginning, Narcissa talked a lot, almost babbled, which was very much unlike her. But Snape understood. She was scared, desperate and alone and in dire need of someone who would just listen to her without judging. And that was what he did. He even listened to her when she started reminiscing about Grindling Gibbons, how handsome she had thought him and how she wouldn't have minded going out with him if Lucius hadn't started courting her.

Towards midnight then, Narcissa became quieter, and Snape was unable to tell if it was due to the Firewhisky they had drunk or because Narcissa had said everything she had needed to get off her chest. But when he gallantly kissed her hand and bade her goodnight, she seemed calm and composed, and he was confident that she would have a rested night, something he doubted that he himself would experience.

Back at Spinner's end, he poured himself yet another glass of Firewhisky and then sank to his knees in front of the fireplace, hailing Dumbledore. It came as no surprise that he found the Headmaster still in his study, despite the late hour. The old man seemed to sleep very little nowadays.

'Severus,' Dumbledore exclaimed. 'To what do I owe the honour of your calling?'

The Headmaster seemed rather cheerful, but Snape was not in the mood for pleasantries.

'I have to inform you, Headmaster, that your plans concerning Draco and Miss Belakane have to be revised,' he declared, not entirely succeeding in hiding a certain tone of satisfaction in his voice. After all, he had never liked the idea of Morgana returning to Malfoy manor as a spy. 'I have just spoken with Narcissa, and she informed me that her son still holds a fair amount of hostility against Miss Belakane. Narcissa considers it unwise to invite the girl for the time being. And I wholeheartedly agree. We do not want to cause a bloodbath, do we?'

Dumbledore nodded gravely, stroking his long white beard. 'This is rather unfortunate,' he commented. 'I was rather hoping Morgana would be able to inform us about Draco's plans before he returns to Hogwarts so we can keep him from harming anyone by accident while he tries to get to me.'

Damned Gryffindor chivalry, Snape thought with a sneer. Trust him to turn the whole issue into a matter of student safety.

'I am quite certain, Headmaster, that we will be able to keep an eye on Draco once he is at Hogwarts. And I very much doubt that he will try to assassinate you within the first days of term. There will be plenty of time for me to gain his trust and get him to confide in me.'

Once more, Dumbledore nodded. 'Yes, I quite agree that there is no rush. But just in case young Draco displays some sort of adolescent petulance against you, I suggest that Morgana still get her feet under the table at Malfoy manor. If she and Narcissa have bonded by the time the boy returns home for Christmas, I doubt his mother will allow him to act hostile towards her guest. And who knows, as term progresses, maybe Morgana will be able to pick up useful information about Draco from his mother, even with him being at Hogwarts.'

Snape felt the muscles in his jaws tighten. Trust Dumbledore to find a loophole! Could the old codger not just drop the whole idea and let Morgana off? But of course, this was Albus Dumbledore, the Gryffindor who possessed so much Slytherin cunning that it would have surprised even old Salazar.

And so Snape considered himself defeated for the time being and bid the Headmaster goodnight, firmly declining the latter's invitation to tea at Grimmauld Place the next day. He'd had quite enough of Molly's cake that week and of the company of the Order members as well. This Sunday, he would spend in peace and quiet in his library.

He emptied his glass and retired, but before he turned off the lights in his bedroom, he cast a glance into the tiny mirror on his nightstand, finding both his girls sleeping tightly in their beds. Neither of them was tossing and turning, either from nightmares or erotic dreams, and Snape was confident that it would be a quiet night. For the pair of them, at least.

XVIII: Tea and Wine

Chapter 18 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

A/N: Dedicated to The Mugglechief, a dear friend who is sorely missed. We know he'd love the wine in this chapter.

Chapter XVIII: Tea and Wine

The first of September arrived in a flurry of activity as Narcissa Malfoy helped her son Draco to prepare for his return to Hogwarts. As he had refused to be fitted by Madam Malkin and then thrown quite a tantrum on their way to Twilfitt and Tattings, they had returned from Diagon Alley without new robes, and Narcissa had been forced to arrange for a private tailor to visit the manor; a task which had turned out to be more difficult than she had expected. Whereas she only had needed to clap her hands a few months ago to get all she wanted, she now almost had to beg people to be of service to her. Simply saying 'Lady Malfoy wishes' didn't do the trick anymore, and instead she had to ask people if they would be so kind as to assist her. It was a humiliating experience, to say the least, but Narcissa suffered through it. For her son, she would do just about anything. He was all she had left. And now he was back at Hogwarts, the manor seemed so empty, and Narcissa felt as if she was rattling around the old place like an aged spinster without either of the two Malfoy males around to keep her company.

On the Wednesday after Draco's departure, she didn't even get up in the morning. She simply couldn't muster the strength to face the empty house yet again. She had no one to talk to, no one to look at. She felt as if she were going mad. The night before, she had imagined hearing the clicking of Lucius' boots against the polished oak floors and the swishing of his robes when she had wandered through the empty rooms. And she had imagined his touch when she had finally drifted off to sleep. She had even dreamt of him, and when she had awoken in the morning, she had felt so lonely and desolate that she had been unable to make herself leave their matrimonial bed. She would lie there until he returned to her, she thought, and pulled the fine silk sheets over her head. But in the late afternoon, when she had no more tears left to cry, Narcissa decided that waiting and hoping wouldn't do. She would have to take matters into her own hands. If she did as Severus had advised her, maybe the Dark Lord would be merciful. And so she sent off an owl to a tiny room at the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley.

Three days later, Narcissa was waiting impatiently. There were still ten minutes left to the appointed time, but she couldn't deny that she was looking forward to company after a week alone, even if her primary reason for inviting Morgana Belakane for tea had a much more manipulative motive. It would be delightful to have someone to talk to.

Narcissa had made sure the elves had set the drawing room just so: an intimate table and chairs were laid out, the table adorned with little plates and bone china, awaiting her guest's arrival. There was also an empty cake stand, ready to be filled with petit fours and cakes at the snap of a finger. She had asked the elves what the girl had preferred to eat when she had visited the manor last summer, but had been informed that Master Lucius had only allowed one elf to take care of the girl, and that elf wasn't at the manor anymore. Where the elf had gone and what had happened to the creature, Narcissa did not know. Frankly, she had not even noticed its absence. And at the moment, she was too annoyed by the fact that she was unable to present the girl with her favourite dishes to care about the elf's whereabouts. It had probably died, broken its neck after having tripped over Lucius' cane.

Now, Narcissa was sitting in the drawing room, looking as immaculate and ladylike as ever, waiting for the knock at the door that would announce Morgana's arrival. Five minutes left. She wondered if the girl would be on time.

Frowning slightly, Narcissa tried to remember as many details as possible about the girl. Somewhat of a tomboy, Severus had said. And yes, Narcissa did remember that

Morgana had worn her hair awfully short, no nail varnish and barely any make-up. But she also remembered fine features, inquisitive blue eyes and a posture that spoke of pride and self-confidence. She could work with that, for sure. She had given it a good try during a few days the last summer. But Lucius had insisted on teaching the girl about bloodlines and the teachings of the Dark Lord. Beautification charms, dresses and high heels could wait until later, he had said. And Narcissa, the obedient wife, had stepped back and let her husband do what he deemed best.

Once more, her eyes flitted towards the clock on the mantel piece. Three minutes left. Well, as a member of one of the oldest pure-blood families in Britain, the girl could afford to be fashionably late. But then again, it was good manners to be punctual.

And Morgana was more than punctual. She had been standing on the doorstep of the main entrance for a few minutes now and had reached out her hand to knock several times. But she couldn't. And her inability to perform that simple task annoyed her no end.

It had seemed so easy to come to the manor, and Dumbledore's instructions had been so clear: *Befriend Narcissa. She needs the company. It won't be difficult to gain her trust.* But once Morgana had made her way through the Malfoy garden, her stomach had clenched and her hands had become sweaty. She had not imagined returning to the manor would be so difficult. She had not expected to be so nervous, so afraid. And she had very much hoped not to encounter any ghosts. But she had been wrong on all three points.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she brought herself to knock, and after only a few moments, an elf that Morgana hadn't seen before opened the door with a deep bow.

'If Miss Belakane would follow Dinky to the drawing room, Mistress Narcissa is waiting for her there.'

Morgana stepped inside, steeling herself. *I can do this*, she told herself firmly, following the elf through the magnificent hallway. But she wished that Narcissa had chosen another room to serve tea. Far too often had Lucius welcomed her in this particular room. Far too often had they made love on the sofa. *No, not made love*, Morgana corrected herself, scowling. *We had sex. That was all. Period*

Narcissa stood up, expectantly, as the elf opened the door and announced Morgana's arrival, and Morgana entered the room, trying to look confident. She hadn't seen Narcissa since the previous summer when she had stayed for a few weeks at the manor. It was then that Lucius had seduced her. It was then that she had still believed that she could handle the situation. How wrong she had been.

She swallowed as Narcissa greeted her with a warm smile.

'Morgana, I am so pleased you decided to come!'

She clasped the younger witch's hand in her own, and Morgana had to resist the urge to curtsy as she felt Narcissa's delicate handshake.

'Madam Malfoy,' Morgana responded awkwardly.

'Call me Cissy, please!' Narcissa insisted, picking up on the girl's discomfort. She had to make sure the girl felt at home and had to gain her trust. 'Come, take a seat. We've plenty to catch up on.'

She smiled again, and Morgana tried to smile back, but it came out as just a little twitch of her lips. Oh, if Cissy knew just how much catching up they had to do. If Cissy knew what had happened on the sofa on which they were now sitting opposite.

Narcissa politely offered tea, and Morgana accepted, but declined the sugar. Her boss had said she needed to watch her weight, she claimed, and Narcissa wrinkled her pretty little nose. Surely, the girl wasn't carrying a single ounce of excess fat. Not that it would show under those dreadful robes. Narcissa resisted the urge to tut. This girl needed to be properly attired if she were to be presented to the high society of wizardkind. Those black, shapeless robes wouldn't do. And neither would that boyish hairstyle of hers.

'I hope your boss does not object to petit fours,' she said, pouring the tea by hand and nodding towards the still empty cake stand. 'One of my elves is an excellent baker.'

'The Malfoy elves have a good reputation. I assume your husband took in only the best,' Morgana replied in what she meant to be a compliment.

However, at the mention of her husband, Narcissa's smile tightened a little, and Morgana saw some sadness in her eyes fleetingly. And she, too, regretted her words. She had sworn to herself not to mention Lucius. Now she had failed within the first five minutes of her visit.

But then Narcissa clicked her fingers determinedly, ripping them both out of their thoughts, and the cake rack filled up with delicious-looking cakes and slices.

'Help yourself, please,' she instructed, after choosing a delicious-looking cream slice.

Morgana chose a cute little green cupcake, and once more she was unable to keep her mind from wandering. In this very room, Lucius had served Tiffin on another fateful Saturday afternoon a little less than a year ago, and it had affected some people more than others. And with a jolt, Morgana realised that Bellatrix Lestrange was Narcissa's sister and wondered if Narcissa knew nothing of that affair either.

'I can hardly believe it's been over a year since I last saw you!' Narcissa exclaimed, taking the tiniest nibble of her cream slice.

'Time flies,' Morgana admitted. 'And I've been busy, what with exams and everything.'

And having an affair with your husband she added silently in her mind, guilt creeping into the pit of her stomach. Not once over the last year had she thought of Cissy and how she would feel if she found out that her husband was having an affair, and not just with anyone, but the girl who she had bought dresses for last summer, the girl she had taught etiquette and how to walk in high heels.

'To think that you're now of age and have left Hogwarts...' Narcissa shook her head, as if in disbelief. 'Professor Snape told me you left with good grades.'

Morgana's eyebrows shot up. Snape had been talking to Cissy about her? Sure, she knew that he had been the one to suggest that Cissy invite her to tea, but somehow she had not thought that he and Cissy would have discussed her. And she had definitely not expected that Snape would have given any sort of praise.

'Professor Snape would not have allowed anything but good grades,' she said quietly.

At this, Narcissa laughed. 'Very true, very true. Severus is a demanding man.'

'Um, how's Draco doing?' Morgana asked uncomfortably. 'In school, I mean?' she clarified hastily. She knew full well the little ferret was a Death Eater in training, and she had no intention of going down that particular avenue with her hostess. Not now, anyway. Once she knew Narcissa better, once she had gained her trust, then she could mention the topic. Maybe.

'He is doing well, thank you,' Narcissa replied graciously. 'Draco's always been the same though: in the subjects he finds easy, he'll excel. It's the ones he has to work at that he dislikes.'

'I was asked to tutor him once, but that never happened,' Morgana admitted. 'Guess he didn't like the idea.'

'As I recall, when we spoke to Professor Snape about it, he quite rightly said that as you were in your NEWT year, it would have been too much work for you to take on. A

shame, as I am sure he could have learned much from you.'

Or maybe not. Morgana suppressed a snort. 'I think Draco never really liked me,' she said instead, looking up at Narcissa with a slightly regretful look in her face.

'I'd heard there had been an... *altercation* between the two of you last year,' Narcissa offered tactfully.

Morgana bit her lip, managing to look really guilty in the process. 'Yes, I, um... we had a disagreement about my choice of friends.'

Narcissa nodded slowly.

'And he picked the wrong morning to start an argument. Ladies' problems, you know...' Morgana finished with embarrassment. Merlin, if Cissy knew what who exactly had caused her hormonal imbalance that day.

'Well, it's all water under the bridge now,' Narcissa responded briskly. 'I am sure you have moved on from it.'

Morgana nodded, casting down her eyes. If she were honest, she would tell Cissy that she'd love to tear Draco apart with her bare hands. But of course, she would keep quiet about that.

'So, how is life after Hogwarts?' Narcissa asked, eager to steer the conversation into less awkward territory.

'Even busier,' replied Morgana truthfully. 'Some days I wish I were back at school. Sleep until seven, have breakfast and start classes at eight-thirty. That was nice. Now I have to be at the Ministry at six or seven most of the days to exercise.'

'You're a trainee Auror, is that correct?' Narcissa enquired lightly.

'Yes, ma'am... Cissy, I mean,' Morgana corrected herself quickly. She couldn't help but feel like she was having tea with royalty, being around Narcissa Malfoy. Every inch of her screamed good breeding, good manners and exemplary taste. And she was also beautiful, which Morgana found very intimidating. It was hard to believe that Lucius chose to cheat on Narcissa with her, of all people. Once again, guilt squirmed in her stomach like a Flobberworm.

'That does seem to be a somewhat risky job for a witch such as yourself,' Narcissa said carefully.

'A witch such as myself?' Morgana scoffed. 'I'm nothing special.'

'Au contraire, Morgana Belakane!' Narcissa answered firmly. 'You come from a long line of pure-bloods. And as such, there are many ways you could make your mark in the world that would involve less personal risk on your account.'

Morgana put down her cupcake on which she had barely nibbled and looked at Cissy. 'Well, I could always get married and have babies,' she joked, but there was a sarcastic tone to her voice that betrayed her true feelings about this course of action.

Narcissa inclined her head. Clearly, the girl was on edge. 'There is nothing shameful in starting a family,' she replied softly.

'I doubt someone would have me,' Morgana replied darkly. 'There isn't much left of the Belakane fortune.'

'Now you are talking nonsense, my dear,' said Narcissa, not unkindly. 'There is the potential for a...*well-connected* pure-blood witch such as yourself to climb higher, both professionally and personally...'

Morgana looked at the blonde witch with a disbelieving look on her face. 'I'm afraid I do not quite understand.'

Narcissa put down her teacup daintily, considering her words carefully before continuing. 'You have been quite isolated at Hogwarts, with limited opportunities to mix within wizarding society,' she started. 'But that is about to change, Morgana. I can open those doors up for you. I can give you opportunities to seek power and influence, and to mingle with the upper echelons of wizarding society.'

Morgana frowned slightly. She knew the Malfoys had fallen from grace, so she couldn't see exactly what Cissy was getting at.

'I am not sure power and influence is what I seek,' she replied with a smile. 'I might have been sorted in the wrong house.'

'Morgana, dear,' Narcissa replied with infinite patience. 'People automatically think of ruthlessness when they think of the noble House of Slytherin. But that does little to describe our nature. What we truly want, is to be acknowledged for our full worth. And that is what makes us ambitious and, more often than not, seek power.' She paused, and looked at the young witch before her carefully. 'I fear that following a career as an Auror is not fulfilling your true potential.'

Morgana looked like she had been slapped in the face at this, but she managed to hide her outrage. She had heard those words before, but that time they had been wrapped carefully into sweet declarations of love, and she had not heard their true meaning. She had been too enchanted by the blond wizard who had spoken them.

'Then what, exactly, is fulfilling my full potential?' she asked, keeping her voice even.

'Well, that is for us to discover, is it not?' answered Narcissa pleasantly. 'And the best way to do that is to discuss options with some contacts in the higher corners of the wizarding world, who, I am sure, will be able to offer some very good advice.'

At this, Morgana looked down at the table. It appeared that, once more, she was getting in way out of her depth.

* * *

On the same day, but a few hours later, Charis and Grindling were sitting at a table by the window of an intimate little restaurant, nestled in the Scottish highlands and overlooking a loch. The sun was setting and casting a red-golden light over the dark water. There weren't many people in the restaurant, and those who were there all looked like lovers or newlyweds. But it wasn't the lovebirds that made Charis uncomfortable; this couldn't have been more different from the cosy pint they'd had in the Leaky Cauldron last week. This place looked expensive, high class, and she felt underdressed in her dark blue robes. She was not even wearing any jewellery, besides of course from the little silver necklace that she always wore.

'Would you stop fidgeting, Charis? You look lovely!' Grindling said with a smile.

Charis returned his smile nervously. 'I've never been anywhere as nice as this,' she confessed. 'I feel a little out of place.' She blushed at the admission. She was a Muggle-born, brought up on a council estate in Somerset. She felt as out of place here as a Horklump at a gnome convention.

Grindling, sensing his young belle's discomfort, leaned in and whispered, 'Would it make you feel better if I told you that my socks don't match?'

At this, Charis could not help but giggle. He had such a warm sense of humour.

'Honestly, you fit right in,' he continued with a grin. 'No need to be nervous.'

Charis grinned back gratefully, before glancing up and admiring the high ceiling, which was decorated ornately. Golden filigree swirls adorned the many bosses, which were interconnected by criss-crossed buttresses. 'It's really beautiful here.'

'Yes, it is,' Grindling agreed. 'It's not often I have the opportunity to come here. It's not a place one likes to visit on one's own.'

At this, Charis thought she detected a note of melancholy and, not for the first time, wondered why Grindling hadn't been snapped up already by a lucky witch.

Grindling also looked around at the marvellous décor, and there was an almost sad smile on his lips. But when he looked back at Charis, it was a happy smile again.

'Now, I know you'd like to go to a wine tasting, but to be honest, I have never really seen the point in sniffing, gurgling and then spitting the good stuff out again,' he confided. 'So, I thought we'd actually drink some wine and have a bite to eat. I hope that is alright with you.'

Charis smiled broadly. 'That sounds lovely. It does seem like a waste of good wine, to spit it out, after all.'

Grindling nodded. 'Indeed. I took the liberty of creating a little menu for us. I didn't know what you like, and if there's something you don't like, please do let me know. I wouldn't want you to eat something horrid just to please me.'

Charis raised her eyebrows in surprise. 'Oh, you've gone to so much effort!'

'It was a pleasure,' he replied, inclining his head slightly. 'Now, would you like to start?'

Charis replied eagerly in the affirmative, and Grindling imperiously waved for the waiter and whispered into the man's ear. The waiter nodded, gave Charis a meaningful look and then headed for the kitchen.

'I hope you like mushrooms.'

'I love mushrooms! How could anyone not love them? They are earthy little bundles of tasty fungus.' Charis cringed inwardly and blushed at her babbling. She was still feeling quite nervous.

Grindling smiled. 'My grandmother used to take me to the forest to pick mushrooms when I was a boy. I haven't done that for years. I miss it.'

Charis was interested to know more. 'Which forest did you live near?'

'Sherwood Forest.'

Charis had to suppress the thought of Grindling dressed as Robin Hood, complete with green tights. But before she could ruminate on this any further, the waiter returned with two plates. He was followed by a second waiter, who carried a bottle and two glasses.

'Chorizo stuffed mushrooms, madam,' the first waiter said, putting a plate in front of the blonde witch.

'Ooh, this looks delicious!' she replied, and Grindling gave her a quick smile.

'I'll take care of the bottle,' he instructed the second waiter and filled Charis' glass with bubbly goodness as the waiters retreated.

'Now, these little devilish mushrooms should be served with either beer or a dry sherry. But I don't care much for sherry, and we had beer the last time we were out. So, I thought we'd start with a nice glass of champagne.'

Charis picked up her champagne flute gingerly. She'd never had champagne before. At Christmas, her mum might get a bottle of Cava in, but as for real, proper champagne... She glanced at the label, not even able to guess how many Galleons it cost.

'Should we have a toast?' she asked, unsure of the etiquette.

'Be my guest,' Grindling replied, holding his glass aloft.

Charis thought for a moment and then said, 'To good food, good drink, and good company.'

Grindling grinned broadly at this. 'Hear, hear.'

Their glasses joined with a satisfying clink, and Charis found the champagne to be dry, fruity with a fresh taste of yellow apples and blood oranges.

'Oh, now that is rather nice!' Charis exclaimed after a sip.

'Should be,' Grindling replied, nonchalantly swirling his glass. 'It's elf made.'

Charis tried hard not to choke thinking about how much it cost. Elf-made wine was expensive. But elf-made champagne? Charis thought it would probably cost more than her monthly salary.

'Have a mushroom,' said Grindling, once more smoothing over Charis' feelings of awkwardness.

Charis dutifully cut one up, and the juices ran out tantalizingly on the plate.

'Mmm, that's a really good combination,' she said after a nibble. 'Meaty and earthy and a little spicy.' She paused. 'Nicey!' And immediately, she blushed again.

Why am I being an idiot? she chastised herself. *Just be normal!*

But Grindling smiled. He found her ever so adorable. 'I'm pleased to hear that.'

'Oh my, I'm feeling light-headed already!' Charis giggled after a few more sips of champagne.

Grindling faked a wolfish grin. 'It seems my plan is working, then.'

Charis looked mock-shocked at this. 'Mr Gibbons! Are you trying to get me drunk?'

Grindling leaned in. 'Would you mind?'

They gazed into each other's eyes for a moment before the waiter's polite cough disturbed them both. He swiftly removed the empty plates.

'They charge by the minute for a table here,' Grindling whispered conspiratorially. 'I guess they don't think we can afford to chatter too much.' He grinned boyishly.

Charis, already conscious of how much the meal was costing, replied with a worried, 'I hope you are joking!'

'Of course, I am,' he replied, amused at the young witch's manner.

'Good,' countered Charis, 'otherwise I'd take you for fish and chips instead.'

'Talking of fish, there's our next course.'

Charis looked up to see the waiter effortlessly placing her plate in front of her.

'Lemon marinated salmon with sesame dip,' he said with a flourish.

'And with it, a fruity Sauvignon Blanc,' Grindling added. The waiter had quickly learned and left the bottle on the table for Grindling to take care of it.

Charis looked almost disappointed as the champagne was taken away.

'I think you'll like this one. It's very fruity,' Grindling reassured her. 'Mangoes, pineapples, nectarines.' He put his nose in the glass and inhaled deeply. 'Pear, too. Add the grapes and you have your five a day.'

Charis giggled before taking a sip. The only white wine she'd tasted before was the disgusting Liebfraumilch that her mother insisted on serving for special occasions, believing it, in folly, to be the height of sophistication.

'Oh, it's very light,' she exclaimed. 'Very cleansing on the palate.' She was acutely aware that she had no idea what she was saying, but hoped she was sounding correct and not like an idiot.

Grindling smiled fondly. 'And you thought you didn't fit in here.'

Charis bit her lip, but Grindling admonished her.

'Don't do that.'

Charis looked down, suitably chastised, and started her salmon.

Grindling leaned forward, really low, and tried to catch her eyes. 'Did I say something wrong?'

'No, it's okay,' Charis murmured.

What could she say? That she felt guilty for part of her wishing that it was Severus sitting opposite her, treating her to this meal and being so attentive? That she felt that she didn't deserve such treatment? That she was unworthy, an ignorant pauper?

'The salmon looks great,' she said after some moments. 'I don't usually like salmon... sometimes the flavour can be overpowering. But the sesame dip takes the fishiness out of it, if that makes sense?'

Grindling nodded. 'Yes, it does.' He was still trying to catch her eyes and reached out to softly brush her hand with his. 'Are you still feeling uncomfortable?' he asked quietly.

Charis put down her knife and fork with a sigh. 'I hope I don't seem ungrateful...'

'Heavens, no!' Grindling replied forcefully. 'I might have gone a bit over the top. I tend to do that when I'm nervous. I really want you to enjoy this. We can go and have fish and chips if you'd prefer...' It appeared it was now Grindling's turn to babble, and Charis looked up at him earnestly.

'I am enjoying it, honestly. I'm just not used to such wonderful food and everything.' She didn't know how to begin to describe her torn feelings: of how she loved the luxury but felt like an imposter and how she appreciated Grindling's generosity and yet felt out of sorts at the same time.

'You should be used to it,' Grindling insisted. 'A lovely witch like you.'

Charis took a deep breath. 'I hope you know that you don't have to spend your money on me for us to have a nice time. I hope you know what I mean by that.'

She looked at Grindling meaningfully when she said this, and he blushed. She squeezed his hand gently, hoping he understood that she was not a gold digger and not merely attracted to him merely for what he could buy.

'I'd be happy eating chips by the seaside with you,' she murmured.

Grindling blushed even more. What a sweet, pure little Ravenclaw she was!

'I... I... I have a confession to make,' he began.

'Go on?' she answered curiously, removing her hand.

'My cousin owns this place. I promised to babysit his kids next weekend so I'm getting a good price here.' He smiled mischievously.

Charis could not help but laugh, and Grindling laughed too, relieved that the awkwardness seemed to have passed.

'So I'll have to do the washing up, is that it?' Charis asked playfully.

Grindling nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

'Good job I know a good Scourgification spell then!'

The pair laughed again, and Charis could not help but notice that Grindling looked lovely when he laughed. The lines around his eyes were just too cute.

But then her attention was caught by a wonderful sight from the window: the sun was glowing deep red now, a huge scarlet orb just hovering over the loch.

'Ooh, look at the sun,' she breathed.

'It's beautiful,' Grindling agreed. 'Would you like to go outside to see?'

'If that's okay with you?'

'Dessert can wait.'

And with that, he took Charis on his arm and they left the restaurant and strolled slowly around the loch together. The trees and mountains were silhouetted by the fiery sky, the crimson sun turning the loch into molten lava.

'Charis,' Grindling started after a while. 'I... I hope... I mean...' He stopped, sighing. 'Oh, let me be frank: you did not just agree to accompany me because I am your boss, right?'

Charis looked up at him, surprised by his question. He always seemed so self-assured. 'You did not ask me out as your employee, did you?' she replied, hoping she had not misread the intent of the evening.

'No! Merlin, NO!' he answered urgently. 'I... I like you. As I said, I think you are a lovely young witch.' He blushed slightly at this.

'I... like you too.' Now it was Charis' turn to blush.

Grindling smiled and tenderly brushed her cheek with the back of his hand, and Charis felt a lot of things all at once: she enjoyed his touch, yet part of her was afraid. She'd been hurt before, and so part of her was holding back, even though it would have been the most natural thing in the world to lean into his hand.

'It's lovely watching the stars coming out,' she said instead, taking a small step away from him and staring at the deepening sky. 'Venus is always first at this time of year.'

Grindling nodded, hiding his disappointment quickly as his hand fell to his side, and he looked up, following her gaze. The stars were a lovely sight, but he would have preferred to see them reflected in Charis' green eyes.

'Oh, look! Shooting stars!' Charis said excitedly. 'Make a wish!'

Grindling squeezed his eyes shut and seemed to concentrate very hard before opening them again. 'Look,' he said with a smile. 'It worked.'

Charis looked at him, a puzzled smile on her face.

'I wished for a lovely witch to smile at me tonight,' Grindling clarified. 'And here you are.'

Charis could not help but blush yet again, but her smile lingered on her lips. 'You're so sweet.'

'Good thing I am sweet, because there will be cheese for dessert.'

Charis laughed again. 'I wonder if it will give me strange dreams.'

Her stomach clenched as she thought back to a particular dream she'd had only a few weeks ago. That had felt so real, and Severus' touch had awakened the passion in her so easily and had melted any pretence she'd had of forgetting him. Guilt began to nag at her, as she realised she should not be dwelling on her former teacher when on a date with someone else.

'Do you often have strange dreams?' Grindling asked, shaking her from her reverie.

'From time to time,' Charis admitted. 'I've been told I talk in my sleep sometimes too!'

Grindling looked at her carefully. 'You should meet a Seer. You might have the Gift.'

'Well, I always enjoyed Divination,' Charis explained.

'I can arrange for you to meet with a Seer,' Grindling offered. 'If you'd like to, that is.'

'That would be very interesting. Thank you!' Charis beamed at him.

'It's no big deal,' he replied. He paused, and then continued, 'You like stars a lot, don't you? I noticed your necklace. You wear it every day.'

Charis felt a warmth at his attentiveness. 'Yes, I do love Astronomy. It's such a treat to enter the Space Chamber at work! But there is something about the shape of the five pointed star that I find aesthetically pleasing.'

'Magic of old,' he mumbled in response, taking her by the hand and leading her slowly back to the restaurant.

After they had returned, they found that a second bottle of wine had already been uncorked and was breathing, waiting for them on the table. It was the darkest of red, almost purple. Its aroma was spicy, and there were hints of raisins, rosemary and dark chocolate. The cheese platter looked delicious, with all different types of cheeses and crackers, as well as chutneys, pickles and fruit.

Charis took a sip of the wine, before exclaiming, 'Wow!'

'Can you taste the prunes and the nutmeg?' Grindling asked eagerly.

Charis nodded. 'It's very deep... there's cherry in there, too?'

'It's one of my favourites,' Grindling said, clearly thrilled at Charis' response. 'I hope to drown in a barrel of it one day.'

'Make room for me!' Charis smiled, holding her glass aloft.

The rest of the meal passed in cosy chattering, Charis all but forgetting her nerves. And once they had finished, Grindling discreetly paid the bill whilst Charis powdered her nose.

'May I escort the lady to her door?' he asked, offering his arm to Charis for Side-Along Apparition.

'That would be very kind of you,' she replied and took hold of his arm. And he pulled her close to her chest, wrapping his other arm around her as to hold her tight.

Charis could not help but sink into his chest and wrap her arms around him, too. He smelled glorious; she wasn't sure what was in his aftershave, but it was undeniably manly and delicious.

As they Apparated in front of her door, neither one of them was in a hurry to let go of the other. Charis gave Grindling a little squeeze and in return, he gingerly stroked her hair.

'I had a very good time tonight, Charis. Thank you,' he said, at last releasing her and taking a reluctant half-step backwards.

'No, thank you! You went to all that effort, just for me. It was wonderful.'

'It was no effort, it was a pleasure.'

Charis looked at his eyes and his mouth, unsure of what to do or say. 'Thank you for seeing me home safely,' she said eventually.

Grindling gave an uncertain nod and inhaled several times as if he were about to say something. Finally, he leaned forward and placed the softest of kisses on Charis' cheek.

'I... I'll see you on Monday.'

Charis reached her hand to her cheek, stunned by the tenderness of the gesture and merely nodded in response as Grindling turned on his heel and Disapparated, wishing that the evening had not yet ended and that Monday would come around quickly.

XIX: Of Men and Snakes

Chapter 19 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XIX: Of Men and Snakes

'Odgens.'

Rosmerta quickly picked up a glass and uncorked the bottle of Firewhisky without batting an eyelid; she was used to Snape's curt manner and did not take offence to it.

'You better fill that to the brim.' He sneered, watching her pour the amber liquid.

'Severus! On a Sunday evening?' Rosmerta admonished jokingly. 'You have classes to teach in the morning.'

Snape raised his eyebrow at the landlady of the Three Broomsticks. 'You have never taught teenagers, have you?'

Rosmerta laughed and filled the tumbler right up to the brim, just as Snape had asked her to do. 'Is it that bad that you need a drink to be able to face the second week of term?'

'You have no idea.'

Snape took a first gulp and closed his eyes for a moment as the burning sensation of the liquid trickled down his throat, filling his chest with warmth. He had been longing for a drink all week, and he deserved it, by Merlin! This must have been the most horrid first week of term in his teaching career.

Potter had been the first to make his bile rise. The teachers of Hogwarts, together with a whole host of Aurors, had placed uncountable protective charms around the castle to ensure the safety of the Chosen One, and what did Harry bloody Potter do? He decided to hang back a little on the Hogwarts Express and come sauntering up to the castle an hour late, together with that clumsy klutz Tonks. At least, that had given Snape the opportunity to deduct points from Gryffindor, but that had been a small victory and had obviously made no difference to the boy. Otherwise, he would surely not have been so insolent during Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Ah, DADA. Snape gave an inaudible sigh. Not in his wildest dreams could he have imagined that those dunderheads were even worse at Defence than they were at Potions. Then again, he reasoned, what more could be expected seeing the parade of incompetent fools that had taught them over the last years? Oh well, at least said dunderheads were not fingering his precious potions ingredients anymore. And jinxing someone during DADA seemed to be more, ah, *acceptable* than poisoning someone during Potions.

Snape watched Rosmerta top up his glass and then looked around the empty pub.

'I'll be over there,' he said, pointing out a booth in the darkest corner. 'I expect a refill in about fifteen minutes. Otherwise, pretend that I am not here.'

Rosmerta nodded, realising that Snape was neither in the mood for company nor small talk, but when he turned from the bar, her curiosity got the better of her.

'Severus, don't get me wrong, now. I love having you, and Merlin knows business has been slow today. But if you don't want to talk, then why did you come here? Why not have a wee dram in the privacy of your quarters?'

Snape snorted. 'Privacy? Dear Rosmerta, you seem to forget that the Headmaster is a curious old man. If I retire right after dinner instead of joining the ever-so-delightful Sunday tea in the staff room, he will come looking for me.'

Rosmerta smiled sympathetically. 'In case I get any more customers tonight, which I severely doubt, I will make sure they don't bother you. Refill in fifteen, then.'

Snape gave a curt nod, and Rosmerta watched him slink into his booth and disappear into the shadows, and her heart went out to him *Poor man*, she thought. He should be taken care of by a lovely witch on a Sunday evening, a witch who would cook for him, hold him and make love to him by the fireplace. Instead, he fled to a pub and hid in a corner. It was a shame, a true shame.

The minutes went by, and Rosmerta was just about to approach the dark booth, despite it not being time for the refill yet, when the front door opened and two young witches entered, one blonde, one red-haired.

'Now this is a surprise!' Rosmerta exclaimed, approaching the two new arrivals. 'Welcome back, lovelies. Welcome back!'

From the corner of her eye, she saw Snape sink even deeper into the shadows and quickly ushered the two girls towards a table by the window, as far away from Snape's booth as possible.

'What brings you two back to Hogsmeade?' she said cheerily, taking her place back behind the bar in order to serve drinks.

'We're here to meet Tonks,' Morgana explained. 'But I see she isn't here yet.'

'Can I get you both a drink while you're waiting?'

Morgana settled for pumpkin juice whilst Charis bravely ordered a glass of red. She felt confident to order the drink after the wonderful meal with Grindling last night. Then she looked around, noting that not much had altered since her last visit.

'I've missed this place. It feels weird being here and being able to order something alcoholic for a change.'

'Like you didn't manage to get some booze here already in your sixth year,' Morgana grinned as they took their places by the window.

'Shhh! Rosmerta will hear!' Charis answered playfully.

'What? Think she's going to have you arrested for underage drinking in retrospect?' her friend asked with her eyebrow sardonically raised. 'Talking of alcohol: how did your wine tasting go with Grindling?'

'Well, it became more of a meal...' Charis began, taking a deep breath. She'd been dying to tell Morgana all day. 'Have you heard of The Auld Stoney restaurant,

overlooking Loch Lomond?"

'He took you *there*?' Morgana asked in astonishment. The place was very expensive, from what she'd heard, and the waiting list was weeks long.

In his booth, Snape tightened the grip around his glass. The girls might not be able to see him, but he could hear them very well. And what he was hearing now made him sneer. *Losing your touch, are you, Grindling?* he thought bitterly. *Do you now have to bribe witches with lovely views and expensive wine to get under their skirts?*

By the window, Charis nodded bashfully, and Morgana's eyes widened.

'Merlin's balls!'

'I did feel like a fish out of water,' Charis confided. 'I don't mean to sound ungrateful... The food was amazing, and as for the wine...' She sighed. 'I don't know how much the Ministry is paying him, but no expense was spared. But I didn't feel comfortable. I felt a bit like a pauper amongst aristocrats.'

'That's what the Gibbons are, right? "Aristocrats". They have gold to spend,' answered Morgana matter-of-factly.

'It appears so.' Charis bit her lip anxiously.

'Does that bother you?' Morgana asked curiously. She herself had very much enjoyed the taste of indulgence that her affair with Lucius Malfoy afforded her, and she found it difficult to see how any woman could be anything less than thrilled at being spoiled rotten by a handsome, wealthy man.

'I don't know...' Charis paused, and it seemed as if what she would say next took great effort. 'I don't feel like I'm worthy of his attention... I'm Muggle-born and from a council estate. I was brought up on Findus Crispy Pancakes.'

'Don't know what they are, but they sound nasty,' Morgana wrinkled her pretty little nose. 'But hey, at least you know he's sincere and not dating you for your money.'

'I'm not dating him for his money either!' Charis answered hotly. She may have been brought up in a poor household, but she was not a gold-digger.

'Never said you were,' Morgana replied, holding up her hands in a truce gesture. 'By the way, are you officially dating?'

Charis looked confused. 'I... I don't know.'

'The Auld Stoney...' Morgana leant back in her chair with a smirk. 'I'd say you are. You don't really bring co-workers there.'

'It was... intimate,' Charis admitted.

At the word intimate, Snape almost choked at his Firewhisky. What had those two done at The Auld Stoney? Fornicated on the table?

'How intimate?' Morgana asked, obviously interested in the details, and Charis blushed.

'Well, we were surrounded by couples. The restaurant overlooks the loch, and...'

'And...?'

'It was nice.' Charis blushed even more and looked down.

'Nice? You went to one of the fanciest restaurants in Scotland, and it was just nice?' Morgana scoffed in disbelief.

Snape, however, triumphed. Nice? Ha! So Grindling had not had any success with his seduction tactics. Of course, Charis would not settle for a little twit like Grindling. She knew real men who didn't have to resort to bribes in order to get what they wanted.

'It was lovely, alright?' Charis defended herself. 'But Grindling is so much older than me... We come from very different backgrounds...'

'But you like each other, don't you?' Morgana asked, once more sounding as if her question was the most simple in the world.

And Charis once more nodded in the affirmative.

'Just like, or like-like?' Morgana pressed.

'I'd be lying if I said I wasn't attracted to him,' Charis confessed. 'He was such a gentleman, Morgana.'

Morgana couldn't help but sneer at the word "gentleman". *Been there, done one of those*, she thought bitterly.

'Don't let yourself be dazzled by nice behaviour, Charis,' she said instead, suddenly feeling somewhat protective of her friend. Despite her not having found out anything negative about Grindling Gibbons, she did not trust him entirely. And she did not want Charis to get hurt the way she had been hurt. After all, until two months ago, the Ministry files hadn't said anything about Lucius Malfoy being a Death Eater either. Grindling could have skeletons hidden in a closet no one knew about.

'He didn't even try it on with me at the end of the night,' Charis pointed out. 'We hugged, and he gave me a kiss on the cheek. And then he went home.'

Ha! Snape sneered. He'd always known that Grindling was a bit of a nancy-boy. At Hogwarts, he had taken better care of his long blond hair than even Lucius, and he had spent about as much time in front of a mirror as Gilderoy Lockhart. Most probably, they had spent a lot of time there together.

'A kiss on the cheek?' Morgana asked incredulously. 'That's it? After he had paid for a dinner most people have to work about a month for?'

'It was like he was showing me that he wasn't paying for dinner just to get into my knickers,' Charis insisted. She would have been lying if she'd said that she hadn't thought about the same thing as her friend. But she was so glad Grindling hadn't tried anything. After all, she was used to men who just took whatever they wanted. Zabini had used her, and so had Snape.

Morgana's lips twitched into a mischievous grin. 'He missed out on a pair of lovely knickers,' she pointed out.

Charis could not help but giggle in response.

'Would you have wanted him to?' Morgana asked. 'Get into them, I mean?'

Charis swirled the wine in her glass around, looking into its burgundy depths. 'I am attracted to him. But I am glad he didn't rush it. I'm not sure if I'm ready for that. He is so much older than me, after all.'

You were ready in your dream, alright Snape thought sourly. *You moaned for him. Don't you remember?*

'So, if he'd made any advances... would you have turned him down?' Morgana wanted to know.

'I honestly don't know,' Charis answered truthfully. 'Merlin knows I'm amorous at the moment, but emotionally... I don't know if it would have been too soon... I work with

him, Morgana. It's not like I can avoid him should anything go wrong...'

Morgana opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the door opened and Tonks entered the pub. Her hair was mousey grey, and she looked like she had been having a tough time of it.

'Wotcher, girls,' she said in a subdued voice, as she dropped down on an empty chair beside Charis.

'Hey, Tonks,' Charis replied. 'Are you okay? You look exhausted,' she added with concern.

'Hell of a week that was,' Tonks replied, shaking her head. 'Glad to see some friendly faces. Not that you two look too cheery.'

'We're discussing relationships,' Morgana explained, hoping Tonks did not want to join in. It was one thing to discuss this topic with her best friend. They'd know each other for years. Tonks, however, was practically a stranger.

Tonks pulled a face at the word relationships. 'Don't get me started.'

'What's happened?' Charis asked.

'Nothing's happened, that's the problem,' Tonks replied. 'Remus and I were supposed to go out for dinner yesterday, and he... didn't show.' The young Auror bit her lip and swallowed. She was clearly still upset about it.

'He stood you up?' Morgana clarified in disbelief as Charis looked shocked.

'That's not like Remus.' He was a nice guy, in her opinion. Caring and rather sweet. Surely, if he had not shown up, he must have had his reasons.

'He sent an owl,' Tonks admitted, 'But... His excuse was just ridiculous! He said he's too old for me. Too dangerous. Bugger, I don't care.'

The last of Tonks' self-control evaporated as her lip wobbled in grief.

'Oh, Tonks.' Charis put a comforting hand on the Metamorphmagus, who was battling to contain her emotions.

'I mean, he takes his potion regularly,' Tonks continued. 'He isn't more dangerous than I am. And I don't care about his age!'

'Looks like age is the theme of the day,' Morgana muttered, thinking of Charis repeatedly commenting on Grindling's age.

'I am sure he didn't mean to hurt you,' said Charis kindly, giving Tonks's hand a squeeze.

'It's just not what I needed after this week, that's all,' Tonks replied, sniffing slightly. 'I was really looking forward to going out with a nice guy after bumping into that... dungeon bat every other day.' Tonks said the word bat like it was coated in something deeply unpleasant.

Charis frowned. 'You mean, Snape?'

'Yes, I mean Snape. He was ever-so-charming once again,' Tonks replied sarcastically.

Charis and Morgana exchanged a surprised look.

'What did he do?' Morgana asked curiously. She was well aware that her former Head of House was never going to win any "Most Lovable Teacher of the Year" award, but after he'd stood up for her against Moody and Tonks had pointed out how much she had appreciated the gesture, Morgana found it hard to believe that Snape had been nasty to Tonks.

'He's been making snide comments about my new Patronus,' Tonks explained. 'Like I could help it what shape it takes,' she added defensively. *I think you were better off with your old one. The new one looks weak*, she continued in a clear imitation of Snape's voice, before sighing. 'You should have heard the malice in his voice. It's like he's happy my Patronus is weak.'

'I'm sure he didn't mean it like that,' Morgana started, remembering that although Snape had asked about her own Patronus, he hadn't commented it.

'Just because he defended you,' Tonks replied sourly.

'I don't think he's happy about your Patronus being weak,' Charis said quietly whilst Tonks snorted in response.

Snape glared at Tonks from the shadows. He hadn't meant to snap at her on the first evening of term. He had been annoyed with Potter, not her. But her Patronus was weak. And in these days and the days to come, it was important for Tonks to have a strong Patronus. One day, it could make the difference between surviving and perishing.

'Snape knows how important it is for you to cast a proper Patronus,' Charis continued. 'But your Patronus is a werewolf and, well, I think Snape isn't happy you and Remus have a thing going on...'

'What does he have to do with that?' Tonks spluttered.

'Well, nothing, I guess. I'm... sure he didn't mean it personally, that's all.' Charis knew Snape hated Remus, although she had no idea why. It seemed therefore logical to her that Snape would be disapproving of Tonks' budding relationship with Remus. And she also knew from her own experience how cruel Snape could be, but she'd realised that his abrasive manner usually disguised a softer emotion. Maybe he cared for Tonks?

'Just because he isn't getting laid,' Tonks muttered darkly.

'Getting laid is overrated,' Morgana sniffed, before taking a deep swig of her pumpkin juice.

Charis raised her eyebrow. This did not sound like the Morgana Belakane she knew.

'I most certainly don't think so!' said Tonks, looking to the blonde Ravenclaw who nodded in agreement.

'Well, I do! So are men,' countered Morgana matter-of-factly. 'I mean, look at you two... Wouldn't life be easier without men? Without... love?' She looked slightly disgusted at the very thought.

'Maybe. But it wouldn't be half as exciting,' Charis pointed out.

'I could do without that excitement,' Morgana answered flatly.

'Aren't any Slytherins getting any at the moment?' Tonks whispered to Charis, but loud enough for Morgana to hear. 'They seem all rather grumpy.'

'Maybe we Slytherins don't need to get any,' Morgana shot back, feeling irritation prickle. 'We do pretty well without.'

'Sex or love?' Tonks demanded, eyes narrowed.

'Well, both,' Morgana snapped.

'That's not true!' Charis burst out.

Both Tonks and Morgana looked at Charis in surprise. Since when had the blonde witch become an expert in Slytherin behaviour?

'I... I mean, Slytherins have needs just like anyone else,' Charis clarified. 'Just because someone is in Slytherin doesn't mean they are a heartless beast without any sex organs.' She blushed. She knew full well just how potent Slytherin sex organs could be. And she very much wanted to believe that there were caring hearts beating inside Slytherin chests. She knew Morgana cared and hoped Snape did, too.

'Just because one has sex organs doesn't mean one has to use them,' replied Morgana dismissively. 'As for the heart, that should be locked up so no one can tear it into pieces.'

Tonks looked a little shocked at this confession. Whatever could have happened to the rookie Auror to make her feel like that? The girl was eighteen and good looking. She should be fighting off young men with her wand. But now that she thought of it, Tonks couldn't think of a single occasion when Morgana had said anything positive about the opposite sex. She had never mentioned men at all.

'You can't open yourself to love unless you open yourself up to being hurt,' Charis reasoned. 'That's the price of it.'

'Well, it isn't worth it, is it?' Morgana sneered.

'Of course it's worth it!' Charis replied. 'To be touched by love is the greatest thing in life of all.'

Morgana snorted cynically at her friend's soppy words. 'That would be why you both look so cheerful tonight then.'

Tonks sighed. 'Let's change the subject, shall we? This is far too depressing. If we carry on like this we'll all go and jump in the Black Lake at this rate.'

Charis and Morgana managed to raise a smile at this.

'So, how's Moody been with you, Morgana?' Tonks asked, grabbing hold of the first best topic that had come to mind. 'Since... you know, the incident.'

'Alright,' Morgana shrugged. 'He seems to have turned softer, if you know what I mean. Doesn't cast Scorching Hexes anymore.'

'I should hope not!' Charis interjected, shocked.

'He's always hard at the start,' Tonks explained. 'Needs to sort out the wheat from the chaff, to see who's tough enough. Looks like you made it okay, Morgana.' She smiled.

Morgana smiled back rather weakly. 'Not sure about that. I have been called in for a second psych evaluation.'

'Good. That means he's taking your health seriously,' Tonks said approvingly.

'Or, they think I'm losing it.' Morgana rolled her eyes like a mental patient, and the other girls laughed.

'If you ask me, I think Moody could do with his own psych evaluation,' Charis joked.

'Constant vigilance!' Tonks barked in a canny impression of Moody. 'Have you checked that wine, Charis? Might be poisoned!'

All three girls laughed again, clearly relieved the mood had lightened. Even Tonks seemed to have been shaken out of her gloomy mood.

'Hey, I know it's a school night and stuff, but I feel like going somewhere a little bit more lively. You chicks up for that?' she asked, looking around the table at the girls.

'Know anywhere?' Charis asked, surprised but pleased at Tonks' mood swing.

'There's a great bar called The Shaking Warlock in London. There might be a hottie or two there,' she added with a wink.

'Sure, why not?' Charis grinned. It sounded like fun.

Morgana, however, did not look convinced.

'Come on, Morgana,' Tonks pleaded. 'We girls need to let our hair down. If I stay here any longer, I might just drown in my Butterbeer. No offence, ladies.'

Morgana raised a sardonic eyebrow. 'Fine. Just don't make me dance.'

'I won't.' She winked conspiratorially at Charis.

And with that, the girls finished up their drinks, bade Rosmerta goodnight and left the pub, the whole time being watched from the shadows by Severus Snape.

He'd listened to them talking quite intensely over the last couple of minutes, and what he'd heard had both shaken and surprised him.

The biggest surprise, he had received from Charis. She had talked about love so passionately that one could have thought she'd only had the most positive of experiences, that she'd been carried on hands by her lover and bedded on roses. But Snape knew she had been used. He had used her and spent many sleepless nights over it. She had loved him, she had told him so. And despite him knowing that he would never be able to give her what she wanted from him, that he could never give her pure love, he had not pushed her away but instead taken pleasure in coaxing her. And when he finally had done the right thing, when he had finally told her to stay away from him, he had broken her heart. But now it seemed as if she once more believed in love, as if she had found love. And Snape felt almost guilty for having tried to drive Grindling from her mind. Charis deserved to be happy, she truly did. And Snape really tried to be happy for her, even if he felt immensely jealous and wished that she had chosen a different object of admiration.

Morgana, too, deserved to be happy, but unlike Charis, she seemed to have given up hope and decided that living without love was better than being hurt. And Snape could understand her. Having one's heart ripped into pieces, being turned down and rejected, hurt immensely. But he also knew how much it hurt to be alone, and he didn't wish Morgana such a fate.

'Sorry I'm late for the refill. But I thought you wouldn't want the girls to know that you were here.'

Rosmerta's voice ripped Snape out of his thoughts, and he looked up at her, slightly puzzled. He had almost forgotten about her being around.

'Lovely things, all three of them,' Rosmerta commented. 'Shame that their men don't seem to appreciate them. Well, apart from Charis, that is. She seems to have been treated to a lovely dinner last night.'

Snape sneered. 'Do you eavesdrop on all your customers?' he enquired.

'Only when they're talking about something interesting,' Rosmerta pointed out. 'Morgana was in your House, wasn't she?' she asked. 'I can't remember her ever coming

here with a boy. Charis did now and then. Think his name was Jack or Jake or something. And Tonks always had suitors. But Morgana... no, I think she never was here with a boy.'

'As you might have overheard,' Snape commented drily, 'Slytherins do not need love.'

'Now you and I both know that this is rubbish, Severus,' Rosmerta said vehemently, and once more she thought that Snape deserved to be loved. She'd love him, if he would let her. But he never would, she knew that very well.

'Refill then?' she asked, but Snape put his hand on his empty glass, shaking his head.

'I have changed my mind,' he declared and rose to leave. He would be needing a clear head later that night. Because whispering to Morgana would most probably prove much more difficult than whispering to Charis. She was stubborn, after all, and Slytherins had never been known for listening to advice.

* * *

'Come on, stop pouting and admit that it was fun!'

'I never said it wasn't.'

'You didn't dance. You didn't drink.'

'You know I do neither.'

'Well, I for one had a great time! Tonks is a hoot! And the moves she has!'

Charis started humming a song, closed her eyes and started dancing around her bedroom, and Morgana couldn't help but smile as she observed her friend in her little silver mirror.

'Go to bed now, Charis,' she said, sounding tired. 'Or you'll regret this night in the morning.'

Charis kept on dancing while she kicked off her shoes and scattered her clothes on the floor before lying down to sleep, and Snape was tempted to keep watching her, to wait until she was asleep and then once more invade her dreams as he had done about a month ago. He knew very well what kind of effect alcohol had on Charis, and if he whispered to her tonight, she would surely show Grindling the cold shoulder in the morning, no matter how expensive a dinner he had treated her to. She would remember her dream; she would remember him, a real man, not some nancy-boy.

But he could not stay with Charis, not tonight, not even if he wanted to. He had promised himself to take care of his other girl tonight. And that promise, Snape intended to keep.

The right half of the mirror turned black as he blocked Charis, and as he sat back in his chair to watch Morgana change into her nightgown, the feelings her naked body awakened inside him were anything but sexual. Instead, his heart ached with pity for the young woman. She'd once been full of confidence, proud and maybe a little bit too cocky for her own good. But now all of this seemed to have vanished, and Morgana was hiding behind downcast eyes, a scowl and an armour of dark, shapeless clothes. Gone was the cheeky witch he had once known, the witch who'd thought she could take on Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape at the same time.

He watched her in silence as she lay down and was delighted when the movements of her hands suggested that Charis' amorous feelings might have rubbed off on Morgana. He saw hands wander and disappear under the folds of her nightgown, her eyes flutter shut and her lips part in a silent moan. But Snape's hopes were shattered moments later as Morgana pulled the blanket over her and her hands came to rest on top of it, balled into tight fists.

'Why do you deny yourself even this?' Snape whispered, so quietly that if Morgana had heard him, she'd think it had been the curtains rustling in the night wind. Did she not realise that she deserved that she needed every kind of affection she could come across, no matter who it came from? If she was unable to accept even her own caresses, how could she ever allow someone else to touch her?

It took quite some time for Morgana to fall asleep, and Snape watched her silently, waiting for her the drift off into the land of dreams, into a state of mind when he could talk to her without her knowing that it was him, without her having to be ashamed that he had found her greatest weakness.

Once her fists relaxed and her breathing was slow and regular, he took his chance.

'Hiding away from the world will not do you any good, Morgana,' he whispered, carefully monitoring her reactions. If there were the slightest sign of her waking up, he would retreat. But she seemed to be sound asleep, and Snape could only hope that she could hear him.

'You might succeed in convincing people that you are tough, that you are in control of your emotions, or even that you do not have any emotions at all. But you will never be able to fool yourself. You will always know your heart.'

He inhaled deeply. He knew only too well what he was talking about. Ever since he had been hurt, he had not let anyone come close. And as a result, he was one of the loneliest people in the world, unable to love and let anyone come close.

'You are young, Morgana. Your whole life lies ahead of you, and the world at your feet. Do not give up. Do not lose hope.'

She turned, and for a split second, Snape thought Morgana would open her eyes. And even though he knew that it was essential for him to retreat, he couldn't. There was one more thing he had to say, the most important of them all.

'Don't give up on love, Morgana,' he whispered. 'You might think that it is not worth the pain because your wounds are still bleeding. But they will heal if you let them. And once they have healed, you will realise that a life without love is no life at all. Embrace love now, Morgana, before it is too late, before you forget how to.'

Then he retreated into the shadows, and had Morgana awoken, she would not have seen him, even if she had looked directly into her mirror. But she did not wake up, and after watching her sleep for some more minutes, Snape put his mirror down, hoping that she would sleep peacefully and that she would remember his words in the morning.

XX: All the Fun of the Fair

Chapter 20 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new

kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XX: All the Fun of the Fair

It was a sunny, late September day. The month had started foggy and gloomy, and the sunlight was now very much appreciated, especially after the dreadful, rainy summer.

Charis, feeling indebted to Grindling for the wonderful date they'd shared at the restaurant, had insisted on paying for their next date, and after having tried to come up with a zillion reasons why a lady should not be paying for anything, Grindling had replied that he would allow her to take him for fish and chips. And so Charis had told him to dress Muggle-style and taken him to a seaside town, where they had spent the morning walking idly across the beach and taking in the sea air. They talked and joked, and Charis could not help but admire the wizard beside her, who was looking rather sexy, if somewhat uncomfortable, in tight jeans and an impeccable black shirt. He had not tied back his hair today, and every time a strand blew into his face, Charis had to fight the urge to tuck it behind his ear and then kiss his cheek.

'It's lovely here,' Grindling pointed out for the umpteenth time in the early afternoon. 'It's been years since I just strolled along the beach.'

Charis smiled happily, delighted that Grindling was enjoying himself. Yet he had no idea that she was saving the pièce de résistance until last: The Grand Pier. It was out to sea, full of flashing lights and bleeping noises from the arcades, and Grindling looked rather wide-eyed at it all; being a pureblood, he'd never experienced these kinds of Muggle leisure pursuits.

'Noisy bunch, those Muggles,' he said jokingly and craned his neck to get a better look around. 'What is all that racket?'

'It's the games machines in the arcade. There are all kinds of machines in there,' Charis explained.

'Machines?' Grindling looked confused.

'Some, you can win money from. Some, you play games on. And some test your skill or strength.'

Grindling looked delighted at this, like a boy under the Christmas tree.

'Come on,' Charis said. 'Let's have a look!' And with that, she dragged him inside by the hand. She couldn't help but notice that his hand felt big in hers, warm and strong.

Grindling abruptly stopped at a machine with lots of stuffed toys in.

'I assume one is supposed to get one of those out?'

Charis nodded. 'That's right. By moving the mechanical arm. Look.' She put some money into the machine, and it whirred into life with lights and a little tune.

Grindling stood closely behind her, looking over her shoulder. 'Wingardium Leviosa would do the trick as well,' he whispered.

'Forgotten the Statute of Secrecy already, have you?' Charis joked as she manoeuvred the mechanical arm into position. She managed to grab hold of one toy, only for it to slip out of the claw as it moved back to the opening.

'Balls!' she exclaimed with frustration. 'Would you like a go?'

'Sure. Which one do you want?'

'The bunny is quite cute,' Charis admitted.

'The light blue one?'

'Yeah, that's the one.' Charis hastily put some coins in the machine.

'You know, you do not have to pay for me,' Grindling said cautiously.

'It's my turn,' Charis replied firmly. 'And anyway, they don't take Galleons here.' She smiled.

Grindling smiled back and turned to the machine. His face was screwed up in concentration.

'Bunny. Light blue bunny. Come to papa, now,' he muttered.

Charis could not help but giggle, which caused Grindling to lose concentration, and the bunny fell back down. Grindling's shoulders slumped dejectedly.

'I'm sorry. Did I put you off?' Charis asked innocently.

Grindling shrugged, but Charis was already distracted by another machine. 'Ooh, Whac-A-Mole! I love that!'

She ran over, Grindling following in her wake.

'Whac-A-Mole?' he asked, looking puzzled.

'Here.' Charis handed him a club. 'When I put the coins in, the aim is to hit as many moles as possible. Ready?'

Grindling looked at the club as if it were a two-headed snake. 'O...kay?' he answered unsurely.

Charis inserted the coins.

'Go!'

They embarked on a frenzied attack, giggling at the absurdity as they whacked frantically, and Grindling had either very bad reflexes or was distracted by Charis' bouncing breasts, as he didn't manage to hit too many moles. After a minute, the machine made a fanfare noise, announcing Charis as the winner.

'Yay! I am the mole slayer!'

Grindling mock-pouted at the defeat.

'Naww, come on,' Charis said, linking her arm in his. 'I'm sure you'll beat me at something.'

'I am not aiming to beat you in anything,' he pointed out. 'But this game was too violent for my taste, I must admit.'

Charis leaned in and whispered, 'They aren't real moles.'

Grindling smirked and whispered back, 'I know that.'

Charis giggled, and as they looked into each other's eyes, an unspoken warmth passed between them, awakening butterflies in their stomachs.

'Would you excuse me for a moment?' Grindling said eventually, reluctantly pulling his gaze from Charis. 'Little wizards' room.'

Charis smiled. 'Of course. I'll just be over there, playing on Pac-Man.'

'Pac-Man. Okay. Right.' Grindling looked confused. 'I'll just be... yeah...' And with that incoherent sentence hanging in the air, he wandered off, looking around him at all the machines in awe.

Charis happily played on Pac-Man, getting as far the peach level before Grindling returned, but she was so absorbed in the game that she didn't notice him come back. She jumped as she suddenly felt something fluffy brush her cheek. It was a little light blue bunny.

'Can I come home with you?' Grindling asked in bunny voice.

Charis looked up, abandoning her game. 'Aww! You got it! Thank you.'

She gave him a hug of gratitude, and Grindling closed his arms around her, holding her far too tight than was necessary for a "You're welcome" hug. It felt nice, however, and Charis didn't want to let go, either.

'I'll have to think of a name for him,' she murmured, feeling almost a bit forlorn as they broke apart. 'How about Mr Gibbs?'

Grindling grinned. 'That's cute.' He kept his left arm around her shoulder as he looked around the arcade. 'What now?'

'There is a fairground outside,' Charis replied. 'Can we go on the dodgems?'

'I'm scared to say yes.' He laughed nervously.

'They're fun, I promise!' Charis tried to reassure him. 'They are little cars... automobiles. They have pedals on the floor: one to go forward, one to go back. And a steering wheel,' she explained. 'You drive around and try and dodge people, or if you are mean, bang into them.'

'Bang into them?' Grindling looked horrified. 'Muggles *are* violent.'

But Charis swatted his arm lightly. 'It's fun, you'll see!'

'I'm scared,' he confessed. And he wasn't even joking.

Charis ignored him, pulling him on to the ride. 'What colour car are you having? I'm going for purple!'

Grindling looked terrified. 'Um, yellow?' he suggested, truly feeling like a Hufflepuff.

'Come on, then!'

They each climbed into their respective cars, and loud music began to play as they started driving around.

Grindling was the worst driver ever, too much of a gentleman to bang into people he didn't know. Charis, however, knew the ride well and sneaked around and bumped into him. To Grindling's surprise and delight, it didn't hurt, and he laughed.

'Catch me if you can!' Charis called, and she drove off with a laugh.

Grindling set off in hot pursuit, eventually cornering her and bumping into her.

'Gotcha!' he yelled triumphantly. 'Revenge!'

'I knew you'd enjoy that,' Charis told him as they climbed out and made their way down from the ride.

'I thought I would be worse. But actually, I don't mind bumping into you.' He bumped into her lightly with his shoulder.

'Is that euphemism?' Charis replied, looking up at him through her eyelashes.

'Would you like it to be one?' Grindling asked in response, looking steadily at her.

Charis felt her knees go weak. 'It depends on what part of you wants to bump me...,' she answered in a low voice.

Grindling blushed at the insinuation.

'Are you hungry?' Charis asked quickly, wary of making him uncomfortable. The last thing she wanted was for him to find her uncouth.

Grindling nodded, clearly glad of the change of subject.

'Me too. Come on, then. They do the best fish and chips here. You have to have them overlooking the sea, with the fresh sea air around, though. I don't know why, but they always taste nicer by the sea.'

She took Grindling by the hand, and he trotted after her, looking for all the world like a lovesick puppy.

Charis bought them both a huge portion of fish and chips to share from a nearby stall, and they sat overlooking the sea, munching away.

'Do you like them?' she asked cautiously. It certainly wasn't haute cuisine, but it was one of Charis' favourite meals.

'They're lovely!' Grindling replied, making a humming noise as he sank his teeth into the fish.

Charis grinned with delight. 'They always taste better out of the paper too.'

'I think this is the best thing I have ever eaten,' Grindling pointed out, licking his fingers. 'I think, however, that this might be due to the company.'

He smiled endearingly at her, and now it was Charis' turn to blush. Grindling was such a sweetheart. He was charming, courteous and funny, good looking and the perfect gentleman. And he was going out with her! It was almost too good to be true.

Trying to hide her red cheeks, Charis busied herself by feeding chips to the sparrows and seagulls that had gathered not far away from their bench. And Grindling was glad that Charis was looking away for the moment. What he was about to do demanded a lot of courage from his side, courage which he needed to gather first. Charis was so sweet, so adorable, and she had captured his heart in a way no one else had for many years. He didn't want to make a mistake now.

As she looked back at him, her cheeks still slightly pink and a broad smile on her lips, Grindling put his food down on the bench behind him and opened his mouth to speak. But words failed him.

'What is it?' Charis asked as he had opened his mouth for the third time.

'I...' He cleared his throat. 'I would like to...'

He broke off once again. His hands were sweaty, and he could feel them tremble.

'Charis, may I kiss you?' he finally managed to ask, speaking so quickly that he feared she might not have heard what he'd said.

Charis' eyes widened in surprise. Had Grindling just asked for her permission to kiss her? She was rather used to men who just took whatever they desired.

'O-of course,' she breathed.

Grindling's heart leapt with joy, and he quickly dried off his hand on his jeans before carefully cupping Charis' chin and leaning in.

It was the softest kiss Charis had ever received, and it was over in a heartbeat. But when Grindling pulled back, looking deep into her eyes, Charis felt as dizzy as if they had shared a long, passionate French kiss.

'You taste of chips,' Grindling whispered and smiled. 'The best chips I have ever eaten.'

He leaned in once more, still cupping Charis' chin, and this time, he was a little bit braver, pressing his lips firmly against hers. And as he felt her returning his kiss, he grew bolder, sneaked a hand around her waist and pulled her closer. Oh, it felt wonderful to hold her in his arms.

Charis, too, enjoyed the sensation. Grindling's kiss was so different from any other kiss she had experienced so far: not as slobbering as Zabini's, not as demanding as Snape's. And she relished it immensely.

Resting her hands on his chest, only now noticing the expensive feel of the fabric, Charis leaned into the kiss, letting her head fall slightly backwards to gain a better angle, and flickered her tongue across Grindling's soft lips, delighted to find them parting at her touch.

She moaned softly as their tongues entwined, and Grindling pulled her even closer, burying one of his hands in her hair. He didn't want to let go of her, and he found his body respond to the newfound closeness in the most positive way.

'Charis,' he managed to bring forth between kisses. 'How serious... do you take... the Statute of Secrecy?'

Charis froze, puzzled, not sure why Grindling would ask her such a question in the middle of a passionate snog.

But Grindling carried on, covering her lips with kisses, her cheek, her neck...

'If it were up to me,' he breathed, 'I'd respectfully screw the Statute and...' He detached his lips from her skin and looked deeply into her eyes, '...and Apparate with you to my flat right now.'

Charis gasped. 'I... I want you too, Grindling,' she confessed. His kisses had sent waves of pleasure through her body, and as he had pulled her close, she had been able to feel his arousal. She had, however, neither dared make a move nor hoped he would. He was such a gentleman, after all.

Encouraged by her positive reaction, Grindling once more pressed his lips onto Charis', pushing his tongue into her mouth and kissing her boldly. And as he pulled her into a standing position, his arousal became very obvious to them both. Muggle jeans were not as forgiving as wizard robes.

They staggered into the shadows behind the fish and chips shop, and Grindling pressed Charis up against the wall, kissing her and grinding himself against her, and Charis could barely resist the urge to reach out for him and cup his growing erection through his jeans. She would not have minded him taking her roughly right there against the wall, but she had the distinct feeling that her making any bold move would spoil the mood. Grindling didn't seem the type who would appreciate being groped in public or having an outdoor quickie behind a fish and chips shop.

'Are you sure you want to come to my place?' Grindling panted. His voice was quite hoarse, and he didn't know what he would do if Charis said no now. Have the wank of the century, no doubt. He was too aroused to be able to just ignore it. But to his utter relief, Charis nodded, and he grabbed her firmly around the waist and Apparated right into his bedroom.

Charis had a quick look around. The room was minimal but tasteful, with a deep, cream shagpile carpet and various objets d'art dotted around the place. And the bed they were now staggering towards was big and covered with crisp white linen sheets.

Grindling pushed her down softly, and Charis fell willingly, and as he straddled her legs, leaning forward to kiss her face and neck and caress her breasts through her clothes, Charis tugged at his shirt, tearing off a couple of buttons in the process. Momentarily, she felt a need to apologise for ruining his shirt, but when she laid eyes on his bare upper body, she couldn't care less about the shirt. His skin was smooth and pale, and his abs bore witness of a healthy diet and plenty of exercise. Charis traced his chest with her hands, let them run upwards over his shoulders and down onto his impressive biceps. But as she was about to slide off his shirt, Grindling shrugged her hands away and instead engaged her into a deep, passionate kiss, and Charis forgot all about undressing him. Instead, she became acutely aware of his very evident bulge. She ran her hands down over his chest again, over his stomach, but as she ran her fingers inside the waistband of his jeans, Grindling took hold of her wrist.

'Let's take this slow, sweet one. Please?'

Charis looked up at him, slightly confused. They were both ready. She sure was! And judging from the straining buttons at his crotch, Grindling was more than ready himself. Why wait? Why take it slow?

She didn't say anything, of course, but still, Grindling seemed to understand her silent question.

'It... has been a while since I made love to a woman,' he confessed, a blush creeping over his cheeks. 'I fear I am out of practice.'

Charis smiled sympathetically. It had been a while for her, too.

'I am sure it is like riding a broom,' she said and giggled, and as Grindling laughed, the tension seemed to lessen for some moments.

Once more, they kissed. Once more Grindling tenderly caressed her breasts through her top, and Charis tried hard not to moan too much, not to seem too eager. She didn't want to put any pressure on him, didn't want him to be uncomfortable, but she could not deny that she was longing for him to touch her properly. She wished he'd be a bit rougher, that he'd tug at her top and her trousers, that he'd pin her hands over her head and have his way with her. Oh, if she could only tell him...

She let her hands once more slide under his shirt, ran her nails down his back and then took a firm hold on his butt cheeks, pulling him closer and at the same time lifting up her hips to meet him. Oh, that was no tiny wand he had.

Then finally, Grindling made a move. He grabbed Charis firmly around the waist and made them roll around so Charis came to straddle him. And as he looked up at her, his blue eyes were glittering, and he looked as if he had never gazed upon anything more beautiful. Carefully, he sneaked his hands under her top and cupped her breasts, and Charis pulled off her top and bra, letting her full breasts spill into Grindling's hands.

He was gentle, fondled her breasts as if they were made out of glass, massaged them and caressed them. And every time he let his thumbs rub against her nipples, Chris moaned and ground herself against his crotch and licked her lips appreciatively.

'You're beautiful,' Grindling breathed, and when Charis slid backwards and once more teased the waistband of his jeans, he did not resist.

His cock sprung from the confinement of his jeans and pants, and as Charis wrapped her hand around his length, Grindling gave a low moan. This felt so good!

'Merlin,' he managed to articulate as she started stroking him gently, and he bucked his hips. But as Charis shifted and leant forwards, her lips only inches away from the large, sculpted head, Grindling stiffened.

'Charis,' he panted. 'This is not a good idea...'

But she ignored him, lowered her head and took him into her mouth.

Grindling groaned.

'... been... a while....,' he managed to croak, but his hand, which he had extended to pull Charis away, instead grabbed hold of her hair and guided her into the correct rhythm. Oh, this was bliss.

And Charis enjoyed it, too. She enjoyed the feel of Grindling's warm member in her mouth and the sounds he was making. And encouraged by his hand in her hair, she started to suck hard, all the while cupping his balls.

Then Grindling withdrew his hand.

'Charis... I'm... begging you.'

He didn't really know what he was begging for. Part of him wanted her to continue, wanted her to suck him until he spilled himself in her mouth. But another part feared that everything would end too quickly. He had meant to make love to her, not have her blow him like one of the tarts at Persephone's Palace.

But Charis didn't mind Grindling coming. In fact, she wanted him to. She had never made a man come. She and Zabini had been interrupted before Zabini had even been close, and Snape... Snape had held back for some inexplicable reason.

Fighting hard to banish every thought of other men, especially of Snape from her mind, Charis closed her lips tightly around the very tip of Grindling's cock and pumped his shaft deftly with her hand, and after a few moments, he came undone with a grunt and a shudder that went through his whole body, ejaculating deep into Charis' mouth.

She was shocked at the amount for a moment. Also, she had not been prepared for the taste. It tasted strangely bitter, yet sweet at the same time. And she bravely swallowed all of it down, hoping it would please Grindling.

'Merlin's balls!'

Grindling swore quite passionately, and Charis looked up at him, somewhat fearful. Had she done anything wrong? But then his hand was once more in her hair, and he took hold of her, gentling pulling her up towards him. He was smiling when he wrapped his arms around her.

'Was I okay?' Charis inquired bashfully.

'Okay?' Grindling sounded flabbergasted. 'Were you okay? Circe's tits, Charis! I'm seeing stars!'

Charis giggled nervously. 'I've never done that before,' she confessed.

Grindling gave a short laugh. 'You seem to have talent.'

Then he exhaled slowly and wrapped his arms tighter around Charis, who snuggled into his chest.

'This is not how I meant for this to happen,' Grindling pointed out. He sounded less than pleased. Not angry, far from it. If Charis would have to venture a guess, she would have opted for *sad*.

'I enjoyed it,' she quickly reassured him. She had! And the last thing she wanted was Grindling to think that he had used her in any way.

'So did I, Charis. By Merlin, I enjoyed this! But... I had meant to bed you on roses. I had meant to make love to you.'

Charis felt herself grow all warm and fuzzy inside. 'There is plenty of time for that,' she whispered and planted a row of soft kisses on his chest. As far as she was concerned, they had all the time in the world.

But Grindling shook his head. 'I am afraid I am too old for a second round.'

He sounded truly mortified, and Charis wrapped her arms tightly around his chest.

'It is okay,' she whispered. 'Really.'

Of course, if she were honest, she would admit that she was disappointed. She was still very much aroused herself and longing for release. But then again, Grindling had warned her, and she could have stopped her ministrations. But making him climax had felt so good! And for that alone she could live with not getting any herself that afternoon. But when Grindling's hand wandered down her back and came to squeeze her butt cheek, she changed her mind. And when he gently pushed her onto her back and lowered his head to her breasts, she sincerely prayed that he would be able to perform once more this afternoon.

He lay down beside her, his lips alternately exploring her breasts and the soft skin on the side of her neck, and when his hand wandered south, caressing the inside of her thighs through her jeans, Charis squirmed. It seemed almost cruel that Grindling wanted to be so caring and gentle while she was longing to be taken hard and roughly.

When he finally asked permission to unbutton her jeans, Charis nodded eagerly; she knew she must be scorching hot between her legs by now. In return, she moved her hand tentatively towards Grindling's mid-section. He, however, denied her access by positioning his upper leg strategically. It seemed that he wasn't ready yet.

'It's your turn now, sweet Charis,' he whispered into her ear, tantalisingly tracing the edge of her knickers with her fingertips.

Charis wriggled and sighed. Grindling was so sweet, so caring. But didn't he realise that she didn't need to be seduced, that she was ready and just waiting for him to make his move?

She moaned loudly as his fingers finally made contact with her hot flesh, and Grindling looked delightedly surprised. It almost seemed as if he had never touched a woman in such a fashion. But he was curious and sensitive, and after some delicate probing, he found the very special spot that made Charis squeal with delight as he touched it.

'Are you enjoying this?' he whispered and once more started nibbling at her ear, all the while applying pressure to her nub.

'Hm, yes.' Charis moaned. 'Harder.'

'What?'

Grindling sounded puzzled, and Charis quickly caught his mouth in a passionate kiss in order to distract him. She did not want him to think that she was a wanton trollop. But his tender ministrations were driving her to the edge of insanity, and Charis yearned for him being rougher with her.

Thankfully, Grindling didn't repeat his question and even intensified his caresses, placing one finger on each side of Charis' clit and rubbing it deftly while his tongue explored her mouth. And Charis moaned and ground herself against his fingers. He seemed to have understood what she needed now, and he rubbed her harder and faster, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in the same quick pace. And Charis moaned frantically, flushing as her orgasm crept closer. If Grindling stopped now, she would surely die.

But he did not stop. His fingers moved quickly and firmly over her pulsating clit, and Charis peaked with an outcry that would surely alarm all of Grindling's neighbours. But she did not care. And she arched her back and jolted as if electrocuted, moaning and panting and calling out Grindling's name.

He made her come twice, and as he stroked her gently as to ease her down from her peak, he smiled fondly at her.

'Are you alright?' he asked, receiving a content hum in return. 'Looks like we both have undreamt-of talents.'

Charis looked at him in surprise. Surely, a man like Grindling must have bedded hundreds of witches. But the way he spoke made her think that he was quite... inexperienced. And he had mentioned that it had been a while...

He hugged her close and softly stroked her hair, and Charis was just about to doze off in his strong arms when his voice made her become wide awake.

'I am truly sorry, Charis,' he said. 'This did really not turn out the way I hoped for it.'

Charis opened her mouth to speak, but Grindling hushed her with a soft kiss.

'You were a dream, Charis,' he assured her, smiling a genuine smile. 'It's just... I'd really hoped to be... better.'

He looked truly mortified once more, but instead of saying something, Charis just hugged him tightly. She had the feeling that he had more to say.

'When I said it had been a while...' he continued. 'It's been a really long time...'

'Since you had sex?' Charis butted in.

'Oh, I've had sex,' Grindling assured her, sounding almost defensive. 'But those were quick, meaningless encounters. They weren't worth the effort, and although they quelled my hunger for flesh, they left me rather... unsatisfied.'

He moved his hand to his chest, and Charis understood that he was not talking about orgasms. He was talking about that warm and fuzzy feeling Charis felt in her chest right now. The feeling of having shared something special with a lover.

'It has been almost two decades since I made love,' Grindling carried on. 'There were times when I feared it would never happen again.'

Charis felt her heart go out to the wizard in her arms. She knew how it felt to be without love, but the poor man had suffered for twenty years. What a fate.

'May I... may I ask why?' Charis asked carefully, brushing a strand of stray hair out of Grindling's face. She truly hoped he trusted her enough to share his story.

'I was about your age when I realised I was in love,' Grindling started. 'Truly, deeply in love. We'd been out a couple of times during my last year at Hogwarts, but it wasn't until I had left school and had not seen her for a couple of months that I realised how much I missed her, how much I ached for her.'

'Couldn't you meet?' Charis asked.

'She was still at Hogwarts. Then I went to Greece to study, and when I saw her the next time it was at a friend's house. He presented her to me as his fiancée.' Grindling gave a deep sigh. 'She had to marry him. They'd been betrothed for years. But we had an affair before their wedding. It lasted three months. And during all that time, I was foolish enough to believe that she would run away with me. It broke my heart when she didn't.'

'Oh, Grindling.'

It might not have been the most romantic of pillow talk, and many women would have hated to hear the man in their arms talk about his long-lost love. But Charis felt touched and proud. Grindling had said he had not made love to any woman since the love of his life had married another. And he had also told her that he wanted to make love to her.

'I am so, so sorry, Grindling. I shouldn't have asked...'

'By Merlin, Charis, don't be sorry,' Grindling exclaimed and took her face into both his hands. 'I'm glad you asked. I'm glad you're still here.'

He kissed her tenderly, and Charis didn't know if she felt happy or if she wanted to burst into tears over the sadness of Grindling's fate. But when he continued kissing and caressing her, she kissed him back, letting her hands explore his smooth chest once more, and she hoped she would be able to heal this wizard's wounds. Eventually, they both fell into slumber, Charis nestled into the crook of Grindling's left arm.

It was him jerking away said arm an hour later that awoke her.

'What is it?' she asked in alarm.

'Nothing,' Grindling assured her, rubbing his forearm. 'Must have tried to turn with you still lying in my arms and pulled a muscle or something.'

Then the big grandfather clock in the hall chimed six times, and Grindling shot off the bed.

'Shit! There is this dinner I have to attend at six-thirty. I forgot all about it. And I'd much rather stay here with you and do this properly but...'

'It's okay, I understand,' Charis said truthfully. She'd had a wonderful time, and maybe breaking off this date now was for the better. They both had a lot to think about.

'I... I'll take you home, of course... I'll get changed right away. I'll still be able to make it in time if I take you home... Oh, Charis, I am so unspeakably sorry.'

'What on earth for?' Charis exclaimed.

'Many things.' Grindling laughed uneasily. It was clear that he was very uncomfortable.

'Go get changed, and I'll try to find my bra,' Charis said jokingly in order to defuse the tension. Her bra was lying right beside her on the bed. She didn't have to look for it.

Grindling disappeared into the en suite bathroom and re-emerged less than ten minutes later, wearing exquisite dove grey robes. He looked to die for, and Charis suddenly regretted breaking the day off so abruptly. She would not have minded looking at this dashing wizard for a while longer.

'I am truly sorry, Charis,' he repeated once more as he offered her his arm for Side-Along Apparition. 'I meant it when I said that I would want to bed you on roses. I hope

that you will give me a second chance.'

XXI: Three's A Crowd

Chapter 21 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXI: Three's A Crowd

And Charis is now strolling down a sunny beach, having fish and chips Morgana thought bitterly, timidly looking around in the exclusive London boutique Narcissa had brought her to. She didn't feel comfortable at all and feared that she sooner or later would manage to somehow damage one of the haute couture gowns that hung so neatly on silvery racks all around her. They were all beautiful, even Morgana had to admit that, and surely splutteringly expensive.

Narcissa, however, didn't bat an eyelid at the price tags. She was used to shopping in boutiques like this, used to spending more money on one gown than an average witch spent on clothes in a year. But unfortunately, she had been forced to dispense with this sort of pleasure since Lucius had been arrested. She still had gold to spend, that was not the problem, but shopping for expensive gowns seemed somewhat tasteless with one's husband in Azkaban. Today, however, Narcissa wasn't buying anything for herself.

'If we are to present you to society, Morgana, we need you to dress like a lady as well as act like one,' she had told the girl earlier that week when they'd had tea. And by Merlin, the girl needed proper attire. However, she looked as if she were about to Disapparate at any moment.

'Don't worry, Morgana,' Narcissa said, laying a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder. 'Once you try one of these on, you'll look and feel like a million Galleons. Trust me.'

'I bet some of those gowns cost a million Galleons as well,' Morgana brought forth between gritted teeth.

Narcissa gave a pearly laugh. 'Not quite that much, dear.'

She swept towards the closest rack and picked up a light blue gown. 'Now, this would look lovely on you,' she pointed out. 'It would really bring out your eyes and that lovely pale skin of yours.'

Morgana wrinkled her pretty little nose. Light blue? Wasn't it bad enough that Narcissa insisted on buying her a dress? Did she have to pick a colour so close to white as well? And, by Merlin, there were frills!

Narcissa looked highly disappointed. 'No? What don't you like about it?'

Morgana fought hard not to blurt out "everything". Narcissa meant well, Morgana well aware of that. Over the last couple of weeks, Narcissa had invited her to tea several times, even to dinner or lunch once or twice. She had been nothing but nice and adorable, and Morgana understood that the woman relished taking care of her, buying her little trinkets and spoiling her rotten. Now, she did not want to come across as ungrateful.

'It's a bit... girly,' she said diplomatically.

Once more, Narcissa laughed. 'That is the general idea, my dear. We need your gown to bring out your best feminine features. But alright, let us try and find something a little less dainty. Have a look around.'

Morgana, of course, made a bee line for the rack by the window, where she'd spotted a black satin gown.

'No black,' Narcissa said in a warning tone. 'Colour can really lift your complexion, Morgana. You wait and see. Now, is it satin you like?'

She picked up a deep purple one and held it up towards Morgana. 'Oh, now that is lovely.'

Morgana sighed in defeat. There was just no hope. Narcissa was determined to buy her a dress, whether she liked it or not. Best to smile and nod to at least get out of this boutique as soon as possible. And sure enough, Narcissa was already examining the next rack, scrutinising gown after gown, every now and then holding one up against Morgana.

'Now, this one...'

She picked up a midnight blue dress with long, wide sleeves and a bodice-style top that laced up all the way down the back.

'... is simply gorgeous!'

Even Morgana had to admit that it was a lovely dress. The colour was dark enough for her to feel comfortable with it, and she had always had a thing for laces.

'I will not take no for an answer this time, Morgana,' Narcissa pointed out firmly. 'I want you to try this on.'

She directed Morgana towards the fitting room.

'Let me know if you need a hand with the laces. Merlin knows they can be tricky.'

Morgana changed without even once looking into the mirror. She didn't want to wear a dress. She hadn't worn one since... well, since one of her trysts with Lucius and only because he had insisted on her wearing one. And now his wife had the same wish. Oh, if Cissy knew...

'How are you doing with those laces?' she heard Narcissa ask, and a moment later, the curtains were pulled back.

'Heavens, Morgana!' she exclaimed. 'You look truly lovely.'

Morgana ventured a glance into the mirror while Narcissa busied herself with lacing up the dress at the back. It was a magnificent piece of clothing, no doubt.

'Give me a twirl,' Narcissa suggested, taking a step backwards.

'A twirl?' Morgana inquired. 'Really?'

'Don't be shy.' Narcissa smiled and gave Morgana a soft push as to set her in motion.

And Morgana twirled, grudgingly. *When a Malfoy says "jump", ask how high...*

'Yes, I think we've found ourselves a dress,' Narcissa confirmed. 'Can you see how much the blue brings out your eyes? And the lovely red of your hair?'

Unconsciously, Morgana let her hand run over her short hair. She had let Tonks perform a Cutting Charm, and her hair was now just over half an inch long. She liked it that way. It saved her time in the morning, didn't get into her eyes...

'We'll take care of that when we get home,' Narcissa interrupted Morgana's musings. 'I know a great hair charm. And I am thinking a lovely pink shade for your cheeks and lips.'

Morgana spluttered. 'Dress, hair and make-up *today*? Excuse me, Narcissa, but did I miss something? I thought we'd have dinner at the Manor tonight.'

Narcissa smiled mysteriously. 'But we are, dear one. I just want you to feel like a lady. Trust me, by the time I've finished with you, you won't recognise yourself. You will be so beautiful, the wizarding elite will be unable to resist you. Now, chop, chop. Get changed. We have a lot to do.'

'Narcissa, please,' Morgana insisted. 'I hate surprises. Please, tell me you are not planning on presenting me to the Minister of Magic or something tonight.'

Narcissa smiled. 'Well, I was going to save it as a surprise, but yes, I have a guest coming for dinner that I would like you to meet.'

Morgana's eyes widened in shock. Narcissa had to be joking!

'Don't worry, dear. There is nothing to be nervous about,' Narcissa assured her.

Finally, Morgana found her tongue. 'Narcissa, sorry, but... Have you arranged a blind date?'

To that, Narcissa laughed out loud. 'Don't be silly, it's not a date. I will be dining with you.'

'You mean you will be chaperoning?' Morgana asked in a sour tone.

'Assisting with social niceties, making sure the conversation flows,' Narcissa clarified. 'It will be fun. Now, come on. We need to get going.'

Half an hour later, back at Malfoy Manor, Narcissa wasted no time in leading Morgana to her dressing room, where she instructed the girl to sit with her back towards the big gilded mirror. And dutifully, Morgana followed the older woman's order, yet secretly hoping a band of Death Eaters would invade the room or even the Dark Lord himself. Heck, she would even be happy to see Draco and his goonies. Anything to keep Narcissa from dolling her up.

'Curls, I think,' Narcissa murmured, running her slender fingers lightly through Morgana's hair. 'About shoulder-length.'

Morgana gave a tiny jerk with her head.

'You have to trust me, Morgana,' Narcissa said in a motherly tone. 'I know what I am doing.'

She drew her wand and spoke an incantation, and Morgana's hair started to grow, from messy, choppy shortness into shoulder-length, lustrous loose red curls.

Narcissa smiled like she was looking at her firstborn baby. 'Oh, yes. Exquisite.'

Morgana squirmed around for a mirror, but Narcissa had other plans.

'Ah, ah, ah! Not yet! Not until we're all done!'

Morgana sighed and plucked carefully at one of her new-grown locks. 'I haven't had hair that long since...' She grinned. 'Since the first Transfiguration lesson in my sixth year. McGonagall almost had a heart attack when I turned my hair short.'

'And with every right!' Narcissa pointed out. 'There should be a law against lovely girls like you mutilating their looks by having a haircut like a boy. Now, let's get you back into this dress.'

Once again, Narcissa assisted Morgana lacing up the back and then sat her back onto the chair, still with her back against the mirror.

'And now, a little make-up. Quite subtle, I think. Just enough to accentuate your eyes and your lovely cheekbones. And a soft pink for your lips.'

Once more, she waved her wand, and when she was done, Narcissa Malfoy, who always behaved like a lady, actually welled up.

'Oh my,' she breathed and put her hand on Morgana's shoulder to turn the girl towards the mirror. 'Look at yourself.'

Morgana scrutinised her reflection from top to toe. She didn't dislike what she saw, but she couldn't keep herself from squirming and fidgeting.

'I don't know...', she started in a small voice.

'You are beautiful, Morgana Belakane,' Narcissa assured her. 'Don't you think?'

'It's just not... not me...'

'But it is you, dear,' Narcissa exclaimed, taking Morgana firmly by the shoulders and walking her closer to the mirror. 'This is the you that has been hiding under shapeless black robes and a boy's haircut. You saw how little I had to do to transform you into the true lady you are.'

Morgana fingered her hair, surprised at the softness of the curls.

'Are you glad you trusted me now?' Narcissa asked.

Morgana nodded and gave Narcissa a tiny smile. And the older woman smiled broadly, looking like a proud parent whose child had just taken its first step.

'Take time to admire yourself whilst I get dressed for dinner,' she said. 'And don't be nervous. The way you look, no one will care if you use the wrong fork for the main course.'

She swept out of the room, and Morgana lingered in front of the mirror, unable to take her eyes off her reflection. So that was what she looked like, she thought. That was the Morgana she had been trying to hide so desperately. She'd almost not recognised her.

She tucked a stray lock behind her ear and tilted her head, looking deep into her own eyes.

You're young, Morgana. Your whole life lies ahead of you and the world at your feet.

She frowned. Where that thought had come from, she did not really know. But the words rang clearly in her ears as if someone had given her a lecture about them. And they were true. She was young. And as much as she hated to admit it, she was a fetching witch who possessed all the attributes needed to charm a wizard. She had the looks; she had the brains. But first and foremost, she had an old family name. And that was what Narcissa was counting on.

'Are you ready, my dear?'

Narcissa re-entered the room, wearing a pale blue gown, her long blonde hair ornately braided with jewels. She looked like royalty.

'As ready as I'll ever be,' Morgana answered with a tiny smile. She still didn't feel comfortable, neither with her dress, her hair or the situation. But she'd give it a try. After all, this was not a date, and Narcissa would be there all the time.

'There is still something missing,' Narcissa said, but as Morgana cast a somewhat fearful look towards her reflection, she smiled. 'Don't worry, dearest. It's nothing you can see.'

She pulled a tiny crystal phial from the folds of her robes, which contained something that looked like molten gold.

'Felix Felicis?' Morgana asked with a frown.

Narcissa laughed. 'No, silly. I doubt you'll need liquid luck. But this perfume has almost the same qualities. I wore it during some of the happiest nights of my life.'

As Narcissa uncorked the tiny phial, Morgana's sensitive nose filled at once with the scent of May roses and jasmine, and as the scent settled, she also detected vanilla and sandalwood. It was a heavy scent, but it made her feel like a queen. And when she followed Narcissa out of the room and down the stairs, she was quite convinced that she'd be able to achieve anything she wanted that night.

* * *

The table in the dining room was set for three people. The wine was open and breathing, and there were candles lit all around the room, casting a warm, soft light.

'Now, I don't want you to be nervous,' Narcissa said in a kind tone as she took her seat at the head of the table, gesturing for Morgana to sit to her left. 'The wizard you are to meet is a very old friend of mine. And I have heard that you have already met him at least once.'

Morgana frowned, pondering who of all the wizards she knew would be an old friend of Narcissa Malfoy. She had never thought about what kind of people Narcissa associated with. Lucius had rubbed elbows with the richest of the rich, the most influential and important witches and wizards in the country. And Death Eaters, of course. Who did Narcissa count as friends? But before Morgana could ask, the door opened, and a wizened elf showed in a dashing tall man with long fair hair, dove grey robes, a dazzling smile and kind blue eyes.

'Grindling, darling!'

Darling? Morgana was so surprised by Narcissa using such an intimate address that she momentarily forgot her shock about Grindling Gibbons being the mystery guest. He was about the last wizard she had expected.

Narcissa stood and swept across the room where she kissed Grindling on both cheeks.

'Oh, I am so glad you could make it!'

'I hope I am not late,' Grindling replied, bowing low and kissing the hand of his hostess, holding on to it far longer than it was either necessary or polite. 'I... something came up.'

Morgana's eyes narrowed. Something came up, eh? Of course, it had! Grindling was supposed to be on a date with Charis! What the heck was he doing at Malfoy Manor, looking like a million Galleons?

'You look stunning,' Grindling complimented Narcissa in a slightly hoarse voice, and the lady of the manor smiled broadly, hiding her blushing cheeks from her male guest by turning towards Morgana.

'Now, I know that you two have met briefly, but having been introduced to each other by a mutual workmate in a café in Diagon Alley will not do for two purebloods like yourselves. So, let me do this properly: Grindling, darling, this is Morgana Belakane. My husband and I have sponsored her throughout Hogwarts. Morgana, this is Grindling Gibbons, Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies and an old and very dear friend of mine.'

Reluctantly, Grindling let go of Narcissa's hand and gentlemanly stepped forwards to take Morgana's instead.

'It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Belakane,' he said before he bowed, kissing her hand as well.

'The pleasure is all mine, Mr Gibbons,' Morgana replied, and she was not even lying. The man looked breathtaking! In many ways, he resembled Lucius, but he seemed much kinder, more honest...

'Who is for wine?' Narcissa asked and guided Grindling to his chair opposite Morgana. 'Grindling? It's a nice Châteauneuf-du-Pape.'

Grindling inclined his head as to accept Narcissa's offer, and the old elf shuffled forward at once to fill his glass.

'Miss Belakane?' Grindling enquired. He was well aware that it was not his task to offer wine. After all, it was Narcissa who was hosting this dinner, not him. But talking to Morgana gave him a legitimate reason to not look at Narcissa. Maybe, if he averted his eyes long enough, he would forget how stunning Narcissa looked or that she was wearing the perfume he had gifted her with all those years ago.

Morgana shook her head at Grindling's offer and replied with a 'No, thank you. I do not drink,' to which Narcissa smiled benignly.

'It is considered somewhat refined to have wine with one's meal, Morgana,' she explained.

She sounded ever so kind, but Morgana felt like a five year old who'd just been told to use a fork instead of eating with her fingers.

'You should not see wine as an alcoholic beverage,' Grindling added. 'See it as a supplement to the food. Which, I am sure, will be delicious.'

He chanced a smile at Cissy and then quickly brought his glass to his nose, inhaling deeply.

'Raspberries and plums,' he mumbled. 'Chocolate and lavender... You would enjoy this, Miss Belakane, I am most certain of it.' And taking the bottle from the surprised elf, he filled Morgana's glass before she could protest.

'I'd like to make a toast,' Narcissa announced once Grindling had filled her glass as well. 'As you both know, my family and I are going through some troubles at present. It is true to say that one certainly knows who their friends are in times of need.' She gave a hollow laugh. 'However, the Malfoys are nothing if not resilient. And so I would like to drink to new beginnings.'

'To new beginnings,' Grindling repeated and raised his glass, smiling encouragingly at Morgana, who had no other choice than to follow suit.

The starter was made up of dried figs, cheese and a nice creme di balsamico, and after Grindling had explained to Morgana how the sweetness of the figs, the saltiness of the cheese and the acidity of the vinegar were being accentuated by the wine, Narcissa took over the lead, asking questions and feeding the conversation, making sure that her two guests always had something to say to each other. And by the time the main course was served, Morgana had emptied almost two glasses of wine and the conversation had been steered towards Grindling's private life, much to his chagrin.

'Tell me, Grindling,' Narcissa started, 'Rumour has it that you are still the wizarding world's most eligible bachelor. Can you believe it, Morgana? That this handsome wizard has not found a mate yet?'

Grindling nearly choked on his wine, and Morgana gave him a cold look. She had given him the benefit of the doubt so far, but depending on how valid his answer was, she would hex him into the next week. She knew he was dating Charis. She knew they'd been out three times now, including today's date. If he denied it now... But Grindling didn't seem to be willing to give Narcissa an answer. Instead, he busied himself with refilling their glasses.

'I heard differently,' Morgana said instead of him, in a tone that made even the hair on her own neck stand up. 'There are rumours at the Ministry that you are currently dating, Mr Gibbons.'

'Is this true, Grindling?' Narcissa exclaimed, obviously shocked.

Grindling blushed and cast Morgana an imploring look. Narcissa mustn't know!

'I... um... I have taken a lady to dinner recently, yes. But... um... we are not... It's nothing serious.'

Morgana's look darkened. How dare he? How dare he say that what he and Charis had going was nothing serious?

Narcissa, on the other hand, beamed like the sun. 'Nothing serious? Well, that is good to hear. Grindling, darling, you are in luck. Morgana here, who, as you know, is descended from one of the oldest wizarding families in Britain, also happens to be single.'

Now it was Morgana's turn to almost spit her wine all over the table. Was Narcissa playing matchmaker?

'I am convinced Miss Belakane has many suitors,' Grindling tried to smooth over the situation. 'A young witch of her standards...'

And a lovely witch she was. The last time he had seen her, he had not noticed as she had looked pale and tired; her hair had been chopped short, and her robes had revealed nothing of her well-shaped body. But now her hair looked like molten lava in the candle light; her eyes were glittering like two precious gems, and her curves...

'You agree then that Morgana would be an excellent catch for any wizard?' Narcissa interrupted Grindling's thoughts.

'By all means.' Grindling shifted uncomfortably in his seat. What a predicament he was in! 'I am sure any wizard would be glad to...'

Once more, Narcissa talked over him. 'The alliance of the last of the Belakanes and the ancient and noble house of Gibbons would be a powerful union, don't you think, Grindling?'

Grindling gave an uncomfortable laugh. 'Cissy, dear, we have just met. I think it is a bit hasty to be talking about alliances and unions.'

'Darling Grindling, you were always such a romantic,' Narcissa smiled sweetly and patted Grindling's hand. 'A marriage can be more than hearts and flowers.'

'Cissy, I am begging you,' Grindling implored his hostess, resisting the urge to pull away his hand. 'Miss Belakane is... How old are you?' he asked, turning away from Narcissa's blue eyes and looking into Morgana's instead. 'Eighteen?'

Morgana nodded, too befuddled by the wine and too shocked by Narcissa's matchmaking plans to utter a single word.

'Cissy, I could be her father,' Grindling exclaimed, turning back towards his hostess.

'Morgana is of age,' Narcissa laughed. 'I know what you are thinking, Grindling. You want to be swept away by an orchestra with the wind through your hair on the top of a mountain. But that is not the way love works! I myself was betrothed to Lucius since before I started at Hogwarts. And we grew together, he and I. And now I love him with all my soul.'

Lucius. The name made Morgana snap out of her trance. What the hell was this? What was Narcissa playing at? Why was she trying so hard? What could she gain?

'You are both intelligent, single people from old bloodlines,' Narcissa carried on, looking first at Grindling, then at Morgana and then back at Grindling. 'It is your duty to ensure that purity of wizardkind continues. Love will follow, mark my words.'

'Would you like us to get started on that right away?' Morgana asked, her voice heavy with sarcasm. 'The continuation of the blood line, I mean. I'm sure the moon is in the right phase. We could have a baby by the end of June.'

'My dear Morgana!' Narcissa was beaming. She had obviously missed Morgana's sour tone. 'Nothing would make me happier than to see Grindling as your consort. But we don't want to rush things. Now, why don't you two get more acquainted before dessert while I just go and powder my nose...'

'I am truly sorry, Morgana,' Grindling burst out the moment Narcissa had closed the door behind her. 'I had no idea...'

'No idea the woman Narcissa was going to set you up with would turn out to be Charis' best friend?' Morgana hissed. 'What did you do to her anyway? Did you ditch her so you could come here? Muggle-style date not good enough for you, is it, Mr Gibbons?'

'Don't be ridiculous! Charis and I had a lunch date. And I'd already accepted Cissy's dinner invitation weeks ago.' He closed his hand tightly around his napkin, looking deeply offended. 'I would never do anything to hurt Charis,' he added firmly. 'Never. She means a lot to me.'

'Then you better tell your dear Cissy that you are already involved with someone,' Morgana suggested. Her voice was considerably softer now. She had been angry with Grindling at first and thought that he had known about Narcissa's schemes. But then she had seen his eyes when she had accused him of having deceived Charis. He had looked crestfallen, truly hurt, and her heart had gone out to him.

'I can't tell Cissy I'm dating Charis. You understand that, don't you?' Grindling swallowed hard. 'You've seen how obsessive she is about blood status,' he added quickly. 'If I mention Charis, it might put her at risk. And I am not prepared to do that.'

He looked pleadingly at Morgana, who inhaled sharply. Charis' blood status had already caused the Ravenclaw enough trouble. It had almost cost her life. And the one who had almost killed her had been no other than Narcissa's own sister.

'You have to tell Narcissa something,' Morgana insisted. 'Tell her you prefer blondes.'

Grindling flinched. 'This isn't going to be easy, Morgana,' he pointed out. 'You have seen how persuasive Cissy can be. She won't take no for an answer.' He paused and then smiled compassionately. 'I am presuming your new look was her influence, too?'

Morgana couldn't help but blush. 'The woman's like a trampling herd of Hippogriffs,' she muttered and discontentedly plucked at her dress. 'Won't take no for an answer.'

'Do not get me wrong,' Grindling said softly. 'You look enchanting. But something tells me it was not your idea to charm your hair and wear a dress for dinner.'

Enchanting? Morgana felt a little warmth deep inside herself. Grindling had noticed, and he liked what he saw. But she had never been good at accepting compliments.

'What?' she asked in a sarky tone. 'Don't you think I like being prettied up and then thrust in the arms of the first available wizard?'

'By the look on your face during the starter, I would hazard a guess and say no.'

Morgana gave a little laugh, and Grindling smiled a gentle smile before topping up her glass.

'I am sorry, Morgana,' he said once more, gingerly patting her hand. 'I like this as little as you do. But I can't see how to get out of it right now. I fear for tonight, we will have to play along.'

The door opened, and Morgana quickly withdrew her hand, thereby nearly knocking over her wine glass.

'Ah, I see you've been getting along nicely.' Narcissa looked positively delighted. 'Very good. And now it's time for dessert. I am sure you will love it. It's rather... special.'

She clapped her hands and into the room came the ancient elf, carrying three glasses of white wine, and behind it walked a younger elf, carrying a tray with three pudding dishes filled with white...

Morgana paled with shock.

'The Malfoy gu,' Narcissa explained, 'is the stuff of legend. It is passion personified in pudding. My dears, if the moon isn't shining a little brighter in your eyes after this, then you are as dead from the waist down as Hel herself. Bon appetit!'

Morgana made a dive for the wine. There was no way she was going to touch the gu! She knew what that pudding could do! Grindling, however, was blissfully ignorant.

'Sweet Circe, this is amazing!' he exclaimed after the first spoon, and Narcissa smiled ever so smugly.

The second spoonful elicited a tiny moan from Grindling, and Narcissa directed her focus onto Morgana, hoping Grindling would follow her gaze. She needed him to look at the girl.

'Come now, eat up. I know you have a secret sweet tooth. And every girl likes chocolate.'

Morgana felt like crying, and her hand was shaking badly when she brought the first spoon to her mouth. She was terrified what the gu would do to her, but under Narcissa's watchful gaze, she had no other choice than to eat.

The reaction was instantaneous. Her breathing quickened; she felt hot and bothered; and her mind was flooded with memories of her being spoon fed by Lucius, of her sitting in his lap, moaning into his mouth as he slid deep inside her...

'Whatever have you put in this, Cissy?' Grindling groaned, uncomfortably crossing and uncrossing his legs. He, too, felt the magic of the gu.

'Oh, it's nothing illegal, I assure you,' Narcissa chirped, pretending to eat some of the gu herself. But the spoon she was using was charmed, and by the time it reached her mouth, it was always empty.

It was the most agonising dessert Morgana had ever sat through, and by the time the elves removed the empty dishes, she found herself quivering and squirming in her seat. And she did not dare look at Grindling whose eyes she felt boring into her hairline. If the gu had a similar effect on him, if he looked at her with even the slightest trace of desire in his eyes, she would not know what to do.

'Is it just me, or is it a little warm in here?' Narcissa asked in a cheerful voice. 'Why don't we retire to the balcony? It's been such a sunny day. I'm sure it's lovely out there.'

Morgana got up from her chair so quickly that it almost fell over. But she did not care. She just wanted to get outside, into the fresh air, away from Grindling's gaze. But her plans were thwarted by their hostess, who guided Grindling towards her young guest ever so smoothly. And as the gentleman that he was, Grindling took Morgana's arm and walked her outside, where they were greeted by gentle light and soft music.

'I thought maybe you'd like a little dance,' Cissy suggested innocently and lingered by the door. 'It's such a lovely evening, after all.'

Dutifully, Grindling immediately bowed and offered Morgana his hand.

'I hate dancing,' she protested, loud enough for Narcissa to hear and make the older woman frown disapprovingly. The girl was still terribly uncouth. They would have to work on her manners.

'If we don't dance, Morgana,' Grindling whispered, turning his back towards Narcissa so she wouldn't hear, 'Cissy will put a Permanent Sticking Charm on us.'

He pulled her towards him, gently but firmly, and Morgana shuddered as he placed his hand on the small of her back. It had been so long since she had been that close to a man. And now she was under the influence of both gu and wine, and Grindling smelled of musk and dark chocolate. And the bulge between his legs...

Grindling cleared his throat and held Morgana a few inches further away from him, noticing the same thing as she had.

'I am truly... mortified. That gu...'

Morgana forced herself to smile kindly. 'Don't apologise. I know that pudding. I know what it does to people. I can feel it, too.'

They began to sway together, slowly and gently, and soon they forgot about the awkwardness between them. They forgot about the gu, about Narcissa and Narcissa's plans...

'You suit those curls,' Grindling murmured after a while. 'Your hair is so vibrant, like flaming coals... Why on earth do you choose to wear it short?'

So nice guys like you won't notice me, Morgana thought, feeling tears sting her eyes. She didn't deserve nice guys like Grindling noticing her.

'It's a shame,' Grindling whispered. 'And that dress... You look adorable.'

Morgana squirmed. 'Grindling, please,' she started, finding her throat far too tight to speak properly. 'Don't say such things to me. Don't be nice to me.'

'Would you rather I said that your dress is like a dishrag and you look like you've been dragged through a hedge?' Grindling asked in a puzzled tone.

'I'd rather you said nothing at all.'

'As you wish, Morgana.'

Grindling did not understand. Morgana was indeed a charming young witch, and he would find her attractive even without being under the influence of the gu. But she seemed shamed by his compliments, terrified by his touch. Whatever had made this young witch so afraid of affection?

Carefully, he pulled her closer so her head came to rest on his shoulder, and he rested his own face against her. She stiffened at first, but Grindling held her close, hoping she would relax eventually. His nose filled with her intoxicating scent, and he closed his eyes, inhaling the familiar smell of jasmine and roses.

Morgana felt her heartbeat falter and treacherous tears welled up in her eyes. Being held by Grindling felt wonderful. His arms were strong; he smelled so nice, and she had not felt this safe in months. But it was wrong, so terribly wrong. Grindling belonged to Charis. Charis was in love with him, and surely, he was in love with Charis. He was only under the influence of the gu and the wine right now, just like herself.

As she felt his hand stroking her back, Morgana gasped.

'Grindling...'

'Hm?'

His face was buried in her hair now, and she could feel his lips on her hairline.

'You should... let go of me now...'

'What is it, Morgana?' he whispered and cupped her face as she tried to wriggle free from his embrace. 'Have I done something to upset you?'

Morgana gave a tiny shake of the head, biting her lip so hard that she could taste her own blood in her mouth.

'To use a clichéd phrase,' she said, 'it's not you, it's me.'

There were tears in her eyes now, and as they moved closer to each other, Grindling felt so unspeakably sorry for the young witch who was trembling in his arms. And he leant forward, and she got onto her toes as he tightened her grip around her.

And in the shadows, Narcissa Malfoy smiled triumphantly.

XXII: Regrets and Rumination

Chapter 22 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXII: Regrets and Rumination

There was a flurry of midnight blue robes and red hair, followed by a pop that silenced the music, and Grindling stood dumbstruck, not knowing what had happened. One moment, he had held Morgana in his arms, and the next...

'What on earth happened, Grindling?'

He blinked and stared at Narcissa. Where she had suddenly come from, he did not know. Just like he didn't know to where Morgana had Disappeared. In fact, he felt like he didn't know anything at the moment.

'One minute we were dancing,' he started, 'and the next...'

'I saw that you were dancing!' Narcissa exclaimed, equally worried and frustrated. 'I also saw that you were about to kiss!'

Grindling's eyes widened. 'Were you... spying on us, Cissy?' he brought forth.

'Spying?' Narcissa gave a short laugh. 'I'm insulted. I feel responsible for Morgana when she is in my house! I...' A faint blush appeared on her cheeks. 'I wanted to keep an eye on her.'

'You wanted to keep an eye on her?' Grindling had snapped out of his haze now, and his Ravenclaw brain started analysing the situation at hand. 'After you served an aphrodisiac for pudding?'

He was looking straight into Narcissa's eyes now. They were as blue as the sea off the shores of Cyprus.

'Did you... want us to kiss?' he asked slowly. He wouldn't be surprised, not after what Narcissa had said at dinner, that she would love to see him as Morgana's consort. And to his disappointment, his suspicion proved to be valid.

'Of course, I would have been delighted if you two had kissed!' Narcissa confirmed. 'Grindling, darling, have you not understood what this evening has been all about?'

Grindling exhaled through his nose. Oh, he understood. Only too well. But he wished he were wrong.

'So you thought I would kiss just about any young witch at the drop of a hat, Cissy?' he asked in a tone that suggested that he was hurt beyond belief. 'Did you think Morgana would want to kiss *me*?'

'It very much looked like you both wanted to!' Narcissa maintained. 'I saw you two dancing. I saw how tenderly you held her in your arms.'

Grindling swallowed drily. It had felt good to hold Morgana in his arms, to inhale her scent, to look into her blue eyes. But if the choice had been his, he would have chosen another witch to hold.

'I was hoping you two would like each other,' Narcissa went on. 'And you did get along so well.'

'We did,' Grindling confirmed. 'Morgana is an enchanting young witch, but... Cissy, we have only just met, and already it seems you are choosing the cutlery for our wedding! Don't you see what pressure that has put Morgana under?'

Narcissa bit her lip. 'I wanted too much too quickly, didn't I? Oh, Grindling, you do understand that I only want the best for the both of you, don't you? Two purebloods, both intelligent, good looking... You could learn to love each other, I'm sure.'

'Why would Morgana ever love me, Cissy?' Grindling asked, barely able to keep a distinct note of sadness out of his voice. 'Why would she love me when the woman I am in love with does not?'

'You're in love? You said you just took someone out for dinner. You said it was nothing serious!' Narcissa's voice was rather shrill now, quite unladylike. And she feared that she had put her hopes in the wrong wizard.

'I am not talking about the other woman, Narcissa!' Grindling said quietly. 'I am talking about you!'

'Me?' Narcissa gasped. 'Grindling, get yourself together! This must be the wine talking. Or the gu.'

But both intoxications had long since worn off, and Grindling was thinking clearer now than he had all evening. How could he have fooled himself so? How could he have come to Malfoy Manor and hope that he would do well, that he could leave behind everything he had once felt for Narcissa?

He turned his back on her and ran his hand through his ponytail, seriously considering following Morgana's example and just Disapparating. But when Narcissa gingerly put her hand in his shoulder, he knew that he would not be going anywhere that night. Not before she sent him away.

'Grindling, darling, you can't... You mustn't... Not after all this time.'

'I always have, Cissy,' he whispered, fighting the urge to turn around and look into her eyes. He would drown in those blue pools. And he knew that he would not have the strength to even try to resurface. 'Why else do you think I have not found a wife? I never wanted anyone else.'

'Grindling, we've been through this, almost eighteen years ago,' Narcissa said, tightening her grip around Grindling's shoulder. 'I made my choice back then.'

'But did you make the right choice, Cissy?' Grindling asked meaningfully and turned around, looking down at the woman he had loved for over two decades. She was still beautiful, still desirable, but she was in a position he didn't wish upon his worst enemy. 'Look where you are today.'

'My choice is not up for discussion tonight, Grindling. As I said at dinner, I learned to love Lucius. I am content.'

'Content?' Grindling asked disbelievingly. 'With having your husband in Azkaban? With you having to fend for yourself? You deserve better than that, Narcissa. You have always deserved better.'

Narcissa inhaled sharply. 'It is true; Lucius being behind bars has created certain... difficulties. Life is not easy for me now, Grindling. The name of Malfoy doesn't ring as well in people's ears as it once has. This is why I need to create something for myself. And Morgana... We've sponsored her through Hogwarts, and now I have the chance to introduce her to the Wizarding society. I can be her fairy godmother... But I cannot do this alone. I need help. I need someone to stand by her side when she takes her first steps into society. I was hoping you... You could be happy with her, Grindling. She is such a lovely young witch.'

Slowly, she took a step closer.

'Will you help me, Grindling? Will you help me make a lady out of the girl, a presentable pureblood? Will you help *me*?'

Yes! Grindling wanted to scream. *Yes! I would do anything for you!* But the words failed him as he sank into Narcissa's blue gaze.

'I need that girl to be presentable, Grindling. I need her to be sophisticated, respectable and...'

She was standing so close now that her breath tickled his lips when she spoke, and Grindling closed the gap between them, drinking from Narcissa's lips like a man dying of thirst. They were just as soft as he remembered them, just as sweet. And he did not dare let their kiss last for more than a few seconds, lest he'd never be able to pull away again.

'I need you to kiss her like you kiss me,' Narcissa whispered, her lips brushing Grindling's ever so softly, so close were they still. 'I need her to believe she is worthy of a pureblood like you.'

Grindling nodded, his breath shallow. 'For you, Cissy, I will do it. But every time I touch her, I will wish it was you.'

'I will never be far,' Narcissa promised and once more got onto her toes to reach his lips. 'I'll be right there, Grindling. Right there.'

Morgana stood in her tiny bathroom, her fingers so desperately cramped around the edges of the basin that she had broken off several nails. Her heart was racing in her chest; she felt nauseous and lightheaded and had difficulties breathing. She wanted to cry. She really did. Most probably, tears would wash away the constrictive feeling in her throat. But she couldn't. The tears that had burned in her eyes only minutes earlier had evaporated, and she stood now shaking with dry sobs and a sense of terror in her heart.

By the gods, what had she done? How low had she sunk? And how many times more would she lay her hands on a man who belonged to another woman?

A chill ran down her spine, and she once more whimpered as if she were severely wounded. She wished she were, in fact. At the moment, hurting and dying, slipping away into nothingness seemed like a favourable option. If she were dead, at least she wouldn't be able to inflict more pain on anyone.

The sound of light footsteps on the other side of the bathroom door ripped Morgana out of her dark thoughts, and she hurriedly splashed some cold water in her face, hoping it would be enough to wipe the traces of anxiety away. The very last thing she needed now was a little house-elf becoming upset because she found her mistress in a state of desperation. But the footsteps soon died away. Most probably, Silvy had heard Morgana Apparate in and had come to offer her services. But as eager as Silvy was to serve and please, she would never intrude. And as she had found the bathroom door locked, she had retreated.

With a sigh of relief, Morgana sat down on the toilet, rubbing her red eyes. What was happening at Malfoy Manor now, she wondered. Would Narcissa be angry with her for making a rather unladylike exit? And Grindling, what would he think of her? Would he think her a tease and Apparate to Charis' place to tell her what her supposedly best friend had done? That she had practically thrown herself into his arms and tried to kiss him?

But, no, that was not what had happened. It had been he who had pulled her close, he who had cupped her face and leaned in to kiss her. And she had been the one to break away. Or had it?

Morgana shook her head, desperately trying to focus. But the room seemed to start spinning around her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, burying her face in her hands. The three glasses of wine were now taking their toll, and so was the tension she had been under all evening. She was too tired now and too confused to be able to remember that Grindling and she both under the influence of alcohol and gu had simultaneously leaned in for a kiss and that they both had pulled back just in time, both for the very same reason: Grindling because he didn't want to be unfaithful and Morgana because she didn't want to take her best friend's man. They both loved Charis too much to hurt her.

Charis. The thought of her best friend made Morgana snap her head up. She had told Dumbledore that she would gladly humiliate Draco Malfoy publicly if it meant gaining information that was of help for the Order. She had even thought she could deceive Narcissa. That, however, had proved harder than Morgana had expected, mostly because Narcissa had been kind to her. But still, Morgana had returned to the Manor. But now Narcissa had disclosed her plans, and agreeing to them would mean hurting

Charis, and that was the one thing Morgana wasn't willing to do. She wanted out. And she would tell Dumbledore right away.

* * *

'You have exhausted yourself, Headmaster.'

Dumbledore shrugged tiredly, which made the frown on Snape's brow deepen.

'You know you are weak,' the Defence teacher pointed out. 'I do not see any reason for you to have late night chats with Potter.'

'I do have my reasons, Severus. Believe it or not,' Dumbledore replied quietly and accepted the goblet Snape was handing him. It contained a ruby red liquid that looked very sweet. But as Dumbledore drank, he grimaced.

'What did you expect?' asked Snape. 'Elf-made wine?'

'I was rather hoping for cherry flavour,' Dumbledore explained and put the goblet down. He still looked tired, but there was already some colour returning to his cheeks.

'Thank you, Severus,' he said. 'I feel much better already.'

Snape, however, severely doubted this, and judging from the Headmaster's slumped posture, his doubts were most probably justified.

'You need to rest, Albus,' he said, and Dumbledore couldn't help but smile at the fact that Snape used his first name. It seemed like the Head of Slytherin actually cared.

'Not just yet, Severus. I'd rather be sitting here for a little while longer. And as you are already here... Are you making any progress with our young Slytherin friend?'

Snape gave an impatient huff. 'Draco is rather... unapproachable at the moment.' And that was putting it mildly. In fact, Draco seemed downright hostile towards his Head of House. And who could blame him? His father was in Azkaban because he had failed in a Death Eater mission in which Snape had not even participated. Naturally, the boy now doubted Snape's loyalties.

The eruption of green flames in the fireplace prevented Snape from giving any more explanations, and he fully expected Dumbledore to jump off his chair in order to talk to whoever was calling him via the Floo network. But to Snape's surprise, Dumbledore didn't move, and as Morgana Belakane's voice rang out from the flames, the Headmaster only gave a feeble shake of his head. And so Snape didn't move either, and eventually, the flames died down again.

'Do you know if the girl has been to Malfoy Manor tonight?' Dumbledore asked after a while, sounding so tired that Snape had the urge to tell him that it did not matter where Morgana had been or if the Ministry of Magic was on fire. The old man needed to rest.

But Dumbledore was concerned. 'I should have answered her call. It is late, and if she couldn't wait until the morning to contact me... Severus, do you think something has happened?'

'In my opinion, Miss Belakane sounded rather composed,' Snape pointed out. But he had to admit that Dumbledore had a point. ~~It~~^{It} was late, and Morgana wouldn't disturb Dumbledore on a Saturday evening if she didn't have anything important to say. Maybe something *had* happened. And thus, Snape did not argue when Dumbledore suggested that he'd Apparate to Grimmauld Place in case Morgana tried to get hold of Dumbledore there.

However, when Snape arrived at the Headquarter of the Order, the house was deserted.

What a waste of time, Snape thought somewhat grumpily. Of course, Morgana would not come here. She'd realise that no one, and especially not Dumbledore, would be at Grimmauld Place on a Saturday evening. Molly was with her family, and that meant there was no cake. So why would anyone hang around in this unfriendly house? He for one had no interest whatsoever to spend another minute there.

But just when he was about to open the front door to leave, Snape stopped. He was alone there tonight, a luxury which he had never before experienced. No one would notice if he had a look around.

Determinedly, he walked up the stairs, his mind focused on his goal. Tonight, he would systematically comb through Sirius Black's bedroom. After all, the man had been James Potter's best friend. If there were any pictures of Lily anywhere, then they would surely be in Black's bedroom.

But the very moment his hand closed around the door knob, he heard the front door creak.

* * *

Whilst Morgana sneaked down the dark corridors at Grimmauld Place, her mind was much clearer, and she was moving with determination. She felt much more confident as well, now that she had discarded her fancy dress and was once more wearing her black, high-collared robes. Her hair, however, still hung in curls to her shoulders. Narcissa's charm seemed to be of the lasting kind.

Outside the drawing room door, Morgana paused, huffing in frustration. She could just as well turn around now. Grimmauld Place seemed deserted, and she was not even surprised by that. Molly was obviously caring for her own family on this Saturday night, and all the other Order members must surely have their own lives to lead: Tonks and Lupin were hopefully sharing a glass of wine somewhere, and Moody was certainly polishing his Sneakoscope. And Dumbledore... well, what he was up to, Morgana could not even imagine, and she knew that hoping to find him at Grimmauld Place when she had failed to get hold of him via the Floo network had been a long shot. But still, she pushed open the door and entered the empty room. The candles on the table sprang magically to life, and Morgana sank onto a chair by the table. Maybe if she waited a while...

And sure enough, after only a few moments, she heard cat-like footsteps on the stairs. The door was pushed open with an ominous creak, and Morgana instinctively drew her wand.

'Put your wand down, you silly girl!' Snape commanded in a voice so cold that it would have made any first-year wet their pants. And Morgana flinched, thereby missing the flicker of surprise on Snape's face. The first thing he'd seen upon entering the semi-dark room had been a shock of red hair, and with his mind still on Lily, he had for a split second thought... hoped... How foolish of him!

'Sorry, sir,' Morgana muttered, stowing her wand away in the folds of her robes.

'You are aware of the time, Miss Belakane?' Snape enquired, sounding much like he did when he caught a student out of bed after curfew, and Morgana fully expected him to deduct House points or put her in detention.

'Y-yes, sir,' she stammered. 'Well, actually ... no.' She had no idea how long the dinner at the manor had lasted or how long she had been sitting in her bathroom.

'It is almost midnight,' Snape informed her. 'What are you doing here?'

I had nowhere else to go was the first thought that popped up in Morgana's head. But of course, she wasn't going to tell Snape.

'I was hoping to get hold of Profess... of Dumbledore.'

Snape raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. 'Suffice to say, Dumbledore is not available at the present time, Miss Belakane.' With any luck, the old man was fast asleep

now.

'I noticed,' Morgana replied in a weak tone and lowered her head, absentmindedly twirling a red lock between her fingers. She looked truly crestfallen, and Snape felt a stab of annoyance. Where was the self-confident witch he had once known?

Without a word, he sat down opposite her, studying her while his own face was inscrutable. He noticed that she was wearing make-up. Not much, just enough to accentuate her eyes and cheekbones. And her hair had obviously been charmed to fall in curls to her shoulders. She should wear it like this more often. She looked truly lovely.

'If you have important Order information, Miss Belakane,' Snape said, fighting hard to tear his eyes and thoughts away from those red curls, 'I suggest you tell me.'

Morgana took a deep breath, thinking how much easier it would be to talk to Dumbledore, who knew about her assignment. She had, of course, no idea just how much her former Head of House was involved in her mission. She did not know that the idea of turning her into a presentable young lady had initially been his: to use her as bait so Narcissa would willingly invite her to tea.

'I... I have been spending some time at Malfoy Manor,' she started. 'For the Order. Dumbledore was hoping I could get some information on Draco's involvement with... with Death Eaters. And now that Draco is back at Hogwarts, Dumbledore suggested I should get to know Narcissa.'

'And what,' Snape asked, 'is it that you have discovered that brings you here in the middle of the night?'

'I have discovered nothing,' Morgana replied. 'I came here to tell Dumbledore that I...' She paused and bit her lip. 'I came here to tell him that I don't want to be at the Manor anymore. I want out of this mission.'

'And why would that be?' Snape enquired, inclining his head.

Morgana swallowed. 'Narcissa... Narcissa has decided that she wants to introduce me to the elite of the Wizarding society. She wants to make a lady out of me, make sure I... associate with wizards of class.'

'And you want out because she has dragged you to the beauty parlour?' Snape asked with a sneer.

Morgana's eyes flashed dangerously. 'I want out because she is trying to make me mate!'

'Mate?' Snape's voice was impassive, but inside of him, he felt anger burning. What on earth was Narcissa up to?

'You know, have pretty little pureblood babies with a pretty pureblood wizard,' Morgana spat out, her eyes now narrowed to small slits.

And Snape clenched his jaw. This had to be a bad joke!

'I am not a piece of meat,' Morgana added hotly. 'And I am tired of being treated like one just because my parents happened to be purebloods.'

Now it was Snape's turn to narrow his eyes, and he was unable to restrain the anger that was bubbling in his chest. And as Morgana was the only person present in the room, she naturally became his target.

'Oh, I see what this is about,' he said silkily. 'You wanted Dumbledore to say, "There, there," and make you a cup of cocoa. But, in case it has escaped your attention, Miss Belakane, you chose to join the Order and to therefore accept any mission Dumbledore gives you. And you did so knowing what he put you through in your final year at Hogwarts. You did not learn your lesson.'

'I was given the mission to gain information on the Malfoys, especially on Draco's involvement with the Dark Lord. I am *not* going to lie down on my back and spread my legs!'

'As I recall, Miss Belakane,' Snape answered smoothly, 'you had no reservations against this particular activity the last time you visited the manor.'

Morgana's eyes widened and all colour left her face. Snape's words had been like a Bludger to the gut. And whereas she had been furious only moments ago, she now felt desolate.

'Once a slut, always a slut,' she murmured, balling her fists under the table so her nails dug painfully into her palms. She would not cry in front of Snape, even if there were already tears burning in her eyes.

'I guess I deserved that comment,' she added bitterly. 'Thank you for reminding me, sir.'

But Snape wasn't proud of his harsh words. In fact, he had regretted them even before Morgana had drawn breath to speak. But he had never been one to apologise. And he wouldn't apologise now either.

'Think for a moment, will you?' he hissed instead, his mind working feverishly as to rectify the situation. 'Do you really think the Order would let you carry another child for this mission? Do you not think there are ways of stopping you becoming pregnant?'

'I am not afraid of getting pregnant,' Morgana replied, her voice so cold that the temperature in the room seemed to drop by several degrees. 'For your information, I can't. That I conceived Lucius' child was only thanks to your potion. And it's a miracle I carried it for as long as I did.'

Nothing betrayed Snape's shock. His face was still inscrutable, and his hands still resting on the armrests of his chair. But inside, he was aflame with fury, both about the girl's fate and the coldness with which she seemed to accept it.

Slowly, Morgana rose with her hands flat against the surface of the table.

'You know what? I don't care anymore,' she said in a quiet and composed tone. 'You may tell Dumbledore that I will sleep with anyone he or Narcissa want me to. For the Order or the Dark Lord, I do not care. With one exception: I am *not* going to lay hands on my best friend's boyfriend.'

'What!' Snape's eyebrows shot up, and an almost triumphant sneer appeared on Morgana's lips.

'The most suitable wizard Narcissa could find for me,' she started in a low, drawling voice, 'is none other than Grindling Gibbons, who is currently dating Charis Byrne. And that, sir, is my only true issue with this mission.'

Had she had Moody's magical eye and could see through the surface of the table, Morgana would have seen Snape's knuckles whiten as he gripped the armrests of his chair. But she did not see it, so all she heard was Snape's cold voice.

'You must make your own choice, Miss Belakane. But remember: We have all had to make sacrifices for the Order. Some of us have to do things that make stealing somebody's boyfriend look like a walk in the park.'

'I am not going to hurt Charis,' Morgana said steadily. 'Not for the Order.'

'This is a war, Miss Belakane,' Snape growled, now getting to his feet as well. 'Do you think the Dark Lord would stop his actions because they might hurt someone's feelings? A broken heart is a small price to pay for victory.'

And revenge for my broken heart is the only thing that keeps me going he added silently.

'It might be a small price for you, but the price is too high for me,' Morgana replied, unwaveringly holding his onyx gaze despite him now towering over her, fixing her with his icy stare.

Snape breathed deeply through his nose. He could see the steely determination in her blue eyes and could not help but admire the loyalty Morgana was showing for her friend. But he needed to convince her to play along somehow. He needed to ensure the Order mission continued as planned. He wasn't getting anywhere near Draco at the moment, so if they wanted to find out anything about Draco's plans to murder Dumbledore, they had to rely on Morgana to find some hints at the manor.

'Miss Belakane,' Snape started, his voice now low. 'Just because Narcissa is trying to set you up with Mr Gibbons, it does not mean you have to fall into bed with him.'

'You don't know Narcissa Malfoy too well, do you?' Morgana shot back. 'She served gu for dinner tonight. I bet the elves cast the same spell on that pudding like they do on that damned tiffin. Which, as you might remember, has quite a funny effect on people.'

Oh, he did remember. And had he been less in control of his reactions, Snape would probably have blushed at the memory.

'And at the pace Narcissa is setting,' Morgana went on, 'Grindling and I will be engaged by Christmas.'

'By which time, your mission will probably be over,' Snape answered calmly. 'With any luck, Narcissa will not have the time to go public.'

Morgana gave a frustrated sigh, and something in her eyes changed. Her determination faltered, and she looked now almost pleadingly at her former professor. 'I can't do this to Charis.'

Snape understood all too well. Charis had been through too much emotional pain, much of it at his own hands. She didn't deserve to be put through more. But as much as he cared for her, as much as he cared for both of his girls, there was no other way.

'Miss Belakane, this is nothing more than a sham, a pretence to keep up for the space of a few weeks.'

'I can't do this, sir. I simply can't.'

'Yes, you can!' Snape slammed his palm against the surface of the table, making Morgana flinch. 'Do you think Dumbledore would have given you this mission if he did not think you capable of carrying it out? He has seen what you can do. He knows you can carry out acts that others could not. Acts that others would consider immoral. Acts that require bravery and personal sacrifice. Dumbledore believes in your abilities. /believe in your abilities.' He paused, his eyes boring into hers as if he was trying to penetrate her mind. 'You are Slytherin, Morgana. Do not forget that. Do what you must, but do it cunningly. Dance with Gibbons. Flirt with him. Turn his head but play hard to get. Spin Narcissa a tale of you being too young and too innocent to take the whole thing a step further. She will understand and most probably admire you for your steadfastness.'

They looked silently at each other for a while, Snape hoping that his words had got through to Morgana whilst she was wondering how Snape could still believe in her after all the times she had failed. Not letting Grindling bed her was one thing. He was dedicated to Charis, and surely he would not even think about touching any other woman when he was not under the influence of wine and gu. But how Snape could think that she would be able to lure Narcissa into thinking that she was an inhibited virgin who was scared of a handsome wizard like Grindling Gibbons was beyond Morgana.

Little did she know that at that very moment, Narcissa Malfoy, concerned at the sudden disappearance of her new protégée, was composing a letter to her, apologising for her matchmaking schemes and inviting her to tea next Sunday to make up for it.

A/N: We ask for your patience. Real Life is keeping us busy and the next chapter is not quite done.

XXIII: A Soupçon of Strife

Chapter 23 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXIII: A Soupçon of Strife

Severus Snape had never been a morning person. Not that he minded getting up early. In fact, the hours around sunrise were normally his most productive. But that didn't mean he liked interacting with people in the morning, especially not before he'd had his coffee. But this Sunday morning found him in an especially foul mood, and no matter how much coffee the Hogwarts elves brought to his study, Snape seemed unable to shake off his testiness.

He hadn't slept well, not at all. His dreams had been haunted by all kinds of eyes. He had seen Dumbledore's eyes, blue, twinkling and kind. They had shifted shape and turned into Morgana's, which had been just as blue but cold as ice and filled with a desolation that had made Snape shiver in his dreams. He had seen Lily's eyes, emerald green and almond shaped. Those eyes had not looked at him at all. Charis' green eyes had, though, and her eyes had still held love. But also she had looked away after a while and gifted her loving look to someone else.

Snape pushed away his fourth cup of coffee and rubbed his temples to fight off the beginnings of a headache. But he knew it would be in vain. He cared too much about the people he had dreamt of to be able to shake off his dreams. They would haunt him for the rest of the day and probably even into the next night. The best thing would probably be to down some Dreamless Sleep Potion and crawl back into bed and spend all Sunday there. No one would care if the master of the dungeons didn't show his face in the Great Hall anyway. No one would miss him.

With a sigh, Snape pushed back his chair and made his way to his potions cupboard. But he had only taken a couple of steps when a soft humming noise made him freeze. *The mirror*, he thought and at once changed directions towards the fireplace where the little silver mirror resided on the mantelpiece. And just like in his dream, he was confronted with a pair of green eyes.

'Morgana? Morgana, are you there?'

Charis' voice sounded out into the silence of the dungeon, and as Snape reached out for the mirror and looked into the Ravenclaw's green eyes, he found his hand shaking.

'Morgana, sweetie?'

Her reflection shifted place, and another face appeared on the left side of the looking glass. But to both Charis and Snape's disappointment, it was the face of an elf.

'Mistress Morgana is still in bed, Miss Charis,' piped Silvy, and the little elf bowed so deeply that she disappeared from the mirror for a moment.

'Would Miss Charis like Silvy to wake Mistress?' the elf then asked.

'Heavens, no!' Charis exclaimed. 'If Morgana is sleeping past daybreak for once, we better let her sleep. But will you tell her I called when she wakes up? I'd really like to talk to her.'

'Silvy will tell,' promised the elf.

'Thank you, Silvy. I'll keep the mirror propped up against the wall here, so I'll hear when Morgana calls me. Tell her to shout. I might be busy cleaning.'

'Would Miss Charis like Silvy to come over and help?' the elf offered. She sounded more than enthusiastic, but Charis just smiled kindly.

'How about you do something nice for yourself before Morgana wakes up?' she suggested instead, but Silvy's puzzled face clearly suggested that the elf had no idea what *something nice for herself* implied.

Charis sighed and shook her head. There was no point in trying to convince Silvy to take the morning off.

'Just tell Morgana I'd like to talk to her, alright?'

The elf acknowledged Charis' wish with another deep bow and disappeared from sight, and Snape watched Charis step away from the mirror and start bustling around in her flat. She was wearing an oversized purple T-shirt and a pair of woolly socks. Her hair was dishevelled, and she wasn't wearing any make-up. Not the most flattering look, overall, but Snape did not mind. He knew Charis was beautiful in her own unique way, and he did not mind watching her move around without a bra and, most probably, without any knickers. And for a moment or two, he all but forgot about his headache, so mesmerised was he by her feminine forms. But the headache hit him once again with a vengeance when he caught sight of the faint love bite on Charis' neck.

He swore under his breath. Someone had touched his girl, and he knew pretty well who that someone was. Morgana had mentioned the previous night that Charis was currently dating Grindling Gibbons. Now it clearly looked like their relationship had already gone past the stage of holding hands.

Snape balled his fists. He wanted Charis to be happy. By Merlin, he did! And he knew that he would never be the one to make her happy. But Grindling Gibbons? Couldn't she have fallen for someone else? Someone a bit manlier? Someone with a backbone? Someone who Snape hadn't despised since their school years? Why was it his girls insisted on falling for gits?

But Charis certainly looked happy; Snape couldn't deny that, and he decided to withdraw. Pulling the blanket over his head and not emerging from it for the rest of the day seemed even more tempting now, but now Snape considered Ogden's instead of a Dreamless Sleep Potion. Yet just when he was about to turn his back on the mirror, he heard Morgana's voice.

'Charis?'

Snape gasped. Morgana's red hair still shoulder length hung lifelessly around her pale face. There was a feverish look in her eyes, and the dark shadows under them spoke of a sleepless night.

'Sweetie, you look dreadful!' Charis exclaimed as her face once more appeared in the mirror, and Snape could only concur.

'I think I got a cold,' Morgana informed her friend in a voice that sounded very much like she indeed was suffering from a severe head cold.

But Snape suspected differently. Morgana had played her part well at Grimmauld Place, but Snape was not easily fooled. The girl had been upset, and he had seen the signs. Most probably, she had spent the night weeping not sneezing.

'I'll bring you some chicken soup,' Charis offered at once. 'I have a chicken in the fridge. I'll add some healthy vegetables and...'

Morgana interrupted her friend with a shake of her head.

'I don't want you to catch anything from me,' she said with a raspy voice. 'I'll be fine. Don't worry. Silvy will look after me.'

'There's only so much an elf can do,' Charis protested. 'What you need is soup and hugs. I can deliver both, and you better not struggle. I'll be with you in an hour!'

Before Morgana could protest, Charis had already hustled out of sight and into the kitchen, and the sounds of clattering pots and pans made it very clear that she had already started making soup.

'If you knew what I did, you'd poison that soup,' Morgana whispered before she, too, disappeared from Snape's view. And he was left staring into the now empty mirror, already anxious about what would happen once Charis arrived at Morgana's place.

* * *

'You do look dreadful!'

'I thought we had established this already,' Morgana commented drily as she sat down on her bed again. The short walk to Madam Nutkins' lounge and back had exhausted her. Her head was pounding, and her heart was racing in her chest.

'I'm not trying to be mean,' Charis said softly and sat down beside her friend after placing the tureen carefully on the bedside table. 'I am just worried about you. I bet you went jogging in the rain last night. No wonder you're ill. You need to take better care of yourself.'

'Yes, mother,' Morgana replied tiredly. Oh, how she wished Charis were right. But Charis just giggled, blissfully oblivious to what had happened the previous night.

Silvy brought in two bowls, spoons and some slices of bread, and the girls started eating the delicious chicken soup, Charis with gusto, Morgana a little more carefully. She didn't trust her stomach too much that day.

'You're a good cook, Charis,' she commented about a couple of spoons.

'Chicken is an easy bird to prepare,' Charis explained. 'I meant to make a roast last night, but I never got around to it. I wasn't hungry. Too giddy.'

She blushed and giggled once more, and Morgana put down her bowl.

'Too giddy?' she asked. 'After your date?'

'Oh, Morgana, it was wonderful! I had such a good time. Grindling is adorable! And he looks so good in Muggle clothes. His butt in jeans!'

The words came tumbling over Charis' lips, and she was so enthusiastic about telling her friend every little detail of her date that she almost forgot to breathe. And Morgana let her talk, nodding and smiling every now and then. But on the inside, the knot in her stomach became bigger and bigger, and the feeling of guilt threatened to strangle her.

'He was so sweet, Morgana!' Charis wrapped up her account of Saturday's events. 'I don't doubt he meant it literally when he told me that he wanted to bed me on roses.'

'You're such a romantic,' Morgana commented with a raised eyebrow. 'You realise that roses have thorns, right? Then again, Grindling Gibbons can afford to buy wagon loads of hand-picked rose petals.'

'I'm not dating Grindling for his money,' Charis exclaimed defensively.

'I never said you were,' Morgana replied. 'I'm just stating facts. The Gibbons are an old family, and old families have money.'

Old families also have old friends, she added in her thoughts. *Friends like Narcissa Malfoy.*

Morgana's grip around her spoon tightened that she feared she'd snap it in two. Charis seemed so happy. She was falling in love with Grindling, that much was clear. And the last thing Morgana wanted was to see her friend get hurt.

'So, he didn't tell you who he was going to have dinner with?' she asked.

Charis shook her head. 'No, he didn't. But he really didn't want to go.'

And still he looked like Adonis himself when he showed up at the manor Morgana thought. That didn't seem like someone who really didn't want to attend a dinner.

'Have you spoken to him today?' Morgana asked.

Once more, Charis shook her head. 'I sent him an owl last night, thanking him for a wonderful afternoon. He hasn't replied yet, though. Guess he had a late night.'

'Yeah, guess so,' Morgana answered half-heartedly and picked up her bowl again. She didn't have the heart to tell her friend just how Grindling had spent the night.

After finishing lunch with her friend, Charis spent the rest of the Sunday without any word from Grindling. She was worried at first, wondering if she had been too pushy, too forward or too wanton, so she had scared him away. And by the time she went to work on Monday morning, she was shaking with nervousness. What if Grindling regretted taking her to his bed? What if he regretted telling her that he wanted to make love to her? It would be so awkward to work closely with him then.

But when Charis entered the Hall of Prophecies at a quarter to nine, Grindling wasn't there.

'He's called in sick,' Charis was informed by another Unspeakable as she asked about their boss' whereabouts at half past nine. 'It's the first time he's ever called in sick. He was at work with a sinus infection for several weeks last year. He must be really ill if he's staying at home.'

Charis blushed. And here she had been, imagining the worst of scenarios about why Grindling hadn't contacted her while the poor man had been lying in bed, ill and all alone. She wanted to send an owl to him now, to give him her best wishes and offer her help, but she was so snowed under with enquiries all day that she did not even have the time to eat lunch, let alone find a minute to compile a letter. But she thought of him all day, imagining herself fluffing his pillows, dabbing his brow and feeding him chicken soup.

Chicken soup? Charis could have slapped herself. But of course! She still had some soup left from her visit to Morgana the previous day. Morgana was at work, which must mean that she was well today. So if that chicken soup helped an Auror to get back on her feet, surely it would do the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies good as well.

And so Charis showed up at Grindling's doorstep shortly before seven o'clock that evening, clutching a tureen full of hot, delicious soup. She was feeling a little apprehensive, as she had not announced her visit, but in the end, she still knocked firmly on the door.

For some moments, there was no sound or movement at all, and Charis considered leaving again. If Grindling was too ill to even open the door, she should let him sleep and not impose her company on him. But she would leave the soup, she decided, and searched her bag for some parchment and a quill to leave Grindling a note.

She had just started scribbling when she heard shuffling footsteps. The key was being turned in the lock, and the door opened just a tiny bit.

'Grindling?' Charis asked cautiously.

'Charis?' he replied in a hoarse voice. 'What are you doing here?'

Charis' eyes widened. Grindling looked dreadful! His hair was tied back but untidy, and he was pale as a ghost. There were shadows under his eyes, and he had obviously not shaven that day. And his shirt looked as if he had been sleeping in it.

'Oh, Grindling, you look terrible!' Charis burst out at the forlorn-looking man in front of her.

'Thank you very much. I worked hard on that look,' he answered drily. In all honesty, he was unused to looking anything other than well groomed in company, and Charis catching him unawares actually made him feel a little uncomfortable.

'I'm sorry,' Charis caught herself, picking up on Grindling's discomfort. 'I mean, you must be feeling terrible. They told me you'd never missed work before. I... I brought you some soup.'

She held up the tureen unnecessarily, smiling in what she hoped was a kind way.

Grindling returned her smile, but it was a tired smile. 'You shouldn't have.'

'Someone's got to look after you,' Charis pointed out.

Grindling's mouth twitched at this.

'I'm sorry; where are my manners?' he said and opened the door fully. 'Would you like to come in? It's nothing contagious.'

'I'd risk it even if it was.'

Once more, Charis smiled and then stepped past Grindling, who carefully closed the door behind her.

'Soup, you say?' he asked, and curiously eyed the tureen Charis was carrying.

She nodded.

'Lovely! I'm starving. Let me go get some bowls.'

'No, no, Mr Gibbons,' Charis exclaimed, stepping between Grindling and what she assumed was the door that led to the kitchen. 'You belong in bed. I can fetch a bowl for you.'

'But...'

'No buts,' Charis cut him off with the most authoritarian tone she could muster. 'Into bed with you!'

Grindling hesitated but eventually made to shuffle off towards the bedroom, and Charis couldn't help but wonder if he didn't want her to set foot in his kitchen. And as she approached the sink, she realised why. There lay an empty bottle of elf-made Gin and an empty one of Odgen's. The remains of a wild bachelor party, Chris thought at first, but then she realised that there was only one glass in the sink. She raised her eyebrows. Grindling liked a drink, but spirits weren't really his style. However, evidence pointed to him having drunk those two bottles all by himself. Whatever had driven him to that?

'Some sorrows need to be drowned.'

Charis stiffened at Grindling's voice but did not turn around. She knew that he was standing in the door behind her, knowing that she had found his empty bottles. And she truly wished she hadn't.

She heard him cross the room and mutter a spell, and both bottles as well as the glass disappeared, leaving the sink as spotless as the rest of the kitchen.

'The bowls are on the top shelf,' he informed her as he came to stand beside her. 'It just hit me that you wouldn't be able to reach.'

He took down two bowls and put one back as Charis shook her head to the question of whether she wanted some soup as well, and as Grindling pointed her towards the drawer where he kept his spoons, Charis had the distinct feeling that he was avoiding her gaze. And she chided herself for having been so pushy. If she hadn't insisted on fetching a bowl herself, she would never have seen the bottles and neither of them would now need to pretend that she hadn't.

She watched him eat in silence. He ate with a healthy appetite, but his cheeks did not become any rosier. In fact, Charis thought that they grew even paler.

'How about you go and lie down and I bring you a glass of water?' she suggested when he had emptied the bowl. 'It's important to stay hydrated when one's... ill.'

She looked after him as he more or less sneaked out of the kitchen. She wanted to know what had driven him to drinking, wanted to lay her arms around him and tell him that everything would be alright, but she did not dare ask. If he wanted her to know, he would surely tell her. Or at least, Charis hoped so.

Her heart was pounding in her chest as she opened the bedroom door, and part of her considered leaving. She didn't want Grindling to feel uncomfortable. But the way he smiled at her when she entered the room gave Charis new hope.

'Have you considered Healing as a profession?' he asked as she put down the glass on the bedside table and tenderly brushed a strand of hair from his face.

Charis smiled. 'I wouldn't like dealing with the bedpans.'

Grindling gave a short laugh and reached out to brush Charis' cheek, just as tenderly as she had brushed his.

'The soup was delicious,' he said. 'Did you make it?'

Charis nodded modestly.

'Forget Healing. Become a chef.'

Charis giggled at this. 'My repertoire is quite limited,' she admitted. 'Chicken soup and beans on toast is about all I can do.'

'Nothing wrong with that. I don't care much for lobster anyway.'

They gazed at each other in silence. Charis was happy that Grindling didn't avoid her gaze anymore, and he could not believe that she was still there.

'How are you feeling?' Charis asked carefully after a while.

Grindling shrugged. 'As I deserve, I assume.'

'If you want to talk about it...'

Grindling gave a tiny shake of his head. 'I'm feeling much better now you're here.'

He smiled and held out his arm invitingly. 'Would you mind... just lying here with me for a while?'

Charis' heart took a leap. Only a few minutes ago, she had considered leaving again as she had thought that her presence had made Grindling uncomfortable. But now he was asking her to stay.

She kicked off her shoes and crawled onto the bed beside him.

'I must warn you,' he said. 'I didn't shower today.'

'I don't care,' Charis replied, snuggling down. 'You could smell of Hippogriff dung, I wouldn't care.'

'You're too sweet,' Grindling murmured, wrapping his arm around her so her head came to lie on his chest. Gently, he kissed her hair.

'I had a wonderful time with you on Saturday, Charis.'

'So did I,' she murmured back. 'You look rather good in Muggle clothes, you know.'

'I'm not sure that is a compliment,' Grindling replied, and Charis imagined him smiling.

'How's Mr Gibbs?' he asked after a moment.

'Mr Gibbs is safely tucked up in my bed,' Charis answered. 'He seems to like it there.'

'I bet he does.'

Grindling hugged her closer and held on to her tight. He seemed almost afraid she'd disappear. Charis, meanwhile, happily squeezed him back.

'I've missed you. Yesterday and today,' Grindling whispered.

'I missed you, too. I'm sorry I didn't get in touch sooner. It's been so busy that I didn't have time to think at work. I really wanted to send you an owl to wish you a speedy

recovery.'

'I've never called in sick before, especially not because I was hung over. It's just... I couldn't face people today...'

Charis squeezed him again. 'It's okay.'

They said nothing more after that. Charis hoped Grindling would tell her in his own time what had driven him to drink two bottles of liquor, but for now she was content with just being held. And Grindling was happy to hold her in his arms. At least tonight, they would sleep entwined like the lovers he wished they were.

* * *

It was still early when Charis woke up the next morning. Actually, she thought she had just heard the grandfather clock in the hall chime five. But maybe, that had been a dream. She couldn't tell. But what wasn't a dream was the strong arm that lay around her waist and the gorgeous wizard who was spooning her.

Charis sighed contently and shifted her weight a bit, which resulted in Grindling tightening his grip.

'I'm sorry,' Charis whispered. 'Did I wake you?'

'I've been awake for a while,' Grindling replied and traced the curve of her neck with his nose. 'Watched you sleep.'

Charis shivered both at his words and his touch, and her heart filled with a warmth that soon spread through her whole body.

'We don't have to get up yet, do we?' she murmured.

Grindling shook his head. 'It's only five o'clock. There is no rush at all.'

Charis snuggled closer, and her eyes opened wide in surprise as she became aware of Grindling's erection that was pressing against her bum. She had never woken up in the arms of a man before, and the idea of said man waking up aroused after having held onto her all night sent a feeling of excitement through her. Oh, to make love to him while they both were still half asleep...

She tried to turn around. She wanted to kiss Grindling, touch him and caress him, but he kept a strong grip around her. He didn't hurt her, but he made sure she couldn't move.

'You should go back to sleep, dear one,' he whispered into her ear. 'We don't need to be at work for another four hours.'

At first, Charis wanted to protest. She didn't want to go back to sleep. She wanted to make love to Grindling, properly this time. She wanted to feel him deep inside her, wanted him to make her his. And surely, he wanted the same thing. But he held her firmly and whispered softly in her ear. She didn't hear everything he said, but what she heard sounded very sweet. And eventually, she dozed off after all, despite herself, and didn't wake up until two hours later. That time, she lay alone in bed.

Slightly puzzled, Charis sat up and looked around. There were candles burning on the bedside table, and there was also a note.

You still have time for a bath, dear Charis. Leave your robes on the chair by the door, and the elf will make sure they are wrinkle free and sweet smelling once you're done.

Breakfast will be ready soon.

G.

Charis smiled. A bath sounded certainly tempting, although she would very much have liked to join Grindling, who was obviously in the kitchen. But she had slept in the clothes she had worn all day yesterday, and she had not brushed her teeth last night... Freshening up a bit didn't seem like a bad idea.

She opted for a quick shower and dressed quickly afterwards, secretly envying every witch and wizard who owned an elf. Because her robes looked as good as new and smelled of roses.

'Good morning, kind sir,' Charis greeted Grindling as she entered the kitchen.

He was standing by the sink with his back to the door. In earshot, for sure, but he didn't answer her greeting. In fact, he stood quite still, and Charis thought for a moment that he had not heard her. But as she came closer, she noticed that something was amiss. Grindling didn't stand tall as he usually did. His shoulders were slumped, and his knuckles were white, so hard was he holding on to the edge of the kitchen counter.

'Grindling?'

She heard him inhale sharply, but he didn't turn around. And if possible, he even tightened his grip around the counter. He seemed in distress, so much was clear. But what had caused it, Charis knew nothing of.

Bravely, she shuffled forwards, past the carefully laid breakfast table, and put a comforting hand onto Grindling's back.

'What's wrong, sweetheart? Is there anything I can do?'

'Run,' Grindling brought forth between gritted teeth. His words were barely audible. 'Run as far away as you can.'

Charis' heart stopped for a moment. Already once had a wizard told her to go away, to keep as far away from him as she possibly could. May the gods prevent Grindling from saying the same! Charis doubted that she would be able to bear the heartache.

She slowly withdrew her hand. Her first instinct was to do exactly what Grindling had suggested, run away before he could say anything to hurt her. But when he turned around, just as slowly as she was backing off, Charis froze in mid-step. Grindling looked distraught. His eyes were red rimmed and his cheeks wet with tears.

'My heart is breaking, Charis,' he whispered.

Charis swallowed drily. She neither knew what to say nor what to do. And so she just let Grindling talk.

'I care a lot for you, Charis,' he began. 'I care more for you than I have cared for any other woman for a very long time. I am falling in love with you. But...'

He swayed, and for a moment Charis was afraid he'd collapse. But she couldn't make herself reach out for him to support him.

'On Saturday evening, that dinner I attended...'

He broke off once again, drawing a shuddering breath as to steady himself.

'The woman I told you about, the one who broke my heart... It was she who invited me to dinner...'

At this, his voice broke. He cringed and made a noise that reminded Charis of the cry of a hurt animal. But still she was unable to move, even when she saw him turn around and his body shake with sobs.

'I can't rid myself of her, Charis,' he brought forth in the end. 'I tried so hard, for so many years. And when I left you on Saturday, I thought that you had given me the strength to resist her Siren call. But I am weak. I cannot get her out of my heart.'

He pounded his fist hard against the kitchen cupboard, so hard that the plates inside it rattled. But Charis did not even flinch, and the pain that shot through Grindling's hand was nothing compared to the pain they both felt in their hearts.

'I cannot do this to you, Charis,' he whispered, just loud enough for her to hear. 'I care too much for you to be giving you false hope. My heart is soiled and broken. And you deserve a one that is whole and pure. Forgive me. I beg you, forgive me.'

Once more, sobs shook Grindling's body, and for some moments, he was so absorbed in his own pain that he did not hear Charis' footsteps. And by the time he crumbled onto the kitchen floor, she had had long since Disappeared.

XXIV: The Sympathy of Snakes

Chapter 24 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXIV: The Sympathy of Snakes

In another part of London, in a tiny room at the corner of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, to be precise, Tuesday morning had also started early, not to anyone's surprise. Morgana usually awoke before sunrise, and most days, she was glad to have woken up. For the land of dreams was ordinarily not a place she liked to dwell in for too long. This night, however, there had been no nightmares, no whispers and no steely grey eyes, and Morgana had slept peacefully. Yet still, she had awoken shortly after five with her heart racing in her chest. And since then, she had been pacing her room, unable to get rid of the feeling that something bad was about to happen.

Shortly after seven, Silvy sneaked into the room with breakfast: buttered toast and a cup of tea, the only thing her mistress' stomach could handle in the morning. The good elf never showed up before seven, even though she knew very well that her mistress had been up much earlier. Her mistress needed those hours for herself, Silvy knew that. Just as well as she knew that not more than one of the three slices of toast would be eaten. But Silvy loved her mistress and didn't make a fuss, even though her little elf heart knew that something was amiss.

Morgana drank her tea at the window, overlooking Diagon Alley. The street was still quiet. None of the shops had opened yet, and there were only a few people up and about. The bakery a little further up the street was open, of course, and there were some owls flying around, delivering the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Otherwise, all was silent, and Morgana, therefore, almost dropped her tea cup in surprise as a beautiful snowy owl tapped its beak at her window.

'Who sent you out so early in the morning?' Morgana asked as she opened the window and lifted the owl inside. 'Or have you been flying all night?'

She set her breakfast plate in front of the bird and let it nibble on her toast while she untied the ribbon with which the little roll of parchment had been tied to the owl's leg. It was a green and silver ribbon made of the finest silk. The parchment, too, looked rather expensive. And when Morgana broke the seal, she was not even surprised that it bore the Malfoy crest. Yet still, her hands shook slightly as she unrolled the parchment, and she couldn't deny that she felt relieved when she recognised Narcissa's handwriting, neat and slender, as befitted a lady.

Dearest Morgana,

I hope this letter finds you well.

I must admit, your sudden disappearance after dinner on Saturday caused me some distress at first, but I realise now that the one to blame is I.

Forgive me, sweetheart, for having put you under such duress. In my haste to make two people who are dear to me happy, I risked alienating you. I know that whilst you are young and innocent to the ways of courtship, Grindling is a mature, successful wizard, and I understand how that could seem daunting to you. But let me reassure you that Grindling is a true gentleman and would not dream of pressuring you. He also holds you in very high regard, and I know he would be keen to meet with you again on your terms. After all, you did seem to be getting on so well. And I would like nothing more than to see you both happy.

So, please, darling Morgana, I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me and let me make it up to you with tea at the manor this week girls only, this time.

Think about it, sweetheart, and when you have found it in your heart to forgive me, return the owl.

Fondest regards,

Cissy

'Took you two days to compose an apology, eh?'

Morgana could not help but give a short, bitter laugh which startled the owl and made the poor bird almost choke on the bit of toast it had in its beak. But that was nothing compared with the shock the owl received shortly afterwards, when a second young witch appeared in the middle of the room, seemingly out of thin air.

'Charis!' Morgana exclaimed, just as alarmed as the bird. Charis had always been one to announce her visits in good time and knock politely at the door. Apparating into a room at half past seven in the morning without any warning wasn't like her.

'He... he broke... broke it off!'

Charis was sobbing so violently that her words weren't even close to being comprehensible, but it didn't matter. She was in such a state that her mere appearance was enough to make Morgana drop the letter she was holding and make a beeline for her friend instead.

'Hush, sweetie. Hush.'

But Morgana's words didn't help. If anything, Charis seemed to cry even harder when she flung her arms around her friend. And Morgana knew nothing else to do than pat

the Ravenclaw awkwardly on the back. She had never been good at consoling people.

'Deep breaths now, chicken,' she said calmly and directed Charis towards the yet unmade bed. She had a feeling that her friend wouldn't manage to keep standing for much longer.

'What's going on?'

'He... he broke it off,' Charis managed to bring forth between sobs. 'He... he's in love with someone else... Another woman...'

'Grindling?' Morgana asked stupidly and could have slapped herself for it. Of course Charis was talking about Grindling. Who else?

'Saturday...,' Charis continued, tears still streaming down her face. 'He... he had dinner with her on Saturday. He said he can't get her out of his heart. He... he loves her.'

Morgana paled.

He holds you in very high regard, Narcissa had written. And I know he would be keen to meet with you again

Icy cold dread went through Morgana. No, surely not. This couldn't be. They'd both had too much wine and too much gu. Surely, Grindling had recovered from both by now.

But he had called her enchanting, adorable. He had held her so gently and looked at her as if she were the most beautiful woman he had ever set eyes upon. And she had encouraged him, got onto her toes to kiss him.

No, this must be a misunderstanding!

'Charis, look at me,' Morgana said, steeling herself as she cupped her friend's chin. 'Would you please start from the beginning?'

Red-rimmed green eyes locked onto blue ones, and Charis took a shuddering breath. Morgana, however, did not dare breathe at all.

'Grindling did not come in to work yesterday, and I hadn't heard a word from him all Sunday. I was afraid that I had been too pushy or too needy and that I had scared him off, but then one of the Unspeakables said he was sick and he never calls in sick.'

She broke off and sniffed, dabbing her nose with a tissue.

'I decided to go round after work and bring the leftover soup, as it made you feel better. Oh, he looked awful, Morgana. But it wasn't the flu. I found bottles of liquor in his sink... He was hung-over. He'd drunk himself into a stupor.'

Once more, Charis broke off. She had felt so sorry for Grindling when she had realised why he had stayed home. She had wanted him to tell her what had driven him to drinking, had wanted to share his burden and make him happy again. Now she wished that she had never asked.

'I didn't want to pressure him. I hoped he'd tell me in his own time what was burdening him. So, we spent the night cuddled up instead, and we fell asleep.'

A sad smile flitted over Charis' face. Everything had felt so right when she had been lying in Grindling's arms. She had felt so safe, so loved.

'This morning... he was romantic. He told me he'd watched me sleeping. He was going to cook breakfast for me. But, when I came in the kitchen...'

Her voice started to wobble, and once more her sight was clouded with tears.

'He told me he couldn't lie to me and that his heart was tainted by another witch.'

She buried her face in her hands as sobs shook her body again, and Morgana hid her own shaking hands in the folds of her robes. She did not know what to say. Her first impulse was to apologise, but she sadly lacked the courage. What if Charis didn't accept her apology? What if she lost her best friend over a man she barely cared about?

'He... he said she has haunted him for many years...' Charis went on, her face muffled by her hands. 'He said that he can't break free of her.'

She looked up mournfully and desolately at Morgana, who in her turn tried to give her friend a compassionate look.

'Why would he do this to me, Morgana?'

Morgana opened her mouth to speak, but the words failed her. She felt for Charis, she truly did, but she couldn't help but feel unspeakably relieved that the woman Grindling held in his heart wasn't her. So relieved, that she didn't think about who it was instead.

She gingerly patted her friend's blond hair, letting her hand linger for just a moment longer than was custom between friends. She didn't know what to say. Before he had become befuddled with the wine and the gu, Grindling had spoken so highly of Charis. 'She means a lot to me,' he had said. 'I would never do anything to hurt her.' But now he had hurt her, and he had wounded deeply. For the sake of another woman, a woman who had haunted him for many years.

Morgana frowned as the truth dawned on her. She had seen the look in Grindling's eyes. She had seen him smile. But on Saturday night, she had been too preoccupied with her own thoughts and worries to read the signs correctly. Could it be that the woman in question was... No, surely not. That was just preposterous. But then again, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

'How am I going to face him at work?' Charis suddenly piped up, thereby interrupting Morgana's thoughts. 'I really don't want to go in today!'

'Oh, you're not going to work! You have a cold. Got it from me this weekend.'

Charis gave her friend a surprised look as the latter stood up.

'I, on the other hand, am running late.'

'But it's only eight o'clock,' Charis protested, her confusion growing bigger by the moment. 'You don't start until nine.'

'I need to be there early,' Morgana explained, looking for her cloak. 'I am going to have a little chat with Mr Gibbons.'

'Morgana, no!' Charis explained. 'You really don't have to do that!'

'Yes, I do,' Morgana replied. She sounded calm and determined. 'No one hurts my Star Sister. No matter who he's related to.'

Charis gave her friend a watery smile.

'Don't give him a black eye, alright?' she said in a feeble tone.

'I was thinking about a more subtle form of torture,' Morgana replied drily. 'But if he's putting up a fight...'

Despite everything, a little laugh escaped Charis, and Morgana kneeled down in front of her and once more cupped her friend's chin.

'I want you to curl up under a comfy blanket and eat loads of chocolate today,' she said. 'This rat hole will not do, though. And you'll need your kitty. Silvy!'

The elf appeared in a blink of an eye, and Morgana turned her head to talk to her. She did not, however, let go of Charis.

'Silvy, I want you to take Charis home and stay with her all day. She needs company and chocolate. I'm talking wagonloads of chocolate. Do you understand?'

'Yes, mistress,' the elf replied, and today Morgana didn't even mind being addressed in that manner.

'Morgana, this isn't necessary,' Charis objected. 'I can take care of myself.'

'Hush now,' Morgana interrupted her. 'I'd take care of you myself today, but Moody would throw a fit if I don't show up. And Silvy will be ever so happy to wait on you. I think she is bored out of her mind. Isn't that so, Silvy?'

'Silvy will be happy to serve mistress Morgana's friend,' the elf replied. 'All Miss Charis has to do is tell Silvy what chocolate she likes.'

'Well trained, that one,' Morgana commented and then got to her feet once more.

'Let me know if you need me,' she said, and picked up the little silver mirror from her bedside table to put it into her pocket. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

* * *

While Charis' flat filled with the comforting smell of chocolate croissants and she lay curled up on the sofa with Lily tightly hugged to her chest, Grindling Gibbons made his way through the atrium at the Ministry, barely noticing the greetings of his fellow Ministry workers.

'Good morning, Mr Gibbons.'

'Nice to have you back, Grindling.'

'You look terrible, Gee. Are you sure you're well enough to be here? Shouldn't you be at home, resting?'

To that, Grindling just gave a non-committal nod. The thought of staying at home had struck him, too. But he hadn't considered resting. Emptying that bottle of Ogden's, more likely, and any other bottle of hard liquor he could get his hands on. Not that getting drunk had helped chase his demons away over the weekend. But if he did it properly this time, he might just never have to face them again.

Just how he had found the strength to leave the Firewhisky where it was and get dressed for work was beyond Grindling. He couldn't even remember if he had Flooded into work or Apparated. Everything was a haze, and his thoughts were far, far away. He was, therefore, totally taken by surprise when a hand closed around his arm and he was dragged aside.

'You heinous bastard!'

The wand that was pointing at his nose was as effective as a bucket of cold water over the head, and all of a sudden, Grindling was acutely aware of his surroundings. He was in a lift, a lift whose doors were firmly shut but that wasn't moving. He was being pressed against the wall of said lift. And the wand whose tip he was staring at was held by a small, familiar-looking hand.

'If you as much as think about pulling your wand, I'll hex your pretty face right off.'

Utterly shocked and bewildered, Grindling slowly raised his hands in a truce-like gesture.

'M-Morgana,' he stammered. 'If this is about Saturday... I am so sorry. I acted inappropriately. I should not have...'

'Oh, shut it, Prince Charming!' Morgana interrupted him. 'This is not about Saturday!'

Her blue eyes were as cold as a frozen lake, her jaw set and her lips but a thin line. Her wand wasn't even shaking the tiniest bit, and the vice-like grip with which she held Grindling pinned to the wall made it clear to him that Morgana was not joking around. What she was so furious about, however, he knew nothing about.

'Is this your idea of "I don't want to hurt Charis", Grindling? Dumping her over breakfast?'

Despite having a wand pointed at his face by a young witch who seemed more than capable and willing to hex him into the next century, Grindling felt a wave of relief wash over him.

'You've spoken to Charis,' he brought forth. 'Thank goodness. I... I tried to contact her. I sent her an owl. I used the Floo. But she wasn't home.'

'She was at my place,' Morgana hissed.

'Is she alright?'

'Is she alright?' Morgana repeated. 'You can't be fucking serious!'

'I never meant to hurt her,' Grindling confessed sorrowfully, blinking furiously to keep back the tears that were welling up in his eyes. He felt dizzy now, and he wasn't sure that he would manage to keep standing if Morgana weren't pinning him to the wall.

'I never meant to hurt her,' he repeated. 'She means too much to me.'

'That was one hell of a way to show her,' Morgana spat. But despite the anger still bubbling in her chest, she lowered her wand.

'I never meant to hurt her,' Grindling said for a third time, and this time, Morgana believed him. The look in his grey eyes was more than desperate, and his whole posture spoke of desolation and exhaustion.

'Tell me why you broke it off with her,' she demanded.

'Didn't she tell you?'

'I want to hear it from you. From your mouth, in your own words.'

'I am haunted by another woman, Morgana,' Grindling started slowly after having taken a deep, shuddering breath. 'She has haunted me for almost two decades, half of my life. She was my first love, my only love. Until I met Charis.'

He closed his eyes and took another couple of deep breaths.

'When I left Charis on Saturday, I believed... *I hoped* that her love and what I feel for her would be enough. I truly hoped it would give me the strength to stand tall and break free from my bonds. But I am weak. All it took was for that woman to click her fingers, and once more I danced like a puppet.'

"When a Malfoy says "jump", Morgana said quietly. She had long since let go of Grindling's robes, but her hand had lingered on his chest. Now it took all her willpower not to caress his cheek.

"You are talking about Narcissa Malfoy, aren't you?"

Grindling nodded, and as his grey eyes locked onto Morgana's blue ones, he looked truly wretched.

"I love Charis, Morgana. Truly, I do. And it's because I love her that I cannot deceive her. I cannot be with her if I can't give my whole self to her. She deserves a heart that is whole and pure."

"She broke yours, didn't she?" Morgana asked and placed her hand over the wizard's heart. "Narcissa, I mean."

Grindling nodded sadly.

"Ripped it in two, stamped on it, chewed it up and spat it out. And still I love her. Aren't I the biggest fool on this earth?"

Barely noticeably, Morgana shook her head, contemplating the fact that they had both had their hearts smashed to smithereens by Malfoys. Grindling had suffered for almost twenty years. How long would she have to suffer?

"There are many fools like that, Grindling," she said softly. "Two in this very lift."

Grindling frowned, but when he opened his mouth to speak, Morgana stepped away from him, backing up until her back touched the opposite wall and she could go no further. And Grindling understood that it wasn't the right time to ask.

"Cissy won't give up, Morgana," he said after a while. "She is hell-bent on bringing you and me together."

"I know."

Morgana sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. What she was about to suggest seemed ludicrous, but for the time being, she had no better idea. And with some luck, they could all be set free.

"If we play along," she started, "if we can make Narcissa believe that you and I are really... falling for each other... Will she let you go?"

Grindling shrugged. "I guess."

"And you, Grindling? If Narcissa takes her hand off you, will you be able to walk away from her and never look back?"

Grindling hesitated, maybe a moment too long for Morgana's liking. But when he finally answered, he sounded earnest.

"I would do anything to be free of her."

Morgana nodded.

"We'll have to be convincing. Narcissa needs to believe that you really have given your heart to me. Your whole heart. She doesn't need to know who you've really given it to."

"Will Charis still want it?" Grindling asked fearfully. "Will she still want... me?"

Morgana exhaled audibly.

"Charis cares for you just as much as you care for her, Grindling. Why else do you think she's crying her eyes out now?"

The pain in Grindling's eyes hit Morgana right in the heart, and as Grindling asked her if she would do him a favour, she couldn't turn him down.

"Will you give this to her?" he asked, producing a little round, silver object from his pocket. "It's called a Draumar," he explained. "It's a Sight-Saver, a prophecy recorder."

Morgana tilted her head and eyed the little object. It was pretty, covered in stars and moons. Charis would surely like it.

"It works like a Pensieve," Grindling went on. "Most true visions are immediately forgotten by the divinator and thus reported by spectators. They're second-hand information, so to speak. A Draumar records the prophecy straight from the prophet, you see."

"Why would you give this to Charis?" Morgana asked. She was no fan of divination but, nonetheless, intrigued by the little object.

"I showed it to Charis in her first week here, and she loved it," Grindling replied.

"No surprise there," Morgana commented. "There are stars on it."

Grindling smiled.

"They are rare, Draumars. This one was given to me by my grandmother. It was handed down through generations. It means a lot to me. I carry it with me every day. Now I'd like Charis to have it, to show her how much I care for her."

He held it out towards her, and Morgana held it in her hand, looking at the way the skilful engravings winked in the light. It seemed to be made of solid silver but still fragile enough to be crushed in a fist.

"It's pretty," she conceded.

"Just like Charis," Grindling pointed out and gave her an awkward smile.

Morgana nodded.

"I'm sorry that I was a bit rough with you," she said, putting the Draumar in her pocket and pointing at Grindling's wrinkled robes.

"And I'm sorry for getting you involved, Morgana," he answered.

"This is not your fault," Morgana said dismissively. "Neither is it Narcissa's, if I think about it."

Grindling looked puzzled, but Morgana just shook her head.

"Expect an owl soon with yet another appointment at the manor," she said instead. "I got mine this morning with an invitation to high tea. Girls only. I guess Narcissa will want to tell me about the birds and the bees so I am prepared when I meet you the next time and won't run off because your flirtations are scaring me."

At this, Grindling couldn't help but laugh. But soon the laughter died away, and he once more looked at Morgana with pain in his eyes.

'What have we got ourselves in to?'

'One big mess, Mr Gibbons,' Morgana replied gravely. 'One big mess.'

XXV: The Draumar's Secret

Chapter 25 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXV: The Draumar's Secret

'Come here, Lily-sweetie. We have time for a cuddle.'

The little white cat jumped gracefully onto the sofa and settled in Charis' lap obediently. Within moments, the affectionate feline started to purr contentedly, and Charis enjoyed the rhythmic sound of the cat's purring thoroughly. It helped her to relax, and relaxation was exactly what she needed that Monday evening.

It had been a stressful day. There was still so much to do in the Hall of Prophecies, and the seemingly never-ending task was starting to take its toll on the Unspeakables. Many were stressed out, tired and snappy, and they all very much missed the encouraging words and pats on the shoulders the Keeper of the Hall used to give them whenever they needed it. They all missed their boss, and not knowing when he would return to work or even why he was absent made the staff uneasy. And when her colleagues talked about Grindling, Charis could not help but miss him immensely. The combination of Grindling's absence and tetchy colleagues had made an already taxing Monday even worse, and when Charis had left the Ministry that night, she had hoped to crawl up on the sofa with a good book and maybe a glass of wine. But when she had come home, she'd but had the time to kick off her sleet-covered boots when a phoenix Patronus had materialised right in front of her.

At first, Charis had been startled, but upon hearing the Patronus speak in the familiar voice of Albus Dumbledore, she had calmed down and dutifully accepted the order to present herself at Headquarters at eleven thirty that night. That meant no wine, of course, since Charis didn't trust herself to stop after just one glass. Because judging by the bottle, the wine that Grindling had sent her was nothing else but delicious, and Charis had never been one to put away an open bottle.

Once more, Charis eyed the postcard that had arrived together with the wine on Sunday morning. It depicted a wonderful sandy beach, and the white houses that were clinging to the mountains in the background told Charis that Grindling must be in Greece. Most probably, he was visiting his family's summer house.

Charis turned the card around and read the short note for the umpteenth time. Grindling hadn't written much, just that he was doing his best to relax and that he was hoping to be able to return to work soon. And Charis certainly hoped he would. He had been gone for almost three weeks now.

He had never arrived in the Hall of Prophecies on the Tuesday after he had ended their relationship. Instead, he had spoken to his superior about taking some time off. And the old wizard had granted Grindling's wish. After all, the Keeper of the Hall had looked anything but healthy that morning. And so, Grindling Gibbons had disappeared from sight, not informing any of his staff about where he had gone off to. All the Unspeakables had been told was that their boss was taking some time off for "personal reasons".

When Charis had returned from work the next day, her stomach had been in a knot, of course. Surely, Grindling was keeping away from work because of her. He didn't want to see her, that much was clear. And in her desperation, Charis had almost tossed away the Draumar, which he had gifted her with the day before. How could he give her such a beautiful gift and then avoid her twenty-four hours later? It didn't make sense. But before she had been able to act on her impulse, a large brown owl had arrived at her window, carrying a letter from Grindling.

Dearest Charis,

I hope this letter finds you well and that you have gotten over the cold that kept you home yesterday. Hopefully, you had some of your chicken soup left.

I am aware that you expect this letter to contain an explanation and an apology. And by the Gods, you deserve both. But only cowards apologise in letters. The brave ones do it in person. I am not, however, feeling brave at the moment, and I need to gather some strength before kneeling down in front of you and asking you for your forgiveness. And my dearest wish is that you will find it in your heart to absolve me.

I will not be coming to work for a couple of weeks. I haven't taken a holiday since I took on my assignment at the Hall of Prophecies, and I think now is as good a time as any to make use of the weeks I have at my disposal. I feel I have to be by myself for some time to gather my thoughts and figure out where I am heading.

I hope you accept my apologies for not having said goodbye and that you will allow me to write to you.

Yours, devotedly,

Grindling

He had written to her two or three times a week since then, sending colourful postcards from all around Europe and his best wishes, and Charis had always sent back a little thank you note, talking about the grey London weather or what she'd had for lunch. Neither of them spoke any more of their feelings, and Charis thought it was better that way. Whenever they met again, they would both have had the time to think, and hopefully, they would be able to talk properly to each other then.

Shortly after nine o'clock, the flames in Charis' fireplace turned green, and moments later, Morgana stepped out onto the rug, carrying two white carton boxes.

'Silvy sends her love. And dinner!' the trainee Auror announced, ruffling her hair to get the last of the ash off. She was still wearing her red curls shoulder length, and Charis thought it suited her friend very well. As did the dark green robes she was wearing. They were neither tight nor low cut, but still they showed more of Morgana's well-shaped figure than any of her robes had done in months. And Charis could not help but wonder what or who was the reason for Morgana abandoning her black, shapeless robes and her boyish haircut. But she didn't ask. When Morgana was ready, she would certainly tell her.

Charis watched Morgana putting dinner onto two plates. Her friend had been around a couple of times over the last three weeks, and when she had been working late or otherwise engaged, she had sent Silvy over, both to cook dinner and to keep Charis company. And Charis had been immensely grateful. So grateful that she would have loved to hug her friend senseless every time they saw each other. But she knew the gesture wouldn't go down well with the prickly Slytherin.

'I guess you've been summoned as well?' Morgana wondered as she handed Charis her plate filled with rice and Szechuan beef.

'Yes, I had Albus' Patronus come through when I came home from work,' Charis confirmed. 'It sounded pretty serious. I wonder what's happened.'

'Guess it won't be about cake,' Morgana answered drily, scooping up a forkful of the beef. She had been given her order to present herself at Grimmauld Place by Mad-Eye Moody, but he had refused to tell her why she had been called. Instead, he had muttered something about her needing to start following orders without questioning them.

'Would you like some wine with dinner?' Charis asked, furtively glancing towards the bottle she'd been gifted. Certainly, with Morgana around, she could venture opening it. There were only three large glasses in a bottle anyway, and if Morgana had one... Surely, two glasses before the meeting would be acceptable.

'Since when do I drink wine with dinner?' Morgana asked, eyeing up the bottle that Charis had placed on the table and upon that changing her mind. Even she could tell that it wasn't a cheap one. 'Have you robbed Gringotts?' she asked jokingly.

'Ah, no,' Charis replied, at once feeling rather sheepish. 'It's from Grindling.'

'He has sent you wine?' her friend asked, slightly surprised. She knew Grindling had been in touch with Charis and sent her postcards, and she had given him credit for that. But sending expensive wine?

Charis blushed, realising it looked suspicious. A mere friend wouldn't send such an expensive gift, and a boss definitely wouldn't.

Morgana, however, looked pleased at the fact that Grindling was spoiling Charis. It was clear he cared for her friend, even if his heart still belonged to another witch. With some luck, he'd be free soon, she hoped, and Charis would get her Prince Charming.

'Do you miss him?' she asked.

At this, Charis nodded and swallowed, looking down. Morgana was her best friend, but she still didn't feel comfortable sharing her emotions about Grindling with her. Not now, when she herself wasn't sure what exactly she was feeling.

Morgana eyed the bottle again. 'I'd say he misses you, too.'

Charis said nothing to this, instead pulling out the Draumar from under her robes. She'd managed to attach it magically to a silver chain, where it hung around her neck alongside the star she wore habitually at her throat.

'I can't believe he gave me this,' she said after a moment. 'They're very rare. And this one is a family heirloom. It's beautiful, isn't it?'

Morgana studied the little object. She'd held it in her hand when Grindling had given it to her, but her thoughts had been anywhere but on the Draumar that day, and thus, she didn't remember much more about it than that it was engraved with stars and moons. It was a pretty little item, and even though it might not originally have been meant to be worn as a necklace, its flat form and the small size made the perfect jewellery out of it. In fact, it looked a bit as if Charis were wearing an ornamental Galleon.

'Figured out how it works yet?' Morgana asked.

'No,' Charis admitted, and the frustration was evident in her voice. 'I've tried prising it and using spells, but nothing seems to work. And before you say it, I'm not asking Grindling! My Ravenclaw pride is at stake.'

Charis looked indignant at the very thought, and Morgana couldn't help but snort.

'I guess I'll figure it out,' Charis continued. 'Otherwise, I might need to have a chat with Professor Trelawney.'

'You can't be that desperate!' Morgana exclaimed. She'd always done her very best to avoid the Hogwarts Divination teacher. The woman had given her the creeps. Surely, no one would want to talk to that hag voluntarily!

Charis merely smiled in response.

'I think you should ask Grindling... once he's back,' Morgana said and looked questioningly at her friend. 'Have you thought about how that will be?' she asked carefully. 'When he gets back, I mean?'

Charis gave a deep sigh. 'It's all I've been thinking about. I know he didn't mean to hurt me. And him being away has given us both time to think.'

'But?' Morgana prompted.

'I think we'll have to take things day by day.'

'Hm, guess so.' Morgana paused, playing with a bit of beef. 'Will you give him a second chance?' she asked hopefully. 'If he manages to rid himself of, you know, the other one?'

'I don't know, Morgana,' Charis replied earnestly. 'If she's held on to his heart for twenty years, I don't know if he can ever be free of her.'

'But *if*?' Morgana pushed. She really wanted this to work out for her friend and for Grindling. There weren't many decent men around these days, but from what she'd seen, Grindling was one of the best. Charis deserved a man like Grindling, one who would treat her like a princess and worship the ground she walked on.

'Time will tell,' Charis said. 'I can't risk being hurt again.'

'No, you can't,' Morgana agreed, looking at the postcards which Charis had placed neatly on the counter. She knew how it was to be hurt, and she certainly intended to do anything it took to never be hurt again.

'You can't deny that he's sweet, though.'

Charis smiled once more. 'Yes, he is a darling.'

'Maybe he can be a dear friend to you, if nothing else?' Morgana suggested.

'I'd hope so,' Charis admitted, taking one last scoop of rice. She'd given it a lot of thought, but so far, she had not figured out what would be worse: to have Grindling as a friend, knowing that there would never be anything more, or to not have him in her life at all.

* * *

Number twelve, Grimmauld Place looked slightly eerie at the best of times, but at night, it looked positively creepy. Charis had never been at the headquarters at such a late hour and kept her wand in a tight grip, prepared to hex anyone or anything that should pounce at them from the shadows. And Morgana wouldn't have been surprised to suddenly hear Snape's drawling voice and once more be chided like a little child. Thus, neither of the girls spoke as they crept down the dimly lit hallway to the door that reached the lounge.

'Trust Dumbledore to summon us in the middle of the night and not be here. Some of us actually have to get up early.'

Alastor Moody's unmistakable grumbling could clearly be heard through the door, and while Charis still found the man a bit intimidating, Morgana had grown used to his grumpiness and actually grinned.

'Guess I shouldn't suggest that he give us the morning off tomorrow,' she whispered. 'He'd have my head for it.'

The two friends entered the lounge to find Moody pacing the room impatiently with Tonks sitting on the sofa and looking miserable; Remus Lupin was sitting to her left, and the man to her right was most certainly a Weasley, judging by his ginger hair.

Tonks' face brightened slightly when she saw the girls. 'Watcher!'

Morgana nodded a greeting and slunk off into the shadows of the room whilst Charis was a bit more social and said hello to the room at large, which was met by nothing more than a non-committal grunt from Moody. Lupin, however, beamed and the ginger-haired man introduced himself.

'Arthur Weasley. I don't believe we've had the pleasure?' He smiled kindly. 'Molly sends her apologies. One of our chickens has escaped, and she's been tearing around The Burrow for hours on the hunt for it. She sent a cake, though.'

Lupin, of course, looked happy at the prospect of cake. Moody, however, did not.

'How many of you are only here for the cake, I wonder,' he asked sourly, glaring at Lupin, who jokingly raised his hand.

Tonks giggled, earning herself a reproachful glare from the magical eye. It was clear that Moody wasn't at all pleased with the young Auror that night.

The sound of the front door closing made everyone look up, and only a few moments later,

Dumbledore entered the room. He looked tired but still managed to smile at the assembled group.

'Welcome, everyone. Thank you for coming at such a late hour. I will be quick so you can all go to bed soon.'

He looked around before continuing, and his blue eyes rested on Moody for a moment. It almost seemed as if he had heard Mad-Eye's comment about him letting everyone wait.

'Severus will arrive shortly, but seeing that he is already informed of what has happened, I don't think he will mind if I start.'

He paused to push his half-moon spectacles up the bridge of his Roman nose.

'I summoned you tonight to inform you that there has been an attack on a Hogwarts student.'

Everyone gasped in horror, except Moody, who looked impassive, and Tonks, who made a whimpering noise.

'Nymphodora, this was not your fault,' Dumbledore went on, looking straight at the young Auror. 'Even though you were patrolling Hogsmeade last weekend, there was nothing you could have done.'

Tonks didn't seem to be reassured by this, and Lupin laid a comforting arm around her shoulder as Dumbledore continued.

'One of our students was given a package at the Three Broomsticks, a package which was to be delivered to me. It contained a rather beautiful necklace. Beautiful, but cursed. The pupil in question unfortunately opened the parcel and is now in St. Mungo's as a result. She's lucky to be alive.'

The assembled Order members gave each other shocked looks. An assassination attempt on the Headmaster of Hogwarts was unheard of, and that a student had come to harm was a downright tragedy.

Arthur Weasley was the first to speak.

'Do you have any suspicion who might have done this?'

'There are suspicions, yes,' the headmaster confirmed. 'However, they don't come from me.'

'And the student?' Lupin asked. 'Is she alright?'

'I am afraid Miss Bell will have to stay at St. Mungo's for quite some time,' Dumbledore replied gravely.

'Bell? Katie Bell? The Gryffindor chaser?' Charis asked fearfully.

Dumbledore nodded in the affirmative, and Charis gazed at the floor in shock. She and Katie had not socialized too much at Hogwarts, but the girl had always seemed very nice.

'What can we do about it, Albus?' Moody asked gruffly. 'Who's the culprit here?'

'As I have said, Alastor, there is at least one suspect whom I am already keeping an eye on,' the old wizard replied calmly. 'However, I will need to ask for the assistance of the Order to tighten security around the castle. I fear the Ministry will not be interested in helping.'

Once more, the creaking of the front door made everyone turn their head, and it was to no one's surprise that Snape entered the lounge shortly afterwards with a scowl so black that it matched his robes, which were as impeccable as ever.

'Fashionably late, as usual,' Moody muttered darkly.

'Some of us are actually concerned with matters of life and death, Moody, not just standing around, waiting for cake to be served,' Snape sneered in response, folding his arms across his chest in a manner which could only be described as hostile.

'Severus, thank you for being here,' Dumbledore cut in smoothly in order to avoid further confrontation. Snape and Moody had never liked each other, for several reasons, but since their fall-out during dinner in October, Dumbledore found it wise to not let the two get too agitated.

'I have just explained about the incident with Miss Bell,' he informed his Defence teacher.

'The jewellery was cursed with very dark magic,' Snape confirmed. 'Whoever wanted you to have it, certainly wanted to see you dead.'

Arthur shook his head in disbelief. 'And there are still those who refuse to believe that You-Know-Who is back!'

'Are you implying that a Death Eater managed to smuggle a cursed necklace into Hogsmeade? Right under my Aurors' noses?' Moody enquired.

'I'm afraid so, Alastor,' Dumbledore replied. 'Quite how they did it is anyone's guess.'

'We'll be undertaking a full investigation in Hogsmeade, of course,' the craggy Auror said gruffly.

Dumbledore nodded.

'I saw Katie at the Three Broomsticks,' Tonks admitted. 'I saw her leave. But I didn't see her talk to anyone.'

'Rosmerta knows everybody's business. We'll be speaking to her first thing,' Moody confirmed.

Whilst Moody started to devise a plan with Dumbledore about how to instigate the investigation, Charis began to play idly with the Draumar. Moody was speaking about what the Aurors would do, and while Morgana and Tonks listened carefully and Lupin and Arthur chipped in with ideas, Charis felt a bit left out, knowing very little of Auror business. She would have liked to at least stand with the others and maybe come up with a good idea or two herself, but she didn't dare move. She could feel the weight of Snape's black eyes on her, and they kept her petrified.

And indeed, the dark wizard was observing her intently as she fiddled with her necklace. He knew very well that the only jewellery she normally wore was the star necklace, the twin of the one Morgana owned. But now Charis was wearing a second one, which appeared to be a locket of some sort. It was silver and didn't look like something cheap bought at Tarnish & Sully. And the way Charis looked at it suggested that she was quite fond of the piece. Surely, it must have been a gift.

Snape's glare grew darker. That kind of trinket looked exactly like something a wizard like Grindling Gibbons would use to charm a witch.

Snape just considered making a snide remark when he saw Charis flinch and her eyes widen in surprise. And indeed, the blonde Ravenclaw did feel slightly puzzled. She had been stroking one of the star shapes carved on the Draumar, quite absent-mindedly, when she'd felt the object getting warmer in her hand. As she looked down, she noticed the star was glowing faintly. Then, after a few moments, there was a little click, and the Draumar sprung open, releasing a wisp of ethereal, smoky substance that formed the shape of... Grindling Gibbons!

Charis gazed in awe at the apparition. It certainly looked like Grindling, but his voice sounded strange and other-worldly as he began to speak. It boomed around the lounge, making everyone fall silent and take notice.

'The glowing Lion born into the House of Snakes

Has repented for the error of his ways.

The creature that knows his secrets

Still lives in shadows,

And only the Raven

That was hatched on the lowest branch of the ancient tree

Possesses the means to ask the questions

That will bring the answers to conquer the Dark.'

Everyone stared, mesmerised as the wispy smoke was sucked back into the Draumar and the item clicked shut again. And Charis looked at the silver object in her hand like it might explode at any second.

'That is a very unusual object, Charis. May I ask where you got it?' Dumbledore asked, not unkindly, breaking the rather awkward silence that had descended.

Charis looked up. She had almost forgotten that there were other people in the room. And she had certainly not been prepared for everyone looking at her. She blushed.

'Grindling...,' she started. 'He's my boss in the Hall of Prophecies. He gave it to me. He was the one who appeared. But he never told me he'd made a prophecy.'

Dumbledore nodded carefully.

'Arthur, would you mind taking everyone to the kitchen and letting them taste Molly's cake? I'd like to have a private word with Charis.'

'It's lemon drizzle cake,' Arthur told the room at large, a bit louder than he normally would, in order to get everyone's attention away from Charis. Certainly, the girl didn't need everyone staring at her. 'Remus, would you be so kind as to pop the kettle on?'

He led the way to the kitchen, closely followed by Lupin, Tonks and Moody. The two Slytherins, however, exited the lounge more slowly, Snape giving Charis a suspicious look, Morgana looking worried for her friend. She also felt slightly guilty. After all, it had been she who had agreed to deliver that Draumar.

Once the door had closed and she and Dumbledore were alone in the room, Charis started apologising for having disturbed the meeting.

'I'm so sorry, Albus. I didn't know how to work it; I was just fiddling with it. I didn't mean to interrupt the meeting.'

'Don't worry yourself, child,' the old wizard said kindly, looking at the little silver object in Charis' hand. 'It is a Draumar, is it not?'

Charis nodded.

'May I have a look at it?'

Charis handed it over, unsure of what might happen next. Would it open again? And if so, would they hear the same prophecy once more? But as Dumbledore stroked the Draumar with his thumb, nothing happened.

'Curious object, Draumars,' he said slowly. 'In many ways, they resemble the spheres you work with at the Hall of Prophecy. Those can only be retrieved by the ones who made the prophecies and by those whom they are about. And Draumars... they only reveal their secrets to the person who made the prophecy and those the prophecy involves.'

He looked at Charis over the rim of his glasses meaningfully, and she, in turn, looked bewildered.

'Grindling made the prophecy... about me?'

'Not necessarily about you, dear Charis. But yes, I think the prophecy has something to do with you.' He handed back the Draumar. 'Would you mind opening it once more?'

With shaking hands, Charis fiddled with the silver object until she found the star she'd been rubbing before. Again, it glowed and the Draumar sprang open, and once again, the booming prophecy filled the room.

'Does any of it make sense to you?' Dumbledore asked after they'd heard the prophecy for the second time.

'House of Snakes... must be Slytherin?' Charis reasoned, her analytical Ravenclaw brain kicking into action at once.

Dumbledore nodded, impressed.

'And the Lion... is that a Gryffindor? A Gryffindor who was sorted into Slytherin?'

To that, Dumbledore smiled.

'How many Gryffindors do we know that have been sorted into Slytherin?'

Charis could not help but giggle at this. 'None!'

"Born into the House of Snakes..." Dumbledore recited the prophecy. 'Could it be the other way around?'

'You mean, a Slytherin who became a Gryffindor?' Charis asked, looking puzzled.

'Precisely!' the old wizard replied, his blue eyes twinkling characteristically. He already seemed to know more than he let on but seemed not yet prepared to tell.

'Charis, I understand that this is a very private matter, and you are entitled to say no, but I'd like to consult our very own Slytherins on this.'

Charis agreed, but as Dumbledore went to the kitchen to fetch Morgana and Snape, she almost wished she hadn't. She didn't mind having Morgana by her side, but Snape... He had been staring at her ever since he'd arrived, and the look he'd given her when leaving the room had not exactly been a kind one. She was, therefore, more than grateful when Morgana sat down right beside her and Dumbledore handed her a cup of tea to which she could hold on to. She didn't dare look at Snape, who'd remained standing by the fireplace, his arms once more crossed.

'As you have already overheard the prophecy, I'll ask you straight out. "A lion born into the house of snakes..." Does that mean anything to either of you?' he asked the two Slytherins in front of him.

Morgana looked at Snape, shrugging. Snape, however, seemed more than a little irritated by the question.

'Are you questioning the Sorting Hat's competency?' he hissed. 'There are no Gryffindors in my house,' he answered flatly.

'Is there anyone in Gryffindor who was expected to be in Slytherin, then?' Albus asked pointedly, and the look on Snape's face went from dark to murderous.

'Sirius Black,' he breathed slowly, acid pouring from every single syllable.

Dumbledore nodded.

'The Blacks have always been in Slytherin...', he agreed.

'But Sirius was absolved. He was innocent.' Morgana pointed out.

'The prophecy said he "Has repented for the error of his ways",' she clarified as the others, slightly puzzled, looked at her. 'Sirius never was a follower of the Da... of You-Know-Who. So, that part can't refer to him. Unless he did something bad that we don't know about, of course.'

Like bullying me every day for seven years? Snape thought to himself bitterly, fighting hard not to huff. Then again, to the day of his death, Black had seen nothing wrong with this. He certainly never repented for it. So, maybe Morgana was right.

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully.

'Hm, well, the prophecy also mentions an ancient tree... and the Blacks are one of the most ancient families in the Wizarding world. "The raven that was hatched on the lowest branch..." Now who could that be, Charis?'

Once more, Dumbledore had asked a question to which he already knew the answer, and Charis looked up at him, wide eyed.

'M-me?'

'I think so, Charis,' Dumbledore replied. 'You are Muggle-born and yet a Black. Had your name ever been on the tapestry in the drawing room, it would certainly have been blasted off.'

'But there's still the part about the creature,' Charis blurted out, so overwhelmed by the fact that she'd been mentioned in Grindling's prophecy that she wasn't thinking straight. 'And if the prophecy is not about Sirius, then it could be about anyone! The Blacks go back centuries!'

'I think, I'd like to consult an expert on prophecies,' Dumbledore said slowly.

'Not Trelawney, I hope,' said Snape cuttingly.

Morgana snorted at this, and Dumbledore's mouth twitched.

'No, I think we need someone with more specific expertise than our Professors Trelawney and Firenze.'

He stroked his beard for a moment and then turned towards Charis once more.

'Tell me, Charis, where do you think I might get hold of Grindling Gibbons at this late hour?'

XXVI: The Unknowing Seer

Chapter 26 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXVI: The Unknown Seer

Next Saturday evening, shortly after dinner, Grindling Gibbons stepped out of the fireplace in Albus Dumbledore's office. He was wearing light blue robes and was sporting a very nice tan after his break in Greece. Certainly, he looked healthier and more relaxed than he had done in weeks. But looks are often deceiving, and Grindling couldn't justly claim that he was feeling relaxed. He was a bit nervous, to be honest, and immensely curious. He could not for the life of him guess why the Headmaster of Hogwarts had asked to see him. In fact, when he had received the invitation five days ago, he had been convinced that the owl had got lost and delivered the letter to the wrong person. But the letter had been clearly addressed to him, and Dumbledore had ever so kindly asked the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies to contact him upon his return to England. And so, Grindling had sent an owl to Hogwarts first thing when he had returned to his flat, and Dumbledore had asked him to present himself at Hogwarts at seven-thirty the same night.

And there Grindling was now, looking around the rounded office. He had been a good boy in school and had only been called to the Headmaster's office on a handful of occasions. Yet still, he remembered the curious objects and artefacts that cluttered the room, and his Ravenclaw heart leaped at the sight of all the heavy books on the shelves.

On seeing his former pupil exit the flames, Dumbledore got up from his chair at once in order to greet the fair wizard.

'Grindling! You're looking well. Please, take a seat.' He shook hands with his former pupil briefly before Grindling took the proffered chair.

'Thank you for coming this evening.'

'I must admit I was surprised by your message, Headmaster,' Grindling confessed.

'It did come rather out of the blue,' Dumbledore agreed genially. 'I hope it didn't interrupt your holiday.'

Grindling flushed slightly at this. 'No. No, it didn't. It was time for me to return.'

In fact, Dumbledore's owl had arrived at a very good moment, Grindling had to admit. He had been sitting on the top steps of the ancient theatre in Delphi, overlooking the remains of a world long gone in the valley below. His only company had been a bottle of wine and thoughts about never returning to England at all. He had seriously played with the idea of cutting all his ties with the country where he had been born and starting over in Greece. But Dumbledore's letter had reminded him that he could not just walk away from the life he had led so far. Sooner or later, it would catch up with him, just as Dumbledore's owl had caught up with him.

'Can I offer you something to drink?' Dumbledore offered. 'Tea? Wine? Maybe something a little stronger?'

'Tea would do just nicely, Headmaster,' Grindling replied. 'After three weeks in Greece, I have wine running out of my ears.'

Dumbledore chuckled at this. 'Of course.'

With a brief flick of his wand, the old man conjured some tea for them both.

'Now, I won't take up too much of your precious time, Grindling. I contacted you as I need some advice. I am in the unusual situation of having overheard what seems to be a prophecy. I was wondering if you would be able to assist me in decoding what it means.'

Grindling's handsome forehead creased with intrigue. 'A prophecy? Has it been recorded?'

'It has,' Dumbledore confirmed and passed over a yellowing piece of parchment. 'I've got it right here.'

As Grindling read, Dumbledore watched the blond wizard closely. He didn't seem to recognise his own words, which assured Dumbledore that the prophecy was genuine. Not that he'd had any doubts about that.

'There's a lot of information there, Headmaster,' Grindling pointed out after he'd read the prophecy a couple of times.

The older wizard nodded in agreement. 'Are there any parts that stand out to you at all?'

The Keeper sighed.

'Well, the animals are a good starting point. For instance, the lion can mean a series of things. It could point to a person born under the sign of Leo. It could be someone who carries the name of a lion, like Leonard or Richard. It could be a very brave person...'

He broke off and looked at Dumbledore seriously.

'It could be a Gryffindor.'

Dumbledore nodded again, steepling his fingers in a characteristic gesture.

'Yes, I too was wondering whether the symbolism was linked to Hogwarts. It doesn't seem a coincidence that the lion, the snake and the raven are all mentioned.'

Grindling thought for a moment. 'Do you think there is a badger hidden somewhere?' he jested.

'Well, there is the reference to a fourth creature. But I couldn't see any clear reference to Hufflepuff myself.'

Once more, Grindling read the prophecy, trying to see if he or Dumbledore for that matter had overlooked something.

'The person who made the prophecy....,' he began after a moment. 'I don't mean you have to tell me who it was, but the Seer's attitude towards things always reflects in the phrasing. For example, a woman could refer to another woman as a sister, while a man would probably not call her that. I need to know more about the Seer, in order to give a better interpretation.'

Dumbledore took a deep breath and fixed the younger wizard with his piercing blue eyes.

'Well, this is the thing, Grindling. I don't mean to startle you, but the person who made this prophecy was in fact... you.'

Grindling nearly choked on his tea. 'Excuse me?'

'I believe you recently gifted your colleague, Charis Byrne, with a Draumar. Charis and I were conversing a couple of days ago when she accidentally activated the Draumar. Which means...'

'Which means Charis is part of the prophecy,' Grindling finished, staring at the paper, his complexion suddenly pale.

'Quite so.'

Had Grindling been standing, he would have needed to sit down, as his knees had suddenly become weak. He wasn't sure how many more surprises he would be able to handle. First, Dumbledore told him he'd made a prophecy, and then he learned that Charis was part of said divination. Charis, whom he had hurt so deeply and whom he had not been able to banish from his mind for as much as a second over the last three weeks. Charis, whom he still didn't know how to address on Monday morning at

work.

He cleared his throat. 'I think I'd like to get back to your offer for something stronger now,' he said and put his cup down onto Dumbledore's desk.

'Of course, dear boy. That's quite understandable.'

Dumbledore vanished the tea cups, and with another wave of his wand, a bottle of Ogden's and a little tumbler appeared, which Grindling accepted thankfully. For quite some time, however, he did nothing more than hold on to his glass and continue staring at the parchment in front of him.

'Forgive me for asking,' Dumbledore broke the silence at last, 'but have you made other prophecies? I understand there is Seer blood in the family.'

'I didn't even know that I made this one!' Grindling exclaimed, and Dumbledore could see in the fair wizard's face that he was trying very hard to remember when he had made it.

'Do not fret, Grindling,' he said consolingly. 'The fact that you cannot remember making the prophecy proves to me that it is real.'

These words, however, did not seem to soothe the Keeper's nerves in the slightest, and as he lifted the tumbler to his mouth, his hand was shaking so violently that he judged it wiser to not have any Firewhisky at all.

'Do you consider Charis to be the raven?' he asked in the end, desperately trying to make sense of something at least.

Dumbledore nodded.

""Hatched on the lowest branch of the ancient tree""? Grindling pressed on. 'What tree?'

'Ah, well, that is for Charis to tell you, I'm afraid,' Dumbledore replied somewhat mysteriously.

Grindling's shoulders slumped.

'This might prove to be problematic,' he said very quietly.

The Headmaster looked puzzled. From what he had gathered, Charis thought very highly of her boss and they seemed to work rather well together.

'We, um... Charis and I...'

Grindling ran a hand through his ponytail in agitation, wishing he hadn't said anything. What had happened between him and Charis was none of Dumbledore's business. And he was a professional, for Merlin's sake. Surely, he should be able to put his personal feelings aside and handle this prophecy like any other.

He closed eyes for a moment in order to compose himself and then straightened in his seat.

'Do you consider this prophecy of importance to anyone apart from Charis and me, Headmaster?' he asked.

Dumbledore looked over his glasses and gave Grindling a penetrating stare.

'I believe this prophecy is of utmost importance, Grindling. Not only because it involves Charis but because it appears to refer to yet another pupil, former or otherwise, of Hogwarts. And, in the current climate, the reference to the Dark cannot be ignored.'

Grindling nodded slowly.

'In that case, I assume you'd like to be present when Charis and I decipher the message. Maybe you should ask her to come here?'

'I think that is a good idea. Will you excuse me a moment?'

As the Headmaster headed for the door, Grindling stared after him, and for a moment, he feared that Charis would already be standing outside, just waiting for Dumbledore to ask her to enter. But thankfully, the older wizard exited and closed the door behind him.

Grindling buried his face in his hands. This was not how he had imagined his reunion with Charis. Frankly, he had so far been unable to make up his mind on how to approach her. 'Hi, I'm back,' seemed like a very lousy line after three weeks, and 'Good morning, Miss Byrne. How are you?' seemed far too formal. At one point, Grindling had even considered showing up at Charis' doorstep with a bouquet of flowers and asking her if she had missed him. But for that, he lacked the courage. And now it seemed as if fate had decided for him.

Once more, Grindling reached out his hand for the prophecy, trying hard to remember when he had made it. The Draumar had been in his possession for a bit over ten years now, and he could have made the prophecy at any time during this period. It seemed odd, however, to think that he would have made a prophecy about Charis before he had even known that she existed.

And only the Raven

That was hatched on the lowest branch of the ancient tree

Possesses the means to ask the questions

That will bring the answers to conquer the Dark.

Grindling shuddered. Dumbledore had said that the reference to the Dark could not be ignored. Surely the reference couldn't mean You-Know-Who... Could it?

* * *

'I am so sorry for this, Albus,' Charis apologised for the second time. She had meant to be ready when Dumbledore knocked at her door, but the book she had been reading had been so fascinating that she had lost track of the time.

'There is no need to worry, dear Charis,' Dumbledore assured her yet again while he continued his tour of the lounge, Lily following closely at his heels. It seemed as if the little cat had taken a shine to the old man.

'Can I get you anything while you wait? A cup of tea, maybe?' Charis offered.

'I just had a cup, thank you,' the older wizard declined. 'Don't worry about me. I will find something to occupy myself with while you make yourself pretty. Not that you need it.'

Charis blushed and disappeared into the bathroom once more, where she examined her reflection in the mirror somewhat desperately. *Dumbledore needs to have the prescription for his glasses checked*, she thought because in her opinion, she very much needed to make herself pretty. After three weeks, she didn't want to meet Grindling with pale cheeks and puffy eyes. And that zit on her nose! Charis sighed. She really should have applied that facial mask she had bought at Madam

Primpernelle's the other day. But, alas, she didn't have time for that now.

'Breathtaking!' Dumbledore commented as Charis re-emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later. 'That blue eyeliner certainly brings out your eyes.'

For a moment, Charis was slightly taken aback. She had not expected Dumbledore to comment on her make-up, but her surprise and slight embarrassment wore off when she saw Dumbledore admiring the little silver mirror on the coffee table.

'Morgana has one, too,' she explained. 'We use it to communicate with each other. It's much smoother than using the Floo, I think.'

'A little mirror is certainly easier to carry around than the fireplace,' Dumbledore commented with a smile and handed the mirror to Charis, who quickly stowed it in her bag.

They Disapparated directly from Charis' flat and landed at the boundary of the Hogwarts grounds. They could have used the Floo, of course, but Charis was glad that they hadn't. She didn't want to be covered in ashes when she met Grindling again. Also, she was glad for the short walk through the grounds because her heart was racing in her chest like a herd of Hippogriffs and she hoped that the cold evening air would calm her nerves.

How would it be to see Grindling again, she wondered for the umpteenth time that day. What should she say? What would he say? Was it even prudent to say anything else than, 'How do you do?' with Dumbledore in the same room?

Charis looked at the Headmaster of Hogwarts, who was walking a few steps ahead of her. When he had contacted her earlier that day and asked her if she could join him and Grindling that evening in order to decipher the prophecy, she had immediately agreed. She had thought that it might be good to have Dumbledore there as a kind of chaperon when she and Grindling met for the first time. But now she very much wished that she could speak to Grindling in private. She really wanted to tell him that she had missed him.

The walk through the Hogwarts grounds was far too short, and so was the climb up the stairs to the Headmaster's office, and when Charis caught sight of Grindling, her heart was still racing. But then again, if it had been beating slowly, it would certainly have picked up its pace anyway. For Grindling looked to-die-for.

'How was your holiday?' Charis asked nervously after Dumbledore had offered her a seat.

'Relaxing. Thank you,' Grindling answered somewhat stiffly, and Charis couldn't help but think that he didn't look very relaxed now. But she couldn't blame him. Her hands were quite sweaty as well, and she was at a loss about what to say. Thankfully, Dumbledore was there to break the tension and remind both her and Grindling about why they were all there anyway.

'Charis, Grindling has read the prophecy, and he has some questions about your family tree. I thought it prudent for you to tell him,' he said, looking seriously over the rim of his glasses at the blonde witch.

Charis bit her lip. So far, being a Black had brought her nothing but trouble, and she didn't know how Grindling would take this news at all.

'The prophecy appears to be about me,' she started slowly, 'because it seems to be about a Ravenclaw who is related to the House of Black.'

'The House of Black? You?' Grindling retorted in disbelief. 'I thought you were Muggle-born.'

'Yes, I am. But my great-grandfather was Marius Black. He was blasted from the family tree when he married a Muggle.'

'Oh.'

Grindling's heart skipped a beat, and he swallowed drily. There was a slightly uncomfortable pause as he reflected on unknowingly getting himself involved with yet another Black woman. Especially now, when he was trying so hard to get over the first one.

Grindling's silence caused Charis to lower her gaze and stare at the tip of her shoes. The Blacks were notorious supporters of You-Know-Who, after all, and weren't known to have the sweetest of dispositions in general. Hopefully, Grindling wouldn't think less of her now.

Mostly in order to occupy himself, Grindling picked up the prophecy.

'If "the ancient tree" refers to the Blacks, then the lion must refer to a member of that family. I'd say that rules out the possibility of "lion" referring to Gryffindor House. The Blacks were all in Slytherin, weren't they?' he asked after a moment. 'Present company excluded, of course.'

'Not all, actually,' Dumbledore corrected him. 'Sirius Black was Sorted into Gryffindor. But we're not convinced this prophecy is about Sirius.'

'Then there might have been someone else from the Black family who had also been Sorted into Gryffindor,' Grindling reasoned. 'Hogwarts keeps yearbooks, I assume?'

'Yes, in the library,' Dumbledore confirmed.

'With your permission, Headmaster, may I be allowed to look through these to try to find a link?'

'Why, Grindling, of course, but you are going above and beyond the kind of help I was requiring from you,' the old man replied, barely able to hide his smile. Actually, Grindling offering his help had been exactly what he had hoped for.

'Until we know whom the prophecy relates to, I'm afraid I am not much use at all.' Grindling stated and stood up. 'This might take a while, though. Potentially, we'll have to go back several generations. I will need assistance.'

He looked tentatively at Charis, who glanced up and met his gaze. Grey eyes locked onto green ones, and they both missed Dumbledore's triumphant smile.

'I'll help,' Charis whispered.

'Splendid,' Dumbledore exclaimed, stroking his beard benevolently. 'Do let me know if you find something of interest.'

Some minutes later, Charis was leading Grindling through the old, hallowed corridors of Hogwarts. As it was a rather blustery Saturday evening, the majority of pupils were in their own common rooms, gossiping with friends or playing games. Thus, the two Ravenclaws met no one on their way and slipped into the library undetected.

'I'd almost forgotten how amazing this place is,' Grindling whispered in a hushed tone as he craned his neck to look up at the criss-cross of buttresses on the ceiling. The library was an impressive sight to those who'd never seen it before. Books upon books were stacked from floor to ceiling, with nooks here and there which were perfect to study in. The arched windows were reminiscent of a church, and it had a calm, respectful air.

'Mind you, it's been a while since I've been here,' Grindling added. 'I'm getting old.'

'No, you're not!' Charis retorted. 'Now you're all tanned and relaxed, you look about twenty-five!'

Grindling snorted. 'Too kind, dear lady. Too kind.'

They looked at each other for some moments, both at a loss about what to say once more. There was so much they both wanted to say, but neither of them knew where to start.

'The yearbooks are over there,' Charis finally broke the silence. 'Opposite the Restricted Section.'

'We better go there, then,' Grindling stated quite unnecessarily, his eyes still locked on Charis'. He could have looked at her for hours. Days even. Or a lifetime. And when she turned to lead the way, he still was unable to take his eyes off her.

Charis selected a couple of yearbooks at random and handed them to Grindling.

'What is it?' she asked, as she realised the he was looking intensely at her.

'If your great-grandfather was blasted off the family tree, how do you know you're a Black?'

'I looked up birth certificates and wedding certificates,' Charis replied. 'A friend of mine and I had this project, you see. He was quite convinced that I come from a magical line. It took some effort, but that's how I found out.'

'You wouldn't have found those certificates here, would you?' Grindling wondered. 'I mean, if you're a Black, there might have been other Hogwarts students from the House of Black with different last names,' he suggested.

'Oh! That's a good idea,' Charis agreed. 'But... if we start looking up family history, we'll be here all night.'

'I don't mind,' Grindling whispered, taking the books from Charis and then brushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

Charis blushed. 'I've missed you,' she admitted quietly.

Grindling took a deep breath before replying.

'I've missed you, too.'

His fingertips lingered for a moment on Charis' cheek, and as he withdrew his hand, Charis thought that her cheek felt rather cold.

'I... I didn't expect to meet you before Monday,' Grindling said. 'I... I have a present for you.'

'No, Grindling, you shouldn't have!' Charis protested. 'You've already spoiled me.'

'There have been many "shouldn't haves" in my life, Charis. Spoiling you isn't one of them.'

They gazed at each other and smiled, a tender feeling swelling in each of their hearts, when all of a sudden a rustling sound could be heard behind them. And then, from absolutely nowhere, the imposing figure of Severus Snape swooped around the corner, his lip curled with distaste.

'My, my, Miss Byrne. Loitering around the library after nightfall again, are we?' he asked smoothly, his black eyes glinting in the candlelight. 'One would think you had filled your quota when you were a student here.'

'Professor Snape!' Charis' heart skipped a beat. Of all the people to bang into, and here!

Grindling, however, didn't know Snape too well. He'd met him a couple of times together with Lucius when they all had been students, and Snape hadn't made much of an impression back then. He'd just been there, in Lucius' shadow. Nowadays, however, Snape had the reputation of being quite strict, a reputation which was known beyond the walls of Hogwarts. Also, he struck Grindling as a man who didn't take kindly to rule-breaking of any kind. Thus, Grindling thought it wise to explain what he and Charis were doing in the library.

'Ah, Professor Snape. You might remember me from school? Grindling Gibbons, Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies.' He went to hold out his hand for the dark wizard to shake but decided against it at the last moment as Snape was fixing him with a look that was less than welcoming. 'Charis and I are just doing a little research. The Headmaster has given us permission.'

For the duration of a second, Snape looked down his nose at Grindling with a look that suggested that Grindling wasn't worth his time. Then he directed his black eyes towards Charis again.

'Didn't we have a chat about bringing boys here to play, Miss Byrne?'

His drawl was so low that Grindling couldn't really hear what he was saying. Charis, meanwhile, heard every single word and flushed at the implication. Only a few feet from where they were standing now, Snape had made her moan and quiver. In fact, she could see down that very aisle without even having to turn her head. If it weren't that dark in the Restricted Section, she could probably see the desk he had bent her over.

'Is there a problem, Professor?' Grindling asked, utterly confused at the strangeness of the situation.

Reluctantly, Snape shifted his gaze to Grindling and glared at him.

'No, no problem at all, Mr Gibbons,' he replied silkily. 'Just make sure that Miss Byrne keeps her voice down and doesn't wrinkle any book pages. Madam Pince does not appreciate that.'

And with that, he gave Charis a meaningful, knowing look and billowed out.

'What was that all about?' Grindling still looked rather bemused while Charis was rather pale.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. 'Professor Snape... let's just say he's not the easiest person to get along with.'

Grindling feigned overenthusiastic surprise. 'Really? He seemed ever so charming!'

Charis couldn't help but giggle at this. But now that she had seen Snape here, she did not want to stay in the library for a second longer. Their brief meeting had brought back too many memories, memories she didn't want to be reminded of. Not now. Not when she was with Grindling.

'Look, I really think we'll be looking for a needle in a haystack if we just start blindly looking for names,' she opined. 'I like your suggestion of searching for other members of the family who have been blasted off and looking at those to see if there are leads there. Why don't I find those out first, and then we can research from there?' she suggested. 'I know where to look.'

'Good idea,' Grindling agreed. 'Then we will cross check those names against any kind of reference towards a lion: Gryffindors, Leos, you name it.'

'Great!'

Once more, their eyes met, and a feeling of mutual understanding passed between them.

'It is a pleasure working alongside with you again, Miss Byrne,' Grindling said softly, his grey eyes glittering.

Charis smiled. 'You too, Mr Gibbons.'

XXVII: Relative Discomfort

Chapter 27 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXVII: Relative Discomfort

With a huff, Charis closed yet another heavy leather-bound ledger and Levitated it back onto the shelf, right beside the umpteen others that had not held any answers. This research was getting more and more frustrating. In the weeks that followed their meeting with Dumbledore, Charis and Grindling had spent a great deal of their spare time trying to find clues about the prophecy. Grindling's idea to focus on the members of the Black family who had been blasted off the family tree had led to a dead end, however, and the hunt for any Gryffindors besides Sirius had been completely fruitless. Now they were making their way through birth dates to astrologically cross-check the number of Leos within the family, but so far, this had not yielded any results either.

'There must be something we've overlooked,' Charis told an equally disappointed Grindling.

'But we've been thorough and methodical with our research,' he pointed out, eyeing the ledgers they'd already been through. 'We should have found something by now!'

'I suppose research can only get us so far,' Charis admitted. 'If only Sirius was still alive to talk to. First-hand evidence would be so much better.'

She let herself fall into a chair. She was sure that talking to Sirius would have unlocked something she and Grindling had missed. He certainly knew a lot about the Black family. But he was gone, and the only surviving Blacks were firmly in the pocket of You-Know-Who. They wouldn't have spoken to Charis even if she paid them all the Galleons in Gringotts. Most probably, they wouldn't have touched the money even with a stick after Charis had held it in her filthy Muggle hands. They would burn it and her with it.

Charis shuddered at the thought of Bellatrix and the Dark witch's unsuccessful attempt on her life earlier that year. She still wore the scars on her chest. They had faded, of course, and were barely visible now. But Charis knew that they were there.

'It's actually quite a sad thought that there doesn't seem to be a single Black left who isn't cruel, Muggle hating, manipulating or just plain nasty. Apart from you, of course,' Grindling pointed out. 'I mean, every family has their black sheep. But in this instance, it seems that the Blacks might have a white one instead.'

Charis smiled at Grindling. His tenacity to find something was admirable, but he didn't know the Blacks as well as Charis did. They were vile, the whole lot of them, the living as well as the deceased. Even the portrait of Sirius' mother announced frequently her distaste at watching the shame that befell her family by associating with so-called blood traitors and half-bloods.

At the thought of the portrait of Walburga Black, Charis' eyed widened. There was no-one *alive* she could talk to, this much was true. But there were dead family members that she could speak with! Hadn't Sirius told her that there was a portrait of her great-great-great-grandfather up in one of the gloomy bedrooms in Grimmauld Place? Phineas Nigellus, the least popular headmaster Hogwarts had ever had, Sirius had said. Could he hold the answers Charis was looking for? Would he give them to her? Or would he wrinkle his nose at her and walk out of the frame?

Well, there was just one way to find out.

* * *

Grimmauld Place was an unfriendly building at the best of times, even when the lounge was filled with Order members and the air heavy with the delicious smell of Molly Weasley's chocolate cake. But now, in the dead of night, the abandoned house was beyond creepy. The shadows themselves seemed to be moving, and Charis felt as if there was someone watching her from one of the dark corners. What had she been thinking? Why had she decided to come here on her own on a night that was as dark as if someone had covered the whole city of London with Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. Why had she not asked Dumbledore if she could talk to the portrait of Phineas that resided at Hogwarts? Surely, the headmaster would have been impressed by her idea and would gladly have let her use his office. But it hadn't felt right to talk to Phineas at Hogwarts. This was family business. And family business was best discussed in the family home.

Carefully, Charis made her way down the dark hallway, making as little noise as possible so she wouldn't disturb the hideous painting of the Black matriarch. Walburga would not be happy to see her, Charis was well aware of that. Grimmauld Place may have been home to her ancestors, but as a Muggle-born, Charis knew she would never be welcomed there. If she woke Walburga, the wretched woman would alert the whole house, and Phineas would most certainly agree with his great-granddaughter and want the Muggle-filth out of his house. Better to approach him carefully, and introduce herself in the nicest way possible.

But still, as Charis crept up the stairs, she was filled with a sense of foreboding. Sirius had said Phineas was a pureblood sympathizer. Surely, once he realised who what she was, he would not want to speak to her. But what choice did she have? There was no one else to ask.

In the light from her wand, the grotesque severed house-elf heads on the wall almost seemed alive, and even though she was thoroughly disgusted, Charis was unable to avert her eyes. It was like staring at a train wreck. She was, therefore, quite unaware of the dark clad man who soundlessly descended the stairs from the floor above. He, however, had already spotted her from one of the windows on the top floor when she had Apparated to the front door.

Snape paused on the landing, closely observing the blonde witch, who seemed to be spellbound by the unusual wall decoration on the staircase. What on earth was she doing at Grimmauld Place in the middle of the night? Didn't she have better places to be? Her bed, preferably?

When she bumped into him, Charis gave a startled yelp as the light from her wand illuminated his stern face and reflected in his black eyes, and Snape sneered.

'Stop making noises like a frightened little girl, Miss Byrne,' he snapped, realising almost at once that the term "girl" certainly didn't apply to Charis anymore. Frankly, it had not applied to her for quite some time. She was all woman. Feminine, desirable.

'What are you doing here in the middle of the night?' he asked smoothly, regaining his composure and looking down his nose at the blonde witch, who was looking back at him with her green eyes still widened in shock. How did Snape do this? How did he manage to creep up on her all the time when she expected it the least?

'I... I could ask the same of you,' she replied, surprising herself with her daring. But if Snape thought that he had the right to ask her about her business at the headquarters, then surely she had the right to ask him the very same question. After all, they were not at Hogwarts any more. He was not her teacher and she not his student. They were both members of the Order, and thus, in some way, equals.

Snape, however, did not seem to share Charis' viewpoint.

'You could, indeed,' he answered slowly. 'You will, however, do no such thing since you are very well aware that I, as a senior member of the Order, do not need to tell you.'

Charis scowled slightly at this, but Snape's glare made it look like a wince in comparison.

'Now, Miss Byrne, I will ask you again: What brings you to this godforsaken place at this hour?'

There was no use; Snape would pry it out of her one way or another, Charis knew that. She might as well tell the truth right away. But it felt like a defeat. She had wanted to do this on her own.

'I'm trying to find the portrait of Phineas Nigellus,' she started tentatively, not sure how much she wanted to reveal. 'I'd like to speak to him.'

Snape arched his eyebrow at this. 'One would think you'd have better taste, Miss Byrne. Phineas Nigellus Black is not exactly known for his conversational skills.'

Charis lowered her eyes. 'He's the only one who might be able to help me,' she said weakly.

'Help you with what, Miss Byrne?' Snape asked, slightly annoyed by the fact that Charis was now looking at the tip of her shoes. Surely, if she had picked up the courage to come to Grimmauld Place, a house which even gave grown-up Order members the chills at night, she had good reasons for it.

'Well?'

'The prophecy,' Charis murmured.

Snape's face darkened. He knew that Dumbledore thought the prophecy to be important. He thought that it held clues on how to find the means needed to destroy the Dark Lord once and for all. And now it seemed as if the old man had given Charis the task of deciphering the prophecy. Surely, she wasn't working alone.

'Has your boss not yet been able to make sense of his own words?' Snape asked silkily, just about able to mask his dislike for the man in question.

'The gift of Sight does not include the means of interpretation,' Charis answered, now once again bravely meeting Snape's dark gaze. 'Grindling didn't even know he'd made the prophecy, let alone what it might mean.'

A muscle twitched in Snape's jaw at the mention of the Keeper of the Hall of Prophecies.

'Well, well, well. Grindling, is it? One might think only the senior staff of the Ministry are on a first-name basis.'

Once more, Charis' eyes widened, but this time in surprise. Was Snape actually bothered by her calling Grindling by his first name?

'Or are the rumours true, Miss Byrne?'

'Rumours about what, sir?' Charis asked. She honestly had no idea what Snape was talking about. But she almost wished she had not asked when she saw a nasty smile pull at the corners of his mouth.

'The rumours about you having outgrown boys and having developed a taste for somewhat more... mature wizards.'

Charis almost laughed in shock at this. If she didn't know better, she'd think that Snape was somehow jealous. But that was absurd! Surely, he was being as mean and vindictive as ever. After all, those were the traits he was best known for.

For some moments, the fair witch and the dark wizard looked silently at each other, both absorbed in their own thoughts and feelings. Even now, Snape's words could cut through Charis like a knife. But if he was jealous, did that mean he still desired her somehow? Charis felt giddy at the very thought.

'Why, pray tell, do you think that Phineas Nigellus of all people would be able to shed any light on this prophecy?' Snape suddenly asked.

Charis blinked, the mention of the prophecy pulling her back to reality.

'The prophecy refers to the House of Black, we think. Phineas is the only one left to talk to.'

Snape nodded appreciatively.

'You will find his portrait in that bedroom,' he said softly, pointing to the door behind him. 'You would do well to knock. And bear in mind that Phineas is known for having a somewhat sharp tongue. Do not let him intimidate you.'

For the second time that evening, Charis looked at her former teacher in surprise. Had he just given her a solid piece of advice? Mere moments after having sneered at her?

But Snape didn't give her the time to think any more about it.

'Phineas will mention your blood status,' he went on. 'Do not engage in any discussion on this topic with him. He will win. And if he loses, he will walk out of his frame. Either way, it will be your loss.'

Charis' shoulders sagged at this. She knew it wasn't going to be easy, but now it seemed nigh-on impossible. She might as well turn around and go home again.

'Posture, Miss Byrne,' Snape chided. 'Phineas will not answer any of your questions if you look defeated already when you enter the room. Remember who you are. Remember what you have made it through. Be proud of it.'

Charis straightened up, and Snape stepped aside to let her pass. She would do well, he was quite sure of that. Phineas would certainly give her a hard time in the beginning, but eventually he wouldn't be able to resist her sharp wits. And he wouldn't be the first Slytherin to succumb to her. Yes, Charis would do well, and she didn't need anyone to watch her back. And so Snape turned and billowed down the stairs, walking as silently as ever. Charis never heard him leave, and when she turned to offer him her thanks, the landing was empty. It was almost as if he had never been there.

Outside of the bedroom which Snape had pointed out, Charis took a deep breath and then knocked curtly on the door three times.

There was no answer, not to her surprise. She was hardly expecting red carpet treatment.

She knocked again. 'Mr Black? May I come in?'

Again, there was no response. Wary about being rude and getting on the wrong side of her distant relation, Charis carefully opened the door and entered the bedroom. A small candelabrum leapt into life, casting the room with dim candlelight. She looked around. The portrait of Phineas hung on the wall, its owner seemingly asleep in the frame.

Charis' heart sank. Surely, he would not take too kindly to being awoken at such an hour? But she couldn't just leave now, could she?

Bravely, she cleared her throat. 'Mr Black?'

Had his eyelid just twitched, she wondered, but then decided that it had just been a shadow, cast by the candles on the table. She did not know, of course, that Phineas was indeed awake, but that he was planning to make her work a little harder to gain his attention.

And so Charis tried again, ever so softly. 'Mr Black?'

Phineas turned in his chair as if he was trying to get into a more comfortable position.

'Mr Black? Please, sir, I'm sorry to disturb you...'

Phineas' eyes sprang open, in a well-practised display of pretending to have just woken up.

'Hm? What?'

He stared down his nose at Charis, a look of distaste etched on to his features.

'How dare you disturb my sleep? Who are you? And what are you doing in the house of my ancestors?' he asked indignantly.

'Sir, I'm sorry to wake you,' Charis explained, in as humble a voice as she could muster. 'My name is Charis Byrne, and I am a descendant of Marius Black.'

'I hope you are not under the impression that this is something to be proud of,' Phineas replied, looking as if he'd stepped in something unpleasant. 'That good-for-nothing Squib... No grandson of mine...'

He muttered something inaudible that was no doubt highly offensive.

Charis swallowed before continuing. 'If you please, sir, I believe you must know a great deal more about the noble and ancient house of Black than I do. Would you allow me to ask you about them?'

Phineas raised a thin eyebrow. 'At this day and hour?'

'I realise it is a bizarre time to ask. But I wanted to be able to speak with you alone,' she finished earnestly.

Phineas gave a sly smile at this. 'Keeping secrets, are we? Understandable, with all the blood traitors and half-breeds running around here... Well, be quick! I need my sleep.'

Charis took a deep breath, unable to believe her luck.

'I was wondering if you could tell me if any of the Blacks had ever been Sorted into Gryffindor. Besides Sirius, I mean.'

Phineas was so appalled he looked at his great-great-great-granddaughter as if she had two heads.

'Excuse me? Every Black has been Sorted into the great house of Salazar Slytherin, myself included. What would give you the foolish idea that anyone, besides my worthless great-great-grandson Sirius, had disappointed the family in such a way? Gryffindor. Pha!'

Phineas crossed his arms and looked haughty.

'I do not mean to offend you, sir,' Charis replied, trying to limit the damage her insult had already caused. 'I am just curious. Are there some other descendants that may share the name of a lion, perhaps, instead?'

Phineas narrowed his eyes. 'What are these questions about, you silly girl?'

Charis didn't see any point in lying.

'There has been a prophecy, sir, which points to one of the house of Black and invokes the symbol of the lion. I am trying to work out what that might mean, and I hoped you could help me.'

'Lions!' Phineas shrieked with disbelief. 'There are no lions in the most noble house of Black. Is your eyesight that bad that you mistake the dogs on the coat of arms for Foo Dogs?'

He huffed indignantly as Charis looked down, suitably chastised.

'I apologise; I do not mean to offend you. But as one of the eldest and most respected members of the house of Black, I thought that you out of all people would know the history of the family.'

She looked up at her distant relative hopefully.

Phineas, to her surprise, began to puff up at the flattery. It had been a long time since anyone sought his advice, and he clearly enjoyed being spoken to with a tone of respect.

'As I have said, Miss... what was it? Byrne?'

'Yes, sir,' she answered politely.

'As I have said, all Blacks are tied to the great house of Slytherin. However, Slytherins do share some of the traits that Gryffindor house holds so high. Bravery, for example.'

Charis tried not to look disbelieving at this. The Slytherins she knew were not exactly brave, at least not when they were on their own. She knew, however, that there was an exception to every rule.

'Are there any of your descendants, or indeed forebears, that you consider to be especially brave, sir?' she asked.

Once again, Phineas puffed up with pride.

'Where to start?' he mused and cleared his throat imperiously. 'My own son, Cygnus, worked tirelessly at the Ministry to promote a bill in favour of wizarding supremacy, despite great opposition from the Wizengamot at the time. He also took the very brave decision to blast my grandson Marius off the tree when he showed about as much magical talent as a filthy Muggle.'

Phineas' eyes glittered down malevolently, and Charis looked troubled at this; she really did not want to steer the conversation back to blood status or to her errant ancestor. Instead, she tried a different approach.

'One thing I have noticed is that the Blacks all have such wonderful, regal names,' she started lightly. 'I was wondering if any of those had meanings that echoed bravery or valour.'

Phineas' mouth twitched.

'I can tell you are unfamiliar with Greek mythology,' he sneered. 'My great-grandson Orion was named after the mighty hunter. And his son, my beloved great-great-grandson Regulus, was one of the bravest in the family, standing up for wizard rights and taking the Dark Mark in order to preserve the purity of wizardkind.'

The old man's eyes became misty with recollection.

Charis, however, once more felt way out of her depth, and realising that Phineas had no useful information to impart, she decided to make her excuses and leave as quickly as possible before he had the chance to seize upon her blood status.

'That was very interesting. Thank you, Mr Black, you have been really helpful,' she said, trying hard to keep any tone of disappointment out of her voice. She was more than a little crestfallen at not having gained any information. 'I apologise again for disturbing your sleep. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.'

Phineas' chest swelled as he gazed down at the polite girl in front of him. 'Do not let this become a habit. I do need my sleep.'

As Charis shut the door quietly behind her, she felt even more frustrated. How on earth could she be related to such vile people? And how, for the love of Merlin, were she and Grindling ever supposed to decipher what the prophecy meant? They might just as well give up right away.

With a sigh, she illuminated her wand once more and made her way back down the creepy corridors of her ancestral home, her stomach heavy with defeat.

XXVIII: The Confession at the Manor

Chapter 28 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXVIII: The Confession at the Manor

'It's a beautiful night. Have a stroll through the winter garden, you two. By the time you arrive at the fountain, you will find some sweets to nibble on. Off you go now.'

Narcissa looked after her two guests as they disappeared between the shrubs and bushes, glad to see that they were getting along very nicely. Certainly, she would have loved to see Grindling offer Morgana his arm and the girl accept it with a love-struck look in her blue eyes, but Narcissa had learnt her lesson. There was no point in rushing things with those two. She had been too eager in getting them to fall for each other during their first dinner, and the evening had ended in a disaster. And so Narcissa had changed strategies, and instead of serving them aphrodisiacs for dessert, she had invited Grindling and Morgana for casual lunches and cosy tea parties and waited for things to unfold in their own time. They would unfold, she was certain of that. Grindling was a dashing wizard, witty and charming, and Morgana was an intelligent, beautiful young witch. Why would they not fall for each other? Especially now, when Morgana finally seemed to have abandoned her boyish ways and Grindling didn't seem to be interested in anyone but her.

Narcissa smiled and checked the ornate clock on top of the mantelpiece. She would give the two lovebirds an hour in the garden. That would give them enough time to talk privately and hopefully get a bit tipsy from the sweet wine the elves were uncorking by the fountain right now. And who knew? Maybe the moonlight would work its magic on them, as well, together with the heavy scent of the flowers. Tonight might just be the night.

* * *

'That was a lovely dinner. The lamb was so tender that it almost melted in my mouth. And the gravy!'

Morgana smiled at Grindling.

'It was nice to see that we can have dinner without Narcissa trying to have us marry before the second course.'

Grindling laughed nervously.

'She has calmed down considerably over the last two months. One might almost think she has given up.'

'Don't forget that the woman is a Slytherin. Cunning folks, you know. We can't let our guards down.'

'You're right, of course,' Grindling agreed. But he had to admit that once or twice during the evening, he had found himself looking at Morgana from across the table, admiring her. She was wearing her red hair braided that evening, and her dark green dress, feminine yet not girlish, accentuated her well-shaped body. She was truly lovely. And had the circumstances been different, Grindling thought that he could have fallen for her. But there was Narcissa, the woman he'd loved for so many years, and there was Charis, whom he cherished highly. He was trapped by his own emotions and vulnerable, to say the least. He did not trust his wounded heart. And so he had thought it wisest to avert his eyes.

'I will say one thing for Narcissa, she lives up to her name,' he pointed out now, desperate for a topic that did not involve matters of the heart. 'She always keeps these gardens immaculate.' He stopped, crouching down. 'You see those little lilac and pink flowers there? *Daphne mezereum*. Very fragrant. A treat for the winter months.'

'They're also highly toxic,' Morgana said matter-of-factly. 'Just handling the twigs can cause nasty rashes.'

Grindling withdrew his hand, and Morgana bit her lip. He'd tried to impress her and tell her something nice. Did she have to spoil the moment?

'Sorry,' she said meekly. 'I've never been the flowery kind of girl. Flowers and plants are for potions. And lilac and pink?' She gave a theatrical shudder. 'Reminds me of Gilderoy Lockheart.'

Grindling raised an eyebrow at this. 'Yes, Gilderoy always was... a bit of a dandy.'

'A bit? Half the girls in my year were jealous of his hair! Actually, make that two thirds. At least.'

'Yourself not included in those two thirds, I assume?' Grindling wondered, causing Morgana to snort.

'No!'

Grindling chuckled. He would have liked to say something nice about Morgana's hair now, how the soft curls suited her or that he liked it when she wore her hair long. But he kept silent. The last compliment he had given her had not been too well received.

They strolled together comfortably in silence for a while before Grindling looked up at the sky, which could be seen through the glass roof of the winter garden.

'Orion looks beautiful tonight,' he pointed out. 'Did you take Astronomy?'

Morgana looked at him as if he were deranged.

'Grindling, I was in Slytherin! Slytherins live in the dungeons. The Astronomy tower is out of our domain.'

'That is a true shame,' Grindling replied, shaking his head. 'The stars fascinate me. It always amazes me to think that when we look up at a star, we are actually looking at the past because the light has travelled so far to reach us.'

Morgana watched him, waiting for him to go on.

'For example, with our own sun, the light takes eight minutes to travel to earth. Whereas a star like Betelgeuse, which is the big red star on Orion's left shoulder... it would take millions upon millions of years. Isn't that wonderful?'

He smiled, and Morgana looked amused. What was it with Ravenclaws and stars?

'Betelgeuse is actually very near the end of its life,' Grindling continued. 'It's a swollen red giant, due to explode and go supernova at any moment. And when it does, you'll be able to see it in broad daylight. It will be the brightest object in the sky. Of course, it might already have gone supernova. It's just the light hasn't reached us on earth yet, so we don't know.'

He smiled again, but his smile quickly faltered as he looked at Morgana.

'I am so sorry, Morgana. I must be boring you. You need to tell me to shut up. I do go on a bit, I know that.'

'Don't worry,' Morgana replied, smiling kindly. 'You're passionate, and that's very sweet. I hope you're that way about all the things you love.'

She gave him a meaningful look, and Grindling swallowed drily.

'Sadly, I'm a bit too tenacious,' he admitted. 'It's hard for me to let go of the things I love.'

To that, Morgana just nodded silently. She knew all too well what it meant to cling on to a love long gone.

When they arrived at the fountain in the middle of the winter garden, they found a table with a white tablecloth and wine and chocolates as promised.

'Isn't it ironic that Narcissa has done all this for us, now you know my feelings for her?' Grindling asked, pulling out Morgana's chair for her to sit.

'She doesn't carry the name of Malfoy for show. They'd do whatever it takes to get what they want,' Morgana replied, watching Grindling take his seat. 'Narcissa plays on your feelings for her. Don't forget that,' she added quietly.

Grindling nodded and poured some wine, first for Morgana, then a glass for himself.

'No expense spared, it seems,' he commented. 'This is a good vintage!'

'I'll have to trust you on that one,' Morgana said dryly, eyeing the wine carefully. Narcissa had not tried to make her drink any alcohol since that disastrous dinner two months ago. Tonight, the hostess had even let her guest drink pumpkin juice without pointing out that such a mundane beverage wasn't suited to a lady.

'I am not sure I trust the chocolates, however,' Grindling joked. 'Not after last time! That gu... I'd like to apologise once more for my behaviour that night.'

Morgana shook her head dismissively. Grindling had nothing to apologise for. She'd told him already. She hadn't been in control of her emotions and actions that night either. Grindling, however, insisted on taking full responsibility.

In order to ease his mind, she produced her wand from her sleeve, and after casting a quick spell over the chocolates, she pushed the plate towards the fair wizard.

'All clear. Unless she found some new and undetectable kind of Amortentia.'

Grindling looked impressed. 'Ah, the Auror training does come in handy, then.'

'Finally!' Morgana answered sardonically. Grindling had no idea that she'd known that particular spell for years, of course.

'Well, if you're quite sure they're safe,' Grindling said, eyeing the chocolates, trying to decide which one to choose. 'I could do with something sweet.'

And with that, he took a chocolate and began to nibble on it.

Morgana looked expectantly at him. She was quite certain that she had cast the spell properly, but one could never know. In the worst case, Grindling would be on his knees in a moment, proposing to her.

Yet Grindling's reaction was a completely different one.

'Aphrodite's bellybutton!' he exclaimed. 'These are exceptional.'

Morgana leant back in her chair, playing idly with her wine glass and watching Grindling finish the sweet. He was making the cutest little humming noises, and his grey eyes were glittering. He was downright adorable, and Morgana couldn't help but smile.

'What?' Grindling asked after he'd licked his fingers clean. He'd obviously noticed her watching him.

'Nothing,' Morgana said, a slightly pink colour creeping over her cheeks. 'I was just imagining how it would be to actually fall in love with you.'

Grindling's eyes widened, and he looked both taken aback and embarrassed.

'A crashing disappointment, I'm sure,' he muttered.

'Don't think so, actually,' Morgana stated. 'In fact, I think I wouldn't mind.'

Now she blushed in earnest.

'Sorry,' she said, putting her glass back onto the table. 'I need to stop drinking wine.'

It was a lame excuse; she knew that. Grindling had certainly noticed that she had not been drinking any wine at all. But he was too much of a gentleman to point that out. Instead, he smiled kindly at her.

'You're a very delectable witch. Quite why there aren't queues of wizards formed outside your flat waiting to take you out is one of the seven wonders of the universe.'

'You haven't seen my flat. It reeks of cat pee,' Morgana replied wryly, desperately trying to get over her embarrassment and making Grindling stop thinking that she was *delectable*.

He, however, just laughed. 'It is a good job I do not mind cats, then.'

'Snake baits,' Morgana commented, wrinkling her nose.

Grindling tutted. 'Charis would be most upset if she heard you say that.'

'She knows already,' Morgana replied. 'She also knows that I wouldn't be a good cat owner. I don't have the loving disposition to have a pet.'

'Now, I find that very hard to believe,' Grindling contradicted her, at which Morgana raised a sardonic eyebrow.

'I see how much you care for Charis,' Grindling insisted. 'The way you confronted me at the Ministry showed me as much. You love fiercely and deeply.'

The muscles at her jaw twitched at that comment, but Morgana did not reply. Instead, she seemed to shiver.

'Should we make our way back to the Manor?' Grindling suggested.

Morgana nodded silently, and Grindling offered her his arm.

'Let us make Narcissa happy, shall we? She'll be delighted to see us having come close.'

Morgana hesitated at first but then realised the practical side of Grindling's proposal. If they acted like lovebirds, Narcissa would hopefully give them some privacy.

It was nice to hold on to him. His arm was muscular, and he smelled nice. And Morgana actually enjoyed him once more pointing out stars and flowers to her as they strolled back towards the manor. Yet his soft baritone couldn't drown the haunting cries of the pure-white peacocks that roamed the grounds or the barking and howling of the hounds in the distance.

'It sounds like a zoo out here,' Grindling chuckled. 'Narcissa never liked animals very much. That must be Lucius' influence.'

Morgana flinched, first at the name and then at her reaction. Lucius' name still awakened a feeling in her she didn't want to have; a heart-breaking longing strangely mixed with fear. She still missed him, although she didn't want to. And she was afraid that she would never stop longing for him.

Once more, the peacocks' cries cut through the silence of the night, and Morgana imagined seeing her Patronus soar through the semi-darkness. Regal and beautiful, just like Lucius. Weak and vulnerable, just like her. And it was because of her weakness that it had been unable to protect her in Azkaban.

'There you are, you two lovelies. I was beginning to think you'd lost your way.'

Narcissa's voice ripped Morgana out of her thoughts. The older woman was smiling and was obviously very pleased at seeing her guests returning to the manor arm in arm. Grindling had been right.

'The winter garden is beautiful, Narcissa,' Grindling said graciously. 'And the wine and chocolates were exquisite. Thank you.'

He sounded sincere, and there wasn't the slightest tremble in his voice. But Morgana could feel the muscles in his arm tense up, and she was very reluctant to let go of him as Narcissa reached out her hand for her.

'I am afraid I will have to steal this lovely creature from you now, Grindling, but young girls need their beauty sleep,' the lady of the manor said. 'You're staying over as well, I hope. I have instructed the elves to prepare an excellent breakfast.'

Morgana gave Grindling a furtive look. He would not refuse Narcissa's wish. They all knew that. And if he stayed the night at the manor, and if Narcissa decided that she didn't want to sleep alone, he wouldn't refuse her that wish either. In the morning, he would feel used and heartbroken all over again. This mustn't happen.

'Please, Grindling, stay,' Morgana said, in the most girlish and love-struck voice she could pull off without sounding ridiculous. 'I'd love to see you at breakfast.'

Narcissa was beaming, and Grindling bowed slightly.

'I'd love to stay,' he replied. 'Thank you.'

'How lovely!' Narcissa exclaimed, obviously delighted. 'Good thing I instructed the elves to prepare two guest bedrooms. Follow me, please.'

She led Morgana by the hand like a child, and Grindling walked behind them, following them through the manor and up the stairs to the bedrooms Narcissa had chosen for them. He didn't have a good feeling about spending the night at the manor. But he had understood the look Morgana had given him and the meaning in her words. If Narcissa thought that he was staying for the girl's sake, she might just leave him alone. Or at least, he hoped so. For what he would do if Narcissa knocked at his door later that night, he did not know. He doubted, however, that he would have the strength to turn her away.

Grindling's door was the first on the right, and he gallantly kissed both Morgana's and Narcissa's hand before bidding them goodnight. Narcissa's hand was cold, and Morgana's slightly sweaty, and Grindling sympathised with the girl. His hand wasn't exactly dry either.

He looked after the two women for some moments as they walked down the corridor. They both came from an ancient line and had both been raised in the Slytherin spirit, but they couldn't be more different. Narcissa was cold and calculating and looking out only for her own interests whereas Morgana used her cunning in order to protect the people she cared for. May Narcissa never be able to break her spirit.

The chamber Grindling had been given was beautiful: a pure-looking, white suite, complete with a massive four-poster bed, which was framed with soft flowing curtains. The sheepskin rug was immaculately white, and so were the candles and the roses on the bedside table. The only speck of colour in the room was the bowl of fruit that was standing on the dresser opposite the bed. There were strawberries, cherries and grapes, and beside the bowl stood a bottle of champagne. Grindling's stomach clenched, yet not at the label or the vintage, but at the fact that there were two glasses. Had he walked into Narcissa's trap after all?

When the door on the opposite side of the room opened, the blood in Grindling's veins turned to ice, but to his utter relief, it was not Narcissa who entered the room. It was Morgana. She, however, seemed anything but happy to see him.

'You have got to be jesting!' she exclaimed with annoyance.

Grindling exhaled. 'It seems our hostess is up to tricks again.'

'So much for her playing fair tonight!' Morgana grumbled. 'Seems we gave her too much credit. But at least she had the decency not to lock us in,' she added upon checking the door.

Then she turned back to face Grindling, and her voice dropped to a whisper. 'What do we do?'

'Do you want to leave, Morgana?' Grindling asked seriously. 'I can escort you home.'

Her eyes narrowed, and after a moment, Morgana crossed her arms in front of her chest. 'How about we stay?'

Grindling's eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'Stay? Are you sure?'

Morgana nodded and put a finger on her lips to silence him, and he watched her as she systematically scanned the walls, doors and windows with her wand while muttering spells.

'Whatever Narcissa is up to, she will not see or hear anything that happens in this room tonight,' Morgana announced once she had finished. 'Or what doesn't happen, for that matter.'

Grindling looked around the room. 'I should be able to Transfigure the cabinet into another bed.'

Morgana sneered. 'Don't you trust me, Mr Gibbons?'

Grindling laughed. 'Of course. It's just...' He looked down, clearly embarrassed, and Morgana couldn't help but grin.

'This bed is bigger than my flat. I promise I won't bite.'

Grindling looked highly uncomfortable. 'I will be keeping my robes on, of course.'

'Of course, you will. Just make sure to open a button or two on your shirt before we go down to breakfast.'

Now the fair wizard looked confused.

'Narcissa needs to think that something happened here tonight,' Morgana clarified. 'She is clearly hell-bent on getting us two together. If we wrinkle the sheets, she might just get off our backs for a while.'

Grindling considered this for a moment. 'You might have a point there.'

And with that, he kicked off his boots and swung his legs on the bed, his arms behind his head.

'It's comfy,' he announced, grinning boyishly.

Morgana flinched. The soft candlelight cast a silvery glow onto Grindling's blond hair, and his crisp white shirt almost seemed to glow in the semi-darkness. He looked dashing, desirable, and for a moment, the tiniest of moments that didn't last longer than the blink of an eye, Morgana thought...

'Tell me, is this a good one?' she asked, nodding towards the champagne.

Grindling craned his neck to inspect the label. 'Once again, no expense spared here. It's a good cuvee,' he explained.

'Can one get wasted on good cuvee?' Morgana asked. Suddenly, she wished for nothing more than to flee this room. But since physically leaving meant spoiling their plans, she wanted to escape mentally at least.

'One can get very wasted on this if they choose,' Grindling affirmed. He'd gotten up from the bed and was now expecting the bottle closely. 'However, there seems little point in opening the bottle if I am to drink it alone.'

'Oh, I'll be helping!'

Grindling raised an eyebrow. Usually, the red-haired witch did not care for alcohol. Maybe she had expensive taste?

'Well, let's crack her open, then!' he suggested, expertly popped the cork and filled up two flutes, passing one over to Morgana.

'A toast?' he offered.

'Be my guest.'

Grindling held his glass aloft. 'To getting rid of the chains that bind our hearts as quickly and as humanly possible.'

'Hear, hear!'

The pair chinked glasses, and Grindling took a deep swig.

'Hmmm... nice, crisp, biscuity finish... dry yet sweet enough...'

Morgana, however, had no time for such trifles. She was already half-way through her glass and couldn't have cared less if it the champagne had tasted like goblin piss.

'I never knew you had a predilection for champagne,' Grindling said, failing to keep the tone of amusement out of his voice.

'There are many things you don't know about me,' Morgana replied quietly. 'Most of them would shock you.'

Grindling frowned. Something had changed, he sensed that clearly. There was a shadow on Morgana's face and an iciness in her blue eyes which he had never seen before. And as she began to walk around the room with her glass in her hand, she reminded him of a caged animal.

'Morgana, I do not mean to be rude,' he said after a moment, 'but you are clearly not happy here. Let me take you home.'

'You'll do no such thing!' Morgana shot back. 'If we leave now, then Merlin knows what methods Narcissa will use the next time she invites us. Enchanted gu, anyone?'

Grindling choked on his champagne.

'Morgana, that gu... I can't apologise enough...'

'It's wasn't your fault,' Morgana cut him short. 'You didn't know what that dessert can do.'

But she had known. At she hadn't fought the effects.

'Morgana, please,' Grindling tried carefully. 'You look so uncomfortable here. Is there anything I can do?'

Sadly, Morgana shook her head.

'It's this room,' she started to explain, slowly letting her fingers trail over the silky bed sheets. 'I've been in this... in such a room before. Made the biggest mistake of my life there. I fell in love.'

'Love is never a mistake,' Grindling stated, which caused Morgana to give a hollow laugh.

'No, surely not,' she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. 'This would be why we are both so incredibly cheerful here.'

She downed the rest of her champagne and then looked Grindling straight in the eyes.

'Are you still in love with Narcissa? Or are you in love with an image of her? A memory?'

Grindling closed his eyes. 'I do not even like the woman,' he confessed.

'And still you can't let her go. Love is a cruel thing, isn't it?'

Grindling opened his eyes again and looked at the young witch before him. She was talking from personal experience, so much was clear. And the depth of sadness in her eyes made his heart ache for her.

'Who hurt you, Morgana?' he asked quietly. 'Who has robbed you of your heart at such a young age and made you so wary of love?'

Morgana bit her lip before continuing. She had not shared her feelings with anyone, not even with her best friend. Why she was telling Grindling, she did not know.

'He wasn't all that different from you,' she began. 'He was handsome, wealthy and successful. And I was young, impressionable and terribly naïve. So when he promised me the moon and the stars, I believed him. But after a while, all I wanted was his heart. And that was the one thing he refused to give. There are those who say that he doesn't even have one. And that's where you and he are very different.'

The muscles in her jaw twitched, and despite her fighting them desperately, Grindling could clearly see the tears which were swimming in her eyes.

'No man should ever have hurt you like this, Morgana,' he said softly.

'No man ever will again.'

Her voice was so cold it made Grindling shiver, and as she turned away from him, he did not know what to do. He knew the pain the young witch was talking about. He did not, however, know how to ease it.

'Whoever this man is, he isn't worthy to wipe the dirt from your shoes,' he said in the end. 'But not all men go around breaking young girls' hearts.'

He gave an ironic laugh, thinking of Charis. 'Or at least, we try not to.'

He crossed the room silently and came to stand behind Morgana. She was resolutely staring out of the window, her pale face reflecting in the glass. There were tears hanging on her lashes, tears she had refused to shed for so many lonely nights.

As Grindling reached out his hand for her, Morgana flinched as if his hand were a poisonous snake. But Grindling didn't shrink back.

'Don't be afraid, Morgana,' he said quietly as he lay a comforting arm around her shoulders. 'I am not going to hurt you.'

XXIX: Advent Events

Chapter 29 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)



Chapter XXIX: Advent Events

It was a bitterly cold Wednesday evening in early December when Argus Filch, the ugly sneering caretaker of Hogwarts, unexpectedly interrupted Snape working his way through marking a pile of essays on Hinkypunks and how to avoid them. Snape wasn't impressed by the disruption, but he knew that the craggy old caretaker wouldn't dare disturb him unless he had a very good reason.

'I know Professor Slughorn is the Potions master now, sir, but he won't look at these no matter how many times I've asked,' the caretaker complained, placing his latest haul of confiscated items onto Snape's desk: illicit potions from sources unknown.

'Thinks I'm being paranoid,' he went on. 'But I always know when students are up to no good! I'd bet my last Knut this lot comes from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, but I can't prove it. My Secrecy Sensors can detect jinxes and concealment charms, but they won't tell me what's inside a bottle of potion.'

'I am quite aware how Secrecy Sensors work, thank you, Mr Filch,' Snape interrupted the caretaker's lament and suspiciously eyed the phials, small bottles and jars that were now standing on his desk. They were labelled as perfumes, cough potions and body lotions and looked innocuous enough. Surely, whoever had ordered them was now sulking in their dormitory for having their parcels intercepted. But Snape had to admire the caretaker's resolve. There were indeed rumours going around that love potions had made their way into the castle. Maybe Filch was on to something after all.

'I will have a look at the contents. Later tonight,' he added, as he noticed the older man's crestfallen expression. Obviously, Filch had expected to be given an answer in a

blink of an eye. The poor Squib must have spent too much time around McGonagall and Flitwick. He truly believed that magic was all about foolish wand-waving. He had no idea about the subtle art of potion making.

'Knew I could count on you, Professor Snape, sir,' Filch muttered before he made his way back to the door and almost took a bow before he exited.

Snape sneered. It didn't surprise him that Slughorn had shown no interest in aiding Filch. Slughorn had always been the type of person to do the bare minimum to get by in any situation, and if he could get others to do it for him, even better. He was very skilled in the art of subtly manipulating people to his own end and surrounding himself with the most influential people, or at least, people who may be beneficial to him in some way.

The door opened once more, and Snape fully expected Filch to return with yet another armful of phials and jars, but to his surprise and utter annoyance the door frame was filled with the corpulent figure of Horace Slughorn himself. Talking of the devil!

'Oh, Severus, I'm so glad I found you,' the cheery old wizard smiled, his cheeks shining like polished apples. 'Not busy, I hope?'

Snape raised an eyebrow. No, of course not. A desk cluttered with stacks of essays and potion phials most certainly meant that he was not busy.

'I see you can't tear yourself away from potions,' Slughorn continued in his booming voice, pointing at the phials. Then he frowned. 'So Filch came running to you. You must learn how to say no, dear lad. The caretaker is overreacting.' He picked up one of the phials and chuckled. 'I mean, it clearly says that this is a cough potion.'

'We will see about that,' Snape replied curtly and picked up his quill again. If Slughorn had come to make small talk, Snape would ignore him. He was, after all, busy.

'Put that quill down, Severus dear boy. I didn't come here to watch you work.'

'Then, pray tell, what you did come for?' Snape asked, marking the essay in front of him with a big T.

'I came to invite you to my Christmas party.'

Slughorn beamed in a way that suggested he'd just given Severus a big, fat bag of Galleons and was waiting for eternal thanks. Snape, however, merely put down his quill.

'I beg your pardon.'

'My Christmas party,' Slughorn repeated. 'You must remember them. I used to have them when you were a student here.'

Snape sneered. Oh, he remembered Slughorn's parties all too well. Not that he had ever been invited to one. Those gatherings had been Slughorn's way of filtering out the brightest and best, not to mention well-connected, students. Snape had been a gifted potioneer as a student, yet Slughorn had refused to give him the credit he'd deserved. He had been too busy fussing over Lily, who had been his favourite from the very first day. And when he had handed out invitations to the so-called "Slug Club" to his most gifted students, Slughorn had blatantly ignored Snape. Obviously, he had felt that Snape lacked the popularity or connections to warrant an invite.

'Friday the twentieth,' Slughorn carried on, oblivious to Snape's bitterness. 'Eight o'clock. Dress robes. I assume you own a set nowadays.'

With his arms crossed in front of his chest and a triumphant smile on his face, Snape leant back in his chair.

'I am afraid I will not be able to make it,' he informed Slughorn. 'I am otherwise engaged.'

'Oh. You are?' Slughorn asked incredulously. Curiosity was etched into every line of his face, but Snape had no intention of telling the Potions professor about his plans. It was none of Slughorn's business that he had been invited to Malfoy Manor the very same evening, where Narcissa would be holding an intimate dinner for "close friends who have stuck by me in these troubled times". Snape felt obliged to go, even if he wasn't especially looking forward to it. Fancy dinners at Malfoy manor far too often left behind a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. But the disappointed look on Slughorn's face was priceless and would most certainly make up for anything that could happen at the manor.

'Well, ahem, if you change your mind, the invitation stands,' Slughorn declared in what was, for him, a very uncharacteristic low tone. He was labouring under the impression that an invitation to the Slug Club was a supreme honour and it was clear the old man was not used to people saying no. That Snape had turned him down was a hard blow to Slughorn's ego. For Snape, it was small vengeance, but it made him feel good, nonetheless, and when Slughorn had bid him goodnight, Snape decided to celebrate his victory with a nice glass of Ogden's. The essays could wait, and so could Filch's so-called love potions. Most probably, neither of them were really worth the while.

Glass in hand, Snape meandered around his office, every now and then picking up a book or journal to casually leaf through it. But nothing seemed to catch his interest, not even the latest issue of *Potions Monthly* or the article in the *Prophet* about the latest Death Eater activities. In the end, he left everything where it was, essays and love potions on his desk and books and journals wherever they were lying, and retired to his quarters, where he made a beeline for the little silver mirror that was propped up on the mantel piece. It had been far too long since he had heard anything from his girls. All he knew was that Charis was busy deciphering the prophecy. As for Morgana, he knew even less. He didn't even know if she was still frequenting Malfoy manor.

Snape felt a stab of guilt. The day his girls had left Hogwarts, he had promised himself that he would keep an eye on them. But with the Dark Lord demanding his presence ever more frequently, Dumbledore yanking his chain and Draco Malfoy sneaking around the castle at night, Snape simply had not had the time. Tonight, however, he would take the time, and should anyone dare come knocking at his door, they would find themselves in the hospital wing for the rest of the year after he'd slipped some laxative into their morning pumpkin juice. He was, after all, a gifted potioneer. Madam Pomfrey would never find as much as a trace.

Settling back in his favourite armchair with his refilled glass on the table beside him, Snape put up his feet and took the mirror in his hands. To his disappointment, however, he caught sight of nothing more than his own reflection: sallow skin, greasy black hair that hung in curtains around his face and black, bottomless eyes that defied the theory that a person's eyes were a window to their soul. Because no one would ever be able to read anything in those eyes, neither joy nor sorrow. There was, however, the tiniest spark of excitement in them when Snape's reflection became foggy and the image in the mirror split in two, revealing two young witches, one blonde, one red-haired. They were both wearing their nightgowns, Charis a light blue one and Morgana one of the darkest green. They were both holding a steaming mug, most probably containing hot chocolate. It almost seemed as if they were having a virtual sleepover.

'Sorry we had to change our plans,' Morgana apologised to her friend. 'Merlin knows why Moody insists on a training session at four thirty in the morning. How getting up ridiculously early helps build one's character is beyond me. But hey, this is nice, too. And I can go to work without waking you.'

Charis nodded. 'Those mirrors are ingenious! What would we do without them?'

'Sulk and drink this fabulous hot chocolate for comfort?' Morgana suggested.

Charis giggled. 'Any excuse to drink hot chocolate, eh?' She took a sip and made the most unladylike noise. 'Merlin's balls, this is fabulous! Do you think Remus will give us the recipe for this blend?'

'No way. He'll take that to his grave,' Morgana replied, and Snape took a healthy gulp of Ogden's.

As if there would ever be a grave wide enough to bury Lupin's fat arse he thought viciously. He very much disliked the fact that his girls had taken such a liking to the werewolf.

Charis put down her mug and contemplated her friend for a few moments. 'You look tired, sweetie,' she said finally. 'Moody seems to be working you hard. You must be exhausted.'

Morgana shrugged. 'At least, he has stopped throwing hexes at us,' she said, which caused Snape to huff. The burn on the girl's left hand had healed nicely, but Snape had still not forgiven Moody for putting one of his trainees into danger. Not only once, but twice.

'How are things in your part of the Ministry?' Morgana asked.

'Not great, if I'm honest,' Charis replied, her shoulders slumping. 'Work is... just work. But Grindling and I are just having no luck deciphering the prophecy at all. I can tell he's getting frustrated by it. I mean, he's the one who made the prophecy in the first place, and now he can't figure out what it means. Feels like everywhere we turn, it's a dead end.'

'I see.'

There was a slight tremble in Morgana's voice, but Snape doubted that Charis had picked up on it. He didn't think that she had seen the minuscule twitch of a muscle right under the Slytherin's left eye, either. But he had noticed, and it annoyed him that the mention of Grindling Gibbons would have such an effect on Morgana.

'Has Gri... Have you talked to any another Seers?' she asked.

Charis shook her head. 'It's a matter of pride for Grindling... and for me too, I admit. We Ravensclaws like to try every avenue on our own before we ask others. But if we have no answers by Christmas, I was going to suggest we ask one of his old friends in Greece for advice.'

'Do you know anything about his friends?' Morgana wondered.

'No, not really,' Charis admitted. 'I know he has some relatives in Greece and some friends in France, Italy and Luxembourg. But he doesn't talk about them much.'

Once more, Morgana nodded. 'He seems very private.'

She didn't know much about Grindling either, even though they had spent a few very private moments together. The biggest secret of his that she knew about was his love for Narcissa. And that was the only secret Charis mustn't know about.

'Yes, he is very private,' Charis confirmed. And I'm glad we've been able to move forward after what happened...'

She trailed off, and Morgana chewed on her lower lip.

'Move forward?' she started hesitantly. 'Are you... you and Grindling... What are you? Colleagues, friends?'

'Just friends,' Charis replied. 'It would not be fair on either of us to pursue anything more than that. Let's just say, Grindling is a complex man who has things from his past he needs to work through.'

You have no idea just how much he has to work through Morgana thought, desperately wishing that she weren't a part of Grindling's dilemma. He was a good man, there was no doubt about that, and he deserved a sweet and loving woman like Charis. And Charis deserved a man who had the means to bed her on roses. They would be good for each other, Morgana was quite certain of that. Hopefully, when the whole mess with Narcissa was over, Grindling would be brave enough to ask Charis for a second chance. And hopefully, she would find it in her heart to grant him his wish. Where it would leave her, Morgana didn't care about.

'How about you, sweetie? Isn't there a beau in your life?' Charis wondered. She had seen her friend change over the last few months. Her hairstyle had changed and so had her clothes. She finally seemed to have dropped the tomboy attitude she had adopted during their last year at Hogwarts.

Morgana blinked and looked at her friend in confusion. 'Sorry, what?'

Charis giggled. 'Your new look. Your hair, those lovely red curls. I was wondering if there was a wizard hiding in the shadows you haven't been telling me about.'

Morgana snorted. 'Most certainly not,' she exclaimed.

Charis groaned. 'What is it with wizards? Are they all blind or something? Hello? Two gorgeous, single witches here! Ready to be taken!'

'Speak for yourself,' Morgana replied. 'I don't want to have a man, wizard, Muggle or troll. They're trouble. I'm glad if they keep their distance.'

There we go again Snape thought with a sigh. He had overheard a conversation like this before. That time, Morgana had declared that she was planning on becoming a lesbian. Heaven forbid! What a waste it would be. But Charis was right, in his opinion. What was it with wizards? Why weren't they lining up in front of those girls' doors, offering their very souls to be allowed to take them out? And why did the girls insist on falling for men who only broke their hearts? Snape sighed for a second time. Maybe Morgana had a point. Maybe men weren't worth the heartache after all.

'Hey, I don't suppose you had a letter from Hogwarts this week, did you?' Charis suddenly asked.

Morgana shook her head. 'Did they offer you a job?' she asked jokingly. 'Divination? Astronomy?'

Charis giggled. 'Not exactly! It's a bit strange, really. They have a new Potions master this year. Horace Slughorn. Apparently, he was Potions master at Hogwarts years ago and has returned, and Snape is now teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts.'

'Snape teaches DADA?' Morgana interrupted her friend. 'And we got Umbridge for our last year? Now, that's not fair!'

'Tell me about it!' Charis agreed. 'It would have been so nice to see Snape casting spells instead of stirring potions.'

Morgana grinned. 'You'd watch Snape clean up owl droppings and enjoy it. Merlin, so would I!'

Both girls laughed, and Snape allowed himself the tiniest of smiles. They hadn't forgotten him then, his girls.

'Anyway,' Charis continued. 'As I was saying, this Horace Slughorn apparently used to have little gatherings for selected pupils when he was a teacher. Now he has decided to resurrect the tradition and has invited me!'

'Guess he wants to use you as a good example,' Morgana concluded. 'With your grades!'

Charis blushed slightly. 'Well, he mentioned something about "mingling with the brightest and best at Hogwarts and advising on your career path and making some new connections for the future". I have no idea what to expect, really, and I think it's a bit weird that he has invited me, seeing as I have never even met Professor Slughorn, but I guess it's rude to say no. I'm allowed to bring a plus one. Would you like to come with me?'

'And serve as a bad example?' Morgana asked sardonically but then grinned. 'Sure! When is it?'

'Twentieth of December,' Charis informed her, and Morgana's face fell.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I don't think I can make it. I, um, I think I'll be working.'

Again, there was that tiny muscle twitching under her left eye, and Snape had a bad premonition about the twentieth of December. He would have to check with Narcissa just who had been invited to her little gathering.

'What a shame,' Charis said, sounding truly disappointed. 'Grindling can't come either. He was invited, but he had something else planned already.'

'So I am your second choice?' Morgana asked in a mock-offended tone. 'So much for friendship.'

'Oh, don't be silly!' Charis said. 'Grindling and I both got our invitations at work. Naturally, I asked if he was going.'

Naturally. Snape downed his Ogden's with a sour expression on his face, suddenly putting two and two together. Suddenly, it seemed superfluous to talk to Narcissa. He could figure out the guest list and the purpose of her little party by himself. Surely, she wanted to show off the little match she had made: Grindling Gibbons, old friend of the family, and Morgana Belakane, the last member of an ancient Wizarding family. Snape sneered. After all, it had been he himself who had given Narcissa the idea of making a lady out of Morgana and introducing her to pureblood society. He had, however, not imagined that she would go so far as to set the girl up with another pureblood, least of all Grindling Gibbons. Snape screwed up his face. He'd witnessed matchmaking at Malfoy manor before. He had no desire to go through that once more. He might just have to make his excuses to Narcissa. Slughorn's little gathering, however, seemed most appealing all of a sudden.

'Never mind,' Charis continued, obviously unaware of her former teacher's musings. 'Guess I'll have to brave it on my own then. It's going to be seriously weird going back to Hogwarts. Seeing all those people again...'

'Just don't go down to the dungeons,' Morgana gave a word of warning. 'You never know who you'll bump into. Draco and his cronies are still around. Then again, I bet that little ferret has been invited to the party as well.'

'Or maybe not,' said Charis. 'Remember what Professor Slughorn said in his letter? The party is about "mingling with the brightest and best at Hogwarts". Surely, that definition excludes Draco Malfoy.'

They laughed, and then Charis addressed another, somewhat more trivial dilemma. 'What do I wear, though? It'd be wrong to wear something Muggle, wouldn't it?'

'As long as it isn't your "Muggle-born and proud of it" T-shirt, I guess you'll be fine,' Morgana pointed out. 'Seriously, though, Muggles do make nice clothes, no?'

'Of course,' Charis confirmed, proud as always to be able to show her friend something nice from the Muggle world. 'I do have my LBD.'

'Your what?' Morgana asked.

'Little black dress,' Charis explained. 'I could always wear it with a cloak. Shall I put it on, and you can tell me what you think?'

'Sure, go ahead,' Morgana said rather unenthusiastically. She'd never been one to enjoy fashion. Snape, however, grew interested. He hadn't eaten much that day, and the two glasses of Ogden's he had downed had somewhat shifted his sense of decency. He would very much enjoy seeing Charis in the aforementioned little black dress.

Charis rifled through her wardrobe, sending clothes flying to the left and right, wriggled out of her pyjamas and finally squeezed into the dress.

'How do I look?' she asked, giving a little twirl in front of the mirror.

'Sssmoking!' Morgana commented, making a purring noise which almost made Snape drop his glass. He had to get a grip on himself. Those two girls in combination with Firewhisky had an effect on him which he barely dared admit to himself.

As the girls continued to chat and laugh, Snape mulled over his options regarding the twentieth of December. He was obliged to see Narcissa, but more than that, as her friend he wanted the evening to be a success and wanted to look out for her. The fact that Morgana seemed to be a guest of honour meant he definitely had to be there. He needed to look out for the red-haired witch, too.

But hearing that Charis was going to the Slug Club on the very same night made him feel torn. He wanted to go there, too. He wanted to see Charis in her little black dress and make sure that Draco Malfoy couldn't somehow gatecrash the party and start slinging hexes at her.

He supposed it wouldn't be impossible to show his face at one event for a time and then go to the other later. That way, Slughorn would be placated, and he, Snape, would have fulfilled his promise to look out for both his girls at the same time.

By the time the girls settled down to sleep, the decision had been made. December the twentieth looked like it would be a very interesting night indeed.

XXX: The Slug Club

Chapter 30 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)



Chapter XXX: The Slug Club

The month of December was grey and wet, and despite her having done all of her Christmas shopping and the fact that the Ministry of Magic's atrium was adorned like a twinkling grotto, Charis was finding it hard to get into the Christmas spirit. Her mind was still plagued with twirling thoughts of the prophecy, and she spent every free moment pondering its implication.

The glowing Lion born into the House of Snakes

Has repented for the error of his ways.

The creature that knows his secrets

Still lives in shadows,

And only the Raven

That was hatched on the lowest branch of the ancient tree

Possesses the means to ask the questions

That will bring the answers to conquer the Dark.

Charis knew the prophecy by heart now, but still she had no answers. And as time wore on, she found it harder and harder to believe that the prophecy was really about her! How could she, of all people, possess the means to ask the questions to conquer the Dark... to conquer You-Know-Who? Certainly, she was a bright young witch who had done Ravenclaw House proud, but what did she know about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Nothing more than anyone else. Dumbledore seemed to know more than he was letting on, though. But then again, he was a brilliant wizard. Yet the Headmaster of Hogwarts seemed to have faith in Charis and her abilities. Just why was beyond her.

She and Grindling had been trying to solve the conundrum for months now and had reached dead ends at every turn. Grindling was growing frustrated, Charis could tell. And who could blame him? After all, it had been Grindling who had made the prophecy. No wonder it annoyed him that he did not know what it meant. But his sighs of frustration did not help, and Charis didn't want to put any more pressure on him. He had been working tirelessly, and now, with the holidays approaching, Charis thought it best for him to take a well-deserved break. That was why she had not told him about her plans to stay at Slughorn's Christmas party for a socially acceptable amount of time only and then sneak off to the library to do some more research to try to find exactly what it was that she and Grindling had overlooked during their last visits. Had she told him, he would certainly have insisted on coming along.

When the night of the twentieth of December finally arrived, Charis' stomach was filled with nerves. For she didn't know who else would be attending the party, and as she was a shy girl, the prospect of sitting in a room full of strangers and having to make small talk was totally daunting. Also, she guessed that it was going to be a fairly lavish event, and when she stepped out of the Floo directly into Slughorn's office shortly after eight o'clock in the evening, she realised that she hadn't been wrong. The ceiling and walls had been draped with emerald, crimson and gold hangings so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent. The room was crowded and stuffy and bathed in red light cast by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the centre of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant speck of light. Loud singing accompanied by what sounded like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a number of house-elves were negotiating their way squeakily through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing so that they looked like little roving tables. The assembled crowd of witches and wizards were all dressed in fine robes, and Charis immediately started to regret her own choice of clothing. She was wearing her little black dress, the one she'd showed Morgana a few weeks ago, which was short without being tarty and modest about the cleavage but showed off her collarbones nicely. She wore the silver Draumar around her neck, and her thick blonde hair was tamed into a sleek, elegant French pleat held in place by delicate silver pins. The outfit was completed by little silver star earrings, her favourite kitten-heeled black shoes and an understated clutch bag. She couldn't have looked any more Muggle if she tried, and she could not help but feel slightly out of place in her surroundings.

Shyly, Charis lingered by the fireplace, looking around for a few moments, feeling completely out of her depth and considering returning home before anyone noticed her. But then she felt the weight of a hand on her shoulder, and a kind voice addressed her: 'Would I be right in thinking that you would be Miss Byrne?'

Charis turned around to see that she was greeted by a short, corpulent, bald wizard who was only an inch or so taller than herself. His gooseberry-coloured eyes were shining, and underneath a bushy silver moustache, which reminded Charis fleetingly of a walrus, his smile was broad and genuine.

'Yes, sir,' she affirmed politely.

'Wonderful to meet you.' The wizard attempted a little polite bow, but the enormity of his girth prevented him from bending too low. 'Horace Slughorn, at your service,' he introduced himself. 'Thank you for coming along tonight. I hope you'll enjoy yourself and get to meet many other influential people. Elf-made wine?'

Before Charis had even had the chance to answer, Slughorn had expertly plucked a glass from a passing elf and thrust the cut crystal into her hand whilst taking one for himself.

'Yes, it's a certainly a good turn-out tonight,' he went on after taking a sip of the rather excellent wine. 'I think people have missed these gatherings since I'd retired from Hogwarts.'

He paused, seemingly lost in reminiscing about the past as Charis smiled at him awkwardly. Certainly, Horace Slughorn was very friendly and welcoming, but she still couldn't understand why she had been invited at all. However, asking her host about it would be rather rude.

The next moment, Slughorn shook his head to clear his thoughts and then leaned in whilst pointing discreetly. 'Now, that dashing young man in the smart brown robes is Cormac McLaggen, a seventh-year Gryffindor. A fine lad he is, too. Very athletic. He's the reserve Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. His Uncle Tiberius is rather well known within the Ministry of Magic. But of course, I'm sure I don't have to tell you that, do I?'

The older wizard smiled down at Charis with his twinkling eyes, and although he was merely pointing out a possible shared associate, Charis could not shake the feeling that Slughorn was trying to do a bit of matchmaking. And that feeling increased when she glanced over at Cormac and was surprised to find the young man looking her up and down like a piece of meat. When the Gryffindor caught her eye, he gave her a cheeky grin and raised his eyebrows in a suggestive manner. One would almost have expected him to wolf-whistle or lick his lips next. But Charis, stunned at the attention, merely blushed and looked away, taking a big gulp of the elf-made wine to cover her embarrassment.

'Lovely young chap, indeed,' Slughorn went on and seemed just about to usher Charis over to Cormac the Lothario when a familiar voice called above the hubbub.

'Charis? Is that you?'

Relieved, Charis turned around to see the smiling face of Luna Lovegood, her old Housemate, complete with Harry Potter in tow.

'Luna! How are you?' Charis gave the younger Ravenclaw a hug and then smiled at Harry, giving him a sheepish 'hello'. The last time she'd seen him had been when she'd told him she couldn't join Dumbledore's Army because he'd decided to exclude Morgana, simply because she was a Slytherin. Charis had no idea how Harry had taken that show of loyalty, but to her relief, he didn't seem to hold a grudge about that.

'I'd stay away from McLaggen if I were you,' Harry warned her in a low voice. 'He brought Hermione to the party, but he's been eyeing up everything in a skirt since he walked in. You don't need to be a Legilimens to know what he's thinking about.'

Charis looked shocked. 'Poor Hermione! Isn't she upset?'

Harry laughed. 'She's been trying to get away from him all night. Says he's got more tentacles than the Giant Squid.'

The three old schoolmates chatted for a few minutes until Harry was distracted by the sight of a red-headed girl whom Charis recognised as Ginny Weasley. He made his excuses and left, and Luna started conversing with Slughorn about the usage of Gurdyroots in toothache potions, which left Charis sipping her wine rather too quickly and looking nervously around the room. She recognised quite a few of the guests and gave a friendly smile at most of them. But she almost spat out her drink when she spotted a handsome, dark-skinned boy in one corner, entertaining a pair of twin girls who were hanging on his every word.

Blaise Zabini!

Aside from Draco Malfoy, Blaise was the last person Charis had wanted to run into. Blaise had cruelly broken her heart during her final year, all because of a bet placed by his crony Malfoy. The very sight of him now made Charis' stomach churn as if it were filled with hundreds of writhing snakes. The twin girls, Slytherins in the year below Zabini, if Charis remembered correctly, were wrapped around his finger, laughing at his jokes with bright eyes and touching his arm at every available opportunity, and Charis couldn't help but wonder if his aim was to bed them both at once. And although the thought was repugnant, it did not surprise her one little bit. Feeling nauseous, she turned away, not wanting to catch the Slytherin's eye and be the victim of a scornful stare. But, as coincidence would have it, standing in front of her was the other Slytherin male who had broken her heart last year: Severus Snape!

'You might want to keep your knickers on tonight, Miss Byrne. Mr Zabini pocketing them is getting old,' he growled in his inimitable low tone.

Charis had no answer for this and could only blink back a few times, her mouth open with shock. So much for hello! And did Snape really think that she had enjoyed the attention when Draco Malfoy had dropped her knickers on her breakfast plate in the Great Hall, telling her Blaise sent his regards?

'Or maybe it is Mr McLaggen who has struck your fancy tonight?' Snape asked smoothly, stretching his neck to watch the seventh-year Gryffindor, who was suddenly looking ever so fascinated with his shoes.

Charis' eyes widened. Surely, Snape didn't think she was flirting with the lecherous McLaggen? Unless... Charis' jaw dropped a second time. So, was it like she had suspected back at Grimmauld Place? Was Snape in some way jealous?

'I... I don't know what you mean, um, sir,' she replied, feeling more and more confused and uncomfortable by the second.

Snape raised a cynical eyebrow at this.

'Interesting choice, your outfit,' he went on, apropos of nothing, scanning his onyx eyes up and down Charis' black dress without emotion. 'Are we still proud of our heritage?'

Charis had no idea where this was leading, but Snape's obtuse sniping was beginning irritate her. She raised her chin slightly in defiance, but answered quietly, 'Yes, sir.' No matter what, Snape was still intimidating.

He stared intently at the blonde witch for some moments, and it felt as if the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees when he finally spoke again.

'You consider this wise, in times like these?'

Charis felt bewildered by this line of questioning. Why couldn't he just say what he meant, instead of talking in riddles? He was worse than a Sphinx.

'I cannot change who I am. And neither would I want to,' she answered in an even tone, forcing herself to look back into Snape's bottomless eyes and to show no fear.

'Some would call that attitude foolish,' he sneered. 'Others would call it brave.'

Then his eyes glittered strangely, and when he spoke again, his voice had taken on a warning tone.

'You want to be careful, Miss Byrne. Not everyone appreciates Muggle outfits the way Mr McLaggen does.'

Charis flushed and looked down. So that's what this was all about. Her dress! Snape might as well have said she looked like a Muggle tramp and be done with it. But before he had a chance to quantify his statement, the host of the party stepped in.

'Ah, Severus! So glad you could make it, dear boy!' he beamed, glancing from the Defence professor to Charis. 'A chance to catch up with students old and new, eh? Care for some mead? Or are you more of an elf-made wine type of chap?'

Whilst Snape turned his attention to Slughorn, Charis seized her chance to escape. What with Zabini on one side, pervy McLaggen on the other and a bitchy Snape in the middle, there was nothing she wanted more right now than to escape the party as quickly as she could.

She swiftly necked the remainder of her wine and then flitted discreetly through the crowd and out into the cool, soothing quietness of the Hogwarts corridors. Turning left, she made her way along in the moonlight. Her destination? The place where Ravenclaws always took comfort in solitude: the library.

* * *

Half an hour later, Charis wandered idly down the aisle that contained the yearbooks, now and then taking one off the shelf and flicking through it. Just being in the stillness of the library calmed her mind, and slowly, she managed to shake off Snape's snide remarks and turn her attention onto the prophecy, trying to think of what she and Grindling could have missed from their previous research. Western astrology hadn't turned up any results; could it be that Chinese astrology could throw up answers instead? Screwing up her face, Charis tried to remember back to her Divination class. She seemed to remember that Chinese astrology featured a snake as one of its symbols and also a tiger. But she couldn't recall a lion being featured. Her own sign was that of the horse, and there had been no mention at all of that in the prophecy. No, that couldn't be it.

She was just about to return another yearbook to the shelf when a faint rustle of robes made her look up sharply. Surely, she was just imagining things? No-one could be using the library this close to Christmas.

'Well, well, Miss Byrne, looking up which wizard at the party has the best family tree, are we?' The familiar voice of Severus Snape oozed out of the darkness before the Head of Slytherin himself stepped out of the shadows. 'How very Ravenclaw of you, going to the library instead of dancing.'

Charis swallowed a retort. She was feeling very annoyed by now. After all, she'd come to the library to avoid Snape and his snarky comments, not to invite him there for more. Why was he acting like a jealous child?

'Is there something I can help you with, sir?' she asked lightly, trying hard to disguise her irritation.

Snape raised a dark eyebrow as if he had no idea what Charis was talking about. Instead of replying, he glanced at the shelf of books before her.

'Have you not been through these already with your... boss?' he asked, making the word ~~boss~~ sound like it was something deeply unpleasant indeed.

Charis' jaw tightened at this. Snape knew very well that Dumbledore thought solving the prophecy was highly important. Why was he so snippy about it?

'Albus said we could use the library at any time, if we wished,' she answered evenly.

'And you consider *this* to be a good time, Miss Byrne?' Snape asked, stepping closer to the blonde witch, his eyes glittering. 'When you are all dressed up, looking dazzling? I'd say it is a waste.'

Now Charis was stunned. Did Snape just pay her a compliment?! What on earth was going on? How much wine had he drunk?

'I... I thought you said my outfit was inappropriate, sir,' she stammered, wondering what verbal trap her former teacher had left for her this time.

'Did you hear me use those exact words, Miss Byrne?' Snape answered smoothly, a slight smile pulling at his lips. 'You must have Glumbumbles in your ears.'

And with that, he stepped swiftly beside Charis. If she hadn't known better, she'd have thought he was about to check her ears. Her pulse quickened at his proximity. What was Snape up to? And why did she have the feeling that she was being toyed with, like a Kneazle with a Pygmy Puff?

'No, no Glumbumbles here,' Snape said softly. 'This, however, might be befuddling your mind.'

He reached for the silver Draumar, which was resting on Charis' chest, brushing her breasts ever so slightly as he picked up the necklace, causing a shiver of anticipation to wash over Charis. Had his touch been an accident, or had it been deliberate?

'The star necklace suited you better, Miss Byrne,' Snape said slowly, turning the delicately engraved Draumar over in his hand. 'You wore the star as a proof of your friendship. What are you wearing this for?'

Once again, Charis was caught off guard by this line of questioning. Why should her choice of jewellery be any of his business?

'It's a rare and valuable object,' Charis explained. 'And..., ' she paused, a little embarrassed to go on.

'And?' Snape prompted, silently willing Charis not to mention her boss' name. It was the last thing he wanted to hear.

'It sounds silly,' Charis continued after a moment, 'but I was hoping that having the prophecy on my person would somehow act as a talisman for me to unlock its secrets.'

Charis looked down bashfully, feeling a bit stupid for admitting that.

'Muggle superstition,' Snape muttered, pulling the Draumar up on the necklace so it came to hang on Charis' back instead. He didn't want to see it, that reminder of the other male in Charis' life, and he certainly didn't want her to think of any man other than him that night.

Once he'd hidden the Draumar safely from sight, he cupped Charis' chin and looked deep into her lovely green eyes, relishing the sharp intake of breath his touch caused.

'As for the rest of your outfit..., ' he continued slowly, turning Charis' head to one side, in order to inspect her hair. 'Muggle style... is not necessarily a bad thing.'

Charis was clinging on to her clutch bag tightly in one hand, not trusting herself to say anything. She'd forgotten how his touch felt, how gentle he could be.

Snape effortlessly took the bag from her with his free hand and threw it lightly on the table to one side. He noticed Charis was shaking slightly. With nerves, excitement or fear, he could not tell. Most probably, it was a mixture of all three.

'It appears we are completely alone.'

He caught Charis' elbow and started to walk her backwards into one of the alcoves, where she gave a yelp as she backed into a pillar.

'Hush now, silly girl. You know how much Madam Pince dislikes noises in the library.'

And with that, Snape bent over and covered Charis' mouth with his, keeping her from making even the tiniest of noises. He tasted of smoky Firewhisky, and after a moment's hesitation, Charis started to kiss him back, her hands instinctively grasping his shoulders. His kiss stirred a passion inside her, and volts of pleasure shot down her spine as he pressed his body against hers. And suddenly, she realised that she'd been right: he had been jealous, jealous because he was still attracted to her after all this time! The thought made her giddy. The marble pillar was cold against her back, and she could feel the Draumar digging in to her as Snape shifted his weight. His hands were running down her side, her hips, tracing the outline of her feminine curves.

'Do you know the advantage of Muggle outfits, Miss Byrne?' he whispered, only just breaking their kiss, his breath entwining with hers.

'No, sir,' Charis replied breathlessly, feeling quite dizzy from the dark wizard's intoxicating kiss.

'They are much...'

His fingers traced the hem of her dress.

'... shorter than witches' robes.'

He pulled the fabric upwards, which left Charis' pale, creamy thigh exposed for him to caress with his fingertips. As he crept higher, his thumb found its way under her knickers and into the sensitive flesh beyond. He moved slowly, yet deliberately, leaving Charis trembling in earnest now. Her knees were feeling weak all of a sudden, and she increased her grip on Snape's shoulders as she tried to steady herself.

With a strong hand, Snape picked up Charis' leg, placing it against his waist, and as she hooked it around him, he ground up against her with a slight groan. To this, Charis arched her back, pushing her breasts towards him with a little surprised moan of her own. How could she have forgotten how big the bulge was underneath his robes?

Snape now directed his hand between her thighs, deftly pulling her knickers to the side. For a blink of an eye, he paused, yet again reliving a memory he had replayed over and over since he first touched her: she had been clean shaven, hot and wet. Wet for *him*. And when he let his fingers slide over her sex, he was delighted to find her just as he remembered her to be: wanting and ready to be taken. A smile flitted over his otherwise so dark features. She had always been his, and he could have her whenever he wanted. And tonight, he wanted her badly.

'Those *boys* might have been ogling you all night, Miss Byrne, and would gladly have pawed you and slobbered all over you like dogs,' he breathed. 'But it takes *man* to treat you like the woman you are.'

He entered her wetness with two long fingers, inching into her slowly and carefully, causing Charis to moan and grip his fingers with her muscles as he slid in up to the knuckle. His teeth softly grazed her neck, and Charis could hear his laboured breathing, which betrayed his own arousal and excitement. Oh, he wanted her just as much as she wanted him. Always had, always would. And Charis could not resist and ran her fingers through his thick black hair. Snape stiffened for a moment, fighting the instinct to pull his head away. But in the end, he let Charis pull his head closer towards her, buried his face at her shoulder and kissed the side of Charis' throat, all the while moving his fingers slowly in and out of her, causing her knee to buckle a little. But he held on to her tightly, and she mewled with pleasure at the gentleness and deliberateness of his touch.

Not stopping his ministrations, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes, and she gazed back at him, the pupils in her fern-coloured eyes dilated with lust and her hand still entwined in his hair. Once again, she had the feeling of vertigo from looking in their black depths, of being pulled in and never escaping.

'Do you remember what I told you the last time we were here? Do you remember the difference between love and lust?'

Snape's voice was soft when he spoke, and Charis nodded slowly, never once breaking eye contact.

'Are you able to keep the two apart, no matter what happens here tonight?'

'Yes,' Charis whispered hoarsely. She'd say anything right now, anything at all so he'd carry on kissing her and stroking her special spot.

For a moment, Snape hesitated. He was aware that he couldn't have chosen a worse moment for his question and that Charis was not really in a frame of mind where she could say no. He knew that once again, he would be taking advantage of her. But against his better judgement, he used his free hand to undo his robes and release himself

from the black material. He knew she wanted him, the look in her eyes and the way her body reacted to him was ten times stronger than Amortensia. He would give her what she craved and take what he himself needed so desperately. Hopefully, they'd be able to look each other in the eyes when this was over.

It was now or never. Quickly, Snape pulled his fingers out, taking a firm grip around Charis' waist, and without warning, he thrust into her with a low growl, filling her completely. Charis let out a surprised moan of her own, one leg still wrapped around his hips, the other standing on tiptoes, barely managing to keep her balance as their bodies joined as one.

Snape closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself. He had not been prepared for the sensation of her hot flesh, and had he been less careful, he would have come undone already. But he had to make sure that this was not only about him.

Slowly, he eased out of her and lifted her from the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist and looped her arms around his neck, and he placed his hands underneath her succulent, rounded bottom, preparing to enter her again.

This time, he was careful, sliding in inch by inch, enjoying every second. Charis' eyelids fluttered shut as the sensation of being filled totally washed over her. Gods, she never knew Snape could make love like this! But this wasn't love-making, she reminded herself. This was just sex. The best sex she'd ever had!

Snape was enjoying it, too. Charis was tight and warm, and her moans were delicious. But he wasn't twenty any more. The position was hard work, and once more, a primitive thought entered his mind, the thought of finishing quickly and being done with it. But he fought the urge. This was about Charis.

Once more, he slid into her to the hilt, taking a firm hold on her, and spun around to the nearest table. Sitting her down carefully, he let go of her bottom and pushed her gently backwards so she came to lie on her back. He let his hands run up her hips and her side, over her shoulders and down onto her chest until they came to rest on her full breasts, giving them a gentle squeeze before he started massaging them. Charis sighed. She loved the feeling of his hands on her, the long, skilful fingers caressing every inch of her as if sculpting her out of clay. Suddenly, she wished she could be free of her little black dress so she could feel those wonderful hands on her naked skin. But this was not a time for the passionate ripping of clothes and discarded items being tossed onto the floor. Snape was moving in and out of her, slowly, deliberately, his eyes half-closed and his hair falling into his face when he thrust forward. He looked so relaxed; the permanent furrow between his brows had all but disappeared. Slowly, Charis started to rock her hips in time with his thrusts, hoping he wouldn't find her wanton for doing so.

Snape opened his eyes. Black met green. He leant forward, and for the tiniest of moments, Charis was convinced that he would kiss her. But instead, he grabbed hold of her wrists, pinning her hands to her sides. He changed his angle, and his thrusts became harder. Charis let out a little "oh!" of surprise, and her moans became more urgent as he struck her special spot over and over with his unrelenting thrusts. Heavens, she liked this! Being taken roughly by a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

"Yes! Please... yes, just like that!"

She was silenced with an urgent, passionate kiss that left her gasping for air when Snape eventually pulled back. Whether he had quietened her because they were in the library or because he didn't appreciate his women making too much noise, Charis did not know. But she bit her lip, obediently not making any more sound than a church mouse.

Snape exhaled through his nose. He wouldn't last much longer, he was well aware of that. The angle was perfect and Charis was warm and tight. And her clenching her inner muscles and moving her hips were sending him even further into oblivion. Quickly, he pulled her up into a sitting position, yet again pinning her arms to her side. Charis could feel his hot breath at the side of her throat and noticed how his thrusts became erratic, almost desperate. Was that it, she wondered. Was Snape finally going to surrender and give her what she had wished for since their first encounter in this very library?

She turned her head, seeking eye contact. She wanted to hold him now, but Snape was still holding on to her wrists, and she could not move a muscle.

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, he withdrew, and Charis felt her heart sink. If Snape walked away from her now, yet again, she knew not what she would do. But to her utter delight, he did no such thing. Instead, he pulled her right hand towards his cock.

Charis swallowed, carefully wrapping her small hand around it, marvelling at how slick it was with her own juices and how wide and warm the head was. She squeezed gently as she stroked him up and down, looking into his face for approval after the first few strokes.

Snape's jaw was clenched and his eyes were slightly narrowed, but the look on his face was not of the disapproving kind. Instead, he rocked his hips towards her, and his right hand found its way between Charis' legs where his fingers quickly found that very special spot. He knew exactly what he was doing, and Charis could feel a flush forming on her cheeks and her heart pounding harder and harder as her climax approached with ever-increasing speed.

She gave a small whimper as Snape lowered his head to lick the side of her neck. His fingers applied more pressure, and after a few more deft strokes, Charis found herself trembling. Then it took nothing more than a soft bite right below her ear to send her tumbling into a powerful orgasm. Her muscles spasmed and clenched, and her whole body was shaking as waves and waves of pleasure rolled over her. She didn't even have air to moan.

Snape grunted and wrapped his left hand around Charis' hand, the one that was wrapped around his cock. She still had a firm grip around him but had ceased her ministrations. No wonder. The intensity of her orgasm had astonished even Snape. He was almost surprised that she was still sitting upright. But he needed this now just as much as she had, and carefully, he guided her hand into the right rhythm, eventually increasing the speed of the strokes.

His body went rigid as his orgasm hit, and he moaned as jet after jet of his stringy white cum shot forth, some spraying on Charis' dress and his own robes, some dribbling all over their entwined hands.

He slumped over, panting, and his forehead came to rest at Charis' shoulder. He was still holding onto her right hand and keeping it firmly wrapped around his cock. But her left hand was free, and Charis ventured laying it gently onto his back. To her surprise, Snape didn't even flinch. In fact, Charis wanted to believe that she could feel his muscles relax under her touch.

They both rested like this for some moments, getting their breaths back. What to say? What to do? Charis longed for a kiss, a caress, yes, even some whispered words of love, but she knew she wouldn't get either. Snape had made this clear from the very start. This had been all about lust. The moments they were sharing now, entwined almost like lovers, were more than Charis could ever have hoped for. As was the look in his eyes when he straightened up to rearrange his robes and magically remove the mess he had made on them both. His look was calm, almost gentle, and neither of them had to say a word.

"Let me go, you filthy Squib!"

The high voices outside, further down the corridor, made them both flinch, and Snape spun around, his wand drawn.

"MY FATHER WILL HEAR ABOUT THIS!"

"Your father is rotting away in Azkaban, lad!"

Charis recognised the voices of Draco Malfoy and Filch the caretaker, and when Snape turned back to face her, she saw the angry line between his eyes reappear. She knew he had to go and see what was going on. He was Draco's Head of House, after all. He couldn't stay. And even if he did, it wouldn't be the same any more. The magical moment they had shared had been shattered by Draco's shouting. Now it lay in a thousand pieces, and they would never be able to put it back together.

But before Snape turned to leave, he spoke once again in that low, gentle voice he'd used earlier.

"Be careful, Charis. Your heritage is dangerous. You are a *Black* and a Muggle, and the only thing Blacks wish for Muggles is death. Do not give them an opportunity to strike. Because they will seize it."

He brushed a stray blonde lock behind Charis' ear before he helped her down from the table and pulled down her skirt, and the kiss he left on her cheek was so quick and light, it could have been a dream. And Charis just looked up at her former teacher, so overwhelmed by his display of concern and by the tenderness of his gestures she did not know what to say in response. But Snape seemed to know there was nothing more to say because, after one last meaningful look, he turned on his heel and billowed through the library after his errant student.

At the door, however, he stopped once more and looked back.

'The stars,' he said and pointed at his throat as if to indicate a necklace he was wearing. 'Renew the charm. Wear them. The both of you.'

And with that, he threw open the library door and swept out, leaving Charis reeling at what had just happened.

XXXI: Narcissa's Party

Chapter 31 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXI: Narcissa's Party

'So glad you are enjoying yourselves, dear friends.'

'You look adorable, Narcissa. And the food was delicious.'

From a well-chosen spot by the window, where he could observe everyone in the room whilst being almost non-detectable himself, Snape watched the lady of the manor socialising easily with her dinner guests. A smile, a toast and a fake laugh. Narcissa Malfoy was indeed the perfect hostess, and her guests enjoyed themselves like kings. They couldn't see the strain she was under, so faultlessly did she play her role. They toasted towards her and made small talk. It was almost like old times. Almost. For Lucius wasn't there by Narcissa's side, the guest list was considerably shorter than it would have been a year ago, and the wine somewhat less expensive. Only Snape knew Narcissa was desperately hoping that soon, very soon, the name of Malfoy would once more be paid the respect it deserved. If the plan regarding Morgana's induction into the Death Eaters' inner circle worked, the Malfoys would be on the Dark Lord's good side again. And then, Lucius would be allowed to return home. Narcissa was certain of it, and Snape knew it was these thoughts alone that kept her going day after day.

Once more, she gave the wizard opposite her a dazzling smile and beckoned an elf to refill his glass. Snape recognised the wizard as a highly valued member of the Wizengamot. He was also deeply inside the Dark Lord's pocket, and Snape guessed that Narcissa had felt obliged to invite the man. Yet for all her charm and politeness, it was clear she had no desire whatsoever to talk to him. Snape could see that her eyes were every now and then darting around the room as if she were looking around for someone in particular. And when she caught sight of him and smiled broader than on her wedding day, Snape knew the emotion she felt for him was genuine.

'Oh, Severus! I was beginning to fear that you would not come.'

She kissed him on both cheeks, and Snape gave a bow.

'I am sorry to have kept you waiting. There has been... an incident,' he said matter-of-factly, opting against telling Narcissa that her son had been acting both petulantly and foolishly and that he had failed to gain the boy's trust yet again. Instead, he kissed her hand, and Narcissa smiled.

'I'll have an elf prepare a plate for you. Do you prefer dark meat or light?'

But Snape politely declined her offer. 'Do not trouble yourself, Narcissa. I have eaten.'

'But you'll have some wine, won't you? Or something stronger, perhaps?'

'Wine would be acceptable,' Snape replied. One glass, not more. After all, he had not come to the manor just to hold Narcissa's hand. He had come to look out for Morgana, just like he had vowed that he would.

Even though he'd just ravished her best friend in the library at Hogwarts.

Snape shook his head. He had no time to reflect on that now; no time to reflect on the inevitable guilt and self-loathing that would follow. What he had done with Charis had not been planned. It had simply happened. Now he had to get his act together. Merlin knew what Narcissa was up to this evening. With any luck, all she had planned was to introduce the last of the Belakanes to pureblood society. Certainly, many of the witches and wizards present remembered Morgana's last name and would praise Narcissa for having taken the girl under her wing. In the worst case scenario, however, the Dark Lord would make an appearance and demand the girl become a loyal servant, simply because her lineage demanded it.

Once more, Snape jerked his head to rid himself of the horrible thoughts that haunted him. Narcissa was not Lucius. Narcissa had experienced first-hand what it meant to be under the mercy of the Dark Lord. She was fond of Morgana. She would not risk the girl's well-being. But still, Snape felt uneasy and wished for little more than to see Morgana and make sure she was alright. Yet no matter how many times he scanned the room, he could not spot her red hair anywhere.

'If it is the guest of honour you are looking for,' Narcissa started, following his gaze, 'I sent her and Grindling for a stroll in the winter garden. They need some privacy, those two. Oh, Severus, it is all working out so nicely!'

Snape could see the genuine glow of happiness in Narcissa's eyes as she edged closer to completing her plans. And although he was relieved that the alliance of two ancient houses was all she was after, he couldn't help but loathe the fact that the man in question was Grindling Gibbons. Yet another blond, well-mannered aristocrat. Why did women fall for men like that? Why did his girls?

'They have grown so fond of each other,' Narcissa continued excitedly, 'and the Gibbons are just as old and respectable a family as the Belakanes. They know the old values. Oh, the Dark Lord will be so pleased. Now, please, excuse me for just a moment. I need to talk to Miranda Mulciber. She is utterly thrilled with the match.'

She disappeared in a flutter of robes, and Snape downed his wine, now wishing for something stronger after all. Merlin forbid Morgana had actually fallen for Grindling Gibbons.

'Breathtaking.'

Morgana smiled. She shared Grindling's sentiment completely, but whereas he was talking about the stars that could be seen through the glass roof of the winter garden, she was thinking of the wizard himself. He was wearing robes of blue velvet, so dark that the fabric resembled the midwinter sky. His hair was pulled back into a simple ponytail. And his greyish-blue eyes sparkled more than the stars. He was beautiful indeed and not just on the surface. His heart, although broken, was pure as gold and the kindest Morgana had encountered in her young life. She loved him dearly, the fair-haired wizard, and wished that one day she could repay him for everything he had done for her. He would say that he had done nothing at all, of course, but Morgana thought differently. He had listened, he had not judged, and he had held her close during a night when the darkness had threatened to swallow her completely. And even during that night, he had not judged her.

'Enchanting.'

Morgana gasped as Grindling took her hand and promptly blushed when she realised that he was looking at her now and not the stars. He had paid her many compliments during dinner, about her dress, her hair. But this was different. They were alone now, and he didn't have to pretend to keep up their little farce. And yet he had not sounded more sincere all evening.

'There is no need to blush, Morgana,' he said and brushed her knuckles with his lips. 'I am not blind. I have seen you change over the last few months. Your dress and hair at our first dinner together might have been Narcissa's doing, and she has probably picked the dress you're wearing tonight as well. But you could be dressed in rags, it would not matter. You have blossomed. You have changed. The look in your eyes has changed. And I think, so has your heart. It has started to heal.'

'Has yours?' Morgana asked.

Grindling shrugged.

'I like to think it has. It's on the way, at least. And when we leave here tomorrow morning, I hope neither of us will ever have to return. I know I don't want to, for sure.'

Morgana nodded. That was their plan, at least. They'd tell Narcissa over breakfast that they were planning to get engaged. That way, Narcissa would think that her plan had worked. And as she didn't want to tear down what she had so laboriously built over the autumn, she would let Grindling go. He belonged to Morgana now, she would think, and Morgana and her bloodline were Narcissa's key to a better life. She could not risk losing the girl's trust by laying her hands on Grindling.

'Shall we go back inside?' Grindling asked. 'I guess we have been away long enough for Narcissa to think that we have been naughty.'

Morgana laughed. Narcissa had indeed sent them to the winter garden so they could be on their own. She had also called after them to enjoy themselves. Surely, she would not have minded if Grindling had bedded Morgana on Lucius' award-winning roses. But he had done no such thing. They had talked and also shared a great deal of silence, and now Morgana would very much have preferred staying in the winter garden. For inside the manor were too many people she wasn't especially fond of. Yet with Grindling by her side, she would manage a smile just as fake as Narcissa's and rub shoulders with what the Malfoys called "the right people". And soon, the evening would be over. Soon, both she and Grindling could drop the act, and the whole charade would be over.

When they returned to the manor house, Morgana noticed that they had been in the garden longer than she had thought. The lights in the dining room were dimmed, and the small number of shadows on the curtains told her that most of the guests had already left. People were standing around in small groups, holding glasses in their hands, probably enjoying some private small talk. Most probably, no one would notice if she and Grindling never returned. But, alas, Narcissa seemed to have been waiting for them in the candlelit hallway.

'There you are, sweethearts,' she chirped as she caught sight of Grindling and Morgana returning. 'Did you have a good time? Oh, of course you have. Look at your rosy cheeks, Morgana. And you're holding hands. How quaint. Come inside now. Have some wine. Mingle. I'll just see to it that we will have some sherry and chocolate in a moment.'

With that, she continued towards the kitchen, giving Grindling and Morgana no other choice than to re-join the party.

They had left a room full of people enjoying their desserts, chattering loudly and toasting to each other, but now the mood was more restrained. The heavy velvet curtains were drawn, there were a few candles burning, and the fire in the grate didn't seem to emit much light either. The air was heavy with the smell of cigar smoke and spirits, and Morgana wrinkled her pretty little nose. She had always been sensitive to smells, which had often been an advantage in Potions class and also came in handy in her Auror training when Moody asked them to identify poisons. But there were too many different scents in the air now. They made her nauseous, and Morgana considered leaving the room again. She could feign a headache. Surely, Narcissa wouldn't mind. But then Morgana's nose caught yet another combination of scents, one she had not encountered for quite some time: sandalwood, musk, dark chocolate and just a hint of peppermint.

Her eyes darted around the semi-dark room. She had hoped that Snape would come that evening. After all, he was one of Narcissa's oldest friends and had certainly been invited. But by the time dessert had been served, she had all but given up hope. Why she had hoped for him to come, she didn't really know. She had Grindling at her side. Surely, she should be content with that. But now that she thought that Snape was close, she could feel her heart beat faster in her chest and craned her neck. Yet before she could make him out in the shadows, the flames in the grate turned emerald. There was a swooshing sound and out of the fireplace stepped none other than Bellatrix Lestrange.

'Now isn't this a cosy little gathering,' she cooed. 'Lots of old friends. And new ones. Lovely. Truly lovely.'

Morgana swallowed. Now that her eyes had become accustomed to the semi-darkness, she, too, could make out which of the guests had lingered. All men, all dressed in dark robes, all wearing the Dark Mark on their left forearm. But that didn't show, of course. And to someone like Grindling, this was just a gathering of wealthy, influential wizards, all sprung from old, respectable families just like himself. He had no idea who those men really were. Hence, the entrance of Bellatrix, an infamous Death Eater, startled him. Or at least, that was what Morgana thought to be the reason for him paling. But as Narcissa entered the room behind them, Morgana was forced to reconsider.

'What is your sister doing here?' Grindling whispered to Narcissa. 'You never told me she was invited.'

There was a tone of panic in his voice and maybe just a hint of fear, too. And as Bellatrix caught sight of him, it was obvious that he had every reason to be afraid. Her dark eyes flashed dangerously, and she closed the distance between them in a blink of an eye.

'You!' she hissed. 'Haven't I warned you that I'd kill you if you ever get close to my sister again?'

'Bella, please. Don't make a scene,' Narcissa appealed to her sister, her delicate white hand closing around the dark witch's wrist to prevent her from drawing her wand. 'We have guests, Bella. Important guests.'

Her blue eyes scanned the room, but to her relief, none of the guests were looking in their direction. As so often, the entrance of Bellatrix had made people turn their backs and pretend they weren't there.

Bellatrix gave Grindling yet another hateful look.

'What are you doing here?' she demanded to know.

'I... I am here with Morgana,' he brought forth, tightening his grip around Morgana's hand as if to prove his point.

'You remember Morgana, don't you, Bella?' Narcissa weaved in. 'Lucius sponsored her education. We've become good friends, Morgana and I. Look what a lovely young lady she has become. And now she is to be engaged to Grindling. Imagine the pretty babies they will have. Pureblood babies, Bella.'

Bellatrix's eyebrows shot up, and her lips twisted into a cruel smile as she let her eyes wander over Morgana's figure.

'I do remember that one,' she said, and Morgana felt a cold shiver go down her spine. She remembered Bellatrix, too. All too well. She remembered the taste of her lips, the weight of her breasts. And judging by the look Bellatrix was giving her, the dark witch remembered their encounter as well. But thankfully, she had more pressing matters at hand.

'Why him?' Bellatrix asked her sister. 'Of all the eligible purebloods, you had to choose *him*?'

'Of course, I chose Grindling,' Narcissa whispered sharply, avoiding making eye contact with Grindling. 'You know he'd do anything for me.'

'And you know perfectly well why he does that!'

The uncomfortable silence that followed this statement was so heavy Morgana almost felt crushed by the weight of it. At the same time, she felt Grindling's grip on her hand loosen, almost as if he was losing the strength to go on.

'Come, you don't want to be here right now.'

Morgana's voice was barely audible, but as she pulled at Grindling's hand, he followed her at once. It was almost as if he had no will of his own, as if he were a lifeless puppet.

She led him down the hallway and up a flight of stairs. The door to Lucius' private study was concealed by magic, but those who knew where it was, could enter without even using any spells. And Morgana had spent enough time in this room to know it well. She knew the position of every book on the shelf, knew in which cabinet Lucius kept his brandy. She also knew that the fireplace was connected to the open Floo. Grindling could Floo to wherever he wanted.

'She has been using me,' he said quietly as the door fell shut behind them.

'You knew that, Grindling. You knew all along.'

The look in his eyes was one of defeat, and Morgana gingerly brushed his pale cheek with her fingers, her heart aching for him. It was one thing to know that the person to whom you devoted your very soul was using your love to make you do their bidding. To hear it from their own mouth was a different matter altogether. Morgana knew how much it hurt.

And Grindling had been hurt enough by Narcissa Malfoy. Tonight, she had gone too far. Now he was mourning all he had lost, gazing down at his shoes, fighting back tears he had no desire to cry, his shoulders slumped in anguish.

'Go now, Grindling,' Morgana said gently and pulled him towards the fireplace. 'Leave this place and never come back. Don't ever think about her again.'

'What about you?' Grindling asked, looking up sharply.

Morgana was touched. Even when his heart was once more breaking, he was still looking out for her.

'I'll Floo home right after you,' she promised and gestured towards the silver box of Floo Powder that stood on the mantle. 'Neither of us has any business here anymore.'

Grindling hesitated but then reached for Morgana's hand, squeezing it gently.

'I wish things had been different.'

Morgana knew that it was an ambiguous statement, yet somehow, she understood. He wished he'd never got involved with Narcissa, never broken Charis' heart, and maybe, just maybe, he wished that they both weren't too damaged and caught up in Narcissa's plans for their relationship to be anything other than pretence.

She squeezed his hand back.

'Me too, Grindling. Me too.'

They held each other's gaze for a few moments, both of them knowing that any words they could say were too feeble to explain what they felt. In the end, Grindling simply kissed her hand and then stepped into the fireplace. In a flash of emerald flames, he was gone.

Morgana watched as the Floo Powder wore off, leaving the fire burning flickering orange. She had promised Grindling that she'd Floo home right after him, but she wasn't ready to leave. Because in contrast to Grindling, the Malfoy she had loved had never said right out that he'd used her. Until the very end, Lucius had claimed that he had loved her, too. And Morgana was beginning to fear that she would never be able to admit to herself that she had always known that he had been lying.

Staring into the embers, she got lost in thoughts and memories, fighting them and trying to hold on to them at the same time. She didn't even hear the door behind her open and didn't care when it once more closed.

'Lovers' tiff, Miss Belakane?' Snape asked in his smooth baritone, watching the red-haired witch's reaction carefully.

Morgana turned around slowly, using the few moments to empty her mind so she could fix her former teacher with an icy blue stare.

'Grindling and I are not lovers,' she clarified with a steady voice that did not betray her disappointment. 'But I am happy to hear that we played our parts well enough for everyone to believe otherwise.'

Snape raised an eyebrow at this revelation. What he had heard from Narcissa, and what he had seen from across the room, had made him believe that the girl had indeed opened up her heart once more. He didn't like Grindling, far from it. But if he had the ability to make Morgana believe in love again, then so be it. It now seemed, however, that her heart was just as closed as it had been since Lucius had torn it in two.

'You mean to tell me that all that time you were out for a little stroll in the moonlight tonight, he never even tried to kiss you? Not even once?' he asked.

A muscle twitched at Morgana's jaw. 'No! If you must know, Grindling has been teaching me about the stars.'

Snape nearly gave a bark of a laugh at this. Instead, his mouth twisted into a trademark sneer.

'The man must be a simpleton, or visually-impaired. Either way, he's a fool for not noticing how exquisite you look tonight.'

Morgana gave the dark wizard a puzzled look. Snape complimenting her was the last thing she expected. Also, this wasn't something she was used to. Only two men had ever complimented her: one in order to trap her, the other because they had both been part of a charade. What Snape was up to, she didn't know.

'Narcissa's little dress-up doll,' she answered in a mocking tone, expertly deflecting his compliment. 'All part of the charade.'

'That may be,' Snape agreed, slowly walking towards his former student, studying her carefully. 'But the robe suits you. As do your curls.'

He meant every word he said. Morgana did look breathtaking that night, just like the pureblood pride Narcissa wanted her to be. Feminine, stately, enticing. She should be going to bed that night floating an inch from the ground from joy. She should be in love. She should be happy. Instead, she would spend yet another night mourning for

what she had lost.

Swiftly, he closed the distance between them and looked into Morgana's eyes. He could have forced himself into her mind, if he had wanted to, but he refrained from doing so. He knew what was going on in her head, but he had no idea how to chase away the shadows.

'Why are you still wearing this?' he suddenly asked, reaching for the snake pendent that hung around her neck on a delicate silver chain. He knew it was Lucius' gift, the only one she never returned to him.

Morgana shivered. At first, she wanted to snatch the pendent from Snape's hand. How dare he touch it? It was hers and hers alone. The only gift of Lucius' that had ever meant anything to her. But then she reconsidered. She might have looked at the pendent all dewy-eyed once, but its meaning had changed. Nowadays, putting it on was a kind of ritual. When she put it on, she was donning her shield against the outside world, against anyone who might look at her with kind eyes. Against any man who might come close to her heart.

'The star suited you better,' Snape pointed out, giving Morgana a meaningful look whilst turning the pendant around so it was hanging down her back. 'Much better,' he emphasised.

Morgana swallowed drily as she gazed up into his onyx eyes, and Snape in his turn found himself looking into her cool blue eyes. Eyes that had seen way too much hardship for her eighteen years on the planet and in which he could still see a shadow. The shadow of a man who deserved the Dementor's Kiss for what he had done to her.

'Not all men are out to break your heart, Morgana.'

He cupped her chin gently, preventing her from turning away. He needed her to look at him now so she would understand the full meaning of his words. But to his surprise, Morgana did not even flinch. Instead, she leaned into his touch, got on her toes and...

It lasted only for a heartbeat, and their lips barely touched. Yet when Morgana inched back, she was trembling. How she had dared kiss Severus Snape, her former teacher and Head of House, she did not know. She had been certain that she would never again have either the desire or courage to kiss a man in her life. She had feared that she would never again trust a man enough to engage in such an intimate act. But Snape had always been one to trust. She had always been able to rely on him. And even now, he was still there, not pulling back even an inch. His hands cradled her face as if she were made out of glass, and Morgana realised that she was safe, safe in those hands that had never once let her fall.

Carefully, she got onto her toes once more, steadying herself by putting her hands onto his broad chest. Once more, she kissed him, carefully and timidly at first but then more demanding. She needed this now. She needed to taste him, needed to prove to herself that she could touch a man and still keep control. And Snape did let her take the lead, realising her kisses had become demanding and desperate. Her small hands worked over his black-robed chest, exploring him through the material. He could feel her lips tremble and her breath quicken.

As she pushed her weight against him, Snape started to walk backwards with his hands on her hips. He did not know where they were going and was quite surprised when he bumped against an armchair. So surprised, in fact, that he lost his balance and fell backwards, landing on the cushions, with Morgana on top of him. Their kiss broke, and with a sharp intake of breath, Morgana pulled back, looking confused and slightly scared. What the hell was she doing, she wondered. Her thoughts were a mess. Snape was the man she had always looked up to. He'd always been there for her. All she'd ever had to do was to reach out. She might be destroying the special bond there was between them by taking this further. But if she couldn't trust Snape, which other man would she ever trust?

Carefully, she brushed a strand of hair from his face, slowly inching forward. Her lips were slightly parted, and Snape was quite certain that she was about to kiss him yet again. But in the very last moment, when her face was so close to his that Snape could feel her breath tickle his lips, Morgana lost her courage and turned away.

Snape didn't even frown. The young woman on his lap had suffered so much at the hands of a man. Kissing him had most certainly been the most intimate gesture she had dared make since spring. Whether she wanted to end it there or take things further was up to her. Snape knew that he could not be the one to make a move. Yet Morgana sat quite still, not knowing what to do.

'The choice is yours, Morgana.'

Snape's words weren't much more than a whisper, but they rang out as clearly to Morgana as if he had shouted them into her ear. The choice truly was hers. She could pull back now or in two minutes' time. Or she could carry on all the way to the end. Whatever she chose, Snape wouldn't think less of her. And for her own sake, she had to try at least.

Her breath was hot against the side of his neck, and as she grazed the sensitive flesh with her teeth, Snape let out a soft moan. He was growing more and more aroused, and he was longing to grab Morgana's hips and pull her towards him. But he let his hands rest on the small of her back, caressing it ever so gently. He couldn't be the one to take the lead. This was Morgana's moment.

She was sitting up now, gazing into his eyes. Her fingers swiftly unbuttoned his shirt. Her small hands felt warm against the skin of Snape's stomach, but he also noticed how they were shaking. Shaking so much, in fact, that she failed miserably at unbuckling his belt. Her shoulders slumped, and she gave a sigh of frustration.

'Why don't you use magic?' Snape asked in a thick growl, which sounded as rich as melted butter.

Morgana shook her head.

'No, no magic,' she muttered softly. 'None at all.'

She abandoned his buckle, taking his face into her hands instead. Snape's eyes were glittering in the candle light and fluttered shut when she kissed him. Her kiss was less desperate this time, yet just as passionate. And as Morgana moved her hips forward, Snape gingerly let his own hands glide over her firm bottom, awaiting a reaction. If she struggled, he'd let go. But to his surprise, she ground herself against him, as if encouraged by his touch. Taking this to be permission, Snape squeezed her bottom gently, and the way her hips bucked told him she liked this very much. And indeed she did. So much, in fact, that she found herself trembling once more. From excitement, anticipation or pure lust, she could not tell. But she knew that she was ready now.

Her second try at his fly was much more successful, and both his belt buckle and buttons opened as easily as if they were undone by magic, and in a heartbeat, Morgana had wrapped her hand around Snape's hard, warm length. Her eyes were firmly locked on his, her teeth deeply sunk into her bottom lip, and the way her hand travelled up his shaft made Snape hiss. Merlin, the girl knew what she was doing! If she wanted to, she could make him come undone with a single stroke.

Once more, Snape resisted the urge to pull her on top of him. Instead, he moved his hands up her hips, caressing her waist, slowly moving up towards her pert breasts. He heard her sharp intake of breath and paused, but as she did not even blink, he carried on, gently cupping her breasts and flicking his thumb across the now-hardened nipples. He saw her lick her lips, saw her eyelids grow heavy. She was enjoying his ministrations, so much was certain, and Snape didn't object to hers either. Her little hand was now wrapped around the lower half of his shaft, and she stroked him gently, carefully avoiding the tip. With her free hand, she gathered up her skirt, revealing fine white stockings and suspenders.

Snape groaned as Morgana shifted her weight on his lap. Her face was once more only inches away from his, and his cock was pressed against her inner thigh. All she needed to do was move a few inches of fabric to the side to welcome him. But would she dare?

Her cool blue eyes travelled over his features. The candle light gifted his pale skin with an almost unearthly glow, contrasting beautifully with his onyx eyes. And Morgana lost herself in those pools, not even noticing how her mental barriers crumbled and Snape entered her mind with the most careful little steps.

Do you want this, Morgana? he asked. *Do you really want this?*

She could still say no. She could still slide down from his lap and walk away. He would not make her go through with the act. She had a choice. She held the power.

Her next movements were slow and deliberate. She shifted her weight, steadying herself with one hand on his shoulder. Her eyes fluttered shut as she lowered herself onto him, and her lower lip trembled as she took him in, inch by inch, all the way up to the hilt. For some moments, she didn't move but only listened inwards. To her relief, the little voice that had kept her from enjoying any kind of intimacy for the last couple of months kept silent.

Slowly, she opened her eyes again. Snape was still looking at her. His hands on her waist were supporting her, his breath was tickling her lips, and as she started rocking her hips, he groaned and exhaled through his nose.

The girl knew what she was doing, Snape thought, and as her grip around his shoulder relaxed and her free hand moved behind his head, he dared match her movements, meeting her with an upwards thrust as she drove down on him. He filled her completely and elicited the most delicious little sound, a mixture between a moan and a sigh, not dissimilar to the sound one makes when waking up after a long, good sleep. Her eyes fluttered shut again, and she let herself fall forward. Her lips made contact with the side of his neck, and as her bottom lifted from his lap, Snape squeezed it gently, rocking his hips in the same rhythm as she. Her breath was hot against his neck, and he felt her hand digging into his hair at the back of his head, heard her panting with the exertion. He could sense that she was closing in on her peak and increased his upwards thrusts, knowing that it was what she wanted as she ground down on him. And as he felt her nails dig into the back of his head, he wrapped his arms tightly around her, partly for leverage and partly for reassurance.

Morgana squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She was desperate for release yet terrified that she would be unable to let go. But Snape's strong arms around her made her feel safe, and as she moved a hand in between them, it only took a few well-placed caresses for her to come undone in his embrace. Softly, she whimpered and let herself be held as her orgasm slowly washed over her. And Snape did not let go. He caressed her back with his hands and laid a gentle kiss on her red curls, even though his heart was hammering away at the height of his own arousal.

With a deep intake of breath, Morgana straightened up and looked into Snape's eyes, and as her muscles started to contract around him, he was almost taken by surprise. Rocking her hips with increasing speed, she squeezed him every time she took him inside, her blue eyes firmly locked onto his, monitoring his reactions.

Snape bit his lip. If Morgana carried on like this, he would not last much longer. But he could not spill himself inside her. The act would be too intimate for them both. Yet he could not see how he could avoid this without upsetting the delicate balance between them. So far, he had let Morgana lead the way. How would she react if he suddenly took charge?

'Do you trust me?'

Snape swallowed a moan as Morgana whispered her question precisely when her muscles once more contracted around him rather expertly. It had not been a question he had expected, and instead of answering, his eyes searched hers as one eyebrow raised in surprise. He could see a mischievous smile tug at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes glittered as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

'Do you?'

'I don't think either of us would be here, if we didn't trust each other,' Snape answered, his voice slightly husky.

Morgana tilted her head.

'No, we probably would not.'

She took a firm hold on his shoulder and lifted her weight off his thighs. He slid slowly out of her, inch by inch, until he was barely left inside her. Yet she kept working her muscles around his tip, and the little hand that she had moved in between them firmly stroked his shaft. She never blinked but watched him closely.

Snape hissed sharply. The pleasure was almost too much.

'I can't....' he brought forth, struggling to contain himself. 'You cannot...'

'Trust me,' Morgana whispered.

Once more, her muscles contracted around him, making Snape almost lose control. Then she shifted her weight. He slid out of her, and her hand quickly moved up his length. Snape's head rolled backwards onto the back of the armchair. He closed his eyes, and Morgana saw his shoulders slump slightly as he relaxed, heard him growl with pleasure and felt him buck his hips. She could read the signs and worked his cock skilfully, concentrating on the tip. She heard him moan and watched as his hands gripped the armrests of the chair so tightly that his knuckles whitened. She felt his body go rigid and held her breath just like he did, letting him spill himself into her hand only moments later.

She kept stroking him softly, easing him down from his peak. She saw him relax and heard him breathe deeply. His eyes were closed, yet still Morgana lowered her head, glad her hair was long enough to hide her face, so overpowered was she by emotions. She did not know what to feel.

Eventually, Snape opened his eyes, watching the red-haired witch carefully. He was slightly bothered by the fact that she was averting her eyes. Was she embarrassed? Ashamed? Regretful? There was no need for either. Gently, he let his fingers caress her arm in a gesture of reassurance.

'Scourgify.'

Her voice was firm when she cast the cleaning spell, and when she finally raised her head, she met his gaze unwavering. The coldness was gone from her blue eyes, and for the first time in many months, Snape thought that the girl looked at ease.

With a shy smile, she slid off his leg, rearranging her dress as she stood up before discreetly looking the other way to give Snape a chance to arrange his own clothing before standing up, too. It was from the corner of his eye that he saw her unclasp her necklace and wordlessly let it drop to the floor.

'The star suited you better,' Snape repeated quietly. 'It always did.'

He turned to look at her, and she looked back at him, and without hesitation, Snape drew his wand.

'*Torquis Evanesca.*'

The necklace and the snake pendant both vanished in a small puff of black smoke, but neither Snape nor Morgana looked at it. They didn't need to. They both knew that Morgana had finally cut her ties with Lucius Malfoy. She was free of him now. And soon, Snape would make sure she was free of his wife, too.

'Leave now,' he said softly. 'Do not concern yourself with Narcissa. I will see to it that she does not disturb you from now on.'

Morgana nodded and hesitantly moved towards the fireplace. She had already reached out for the Floo Powder when she once more looked back at her former Head of House.

'Thank you,' she said quietly.

Snape inclined his head, knowing that a hug or even any other kind of affection was the last thing Morgana wanted, and felt slightly relieved, as he was not sure if he'd

have been able to give her anything even if she did. They had shared their moments of intimacy. Now both their walls were up again, solid and impenetrable.

'Take care of yourself, Morgana,' he said carefully. 'Enjoy a Malfoy-free life. Spend time with the ones who love you the most.'

And before Morgana could ask just who he meant, Snape strode towards the door.

XXXII: Reflections and Realisations

Chapter 32 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXII: Reflections and Realisations

Snape didn't want to leave Malfoy Manor. Not really. Narcissa was in distress, to say the least, and Snape couldn't help but blame himself for at least part of her misery. After all, it had been him who had suggested to her to take Morgana under her wing. And when he had taken the Unbreakable Vow, swearing to protect Narcissa's son, he had by extension sworn to protect her as well. He couldn't just leave her now. But there were too many thoughts running through his head for him to be any useful support for Narcissa that night. He had to sort things out for himself first. Just for once, he had to be selfish.

On pausing at the door of the lounge, Snape looked once more back over his shoulder. Narcissa was still sitting on the chaise longue where she had collapsed almost an hour ago. She had been stubbornly strong while her sister had still been around and had deflected Bellatrix's taunts with a dignity only a few people could muster. But when Bellatrix had left, Narcissa's façade had crumbled, and the tears had run down her pale cheeks. Tears which no one was allowed to see. No one except Snape. And he had sat silently by her side, waiting for her to reach out should she feel the need to. But she had cried silently, without as much as reaching for his hand, and Snape decided that there was nothing more he could do.

'I lost them both. Morgana and Grindling. I messed up. I pressured them too much.'

Slowly, Snape turned around to face the blonde witch.

'You brought two lonely people together. Is that not something to be proud of?' he asked. Narcissa was under the impression that Morgana and Grindling had left together, and Snape thought it wise to let her believe just that.

Narcissa sniffed.

'Perhaps. But I meant to win them for... for the cause. I meant to...'

Narcissa wiped her tears with a delicate handkerchief and thus missed Snape clenching his jaws. He knew what she had meant to do, what she had hoped for. She had meant to present a pair of lovers sprung from two of the oldest Wizarding bloodlines to the Dark Lord. As a present, on a silver plate. And she had hoped that the Dark Lord would reward her for it and welcome her, her son and her husband back into the fold.

'All is not lost,' Snape said, despite him knowing that it was a lie. He had always known. 'Grindling might yet come to his senses. He has forgiven you before.'

The sound in his voice was bitter. He didn't like Grindling Gibbons. Never had and never would. But he had seen a broken man tonight, a man who had been let down by the one he thought he loved. And Severus Snape, if anyone, knew how that felt. Grindling would never return. He would never forgive. But if the lie gave any comfort to Narcissa that night, then so be it.

'There is nothing you can do tonight, Narcissa,' Snape pointed out. 'Go to bed, try to sleep. The world might look brighter tomorrow.'

He turned on his heel and headed once more for the door.

'Are you sure you won't stay a little longer?'

The tone of Narcissa's voice was pleading, and Snape knew it took much for her to ask that of him. But he just could not give her what she needed tonight. So he shook his head slowly, pity flickering in his black eyes.

'I am sorry, Narcissa. I have to go.'

He paused, searching for the right thing to say. After some moments, he spoke again.

'As much as it pains me to admit it, maybe there is some truth in what your sister says. Maybe it is time to focus your efforts in aiding Draco. Grindling and the girl are not your only chance to get back into the Dark Lord's good books: if Draco succeeds, the Dark Lord will reward you both beyond measure. And if Draco should fail, then I am sworn to help you both.'

Narcissa gave Snape a watery smile at this, and now it was tears of gratitude that swam in her eyes.

'Oh, Severus, whatever would I do without you?'

Snape gave her one final meaningful look.

'Goodnight, Narcissa.'

And with that, he turned and billowed out of the lounge and into the dimness of the grand hallway, his mind buzzing with thoughts. Never before had the walk that lead to the front door seemed so long, and the clicking of his boots had never echoed so loudly through the manor, and when he finally reached the outdoors, he inhaled the crisp winter air as desperately as a drowning man. At last, he was alone with his thoughts and had a chance to reflect on the evening's events.

He had certainly not planned for anything that had happened that night and had been totally surprised by the outcome. Surprised, shocked and slightly appalled. How could he have let this happen? How could he have breached the one rule he had thought unbreakable? How could he have touched both his girls when he had sworn to protect them? How much damage had he caused?

He had never meant to touch Morgana. She had been off limits ever since Lucius had claimed her. For what Lucius Malfoy considered his, no other man was allowed to touch. But Snape had touched her. More than a year ago, right here in the garden of the manor, he had kissed her feverishly only moments after having pulled her from Lucius' claws. He had barely been able to keep himself from ravishing her that afternoon. And tonight, he had...

Snape spun around, and his eyes darted up towards the window of Lucius' study. It had been Morgana who had initiated their kiss. Just like that afternoon in the garden, she had gotten on her toes and pressed her lips on his.

Snape mentally slapped himself. How dare he put the blame on the girl? She was innocent, damaged. Malfoy had destroyed her, ground her confidence into dust and left nothing more behind than a broken heart. The girl was so afraid of getting hurt again that no man was allowed to come close. Snape doubted that she had even fully trusted Grindling.

Yet she had kissed *him*. She had reached up on tiptoes and placed the gentlest of kisses on his lips, and Snape had known that pulling away would have been a crushing rejection. And so he'd let her kiss him, at first tentatively and then with more and more passion, until it was like Morgana somehow had a point to prove.

In order to get over a wizard, you have to get under one was a phrase Snape had once heard in the Slytherin common room, and whilst he found this analogy to be crude in the extreme, it seemed there was some truth in it. Morgana had needed this tonight. She had needed closeness and intimacy. She had needed *him*, a man she knew that she could trust. And so he had reassured her every step of the way, knowing that she was the one who needed to hold the power if she were to see the whole thing through, and before he knew it, Morgana had been grinding on top of him, losing her inhibitions in a way Snape had never thought possible. And afterwards, when she had unclipped the snake pendant that dangled habitually at her throat these days and let it drop to the floor, Snape had known that Morgana was finally free of the blond Slytherin who had dominated her heart since he had first sunk his fangs into her.

But where did this leave her now? She had stood tall when he had left her. Her protective walls had been stronger than ever, and she had held his gaze unwavering. She had made no move towards him, nor had she begged for any sign of affection. May Merlin grant that her composure was not just for show, that she really was in control of her heart now. At last.

Snape Disapparated from the front gate, and during the few moments it took him to Apparate to the boundaries of Hogwarts, his mind was actually untroubled. But when he walked towards the castle, his eyes were drawn to the still illuminated windows of Slughorn's office on the sixth floor, and Snape grew once more uneasy. Had Charis returned to the party, he wondered? He hoped that she had and that she was having a good time, but he did not dare go check. For if she saw him, what signals would that send? Would she understand his reasons for checking up on her, that he felt responsible for her and that he wanted to know that she was alright? Or would she think that he was yearning for her, and would the fine line between lust and love once more be blurred?

He should not have touched her, Snape knew that, and his question of whether she could keep lust and love apart had been nothing but farce. He'd known that she'd say anything at that point just for him to continue giving her the pleasure and attention she so desperately craved.

Snape drew a shuddering breath. With Charis, it was like a mutual itch that needed to be scratched. He'd set out the terms of their coupling and she had agreed, even if it all came down to pure, old-fashioned lust. She had not been in a position to fight him, and he had once more taken advantage of her, against his better judgement. He hadn't set out to seduce her, but the opportunity had presented itself. And Slytherins never let an opportunity slip through their fingers.

Descending to the dungeons, Snape reflected upon the blonde witch with those devastatingly pretty green eyes. He had noticed them initially when she had let them wander across the staff table at the night of her Sorting. He had never forgotten that curious and intelligent look in them. Neither had he forgotten the way she had at once lowered her gaze as he had glared back at her.

He couldn't remember the exact moment when he had noticed that she had grown into a young woman, a woman with soft, feminine curves, and he definitely couldn't remember when he had started to be drawn to her, just like a moth to a flame. Most probably, such things didn't happen during one distinct moment but grew over the years. Charis had always struck Snape as very sweet, gentle of heart and shy. Difficult to anger even when he deliberately provoked her, she held her calm even if he knew she was a mass of confusion underneath. Maybe part of his attraction to her was that to him she always seemed so... pure. Of course, she was no virgin, yet something about her struck Snape as being untainted and, therefore, opposite to himself. Maybe, on a subconscious level, he drank from the purity of Charis to try to purge himself of his sullied nature. And there was something about her innate submissiveness that Snape could not deny was very attractive indeed.

And then there was Morgana, Charis' best friend, red-haired and with icy blue eyes, always calculating and with a cold, detached attitude that reminded Snape so much of himself when he had been at her age. Just like him back then, Morgana had walked dangerously close to the edge of the dark abyss. But while he had tumbled over the edge, she had been pulled back, by the very friend whose kindness Snape himself valued so much. And as much as Charis' submissive nature appealed to him, he could not deny that Morgana's dominant qualities excited him as well.

They were both beautiful in their own way, his two girls, and yet nothing alike, Snape thought as he closed the door of his quarters behind him. But for all their differences, they were the perfect match. Two sides of the same coin. Two halves of a whole. They had always been inseparably close since their very first year in Hogwarts. Snape remembered how he had found it more than curious when he had first seen them work together in his class, the Muggle-born Ravenclaw and the pureblood Slytherin. To many, their friendship had seemed like an abomination, and many would have bet their last Galleon that it was not going to last. But Snape had watched their friendship grow and prosper. He had watched them work together and study together. He had seen them laugh together and knew that they had consoled each other many times in a way no one else could. And then he had tried to drive them apart, just because he did not want any of them to get hurt like the way he had been hurt by his best friend. His only friend.

What a fool he had been, he realised as he picked up the tiny silver mirror that was resting on the mantel piece in his study. There had never been any need to test the girls' loyalties. They would always find their way back to each other, no matter how many obstacles how many men that stood between them. Because those two girls shared something Snape and Lily had never had: endless trust, undying devotion. They truly were soul mates, if such a thing existed.

Snape turned the mirror over in his hands, desperately hoping that the girls would get in touch so he could see them in the looking glass. But it was long past midnight. Probably, they were both fast asleep.

So instead, Snape closed his eyes, conjuring up memories of the two. He saw them in his classroom, combining Ravenclaw brains and Slytherin ambition to produce potions that would impress their teacher. He saw them sitting at each other's bedside in the hospital wing, refusing to rest before they knew their friend was out of danger. He saw them laugh together, cry together. And he saw them curl up together in Charis' bed, Morgana still frozen from her harrowing experience at Azkaban prison and Charis protectively wrapping her arms around her as to warm her. They had held each other tightly that night, and it had been Morgana who had placed the first, tender kiss on Charis' neck.

Snape's eyes flew open, a look of realisation in them. What he had witnessed between the girls that night had been more than tenderness between friends. Such caresses, such intimacy was shared by lovers, not friends. He had thought of it that night, but had been so preoccupied by his anger towards Moody and his worries for Morgana that he had put that thought aside. Now he wondered how he had been able to do so. It was so clear, so obvious. How could he have missed the signs?

He had witnessed evidence of the girls growing closer for months through the enchanted mirrors. He had seen Morgana tenderly kiss Charis' neck as would a lover, mere moments before the attack on Fortescue's in Diagon Alley. He had witnessed them curl up together in Charis' bed, exchanging caresses, whilst Morgana had mumbled that Charis always smelled of roses.

Roses.

Snape's mouth went dry as he felt like he'd been hit by a Stunner as the final piece of evidence fell into place. Morgana had always said Amortensia smelled to her like roses. And that was why! She was in love with Charis. And judging by Charis' continued gentle acceptance of Morgana's timid affections, Charis surely felt the same way.

Snape shook his head. He couldn't believe he'd been so foolish not to see it before. It had all been in front of his abnormally large nose, but he'd been too mixed up in his

own pettiness to see it. All this time he'd been confusing the girls, at first setting out to make them jealous but then becoming irresistibly drawn to them and finally seducing them both. But the girls didn't need him, or Lucius Malfoy, Grindling Gibbons, Blaise Zabini or any other man to be happy. They'd suffered enough heartache from their various encounters with men that it would last them a lifetime, Snape thought, feeling a stab of guilt as he knew that much of their heartache had been over him. Now all the girls needed was each other, Snape saw this all too clearly. And he hoped that sooner rather than later, Charis and Morgana would realise this themselves.

XXXIII: Christmas Eve

Chapter 33 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXIII: Christmas Eve

The Ministry of Magic's Christmas party was a big success. The decorations were lavish and the refreshments both exquisite and highly intoxicating. People were dancing and laughing, flirting and smiling. Many of them wouldn't go home before sunrise the next day. There were, however, some Ministry employees who didn't join the frivolities. Instead, they kept to themselves, talking at one of the tables that were placed away from the dance floor in a quiet corner of the room. Two of those were Charis and Grindling. They had shared a dance or two, but now they were sitting at one of the tables in the corner, far away from anyone else, talking about things as trivial as the weather as well as more serious matters like the prophecy which they had still not deciphered. Grindling looked dashing in his dark blue robes, but Charis could tell that he was tired. Thus, she was quite glad for him when he told her that he was about to leave for Greece.

'Oh, I'd love to go to Greece,' Charis exclaimed. 'I guess they have winter there, too, but it can't be as wet and grey as it is here.'

'I will send you a postcard with a sandy beach and a blazing sun,' Grindling promised, and Charis smiled.

'Please, do! Oh, I wish I could go, too!'

'What will you be doing for the holidays?' Grindling wondered, keen to steer the conversation away from Greece. 'Are you going to Somerset to see your family?'

'Yes, I am, but only for a week or so. Morgana has some days off over New Year's, so I think I'll come back and try to get her to do some girly stuff with me. You know, shopping for clothes and shoes and getting a facial. She'll hate it!'

Charis giggled, and even Grindling's tired features lit up with a smile.

'I am sure she will suffer through it for your sake,' he said. 'You two are best friends, after all.'

Morgana would do anything for her friend, Grindling was quite sure of that. She had almost hexed his face off when she had thought that he had dumped Charis. She was loyal as a Hufflepuff and protected her friend as bravely as any Gryffindor would.

'Are you going to meet up here tonight?' Grindling wondered, slightly craning his neck to see if he could spot Morgana's fiery red locks somewhere in the crowd. He hadn't seen her since the fateful evening at Malfoy Manor. He had not even returned her owl by which she had informed him that she had arrived home safely. He had been in no condition to do so that night. And the next morning, he had not had the strength to even think of her, out of fear that thinking of her would then make him think of Narcissa. But now he had made the decision to leave Britain for good and to settle in Greece, far away from all the heartache, and he would very much have liked to tell her goodbye, even if he would pretend to just be going on holidays, as he had with Charis. He felt like a coward, but he didn't dare tell either of the girls that he was not coming back after the holidays. He didn't want to explain his reasons, and he didn't want to sadden them by telling them that he was leaving for good. Eventually, they would forget him, and he would be able to remember their smiling faces.

Charis checked her watch.

'She should arrive shortly. Of course, that slave driver Moody had her work on Christmas Eve. But she said she'd be here around half ten.'

'That is indeed a shame. I have to take a Portkey to Athens in fifteen minutes.'

He looked seriously at Charis, one hand gripping onto hers as if he were drowning.

'Charis, I know things didn't turn out well for us. But I'll always care for you. I want you to know that.'

Charis looked back in surprise. The way Grindling was talking was like he was going away for years, not just for a pleasant bit of winter sun.

'Oh, Grindling, I care about you too, you know.'

She smiled at him, and once more his weary face lit up.

'I'll send you a postcard,' he promised once more before sweeping Charis into his arms, squeezing her tightly and kissing her hair. 'I'll miss you.'

'I'll miss you, too,' she replied, hugging him back.

'Take care of yourself,' Grindling whispered. 'Find love.'

His last words had been muffled, but before Charis had the chance to verify what she thought she had heard, Grindling let go of her and disappeared into the crowd, leaving her puzzled.

'Someone's in a hurry.'

Charis spun around, coming face to face with her best friend.

'Has he eaten something bad?'

Charis shook her head.

'No! He... He's about to leave for Greece. He has a Portkey to catch.'

'I see,' Morgana said. 'Guess some sun and lazy days at the beach will do him good. Your boss has been looking awfully tired over the last couple of days.'

She tried to sound casual, but there was a knot tightening in Morgana's stomach. Somehow she had the feeling that Grindling was not going to Greece to get a tan. She feared that he was running away. And as much as she could understand his reasons, she wished that he had the courage to stay in London.

'Have I missed anything interesting?' she asked, trying to get her mind off the fair wizard. 'Has anyone jumped anybody's bones on the dance floor? Anyone passed out at the bar?'

Charis grinned broadly.

'Apart from a rather dishevelled Rufus Scrimgeour doing a hurried speech and then rushing off followed by that pompous Percy prat who tripped over his vile dress robes and nearly broke his glasses, no, you haven't missed a thing.'

She paused, looking her best friend up and down.

'You look nice, sweetie.'

An unbidden blush crept over Morgana's cheeks. 'Cheers. Didn't have much time. Moody would have loved to have us work all night.'

'Urgh. I don't know how you put up with him. That eye still gives me the creeps.'

'Believe me, the eye is the most pleasant part of that man. You should see his...' Morgana grinned evilly. 'Never mind.'

Charis giggled, sitting down and reaching for the bottle of wine in order to pour a healthy glass for herself and her best friend.

'Let's have a drink, shall we?'

Morgana raised a disbelieving eyebrow. Grindling may have tried to educate her on the subtleties of wine, but to her, it would always taste like Goblin piss. No matter how expensive. And even the lavish stuff the Ministry was offering would most certainly not be enjoyable.

Morgana's eyebrow of doom did not escape Charis' notice.

'Oh, come on! It's free. It's not like they give us bonuses in this place, so I'm accepting any freebie that comes my way.'

And with that, she took a dainty sip, sticking her little finger out in exaggeration.

Morgana took a sip to please her friend but wrinkled her nose.

'I see why Grindling left now. Guess he has much nicer wine in his cellar,' she said drily.

'I hope he has a good Christmas. It's not been easy for him lately.'

Charis let her finger swirl across the top of her wine glass as she spoke.

'He did seem stressed last time I saw him. In the cafeteria, I think,' Morgana commented vaguely, regretting that she had brought up the topic of Grindling once again. He wasn't just stressed. He was also heartbroken and confused. And Charis didn't know half of it.

'He's still very agitated about the prophecy,' Charis explained in a low tone. 'We Ravenclaws hate leaving loose ends and not being able to solve puzzles. It's driving me potty too.'

'Wish I could help. But as you know, brains are quite scarce in the dungeons,' Morgana said sardonically.

'You seemed to have lucked out there.'

Charis smiled, and Morgana snorted.

'Ha! Cheers!'

The girls raised their glasses for a toast, and the band started to play a cheesy love song which made all the couples on the dance floor move closer to each other and Morgana's nose wrinkle in distaste once more.

'I may vomit. Could we go somewhere else?'

'It's quite stuffy in here isn't it?' Charis agreed. 'Let's go on the balcony. There's great views from there.'

Morgana followed Charis through the French windows that surrounded the hall. She had never been to this part of the Ministry before, and as Charis had promised, the view from the balcony was breathtaking. They were so high up, they could see all across London. It was a cold, clear night, and even through the city's light pollution, many stars and constellations could be seen.

'It's lovely out here,' Charis sighed.

Morgana breathed in the crisp air, her breath fogging in the cool night.

'Reminds me of the Astronomy Tower. Remember last Christmas, when you smuggled up two bottles of Butterbeer and had to drink them both yourself? You tripped and almost broke your leg on the way down the stairs.'

Charis giggled at the memory.

'Yeah, and remember when Jack got you that flowery apron as a joke? I thought you were going to hex his testicles off! Your face was a picture.'

Morgana gave a lopsided grin.

'Poor Jack. I think I was a bit shirty with him that night. Wonder how he's doing. He's in Egypt, right?'

'Yeah! He can't tell me exactly where or what, but there have been some new tombs discovered, and he and the team have to break the ancient curses before they can excavate the tombs. It sounds amazing. He said some of the treasures he's seen are just jaw dropping. He also said some of the curses he's come across are really dark magic - one of his colleague's arm shrivelled and shrunk so it looked like a mummy, and it took them weeks to reverse it.' Charis shuddered at the very thought. 'He's loving it, but then, he would. He was always one for adventure.'

'And we're stuck here at the Ministry of Boredom.' Morgana rolled her eyes theatrically. 'Not how I expected my life to look like a year ago.'

Charis gave her friend a grave look.

'I think you've had more than enough danger this year, Morgana.'

'Maybe I am meant to live on the edge,' Morgana replied, reaching up on her toes and leaning over the baluster.

'Look, no hands!'

Charis pulled her back sharply by her upper arm. 'Don't be stupid!'

'Don't worry. I'll behave,' Morgana said softly, putting her hand over Charis'. Their eyes met, and for a short moment, neither of them spoke or breathed. They were merely looking at each other, sapphires locked on emeralds.

'Your hands are cold!' Morgana finally broke the silence and produced her wand to turn Charis' thin jacket into lush fur.

Charis looked amazed. 'Wow, that is some serious transfiguration! Thank you.'

'Always the tone of surprise,' Morgana replied with a wry smile. 'This is my Christmas present to you. I didn't get around to buying you anything.'

'I have a present for you, too!' Charis exclaimed. She opened her clutch bag and rummaged around inside.

'I hope you didn't spend any money on me!' Morgana said, feeling slightly guilty.

'Well, no.' Charis pulled out a little black velvet box. 'Now, these might look familiar...'

She handed the box to Morgana.

'I hope you don't mind, but I had Silvy smuggle it out.'

Morgana looked into the box and frowned. On a bed of white satin, lay two star pendant necklaces the very necklaces Charis had made for them in their final year at Hogwarts. They had once worn them every single day, and they had been charmed to glow whenever the friends thought of each other. They had used them as a calling card, a way of arranging to meet without the use of Floo or owls. However, the charms had eventually faded, leaving the pendants as nothing but pretty jewellery.

'Um, well, I had a theory about why the charms I cast on them wore off after a while,' Charis began, looking down nervously. 'I think it's because only I cast the charm. I think to make it permanent, we both need to cast it.'

She fidgeted and only just managed not to start biting her nails.

'Would you like to cast the charm with me?'

She looked a little embarrassed and hesitant at suggesting this. She knew that Morgana was not of the sentimental kind. She might find the thought of renewing the charm silly.

Morgana held the necklaces up.

'Cast the charm with you and then be bound to you forever?' she asked, and Charis' heart sank. She should have known that it was too much to ask. However, just for once, the Ravenclaw had misjudged the Slytherin.

The pendants caught the light of the stars in the sky and sparkled. As did Morgana's eyes.

'Gladly,' she continued softly, smiling shyly at her best friend. She would put her life into Charis' hand. Even her very soul. And she wished she had the words to tell her friend. But she didn't, and the best she could do was wrap her arms tightly around Charis as she was pulled into a bone-crushing hug. Her nostrils filled with the scent of roses, and for some moments, Morgana wished that Charis would never let go of her again.

'Um, what do we need to do to make the charm work?' she asked when they finally broke their embrace.

Charis grinned.

'I've researched magical wedding rings. You know they have permanent charms on them, right? So I adapted my original charm based on that.'

She paused, waiting for Morgana to wrinkle her nose at the thought of casting a charm based on marriage, but once more, the Slytherin did not object.

'I guess the first step would be to put the necklaces on?' Morgana asked, and Charis nodded.

'Come here, then.'

Morgana helped Charis fasten the clasp of the pendant at the base of her neck, and Charis returned the favour to Morgana. Their hands were shaking slightly, but neither of the girls said anything.

'I wrote the spell down,' Charis announced, producing a scrap of parchment from her handbag and reading it aloud.

'*Sorores In Aeternum, Sub Astra* It means, "Sisters forever, under the stars".'

Morgana smiled at the blonde Ravenclaw, who gave her a shy smile in return. Charis' charm was beautiful. And so, in Morgana's opinion, was Charis.

'You point your wand at my star, and I do the same to you,' Charis explained. 'And then we say the charm together.'

As the girls chanted the spell, white light emitted from the tip of each of their wands, illuminating the stars at their throats. Then the star at Morgana's throat glowed a brilliant blue whilst the one at Charis' radiated green. After a flash of white light, the necklaces returned to normal, and the charm was complete.

'And now to kiss the bride?' Morgana asked, her sinister eyebrow aloft once more.

Charis giggled. 'Happy Christmas, Star Sister.'

She hugged her friend once again.

'Happy Christmas.'

Morgana inhaled deeply the scent of roses and closed her eyes. Once more, she wished the moment would last forever. She felt safe in Charis' arms. Safer than she had ever felt in Lucius' embrace or even Grindling's or Snape's. But the peace was disturbed when Charis cried out, 'Look! A shooting star! Quick! Make a wish!'

But by the time Morgana had turned around, the star had faded away. Yet she wasn't sad. For she had no wish to make. For the first time in a long time, she felt like everything was in order. She was with her Star Sister, just as she was supposed to be.

'The sky is just perfect tonight,' Charis sighed. 'I mean, usually you can see Canis Major and Polaris on a clear night in London, but tonight you can even see Leo.'

'Which one is Leo?' Morgana asked, a broad smile on her face. She was only asking to be polite as Astronomy had never struck her as an interesting subject. But the way Ravenclaws seemed to be fascinated by the stars was simply adorable. Charis, however, stood dumbstruck, an odd look on her face.

'What is it?' Morgana asked, following Charis' gaze with hers, almost expecting to see a dragon in the sky or one of those flying saucers she had heard Muggles talk about.

'Leo... the lion....,' Charis breathed. 'Leo's brightest star is Regulus!'

Charis spun around, gripping Morgana's arms tightly.

'Oh my god, Morgana! That's it!'

Morgana, however, didn't understand. 'That's what?'

'That's who the prophecy is about! Regulus Black!'

Charis desperately tried to keep her voice down, but she was so excited she felt like squealing.

Morgana frowned. 'The lion born into the house of snakes is Regulus?' She still wasn't following.

'The Lion is Leo. Regulus was named after the brightest star in the constellation. And he was born into the house of snakes, the house of Slytherin. I can't believe I didn't see it before!'

Charis' hands raked through her hair, her mind reeling at the new knowledge. Morgana, however, kept her cool. Now that she understood what Charis was talking about, she was keen to help her friend solve the puzzle.

'Regulus was a Death Eater,' she said slowly. 'Doesn't the prophecy say that he has seen the wrong of his ways? Would that mean...?'

'That he repented somehow?' Charis finished for her. 'That he came over to the good side?'

Morgana nodded.

'What's the next line of the prophecy?' she demanded.

'Something about a creature.' Charis answered. '*The creature that knows his secrets still lives in the darkness*' she quoted, but the tone of her voice suggested she had no idea what that meant.

Morgana's lips, however, curled into a triumphant smile.

'There's no place as dark as the House of Black. I think good old Dumbledore made a mistake transcribing the prophecy. It's not c-r-e-a-t-u-r-e. It's k-r-e-a-c-h-e-r. Kreacher, the house-elf!'

Morgana beamed, surprising herself with her brilliance.

'Remember how he'd always mutter about how Master Regulus was his favourite? Wouldn't surprise me he kept his master's secrets safe long after his death.'

Charis' eyes widened. 'Oh my god, you're amazing! That's it!' She paused, remembering the rest of the prophecy. *Only the raven that was hatched on the lowest branch of the ancient tree possesses the means to ask the questions...* Does that mean I can ask Kreacher about Regulus' secrets?'

'Of course!' Morgana confirmed. 'You're a Black. Kreacher has to obey you! He won't like it, since your great-grandfather was blasted off the family tree. But he'll have no choice. He has to tell you everything he knows. All you have to do is ask the right questions.'

'I can't believe we've solved it! Thank you!' Charis was a little teary with relief. 'I think we need to tell Albus about this,' she said after a moment.

Morgana nodded. She disliked the old wizard but agreed that he needed to be told. After all, he was the head of the Order, the mastermind behind the grand plan to bring Voldemort down. He would know which questions Charis had to ask. Hopefully, he would also know what to do with the answers.

Yet getting hold of Dumbledore turned out to be harder than the girls had anticipated. They decided against sending him an owl. Firstly, because they didn't trust the Ministry birds and secondly, because they didn't know where Dumbledore was spending his Christmas holidays. It could be days until the owl found him and yet another couple of days until it returned. And so, Charis sent her Patronus, the magnificent, graceful black panther, which returned only minutes later, carrying Dumbledore's message: They were not to act on their own, but should meet him at Grimmauld Place on the afternoon of the thirty-first of December.

'This is so frustrating! Why would Dumbledore want us to wait for a whole week?' Charis huffed as they walked down Diagon Alley half an hour later. The Christmas party at the Ministry was still going on, but neither of the girls was in the mood for dancing or drinking any more.

'Guess against all beliefs, he actually has a life,' Morgana said jokingly but grew serious again when she saw Charis' annoyed face. 'I bet he wants some time to do some research. You know, read up on the Black family history or go through Regulus' files.'

'He could let us help!' Charis still sounded exasperated.

'I'm sure he has his reasons for letting us wait,' Morgana said calmly, almost unable to believe that she was actually defending the old man.

'I'll be on tenterhooks the whole week!' Charis exclaimed. 'I'll be too nervous to eat mum's Christmas pudding. Maybe I shouldn't go to Somerset at all! Maybe I should stay here, go to the library, do research...'

'Don't be silly!' Morgana interrupted her friend. 'Family's important, especially in a time like this. You will go home, and you will enjoy yourself. Am I making myself clear?'

It took her quite a while to convince Charis that Dumbledore had reasons for making them wait and that there was no point in staying in London, and by the time the two young women bid each other goodnight, their lips were blue from the cold, and it was approaching midnight. Yet still, Morgana didn't return home right away. There was something she had to do. And so she Apparated to a place where she had sworn never to set foot again. Yet it was the only place dark enough for her to ask the question she so desperately craved an answer to.

In the narrow moonlit lane, she sank into the shadows of the neatly manicured hedge, listening with bated breath. But Lucius' hounds weren't barking, and not even the peacocks were making any noises. Had it not been for the lights burning in the second floor windows, Morgana would have guessed the manor was deserted.

In front of the wrought-iron gates, Morgana detached herself from the shadows and came to stand in the middle of the lane, her eyes on the impressive manor house. She was vulnerable there, she knew this, but in no other place would she ever feel a greater need to summon her Patronus. And tonight she needed to see it. She needed to know if her suspicions were right.

Her whispered spell froze to ice in the cold midwinter air, and for a terrifying moment, nothing happened. No light erupted from her wand, not even the tiniest whiff of

smoke, and Morgana thought that she had failed. But then the darkness was split into half, and from her wand sprung a majestic black feline, strong and proud like Morgana herself had once been. It held its head high as it walked through the gates and didn't dissolve until it had jumped back into the moonlight. And Morgana Disappeared only moments later with her heart lighter than ever. She was strong again, strong enough to produce a Patronus at the place that represented hell on earth. She had proven to herself that Lucius Malfoy held no power over her anymore and that her heart was free to long for another, the one whose Patronus was a perfect match for hers.

XXXIV: New Year's Solution

Chapter 34 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXIV: New Year's Solution

The lights were dimmed in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Dumbledore, Charis and Morgana were sitting at the table, each holding onto a cup of tea, each absorbed in their own thoughts. They had learned a lot over the last couple of hours, yet very little seemed to make sense. Kreacher, the house elf, was in his cupboard, muttering and sniffing.

The clock struck nine.

'What a way to spend New Year's Eve,' Morgana sighed. She and Charis had been at Grimmauld place since three o'clock, and as far as she was concerned, the whole afternoon had been a complete waste of time. After all their expectations, Kreacher had mumbled incoherently about things which, as far as she was concerned, had no relevance whatsoever.

Dumbledore's lips quirked, and his blue eyes twinkled over his half-moon glasses. 'This has been a very valuable few hours. I don't think either of you can appreciate just how valuable.'

'What have we learnt, really?' Morgana retorted, somewhat impatiently. 'The elf didn't make much sense. I think he really has lost his mind.'

'I don't understand why Regulus would have a locket, or why that is so important,' Charis added. 'And why would he hide it in a cave?'

'And how can a locket be the key to bring down The Da... You-Know-Who?'

Dumbledore put down his cup and looked intently at the two young witches. Of course, they would have questions. Sadly, they were not questions he was able to answer just yet.

'These questions are nothing that you two need to worry about. You have cracked the code of the prophecy, you have understood that it is Kreacher who held the answers to the questions only Charis could ask. Leave it to me to put together the pieces of the puzzle. After all, I am not only much more experienced but also much older and, I daresay, wiser than the both of you together.'

Morgana raised a characteristic eyebrow. 'So, that's it, is it? We solve the prophecy, and you're not going to tell us what it even means?'

Charis shot her friend a "shut up!" kind of look, but Dumbledore merely smiled benignly.

'My dear Morgana, there are some things that are too dangerous for either of you to know. You have both been through enough. Let me worry about the prophecy now.'

Morgana felt disgruntled at this and scowled. Meanwhile, Charis, who had been pondering thoughtfully, tried a different approach.

'Kreacher said that Regulus died trying to obtain You-Know-Who's locket from the cave,' she started carefully. 'Locketts usually have something inside them... Maybe there is something inside the locket which is the key to bringing him down?'

Dumbledore's lips quirked once again.

'Of course, it would take a Ravenclaw to make that kind of deductive leap. Yes, one could infer that. However, I will ask you once again not to spend any more time thinking about this.'

Morgana watched the old wizard closely, and Dumbledore could see wariness in her icy blue eyes.

'It is not that I do not trust you, far from it,' he tried to appease her. 'Your services to the Order have been immeasurable in such a short time. And that goes for both of you. But now, I am afraid, you are once more in danger.'

He gave both girls meaningful looks, steepling his fingers as his elbows rested on the old oak table.

'You are now keepers of invaluable information. Information that may very well decide on the outcome of the war. Should the other side become aware of that, they will stop at nothing to make you talk. Therefore, the safest thing would be for you to not remember what you've learnt here today.'

Morgana defiantly crossed her arms. 'Are you planning to Oblivate us?'

Dumbledore shook his head.

'If I did not trust or respect you, then Obliviation would be a natural response,' he answered mildly. 'But I do trust and respect you. Which is why I am seeking your permission to take a certain, special vow with me.'

Morgana had to stop herself from snorting. As if the old wizard ever sought permission to do anything. He was manipulative enough to make Salazar Slytherin proud. When he was done talking, Charis and herself would be convinced that they willingly took the vow he proposed to them. Dumbledore went on.

'Let me reiterate again,' Dumbledore went on. 'What we have discovered tonight is crucial. It would be very damaging if anyone else knew what we know and let it slip to the other side. You are in grave danger. So, please, I beg of you: take a vow with me to keep this information safe. And I swear Regulus' death will not be in vain.'

Charis was the first to speak.

'I trust you, Albus. And if you think that this vow is best for everyone involved, I am willing to take it.'

Dumbledore looked expectantly at Morgana.

'As if there really were a choice,' she muttered.

'Do you not trust me, Morgana?' Dumbledore's tone was still light, but there was a steely edge to it this time. Their eyes met, and just like so many times before, Morgana had the uncanny feeling that Dumbledore could read her every thought.

'I trust you to have the means to bring the Dark Lord down,' she replied in the end, weighing her words carefully.

Dumbledore inclined his head. 'And that is good enough for me.'

Dumbledore was the one in charge, grabbing hold of Morgana's right wrist and instructing her to hold on to Charis', who in her turn was to hold on to Dumbledore's. Now they were all three linked, equal and part of a whole, and when Dumbledore spoke the ancient words, a fiery rope bound their hands, preventing them from letting go.

'When the rope dissolves and we let go of each other, neither of you will be able to convey what you have learnt here today,' Dumbledore explained. 'You will have a faint memory of our conversation with Kreacher, but trying to remember the details will be like trying to remember a dream. The harder you try, the further will it drift away. And unless we three stand here once more, with our hands entwined, you will never be able to remember.'

He turned his head and focused on the blonde witch on his right.

'Are you, Charis Byrne, willing to take this vow that will keep our secret safe as well as yourself?' he asked sombrely.

'I am,' Charis replied, her voice not more than a whisper yet still perfectly clear.

'And are you, Morgana Belakane, willing to do the same?' Dumbledore asked the redhead to his left. He knew she would agree now that Charis had made vow. She wouldn't do it for him, not the Order, not even for her own sake. But she would do it for Charis.

'I am willing,' Morgana replied.

'So mote it be.'

Dumbledore was the first to let go when the rope had dissolved, leaving the girls standing with their hands still linked and slightly puzzled looks on their faces. The charm had worked. They didn't remember anything, not even the ritual itself. And down the hall, the clock struck ten.

'Still enough time to celebrate the New Year,' he said lightly after glancing at the old clock on the mantel piece. 'You know, I heard Rosmerta was holding her annual party at the Three Broomsticks this evening...'

Morgana rubbed her wrist and gave Dumbledore a questioning look. She was trying to remember the events of the afternoon, Dumbledore could see that clearly. But the more she tried, the harder it became, just as he had intended.

'I think both of you deserve to celebrate solving the prophecy and advancing the war against Voldemort,' he said. There was no harm in assuring the girls that they had helped him a great deal this afternoon. On the contrary. Unless he wanted them to ruminate all night, he had to make sure they understood that they had told him all they knew about the meaning of the prophecy.

'Yes, the Three Broomsticks is the place to be tonight. Who knows, maybe you will catch up with an old acquaintance or two.'

He stroked his beard and hummed.

'But you will need something nice to wear. May I?'

He pulled out his wand and after a moment of careful consideration, he gifted the girls with the finest of gowns, one sapphire blue and the other emerald green, both flattering the girls' shapes.

Charis spun around, admiring the fabric. 'Wow, this is beautiful! Thank you, Albus!'

Morgana plucked at her dress, but however sick she was of getting her dresses chosen by others, even she had to agree that Dumbledore had great taste and had chosen each dress perfectly.

'Off you go, now,' he said cheerfully. 'I would love to lead you to the dance floor, but I am afraid my old bones are craving nothing more than a nice warm bath and bed. And I think the last dance of the year should be shared with someone close to your heart. Don't you think?'

Once again, his blue eyes twinkled behind the crescent-shaped spectacles, and Charis smiled at him. 'Goodnight, Albus. And Happy New Year!'

'Happy New Year to you both,' Dumbledore replied, watching the two young witches leave the room, hoping that, by the end of the night, they would both see what he had seen all along.

* * *

'Odgen's. Make it a double.'

Rosmerta poured the drink and handed it to the dark wizard, but her blazing smile didn't seem to do anything to enhance his mood. In fact, his features seemed to darken.

'Why are you doing this to yourself, Severus?' she asked bravely. 'You don't like the music, you don't seem to be in a festive mood, and still you're here. Certainly, a man like you has more enjoyable things to do on New Year's Eve.'

Snape raised a sardonic eyebrow and sipped at his whisky before replying.

'I am not here for pleasure, Rosmerta. However, quite a few Hogwarts students are, and the headmaster thought it wise for someone to keep an eye on them.'

'Well, you are certainly the man for the job,' Rosmerta pointed out. Hooch and Flitwick had been on chaperone duty for the first half of the evening, and everyone had been enjoying themselves just fine. But since Snape had arrived, the students seemed to be more wary. No wonder, really. A year ago, he had blasted apart a snogging couple with a flick of his wand. He had never even given them a warning.

'Now, I'll leave the bottle out for you,' Rosmerta informed Snape. 'Help yourself while I see to that there is still enough food to go around.'

She bustled off, suspending overhead with her wand a huge tray filled with pigs in blankets and other tasty treats, and Snape returned his attention to the glass he was holding in his hand. If he were honest, he'd rather be having a cup of tea by the fireplace in his study, but as he was forced to attend this odious party, Odgen's seemed to be the better choice. He had no desire to talk to anyone, and him holding on to a glass of whisky was certainly to hold anyone at bay. No one in their right mind would want

to approach the grumpy Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher when he was intoxicated. What Snape at this point didn't know, however, that his behaviour was even repelling two young witches whom he would not have minded talking to at all.

'Classical Snape behaviour, isn't it? Standing at the bar, scowling at a bottle of booze and threatening to bite the head off anyone who comes too close.'

At her friend's comment, Charis craned her neck to get a better look. She had seen Snape enter the pub a few minutes ago but then lost sight of him. The pub was crowded this New Year's Eve, and Snape had certainly not seen either her or Morgana. In fact, very few people had so far taken notice of them, as they were sitting in a secluded booth as far away from the dance floor as one could get. They had lots to talk about before they could even consider engaging in any kind of frivolities.

'It's a bit sad, don't you think? Him standing there all alone with no one to talk to,' Charis pointed out. 'Wonder if he spent Christmas on his own as well.'

She knew that Snape was not of the social kind, but the thought of him having spent the holidays alone made her sad, nevertheless.

'He wasn't here, anyway,' Morgana informed her.

'How do you know?' Charis wondered.

'I met Tonks for drinks here before she and Remus went to celebrate Christmas with the Weasleys. And then I stayed here and enjoyed Rosmerta's turkey.'

'Next year, you're coming to Somerset with me!' Charis announced. 'Mum's not famous for her cooking, but at least you won't have to be alone.'

Morgana smiled. She didn't mind spending the holidays on her own, but the thought of spending the next with Charis made her feel all warm inside.

'I sure would have liked to have you around this year,' Charis continued, dropping her voice to a whisper. 'Having solved the prophecy and having to wait for a whole week before we could tell Dumbledore... Gah! I feared I'd go crazy! Seriously, if I would have had to wait one more day...'

'Hope it was worth the wait,' Morgana said, absentmindedly rubbing her wrist. 'Hope Dumbledore will be able to put to use everything we've told him.'

'Feels strange not to remember anything from this afternoon, doesn't it?' Charis pointed out. 'I guess that's yet another thing that will do my head in in due time!'

The girls laughed heartily, and Charis emptied her glass of wine.

'Now, at the risk of being hexed into the next year just for asking... Would you like to dance with me? It's New Year's Eve, after all, and the music is great.'

She started grooving to the beat, and Morgana put down her glass of pumpkin juice, leaning back in her chair. She hated dancing, always had and always would, but for Charis, she'd make an exception.

'No shape throwing,' she demanded, however, and Charis promised with a smile. Yet when they had chosen a spot on the dance floor, the rhythms changed, and the song that was playing now was more suitable for loving couples than a pair of best friends. But to Charis' surprise, Morgana didn't withdraw. Instead, she pulled the blonde witch closer, ignoring the wolf whistles and lewd comments from some of the teenage boys and young men in the pub. Charis had asked her to dance, and now she would dance, no matter which song that was playing.

'Look at those two,' Rosmerta exclaimed in a delighted tone as she returned to the bar, putting down the now empty tray. 'They are adorable! Best friends forever, I'm sure.'

But Snape didn't need to turn around to see. He had caught sight of his girls in the mirror above the bar the moment they had stepped onto the dance floor, and now he was watching their every move, secretly and furtively, almost hoping that the song would never end. He enjoyed watching them, moving in harmony and seemingly so comfortable in each other's arms. But the song did end eventually, and as the DJ announced that midnight was only a few minutes away and that everyone should go outside to see the fireworks, the girls broke apart, Charis with flushed cheeks and Morgana with her eyes firmly on the tip of her shoes.

'Shall we go outside to see the fireworks as well?' Charis asked after a few moments of awkward silence. 'It's getting quite hot in here anyway.'

Without waiting for an answer, she took Morgana by the hand, and the two witches made their way outside along with everyone else, neither realising that Snape was watching them intently from his place at the bar, nor that he had sneaked up the stairs when everyone else was filing out the door. He had no desire to stand in the cold among the crowd, pretending that he liked the fireworks or the free champagne Rosmerta was offering. He'd much rather watch his girls from one of the windows on the upper floor. They needn't know that he was there.

'Five, four, three, two, one. Happy New Year!'

Nineteen ninety-seven was greeted with cheerful shouts, clinking glasses and kisses on the cheeks, but while everyone else showed their admiration for the fireworks with loud ooohs and aaahs, Morgana and Charis stood quite still, not caring about the fiery sparkles at all. For they, too, had shared a kiss, a timid kiss on the lips of which neither of them knew who had initiated it. And now they stood gazing into each other's eyes, more or less unaware of the world around them.

'Happy New Year, Star Sister,' Charis breathed.

'Happy New Year to you, too.'

Charis smiled shyly and brushed a strand of hair from Morgana's face. Her fingers lingered on her cheek, and Morgana turned her head slightly, placing a tender kiss on her friend's wrist.

'Your lips are trembling,' Charis whispered. 'Are you cold?'

'No, I'm not.'

Morgana's blue eyes sparkled as she took hold of Charis' hand and brought it to her mouth, lovingly kissing each of her tiny fingers, and as she pulled the blonde witch closer, Charis was trembling as much as Morgana's lips had moments earlier.

'Let me warm you,' Morgana suggested, wrapping her arms around her friend, even though she was fully aware that Charis wasn't freezing. For when she kissed Charis' neck, her skin was just as hot as the breath that tickled her ear.

Snape watched, mesmerised. He had watched his girls exchanging caresses before, in the privacy of their own bedroom. But this was different. Here they were, standing amongst the crowd outside the Three Broomsticks yet seemingly unaware of the people around them. Or maybe they chose not to care. All that mattered were themselves.

'Let's go back inside,' Morgana whispered as the crowd started singing "Auld Lang Syne" and pulled Charis by the hand. 'I think I owe you a dance.'

On the abandoned dance floor, they started swaying to a tune only they could hear. Eyes fluttered shut, fingers entwined in long hair, and lips carefully caressed soft white skin. And by the time the crowd returned to the pub, the girls had made their way upstairs, to celebrate the start of the new year with the ones they truly loved.

XXXV: After Midnight

Chapter 35 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXV: After Midnight

As the strains of "*Auld Lang Syne*" echoed from the revellers outside, Snape kept staring out of the window long after the girls had returned to the pub and vanished from his sight. Yet in front of his inner eye, the image lingered: a shy kiss, a loving embrace, caresses and kisses that grew ever bolder.

He tilted his head, and a faint smile lit up his otherwise so stern features. He should have known. He should have known that his girls didn't need any help to find their way to each other. Once they had been rid of their demons, their eyes had opened, and they had seen what he should have seen a long time ago: they belonged with each other. They always had, probably since the first time they laid eyes on each other on the Hogwarts Express. And to think he had actually tried to come between them. What a fool he had been.

Shaking his head at himself, Snape detached himself from the window. He was planning to go downstairs and reclaim his spot at the bar. If he was lucky, the girls had gone back inside to share another dance. He would enjoy watching them whilst sipping on another glass of Ogden's. And maybe, just maybe, they would have a smile to spare for their former Potions master.

He was just about to leave the room when he heard footsteps on the stairs. Footsteps, rustling robes and a giggle that was far too familiar to be ignored. He'd heard it before, exactly a year ago. That time, it had come from the very room he was standing in now. That time, he had lost his temper, deducted fifty points from his own House and given Charis a good telling-off, which had revealed more of his own jealousy than he had meant to. And the same display of jealousy had driven Morgana into the arms of Lucius Malfoy, who had shattered her heart into thousands of pieces only a short time after.

Snape sighed. Things could have been very different. If only he had kept his prominent nose out of their business, maybe the girls would have discovered their feelings for each other much earlier. Charis wouldn't have fallen for him, nor Morgana for Lucius. They wouldn't have been hurt, their hearts not broken. Oh, the heartache he could have saved them from.

'Morgana, what if we are caught?'

There was nervous excitement in Charis' hushed voice which startled Snape out of his reverie. What on earth were the two of them doing up here?

'We won't be caught. No one's coming up here tonight. I've made sure of that.'

Morgana's murmur was soothing, but as the door knob turned, Snape realised with alarm that he was trapped!

Before the door had even opened, Snape sank deep into the shadows, inwardly cursing himself for wasting time and being caught in a compromising position. The alcohol must have clouded his mind, for it was surely too late to Apparate now.

He flinched as a candle on the nightstand sprung to life, but relaxed as he realised that the tiny flame would not illuminate the room enough for the girls to see him. He, however, could see just enough of them to make him gasp.

They looked breathtaking, both of them, Charis with her glittering green eyes and Morgana with her flaming red locks. Yet for once, those combined features didn't remind Snape of Lily. In fact, his childhood friend, the only woman he had ever loved, was further from his mind than ever. And so were Dumbledore, the Dark Lord, Harry Potter... This night was all about his girls, the two young witches who were slowly approaching the bed, Charis walking backwards and Morgana guiding her with a firm grip around her waist. They held their own magic, those two, a magic which made Snape forget everything else which he otherwise deemed central in his life.

'Did you know my Amortensia smells of roses?' Morgana asked as she traced the line of Charis' neck with her nose, inhaling the delicate scent that Charis bore so well.

'You never told me,' Charis whispered in reply.

'Until quite recently, I didn't know what it meant.'

Gently yet purposefully, Morgana pushed Charis backwards, and the blonde witch gasped as she fell onto the bed. But Morgana didn't give her any time to utter her surprise further. She had already straddled her friend and was now kissing her passionately, expertly exploring her mouth with her tongue, all the while pinning down Charis with her own weight.

Charis moaned and thrust her hips upwards. Morgana's kiss had set her on fire, and now her whole body was tingling. She was aching to be touched, aching to feel Morgana's hands and lips on her body. But the Slytherin seemed to be in no rush whatsoever.

'I should have understood a long time ago. Your scent has always been so comforting,' Morgana whispered into Charis' ear, making her friend shiver before she planted a string on small kisses all the way from her earlobe to her collarbone. And Charis lay breathless, unable to form a coherent sentence, wishing that her friend was not going to cease her caresses.

But Morgana had no intention of stopping. She nibbled gently at Charis' collarbone, every now and then flicking out her tongue to taste the soft flesh of Charis' neck, enjoying seeing the soft blush that was creeping up from her chest. Yet every time Charis tried to move beneath her, every time she as much as tried to lift her hands to return some of her caresses, Morgana shifted her weight, either moving out of Charis' immediate reach or pinning her down even harder. Charis deserved to be treated as a queen. She deserved to be caressed and indulged. She deserved to shudder from pleasure. She herself shouldn't have to do anything.

Slowly, Morgana undid the lace at the front of Charis' blue dress, placing a tender kiss on every inch of skin she uncovered. She gifted both breasts with an equal amount of attention, alternating kissing and gently biting them both, yet still carefully avoiding the hard nipples that were so clearly visible through the sheer fabric of Charis' bra. She would give them her undivided attention later. For now, all she wanted was to get Charis out of her dress.

Snape stood in the shadows as if he'd been Petrified, trying to control his breathing as his heartbeat accelerated at the sight before him. Charis' pale skin bathing in the candlelight as Morgana teased her tender breasts was possibly the most sensual thing he'd ever seen. But as he felt the first stirrings of his own arousal pushing urgently at the buttons of his robes, he knew that what he was witnessing was beyond the realms of his own personal fantasies. Morgana was unmistakably making love to Charis, and it was as beautiful to behold as it was intensely erotic.

Charis had now shifted so her hips were raised, and Morgana carefully pushed the blue satin down her body, laying a trail of kisses down her torso and stomach as she did so. When she paused, flicking her tongue inside the soft dimple of Charis' navel, causing her to giggle, a delighted smile passed briefly over her features before she continued her ministrations ever southward. Slowly and carefully, as if she was unwrapping some priceless gift, she slid the satin over Charis' hips and to her thighs,

hovering over her lace-covered core mere millimetres away, feeling the searing heat begging to be unleashed. Soon, but not yet, Morgana decided, slipping the gown yet further and kissing and nibbling Charis' thighs and legs all the way to her toes until the dress lay crumpled and discarded at the end of the bed.

Snape looked on, almost unable to breathe. Charis was now spread out, clad in only sumptuous lace underwear. Morgana gazed deeply into her eyes as she began her journey back up Charis' body, this time using only her fingertips to swirl patterns over her soft skin, making Charis tingle and shudder with pleasure.

Soon, Morgana had once more covered her friend's body with her own, and they were eye to eye, Morgana dotting the gentlest of kisses over Charis' face before claiming her lips. It was yet another deep, passionate kiss, and Charis' hips bucked involuntarily, her body craving more of Morgana's skilful ministrations. But Morgana shook her head, almost imperceptibly. Soon, but not yet.

Moving her mouth once more to the succulent flesh of Charis' neck, she began to gently nibble as one hand peeled the strap of the blue bra down over Charis' shoulder. The Ravenclaw was trembling by now, her little moans encouraging her friend and, unbeknown to them both, driving their former Potions master half-wild with desire. Yet he stood perfectly still in the shadows, not moving even an inch. He laying hands on himself now seemed wrong, filthy and obscene. And he feared it would destroy the special kind of magic that was hanging in the air.

Agonisingly slowly, Morgana slipped her nimble fingers inside the loosened cup of Charis' lacy bra, drawing from her a gasp as her soft, dexterous fingertips met the awakened nerve ends of her nipples. She brushed them gently before shifting her hands so they came to cup Charis' heavy breasts. When and how she had Vanished the bra, Charis couldn't tell. She didn't care either. She was too preoccupied by watching her friend massage her breasts with the most expert touch. And as Morgana gazed at the star pendant that hung at her friend's throat, twinkling slightly in the dim candlelight, another gentle smile pulled at her lips.

'Mo... Morgana, please, I... oh!'

Charis' whispered words turned into a shaky whimper as Morgana's lips closed around her right nipple, and as she suckled it, deftly and purposefully, alternately teasing it with her tongue and her teeth, Charis felt waves of pleasure rippling through her body, converging at her very core and making her wriggle under her friend's weight. How she wished Morgana would touch her down there. How she longed to feel her friend's lips at her core, her hands, her fingers. But she did not dare utter her wishes. Morgana seemed to know what she was doing. She was the one in charge, and Charis trusted her without reservation.

Yet Morgana, too, was longing to take things to the next level, and as she kissed her way across Charis' chest in order to reach her left breast, she felt her lips shaking with excitement and shifted her weight, rubbing her thighs together as to give some relief to the fire that was burning between her own legs. She felt the blood pulsate in her core, knew that she was wet with desire and also yearned to be touched. But at this point, she was not yet ready to give up control.

Straddling Charis' left thigh, she continued her ministrations of her breasts, kissing, suckling, licking, and while Charis' eyes fluttered shut and small moans escaped her lips, Morgana let her left hand trail down Charis' side, over her hip and thigh, eventually taking a firm hold of her butt. Then she let her lips wander down over her stomach, grinding herself against Charis' leg as she moved further south.

As she placed small kisses along the waistband of Charis' knickers, the fingers of her right hand found their way under the soft lace, meeting even softer skin and a scorching heat that made Morgana forget her plans of peeling off Charis' knickers at the same slow speed she had peeled off her bra. Neither was she any longer interested in kissing the inside of Charis' thighs, teasing her until she begged to be tasted. She needed this now as much as Charis needed it, and with a forceful pull, Morgana tore down the blue knickers and closed her lips around Charis' clitoris without warning, making her lover climax with an outcry that surely could be heard all the way down to the pub below. But neither of the girls cared, and while Charis was thrashing her head around, shaking with the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced, Morgana kept her hips firmly pinned to the bed and her lips still closed around the pulsating nub, suckling it softly as she eased her friend down from her peak. Her own breathing was laboured, and finally, she allowed her free hand to trail down her own body, under the hem of her dress and in between her thighs. As she had anticipated, she was scorching hot, and as she touched herself though her damp knickers, the sensation was almost too much to bear. And so she moved her fingers under the fabric, teasing herself while she lapped up Charis' juices, already inflaming her once again.

Snape stood with his mouth open. He couldn't see Charis' core from where he was standing, but the movements of Morgana's head between Charis' thighs left little to the imagination. And the way Morgana's nimble fingers worked at her own core made him want to sink onto his knees behind her, rip the fabric away and lap her the way she was lapping Charis, bringing her to an orgasm at the same time she made Charis peak, just to pin her down on her friend moments later, thrusting his cock alternately into them. Yet he made no move, none whatsoever, but stood silently, watching intently. He was no part of what was going on between the girls, and as much as his body was aching for release, he knew it was not right to intrude on this most precious of moments.

Morgana could sense that Charis was yet again close to her peak as she probed her entrance with the tip of her tongue. She could both taste it and feel it in the way Charis' body tensed and her fingers clawed at the bedsheets. And she herself was closing in on her orgasm, too, knowing exactly how and where to touch herself to make her body shudder with pleasure. She could make herself come undone right now. All it would take was one more expert flick of a finger against her throbbing nub. But she waited, caressing the soft skin on the inside of her thigh instead. She wanted to wait for Charis, share the moment with her and then curl up against her, holding her as they both came down from their peak.

Snape stiffened as he saw Morgana cease her ministrations. No, this couldn't be. It mustn't. Morgana was supposed to be able to enjoy this. Had she not achieved a sexual as well as an emotional breakthrough when she had come undone in his arms a week ago? Had it all been for nothing? Had he misread her when they had parted? But then he heard Charis' soft moans turn into a mewling, desperate whimper, saw her body convulsing with pleasure, and with a sigh of relief, he saw Morgana's nimble fingers once more working under her dress.

The sensation was breathtaking. Morgana felt her knees go weak as her orgasm took hold of her entire body, making her toes curl and her back arch. She didn't moan or scream, but sank silently onto the bed between Charis' legs, letting her head rest on the inside of her lover's thigh as she recovered from her dual ministrations. Her hot breath tickled Charis' flushed skin, and she let her eyes flutter shut, deeply inhaling Charis' scent and enjoying her warmth against her cheek. Her limbs grew heavier, and she couldn't remember if she had ever felt so relaxed. If she didn't move soon, she would fall asleep. But then she felt Charis' hand on her hair, and as Charis touched her shoulder, Morgana let herself willingly be pulled up, coming to rest in her lover's arms.

She looked beautiful, Charis thought, letting her green eyes trail over Morgana's face. The angry line that far too often appeared between her eyebrows was gone, and the dim candle light was just enough for Charis to make out the soft blush on Morgana's otherwise so pale cheeks. She looked relaxed, at peace. And when Charis hugged her closer and murmured, 'I love you,' the expression on Morgana's face could only be described as complete and utter bliss.

A few minutes later, the girls were both fast asleep, and in the shadows, Snape swallowed drily, once more unable to take his eyes of them, yet for different reasons now. There was a warmth blossoming inside his chest which he was unable to put into words. His girls had found each other at last. And nothing, not even the Dark Lord himself, could surely tear their love apart. They belonged to each other; they were two sides of the same coin, two parts of a whole. But as he watched them sleep now, curled up against each other under the sheet which Charis had pulled over them, Snape suddenly felt like he had no right to be there anymore. He'd witnessed something beautiful tonight, but as the post-orgasmic glow settled around the two witches, his mere presence started to feel like an abomination. He needed to leave and let the girls bask in their new-found love. A love he had no part of, a love he would never be able to share with anyone.

Noiselessly, he drew his wand and cast a well-practised Silencing Charm before moving through the shadows with the grace of a black panther. He would be gone in less than a minute, and the girls would never know that he had been there.

At the door, however, he paused and once more looked back towards the bed. He loved those two girls dearly in his own special way. They would never know, of course, but he hoped that every now and then, they would remember him with fondness.

XXXVI: Sweet Release

Chapter 36 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXVI: Sweet Release

'Join us.'

Snape hesitated. His body was willing; his skin was tingling in anticipation and his cock twitching in the confinement of his robes. He was dying to join his girls, longing to explore their bodies with his fingers, his lips and his tongue. But still he held back, waited, not sure whether joining them was the right thing to do.

Morgana tilted her head and looked at him. There was a smile on her lips, and her blue eyes were glittering mischievously. Charis' eyes, on the other hand, were closed. She was lying in Morgana's arms, resting her head against the red-haired witch's chest, her cheeks still flushed and her breath still coming in small gasps. Mere moments ago, she had been moaning and panting, her body convulsing as Morgana had brought her to yet another violent orgasm. In fact, Morgana's fingers were still glistening with her lover's juices.

'Looks like we have to play alone,' Morgana whispered, placing a tender kiss on Charis' hair, which made the blonde witch open her lovely green eyes.

'What a shame.'

Charis pouted for a moment, but then turned her attention to Morgana's breasts. They were firm and pert, and the erect nipples looked so succulent that Charis couldn't resist taking one of them in her mouth and rubbing her little tongue against it while she gently squeezed the other with her fingers. And Morgana let her eyes flutter shut, exhaling very audibly through her nose as a jolt of pleasure went through her body. She loved the way Charis suckled on her nipple, and buried both her hands in her blond hair, pulling her lover closer so she wouldn't cease her ministrations.

'Hm, yes. You're good at this, Charis,' she whispered, her voice hoarse with desire. 'Don't be shy. Use your teeth. Yes, like that.'

She moaned and bucked her hips as Charis complied, and Snape shifted from one leg to the other. His erection was now pressing against his robes rather uncomfortably, and he was not sure how much longer he could refrain from freeing himself to stroke his length with a firm grip or even bury it in one of his girls. But the latter seemed still too sinful. He had seen the two make love, and it had been the most beautiful act he had ever beheld. What right did he have to be a part of it?

Charis was now kissing her way down over Morgana's stomach, her hands caressing her lover's sides as she positioned herself between her legs, and Morgana raised her hips, presenting her core.

Snape swallowed. He had never tasted Morgana, never ever touched the soft, red curls between her legs. But before he could even move, Charis had lowered her head, parting Morgana's lips with her tongue and eliciting a soft moan from her.

'Am I doing this right?' she asked shyly after she had been carefully probing Morgana's core for a few moments.

'Yes,' Morgana breathed. 'Don't be scared. Think about what you would like and do it. Uh, yes. Right there. Oh!'

Morgana gasped with surprise as Charis entered her with her tongue, and as she started rocking her hips in the same pace as Charis was darting her tongue in and out of her, Snape could no longer resist. He crossed the room with a few swift strides, coming to a halt by the edge of the bed, right behind Charis. He took a firm hold of her butt cheeks, squeezing them as he ground himself against her.

Charis moaned as the fabric of his robes rubbed against her, and she moved slightly backwards, grinding herself against Snape while she continued lapping away at Morgana, enjoying the contraction of her muscles around the tip of her tongue. And Morgana looked up at Snape, her eyes glittering.

'Join us,' she repeated her offer in a husky voice, licking her trembling lips, and this time, Snape did not refuse her.

He freed his throbbing erection and entered Charis unceremoniously from behind, eliciting a guttural moan from her which vibrated against Morgana's core, and as he thrust deeply into her, pushing her forward, he saw Morgana's legs spread even further. And all of a sudden, he was the one in charge, deciding on pace and rhythm.

He growled and pulled out of Charis, only to fill her again moments later, pushing her down against Morgana, who was beside herself with pleasure. Charis' tongue against her core felt marvellous, but the look on Snape's face while he was shagging Charis from behind was almost enough to make her climax. It was lust she saw: pure, carnal desire that had been bottled-up for far too long. But now it had been unleashed, and as his jaws clenched and his fingers dug into the flesh of Charis' arse, Morgana was certain that her former Head of House was about to lose his self-control and spill himself inside her lover. But she was in for a surprise.

Keeping a firm grip on Charis, Snape shifted his position and climbed onto the bed, kneeling upright. He pushed Charis down and forward, making her topple on top of Morgana while he kept pushing into her, making her moan every time he hit that special spot deep inside her. It wouldn't be long until she came undone. Already he could feel her muscles pulsating around him, and every time he thrust into her to the hilt, filling her completely, he heard her moan and saw her arch her back. He would make her squeal before long, and this time, he would not hush her as he had done in the library at Hogwarts. This time, he wanted to hear her scream his name.

But he hadn't forgotten about Morgana, of course. He had seen the disappointed look on her face as he had pushed Charis away from her core, and now he could see how turned on she was by him taking Charis right on top of her. He saw her lick her lips, saw her hands move over Charis' back. She, too, was longing to be caressed, to be touched and satisfied. Yet, Charis was clawing away on the sheets, unable to gift her lover with much more than heated kisses as she lay on top of her, and so it was up to Snape to resume the ministrations Charis was unable to continue.

He entered Morgana with a long, slender finger, making her gasp in surprise. And as a second finger joined the first, his fingertips teasing her G-point while his thumb applied pressure to her swollen nub, he heard her mewl and saw her eyes flutter shut.

He growled as he once more buried himself deep inside Charis. He could feel the contraction of her muscles around his cock and the pulsating of Morgana's clitoris against his thumb. It was a sensation that would drive the most steadfast man over the edge. But Snape held back. He didn't want this to end. Not yet, anyway. But as he slowed down his movements, slowly pulling out of Charis, he heard her whimper and felt her push her butt towards him.

'Please,' he heard her pant, 'Take me. Take me hard.'

Once more, he saw Morgana look up at him. Her lips were shaking and her eyes full of need. But as much as she herself wanted to be touched, as much as she needed to be touched, she nodded almost imperceptibly towards him, and as she buried her hands in Charis' hair, pulling her lover's face towards her to gift her with a deep, sensuous kiss, Snape understood. Morgana would wait. This was all about Charis now.

He entered her once more very slowly, easing into her inch by inch before pulling out again just as agonisingly slowly. Charis shivered and moaned into Morgana's mouth, and Morgana wrapped her arms around her, embracing her tightly while Snape placed his hands on the side of her hips. And then he started fucking her, driving into her like a man deranged. Faster and faster he moved his hips until he felt her spasm beneath him and heard her call his name. Her muscles gripped him tightly, and he kept pounding her, his balls slapping against her until he feared that he would spill himself inside her. But this mustn't happen. There was yet another witch he very much wanted to attend to.

He stroked Charis' back tenderly as he eased out of her. Her muscles were still contracting wildly around him, and he heard her pant. She wouldn't forget that orgasm for a long while, Snape was certain of that. And he himself would never forget how she felt around him either.

Resting for a moment, he looked down on his girls. Charis had more or less collapsed on top of Morgana. Her breath was coming in shudders, and Morgana held her closely, lovingly caressing her blonde hair. And as Morgana looked up at him, Snape gasped. Her blue eyes had been filled with lust and desire only minutes ago, and while the look of need was still there, it had softened. She didn't need what Charis had needed. She didn't need to be taken roughly. She needed a soft and caring touch. And Snape happily obliged.

She welcomed him with a soft whimper as he slowly slid inside her, and he caressed her hips and thighs just as tenderly as she stroked Charis' hair and back. He would be gentle with her, unhurriedly easing in and out of her until she came undone. He closed his eyes, getting lost in the sensation of her hot flesh. He heard the girls kissing, heard Morgana's soft moans and felt her hands brush his as he alternately caressed her hips and Charis' back. And every time he pushed forward, he felt Charis' voluptuous bottom press against his stomach. It was almost as if they had melted into each other, as if they were moving as one.

Morgana's orgasm was a quiet affair. Snape felt her muscles contract rhythmically around him and heard her moan ever so softly. And as he opened his eyes, he saw his two girls embracing each other, holding each other so tightly as if they were afraid of letting go. And as he pulled out of Morgana, watching his girls lay in each other's arms in post-coital bliss, he felt superfluous. He even doubted that they would notice if he disappeared...

He awoke in the darkness of his own quarters, and even though his dream had been intense and his cock was now throbbing urgently under his grey nightshirt, Snape did nothing to give himself any form of relief but once more closed his eyes, willing the image of his two girls to come back to him. Not their naked bodies, glistening with sweat and shivering from the intensity of their coupling, but their faces. Their flushed cheeks and the blissful smiles on their soft lips. That was what Snape wanted to remember. That was the picture of his girls he wanted to carry with him always.

Two months had passed since he had watched them in the tiny room at the Three Broomsticks. Two months since he had seen Morgana make love to her best friend Charis and then curl up beside her with a blissful smile. He would treasure that memory forever. In fact, Snape considered it to be so beautiful, so immaculate, that he so far had never allowed himself to remember how aroused he had been that night, how much he had wanted to be a part of the action and to give his girls pleasure as much as he wanted to receive pleasure in return. He had refused to sully that memory by reducing it to a mere sexual fantasy that would drive most men insane.

Snape sighed. The previous day had been a rough one, ending with him arguing with Dumbledore. He had gone to bed tense and exhausted and had not even bothered emptying his mind or even taking a potion which would have ensured an undisturbed dream. So maybe it was only natural that his subconscious had brought forth an erotic dream, a dream in which almost all his wishes and desires had been fulfilled. Yet he had woken up before...

Suddenly acutely aware of his erection, Snape groaned and sat up. Would it really be wrong to lay hands on himself, thinking of his girls? He had been with them both, had shared moments of intimacy with them of a kind he had shared with no other women. Those two girls, those young women, each aroused him in their own, unique way. He had relished Charis' submissiveness just as much as he had taken pleasure in Morgana setting the pace and keeping the upper hand. And he could very well imagine both senseless rutting as well as sensual seduction with the both of them.

Stripping off his nightshirt and his good intentions alike, Snape made his way to the bathroom, already stroking his length as he turned on the water. How would his dream have continued, he wondered. Would his girls have embraced him, taken care of him and his needs as he had taken care of theirs?

He stepped into the shower and closed his eyes, letting the warm water trickle down over his body. His skin was tingling, and as he tightened his grip around his cock, he once more saw Morgana's blue eyes glittering mischievously as she looked up at him, licking her lips before she engaged into a passionate kiss with Charis. They were kneeling in front of him, and Snape pushed his length between their faces, feeling both their lips and tongues on his glistening tip as he broke off their kiss. They lapped off his salty essence, shared it between them as their tongues entwined yet again, and Snape growled, once more pushing forwards. A pair of lips closed around the head while a nimble tongue made its way down his shaft, and when he felt it tickle his balls, he was almost being overpowered by the sensation of being taken deep into the other girl's mouth.

'Charis! Morgana!'

Snape's voice echoed from the walls of the empty bathroom, but in his fantasy, his girls continued their ministrations, one of them sucking him hard while the other nibbled at his balls and licked the inside of his thighs, her fingers closing around his base. She started to move up and down, slowly at first but then picking up speed, pumping him while the other pair of lips closed tighter and tighter around his tip. As she bobbed up and down, her tongue dragged deliciously on the ridge, and the combined sensation almost tipped him over the edge.

Snape thrust his hips forward, already seeing stars. He was trying to hold back as he wanted both of his girls to be able to taste him as he came, but the tension was almost too much to bear.

'Now!' he growled after a few more thrusts, and as he felt both pairs of lips at the head of his cock, jostling for position, he saw the beautiful eyes of his girls gazing up at him in anticipation.

With both tongues eagerly teasing him once more, he came undone, spurting his hot seed into both of their mouths with barely-suppressed moans. He was coming hard, releasing months of tension, at a loss on why he had denied himself this pleasure for so long.

He slumped panting against the wall of the shower, feeling dizzy with relief, and in front of his inner eye, he could still see his girls, licking him clean and their small hands easing him down from his orgasm with tender, unhurried strokes. Then they looked up at him, Morgana with her icy blue eyes and Charis with her precious green ones. Their cheeks were flushed and their lips smiling. They had enjoyed this as much as he had.

Snape exhaled slowly. He knew that he would never share a moment like this with his girls. He wouldn't allow himself such intimacy. Nor would they probably be interested in him sexually any longer, now they had revealed the depth of their true feelings for each other. But while he had fought erotic fantasies of the two since New Year's Eve, it now didn't seem wrong to have given in. It felt natural, in fact, and Snape was quite confident that he would be able to look either of them in the eyes without any kind of shame the next time they met.

If they ever met again. Neither of the girls had been at Grimmauld Place whenever he had been there over the last two months. He himself barely went there nowadays. What he did for the Order was his concern and Dumbledore's. Soon, he wouldn't go to Grimmauld Place at all any more. Soon, he would be a wanted man, staying as far away from the Order of the Phoenix as he possibly could.

Shaking his head as to rid himself of thoughts of his dark future, Snape stepped out of the shower and grabbed his bathrobe. He had missed breakfast, but that didn't matter. He would brew himself a cup of tea and maybe have a biscuit by the fire in his study. He would spend this Saturday morning in his own company, in a state of quiet he rarely had the luxury to enjoy.

He put up his feet, enjoying how the heat of the tea and the fire warmed his body inside and out, and was just about to let his eyes fall shut when a giggle echoed through the room. It was a familiar sound, and at first, Snape thought that he had fallen asleep and must be dreaming again. Why else would he hear Charis' giggle down here in the dungeons? But then he also heard Morgana's voice, and his lips curled into a smile. He hadn't dared hope that he would see his girls any time soon, but now it looked as if they had activated their mirrors.

Still smiling, Snape left his armchair in search of the third looking glass, excited by the chance to see his girls once more.

XXXVII: Epilogue

Chapter 37 of 37

COMPLETED The Star Sisters have left Hogwarts and are now facing a new world with new opportunities and new kinds of danger. And also for the Half-Blood Prince, times are changing. (This story is the sequel to *Star Sisters*.)

Chapter XXXVII: Epilogue

'What are you giggling about? I'm telling you, there are people who find watching themselves while having sex a real turn-on.'

Charis stopped giggling and rolled her eyes.

'Must be really beautiful people,' she decided. 'I don't want to see my huge thighs! And don't get me started on my arse!'

'I happen to like your arse very much and enjoy seeing it,' Morgana stated. 'Hence, this discussion is over. The mirrors stay. And if you even think about taking them off the wall, I'll put a Sticking Charm on them.'

Ah! This was why the mirrors were activated even though the girls were decidedly in the same room. Snape had wondered about that for a moment. He'd seen Charis first and then caught sight of Morgana, who very uncharacteristically was sitting on a bedspread with kittens printed on it. It must be Charis' bed she was sitting on. And sure enough, Charis had sat down beside the red-haired Slytherin only moments later, leaving Snape pondering. But now he understood: the girls had hung the silver mirrors on the wall behind Charis' bed. But that would mean... Snape frowned and craned his neck to get a better look. Were those really moving boxes by the wall behind Morgana? Were his girls moving in together?

A loud crack made Snape jump up from his chair and grab his wand, but he relaxed immediately when he caught sight of Silvy, Morgana's house-elf, in the mirror.

'Silvy has now cleaned Miss Morgana's old room,' the elf announced happily. 'What would Miss Morgana like Silvy to do now?'

'I'd like you to have a cup of tea and relax,' Morgana proposed to which the elf vehemently shook her head.

'Silvy can unpack boxes,' she suggested instead.

'I can do that myself, Silvy. It won't take much time. I don't own that much.'

A smile tugging at his lips once more, Snape sat down in his chair again, his own silver mirror in his hand. His deduction had been correct. Morgana was indeed moving in with Charis.

Sipping at his tea, Snape took a closer look at his girls. Charis' hair was tousled, and she was still a bit bleary-eyed and wearing a bathrobe. She'd probably not been up for very long yet. Morgana, however, was dressed in a dark shirt and a long skirt, and her red hair was immaculately braided. She'd been up much longer, Snape concluded and wondered what she had been doing. She didn't seem like the type who'd put off packing until the last moment, and he couldn't imagine her taking a tear-filled goodbye from her landlady. Had she been brooding in her old room or yet again ventured into Knockturn Alley in the wee morning hours?

Snape shook his head at himself. It was time to stop worrying about his former student. Morgana had changed. The hard look in her eyes had all but vanished along with her demons, and she seemed to have found her peace at last. She had no reason anymore for dark thoughts and nightly walks down shady alleyways.

'Do you want me to help you unpack?' Chairs wondered.

Morgana shook her head.

'That's alright,' she said. 'I really don't own much. And I guess no matter what I say, a certain elf will start unpacking as soon as I turn my back on her.'

Silvy blushed, and Charis giggled.

'Well, in case you want to get started,' she said, 'I've cleaned out the left side of the wardrobe for you. Feel free to fill it. Same goes for the bookshelf in the sitting room and... Oh, just put your stuff wherever you like. I'm not that territorial. Now, if you excuse me, I really need to have a shower. I feel like I'm still half asleep.'

Morgana looked after Charis as the blonde witch made her way to the bathroom, and her blue eyes lingered on the door long after Charis had closed it behind her. Once Charis was ready, they'd go to the Ministry together, and Morgana would file her new address. It was standard procedure, and especially when it came to the Auror department, the Ministry was keen to know where their employees lived. Mad-Eye was probably the only Auror in history who'd ever gotten away with not disclosing his home address. But Morgana had neither Moody's skills nor connections, and she saw no way how she could keep her new living situation from the Ministry. Otherwise, however, she was planning to keep quiet about her relationship with Charis. Dangerous times were ahead, and should the Dark Lord increase his power, Muggle-borns as well as blood traitors were in terrible danger. It was wise to keep a low profile.

Morgana sighed. Sooner or later, she would have to talk to Charis about this. But not today. This was the first day of their new life. She didn't want to spoil it.

* * *

The sun was setting, casting the whole of London in red light. It had been a beautiful March day. Spring was most definitely in the air, and the city itself had seemed to be inhaling the sunlight. Now the curtains in Charis' bedroom were drawn back, and she herself sat on the bed, admiring Morgana's hair. She had undone her braid, and her red locks were now falling down over her shoulders, bathing in the afterglow of the sun.

'This was such a lovely day!' Charis sighed contently.

They had strolled up and down Diagon Alley for the better part of the afternoon, chatting, shopping and stopping at various cafés. And Charis had felt all day as if she were walking on fluffy pink clouds. Because she had known that she wouldn't have to say goodbye to Morgana in the evening. She'd come home with her, to their home. They'd sleep in the same bed, in each other's arms. And in the morning, Morgana would still be there.

She was unpacking her boxes now, carefully putting her clothes into the wardrobe. Everything was neatly folded, from socks to knickers to robes, and Charis couldn't help but smile. Morgana was such a perfectionist, even pedantic to some extent, so much unlike Charis who kept her socks and knickers higgledy-piggledy in one and the same drawer. And still she and the redhead got along so well and were so deeply in love.

Charis tilted her head. If somebody had told her a year ago that she'd be hooking up with a girl, she'd have thought they'd been Confunded. She had been so sure that she needed a man to be happy. A man who was strong and could protect her, hold her in his muscular arms and make sweet love to her. But now Charis understood that she didn't need any of this to be happy. For Morgana loved her and appreciated her in a way no man ever had. She treated her like a princess. And the way she made love to her...

Charis felt a shudder go down her spine at the mere memory of their sexual encounters. Morgana was the one in charge of their lovemaking, taking the lead and deciding on pace and position, but Charis never felt like she was being taken advantage of. On the contrary! Morgana always made sure that Charis received exactly what she was yearning for, and more than once, Morgana had taken her into her arms afterwards, caressing her softly and easing her down from her peak without demanding anything in return.

'You don't have to do anything for me, Star Sister,' she would whisper then. 'The glow on your cheeks and the smile on your lips are all I am craving.'

Those words meant the world to Charis, for she had far too often been used and then tossed aside. But every now and then, she felt a stab of guilt and the desire to prove her love for Morgana in a physical fashion. For Morgana was special, too, and deserved to be treated like a princess herself. And what night would be better to seduce her than the first night in her new home?

Charis slipped down from the bed and tiptoed towards the wardrobe where Morgana was still busy putting away her clothes. Charis didn't believe that she actually managed to sneak up on the Auror trainee, and thus she was surprised to hear Morgana give a little yelp as she slipped her right arm around her slim waist.

'No need to be jumpy, kitten,' Charis whispered. 'It's just me.'

She held Morgana tightly towards her as she brushed her hair to the side to gain access to her neck, and as she started to place tender kisses on the sensitive skin, she heard Morgana inhale deeply through her nose. And had Charis been able to see her face, she would have seen that Morgana's eyes had fluttered shut.

Pressing herself against her lover's backside and nibbling at her neck, Charis let her hands explore Morgana's body. Her left hand came to cup her breast, massaging it through the fabric of her shirt, and Morgana moaned softly, shifting her weight to grind her butt against Charis. She had not been prepared for Charis making a move, and already the first kiss on her neck had sent jolts of pleasure through her body. And now she was on fire, longing to be touched and hoping that Charis wouldn't cease her ministrations.

Yet Charis had no intention of stopping. She was now teasing Morgana's earlobe with her tongue, eliciting the sweetest of moans from her, and as she sneaked her hand under the waistband of Morgana's skirt and into her knickers, she found her hot and damp.

Morgana whimpered as Charis' fingers tickled her core, and she had to grab hold of a shelf for support. Her knees were growing soft, and her head seemed to be spinning. Yet she knew that Charis would not let her fall. Her lover was holding her tightly and keeping her safe. There was nothing to fear, nothing to dread. Enjoying herself did not mean giving up control. They were equals, Charis and her. Parts of a whole. Joined at last.

She peaked quietly and intensely, with a shudder going through her whole body and a low, guttural sound escaping her throat. And Charis held her close, caressing her soft curls and kissing her gently on the side of her neck.

'Welcome to your new home, sweetie,' she whispered as Morgana's breathing had slowed down and got onto her toes to kiss her lover on her flushed cheek. And as Morgana turned her head and caught Charis' lips in a fervent kiss, they both understood that there was a long and passion-filled night lying ahead of them.

* * *

Sunday morning was already dawning when Snape returned to Hogwarts. The Dark Lord had called for him past midnight and demanded his immediate appearance. What for, Snape still didn't know, not even after almost six hours. The Dark Lord had no new plans, and Snape had no new information, neither about Dumbledore nor the Order. But still Voldemort had insisted on having him around all night, harping on about things everyone already knew. The meeting had been utterly pointless but still exhausting, and when he descended to the dungeons, Snape was longing for some hours of deep, undisturbed sleep. But once he entered his quarters, he didn't direct his steps towards his bedchamber. Sleep would not come, he was certain of that. And if he against all odds managed to fall asleep after all, he very much doubted that he would feel rested when he awoke. Certainly, his dreams would be filled with horrors and darkness, and when he opened his eyes, he would feel as if a hoard of Hippogriffs had trampled all over him. No, it was better to stay awake, make it through the day and then retire early in the evening. Hopefully, he would be so exhausted by the end of the day that his system would shut down and not even his subconscious would have the energy to conjure nightmares.

He did not even light a fire in the grate. He wouldn't get warm anyway, and the cup of tea in his hands was merely an object he could hold onto. He wouldn't drink the tea; Snape had known this already when he had brewed it. A glass of Ogden's, that would be something he might be able to drink down, but Firewhisky in the early hours of morning after a night with no sleep was not to be recommended. And so Snape sat in front of the empty grate for a while, travelling cloak still on and clasping the tea cup in his hands, desperate for something to ease his mind. But the darkness of the dungeons didn't lend him any peace, and Snape was starting to consider that glass of Ogden's once more. A whole bottle, preferably. That would certainly put him to sleep. How he would feel when he woke up again was a different matter altogether and not one he had any desire to consider. But before he managed to get up from the chair, his attention was caught by the rustling of fabrics, the sound of kisses and a whispered voice.

'It's still early, kitten. Go back to sleep.'

Snape narrowed his eyes. The image in the little silver mirror on the mantelpiece was about as dark as his own surroundings, but the first rays of the morning sun were creeping through the gap in the curtains in Charis' bedroom, illuminating it just enough for him to make out the two forms that lay tightly entwined under the blanket. He could also see the clothes that lay discarded on the bed and the floor and the girls' dishevelled hair.

'Go back to sleep, kitten,' Charis repeated. 'You don't need to get up. There's nothing out there that needs your attention.'

Snape cocked an eyebrow in surprise. Of course, he had expected his girls to sleep in the same bed now they had moved in together, and he had also expected them to sleep in each other's arms. After all, Charis was of the cuddling kind and Morgana only too keen to please her. He had witnessed that at the Three Broomsticks. But there it had been Morgana who had wrapped her arms around Charis and held her safe. That it was now Morgana, who was being held, surprised Snape. He had not imagined that she would allow anyone, not even Charis, to hold her in such a fashion. Morgana was so strong-willed, so stubborn and so keen on showing the world her strength and independence. And there she was now, curled up like a kitten in Charis' protecting arms.

A smile lit up Snape's tired face. He didn't know about Charis' brave move the previous evening, of course, nor did he know that Morgana had allowed herself to be seduced and be driven over the edge. And neither did he know about the girls' lovemaking that night, how it had been on equal terms, a mutual giving and taking without guilt or fears. But he didn't need to know about any of it. He could see a shift of power between his girls, and even through the mirror, he could see that their love had deepened.

Leaning back in his chair, Snape watched them silently, observing kisses and tender caresses and eventually seeing them fall asleep again. Morgana had turned around in Charis' arms, and they were now lying face to face with their arms around each other. They were safe and warm, and for some moments, Snape considered turning the mirror around and breaking the connection. The girls didn't need him to look out for them anymore. They didn't need him to heal their emotional scars. They had each other now, and that was all they needed. Eventually, they would probably forget all about him, and that would be just as well, Snape thought. He had once tried to drive in a wedge between them, and he still regretted this bitterly. Thus, he had no right to be part of their happiness now. He should just leave them alone and disappear in the darkness.

But Snape never broke the connection that morning. He watched his girls sleep, listening to their slow and regular breathing and wishing them all the happiness in the world. It didn't matter if they forgot about him. He would never be able to give them the love they deserved anyway. For his heart was crippled, and he had forgotten how to love. But he still knew how to care, and for Charis and Morgana, he cared deeply. He would always watch them, through the looking glass or by any other means that presented themselves. He would look out for them and protect them if need be and never ask for anything in return.

The minutes went by and turned into hours. The sun rose over the horizon and promised yet another glorious day. And by the time Charis and Morgana awoke in each other's arms, their former Potions master had fallen fast asleep.

A/N:

We would like to thank you, dear reader, for your patience and faithfulness. Your support has meant the world to us and given us the energy to go on writing. We are leaving you, Charis, Morgana and Snape for the time being, but we are hoping to return eventually when real life has calmed down and we can devote ourselves entirely to the story once more. For we are not entirely done with our characters yet, and we're aware there may be some questions yet unanswered. For now, however, we will let them sleep in peace.