

A Valentine's Quartet

by The Snapettes

Four different Valentine's Days in the life of Severus Snape. Written as a round-robin for the FB Muffliato! group's Valentine challenge.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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February 14th, 1976

Severus paused before turning the corner of the corridor that led to the Great Hall. So far, he'd managed to get from the Slytherin lair in the dungeons and all the way across the castle for breakfast without seeing any snogging couples, or even Potter and his gang of cronies. He was always wary when walking around Hogwarts alone, his ears constantly listening for the susurrations of a cruel taunt or jibe, and today was no exception. In fact, out of all the holidays, it was this day he hated the most. He hated it more than Christmas, and even more than his birthday, and that was saying something. As if the smug, frolicking couples needed more of an excuse to rub everyone else's noses in how happy they were together, and, in turn, amplify his own loneliness.

Sirius bloody Black would most probably have his lips glued to some new girlfriend for the duration of the day he thought with a flash of irritation and, if he were honest with himself, jealousy. Black seemed to get through girls as quickly as he got through broom polish. Potter, on the other hand, would be strutting around, boasting about how many cards he'd got, if last year was anything to go by. Although most of them were probably sent by Pettigrew. *That pathetic little worm seemed to idolize the pair of them more than any foolish girl could.* At this thought, Severus' lips curled into a smile, and after taking a deep breath through his nose, he rounded the corner and slipped into the Great Hall behind a throng of Ravenclaws and took his place at the end of the Slytherin table, a little further away from his own Housemates. Severus was not one for idle chit-chat and preferred to eat alone, watching other people rather than interacting with them.

Breakfast was a fairly boisterous affair as the tension grew before the arrival of the post. Many girls were giggling breathlessly whilst a few boys were stirring their porridge and looking decidedly green with nerves. Severus nibbled at his toast whilst casting a glance to the Gryffindor table. Lily was laughing with her friend Jenny about something. Even from here, he could see how the laughter lit up her green eyes and how tiny dimples formed on her soft, pale cheeks as she smiled. He'd often imagined kissing those dimples. She had her vibrant red hair down today, and it cascaded over her shoulders like flames. He felt his heart clench in his chest at her beauty.

At that very moment, Lily glanced up and saw Severus looking at her. Her face broke into another broad smile, and she gave him a wave. His throat felt dry as he smiled awkwardly and waved back, doing it in such a way not to attract any undue attention from his Housemates. He saw her mouth 'See you later' before she returned to chatting with her fellow Gryffindors.

Severus dropped his half-eaten piece of toast on to his plate. He couldn't eat now even if he wanted to; his stomach seemed to be filled with bubbles, and his heart felt as heavy as a stone. Instead, he took a big swig of strong, black coffee, trying to wash down the swell of emotion that Lily's smile stirred in him.

A loud screech of the heavy oak doors swinging open and a flutter of wings combined with enthusiastic hooting made the collective hall glance upwards. The owl post had finally arrived. Severus clutched his coffee cup as, one by one, parcels and cards were dropped here and there all over the hall, to squeals of joy and excitement. Of course, he would not get anything. He was not expecting to either, but it was excruciating having to sit and watch the pleasure of others. A little further up the Slytherin

table, he saw that one of his female Housemates had just opened a beautiful, silken, heart-shaped box filled with dozens of exquisite chocolates and was kissing the laughing present-bearer all over his face.

Sighing, Severus chanced another glance at the Gryffindor table. Lily, it seemed, had not received a card but was instead peering over her friend Jenny's, and it appeared that they were speculating on who it could be from. Even though he did not believe for a second that he was the only male in the whole of Hogwarts to find Lily Evans breathtakingly beautiful, he was glad she had not received anything from an unworthy suitor. It would have only put her in a position where she would have to let them down, and Lily hated being unkind. That was one of the qualities he admired in her most. She always had time for people, even for him. Lily was also a chaste girl and had no desire for the silly attentions of boys. That was another quality he liked about her, too.

His musings were rudely interrupted by a card falling on top of his plate of half-eaten toast, making the knife fall onto the table with a clatter. He raised his eyebrows as he examined the neat, curly writing. Could it be... from Lily? He still possessed the one she had sent him several years ago, during their first year together at Hogwarts. His prized possession may have been nothing more than a childish declaration of friendship back then, but now... could it be possible that she returned his feelings? His heart began to thump in his chest as he once more looked over to her, but she was still happily talking away with her Housemates as if there were nothing occurring out of the ordinary. A little to her right, he could see Potter and his cronies staring in his direction and whispering. Severus felt a swell of pride. *Yes, Potter, I have a card! Me! Severus Snape!*

Ignoring the self-titled Marauders, Severus opened the envelope and pulled out the card, trying to control his shaking hands. The card was simple; just a red heart with gold script reading, "Valentine... Be mine?" He was relieved that Lily knew him well enough not to have anything fussy or ornate, or, Merlin forbid, pink! His heart now pounding so furiously he could hear the blood rushing in his ears, Severus opened the card.

Severus,

I can't hide my feelings any longer. I want us to be together. Tell me you feel that way, too.

Love,

Lily xxx

Severus looked up from the smooth, rounded handwriting, feeling giddy and hoping to meet Lily's eyes. But Lily was still talking away with Jenny. Why wasn't she looking? Why hadn't she acknowledged the card? *Maybe she didn't want to cause a scene*, he thought. She did say she would see me later. Maybe she's scared I'll reject her. At this thought, Severus smiled tenderly. As if he could ever reject her!

He looked back down at the card, and frowned. The card seemed to swim in front of his eyes. The handwriting was changing. Gone was the neat, curly script, and in its place formed a lazy, scruffy scrawl:

In your dreams, Snivellus!

Severus' face dropped. He felt like he'd been drenched with ice-cold water, and his stomach cramped. There was only one group of people that called him that name, and they were now pointing, laughing and pulling faces at him from the Gryffindor table.

Severus glowered at them through a curtain of black hair, ripping the card into tiny pieces with quick, jerky movements and willing himself to swallow the white-hot ball of sorrow that had lodged in his throat. He'd managed to master shedding his tears long ago and he certainly wouldn't let Potter have the satisfaction of seeing how much his cruel trick had hurt him. But it felt like there was a knife in his chest, twisting and twisting. Physical pain, Severus could deal with. What was another bruise, another scar? He'd received such injuries since he was a little boy, largely at the hands of his own father. But this time, Potter had attacked him where he was most vulnerable: his heart.

Was he really that transparent? Did his face light up like a Christmas tree when he was with Lily? Could they see his burning love for her in his eyes? Did he follow her around hopefully, like the puppy Pettigrew did with Potter and Black? Suddenly, Severus' hurt turned into a tight, steely ball of fury. He had learnt a valuable lesson today. Never again would anybody exploit his feelings like this. He would lock them away, push them down, and guard them so no-one else could see. He had to control his emotions. Letting them show was his biggest weakness.

He threw the tiny pieces of ripped-up card on to the table and left the Great Hall with as much dignity as he could muster, never once responding to the catcalls and jibes from the Gryffindor table as he stalked past, resolving to find a way to hide his feelings for good.

February 13th, 1978

'Do you *have* to bring him around all the time?'

'Bella, this is *my* house, and I will bring around whomever I please.'

'But he's ...' Bellatrix wrinkled her pretty little nose. 'He has no style, no class. He's a half-blood!'

'He is also a powerful wizard and knows more Dark curses than any other seventh-year at Hogwarts,' Lucius stated in a calm tone. But the way his fingers tightened around the snake head of his cane signalled that he was getting annoyed with his sister-in-law. 'Trust me, Bella; we might one day be rewarded for introducing Severus Snape to the Dark Lord.'

'So what, are you *grooming* him?'

'If you must know, Bella, I am.'

'Maybe you should start by telling him that it is rude to stare,' Bella hissed.

Lucius licked his lips and let his eyes wander over the witch's bosom. 'Bella, dearest, you cannot blame a young man for appreciating beauty when it is presented so nicely, can you? Besides, I very much think you *want* him to look, and that your ego is suffering because he doesn't.'

There was the sound of a hand slapping against a cheek and a door slamming, and Severus retreated further into the shadows. Bellatrix stomped past him, and Lucius swept by a few minutes later. Neither had noticed him, but Severus did not move. He had long ago learnt that one should not leave one's cover too early. He could not, however, keep himself from smirking.

So dear Bella was annoyed with his presence at Malfoy Manor? And she was annoyed because he was *staring* at her? How funny. As Lucius had pointed out so nicely, she seemed very eager that he *would* stare; he and any other male in the house. Just last night, she had fished up an ice cube from the pitcher of water on the coffee table and let it glide over her neck and cleavage ever so sensually, claiming that the roaring fire in the grate was making her hot. And the night before, when she supposedly had cut her finger on a piece of parchment, she had sucked at it so long and hard that Lucius had felt the need to excuse himself. Severus, however, had simply offered her a handkerchief to dry off the blood and had instructed the elf to extinguish the fire.

He wasn't dumb, nor was he slow or prudish. He knew very well what Bella was after. He knew that she *wanted* him to stare at her, her ample breasts and her sensuous mouth. And he also knew that it infuriated her beyond reason that he didn't and that her attempts to make his member rise did not result in anything other than an eyebrow raised in amusement. She would keep on trying, Severus knew that. She would keep flaunting her tits and licking her red lips. She would keep going until he succumbed

or have Lucius throw him out of the Manor.

Maybe it would be prudent just to give in. It was not that he was turned-off by her in any way. On the contrary; she was a good-looking witch, Bellatrix LeStrange. Married, of course, but that did not seem to matter in these circles. Severus had seen her sneak off with Lucius to his private chamber many times. But Severus had worn second-hand clothes for as long as he could remember and had been using his mother's old school books for seven years. If there was one thing Severus would not do, it was to lose his virginity to a witch who had been with just about any man who had ever visited Malfoy Manor.

It might seem old-fashioned and romantic, but Severus wanted his first time to be, well, *special*. He wanted it to be *with* someone special, someone he really cared for. He wanted it to be with Lily. He did not want to give up hope.

When he was sure that neither Bella nor Lucius would return, Severus detached himself from the shadows and returned to the chamber Lucius had so graciously provided him with for the weekend. On his bed, he found a box of chocolates, Honeyduke's finest, accompanied by a card:

Dearest Severus,

I have not slept since you arrived at the Manor. When you are in the room, I can neither drink nor eat. My breath catches in my chest every time you look at me, and I wish for nothing more than to lie in your arms. Just once.

I know you desire me, Severus. I have seen it in your eyes, those eyes that undress me every time you look at me.

Let us not fight it, Severus. Let us give in to our desires. No-one will have to know. It would be our secret, yours and mine.

It is Valentine's Day tomorrow, my dearest. Let us celebrate with a night of passion.

I am longing for you.

Bella

With a shudder, Severus cast the card aside and sneered as he crushed one of the chocolates and let its contents run onto the silver platter on which Lucius' house-elf placed a glass of water every evening. Bella had obviously no idea that he was one of the best Potions students Horace Slughorn had ever taught. Otherwise she would have come up with something more advanced than spiking chocolates with a Lust Potion.



'Severus, a word.'

Severus froze at the door. He had meant to make a quick exit after dinner and retire to his chamber in order to escape Bella's pathetic attempts to turn him on. Well, they were not that pathetic, really. Avery had excused himself twice during dinner, and Lucius... well, Lucius had openly leered and drooled. When Narcissa wasn't around, he didn't even try to pretend that he didn't find his sister-in-law alluring. But Severus had avoided her lusty gaze all evening, admiring the tapestry in the dining room and counting the peas on his plate, anything to not have to look in her direction. After having received her Valentine's gift, her intentions were quite clear, but Severus did not want to play her game.

Lucius beckoned him into the drawing room and offered him a glass of brandy, which Severus refused.

'No wine at dinner, now no brandy. You know, Severus, you surprise me,' Lucius declared, reclining on his chaise longue. 'For a young man your age, you seem quite, ah, resistant against any form of temptation.'

'This is not about me not drinking any alcohol today, is it, Lucius?' Severus asked.

Lucius smirked. 'Clever lad. Have a seat. Relax.'

Severus settled in the armchair opposite Lucius, but he certainly did not relax. Whatever Lucius was about to discuss could not be good. Maybe he would now tell him he had to leave the Manor because he was lusting after Bella?

'Severus, tell me,' Lucius began, apparently unable to wipe the smirk off his face. 'Women... do they interest you? At all?'

Severus resisted the urge to laugh out loud. 'I beg your pardon?' he asked instead, in a tone that suggested that Lucius had been asking him about the weather.

Lucius sat up and fixed Severus with his icy stare. 'Over the weekend, I have observed a certain witch making *advances* towards you, Severus,' he started, the corners of his mouth still twitching. 'I have also noticed that you did not respond.'

Severus kept quiet and just looked calmly back at Lucius, pretending that he had no idea what the blond wizard was talking about.

'Don't play dumb with me, Severus,' Lucius coaxed in the smoothest tone he could manage. 'It would take either a blind man or a complete fool to not notice how Bellatrix has been flaunting her goods in front of you. Since you are neither, I wonder what reasons you have to ignore her.' He leaned slightly forwards. 'You do like women, don't you, Severus?'

'I don't think that is any of your business, Lucius,' Severus replied calmly.

Lucius grinned. 'Of course not. But you can tell me, Severus. I am not judgemental.'

And the Dark Lord loves Muggles, Severus thought, for the second time fighting hard not to laugh. *Lucius Malfoy not judgemental!* But he knew better than to insult his host. Instead, he decided to give Lucius an answer. Perhaps, he would be allowed to retire then.

'I do like women, Lucius.'

'I thought so.' Lucius let himself fall back into a half-sitting position. 'Is there a lady then?' he asked. 'Someone to whom you have promised your heart?'

Severus shook his head. As if he would tell Lucius! He would rather eat slugs.

'Good,' Lucius commented. 'And even if there were, Severus, let me tell you that your heart and your penis are two different things. There is nothing wrong with pledging your heart to one woman, but you must seize the opportunities that present themselves. Practice never hurts, so to speak.'

He took a deep swing of his brandy and narrowed his eyes. 'What are your reasons then?' he contemplated in a low tone. 'You like women, you're not attached. Why would you turn down a sensual, mature witch like Be?'

Lucius broke off mid-sentence. His eyes widened, his mouth fell open, and the next thing Severus knew, the older man was standing right beside him with his hand on his shoulder. 'Severus, are you... Are you a virgin?'

Severus couldn't help himself. Lucius' sudden question had taken him by surprise, and he felt an unbidden flush spread itself over his cheeks. It was, however, instantly wiped away by a scowl at Lucius' reaction. He was now sporting the most pity-filled look and his voice couldn't be described as anything but patronising.

'Oh, Severus, dear boy. Now I understand. Bella is a real woman, sophisticated, experienced. Of course you would feel insecure. Dear boy, dear boy, you should have come to me. This is what older friends are for, to give advice.'

Lucius refilled his glass and handed one to Severus, telling him that he would need it. Then he once more made himself comfortable on the chaise longue and introduced Severus to the secrets of lovemaking.

Two hours and several glasses of brandy later, Severus knew as many intimate details about Bellatrix LeStrange as if he had already slept with her. It did not matter how many colourful terms Lucius had used to describe Bella's physique, her agility and her shamelessness; to Severus she was damaged goods. He would not touch her if she were the last woman on earth.

But she would not give up, he was certain of that. For some twisted reason, she wanted him, and she would have him unless he did something against it. And sending back the chocolates with a note saying *Thanks, but no, thanks*, would certainly not do it. He would have to come up with something better. Something a bit more... Slytherin.



'Hm, naughty boy.'

Bella giggled like a little girl as Severus sank his teeth into the sensitive flesh of her neck, grinding himself against her as his fingers fumbled with the lace of her dress. As his teeth grazed her collar bone and his hands cupped her breasts through her half-open corset, she moaned deeply.

'Rip it open,' she breathed. 'I don't care if I can never use this dress again.'

'Your wish is my command, dear lady,' Severus growled, taking a firm hold of the fabric. It tore, and her ample breasts spilled out, right into his hands, which took hold of the succulent orbs, immediately starting to squeeze and massage them. He took one nipple into his mouth and sucked it firmly, which made Bella throw back her head and moan once more.

'Harder,' she demanded, grabbing a handful of his hair and pulling him closer towards her as if she were trying to smother him. 'Bite my nipple.'

And once more, Severus obliged. He knew better than to object. Lucius had told him that Bella liked to be in charge. He had also told him that she liked it rough.

He pushed her back onto her bed, and when his hand found his way inside her knickers, he found her wet and hot. He thrust his index finger inside her without warning, causing her to yelp. But the way her muscles contracted around his finger made it very clear that she enjoyed his ministrations.

A second finger joined the first, and he hit her special spot every time he slid his fingers up to the knuckles inside her, all the while his thumb massaging her swollen nub and his lips and tongue caressing her breasts. And she moaned and screamed his name, urging him not to stop, urging him to take her.

But Severus had no intention of taking her, not now, not ever. And as her whole body started to tremble and he knew that she was mere seconds away from her peak, he withdrew from her.

Bella shot off from her pillow with a gasp, her pulse racing and the blood pulsating between her thighs. She looked around the room, her pupils dilated and her breathing shallow. For as much as she could see, she was alone in her bedroom. And the dark-haired young wizard, whose tongue and fingers had driven her into a frenzy, was nowhere to be seen.

Hidden behind the curtains, Severus' eyes gleamed with triumph. He knew that Bella had never before had a dream that had felt so real, that she had never before had a dream that had aroused her that much.

Oh, he had done well. If Professor Slughorn knew that Severus could brew up a Lust Potion so intense that a single drop on the lips was enough to make the drinker shiver from need, and a Mind Controlling Potion that let the brewer control the drinker's mind with a mere whisper, Severus would not have to take his Potions N.E.W.T.s. There wouldn't be a grade high enough for such skills anyway. But those potions were illegal, and Professor Slughorn mustn't know that Severus knew how to brew them.

Bella's moans were deep and sensual as her hands disappeared under her nightgown, and they drowned out any kind of other sound in the room. Still, Severus was careful not to make any noise as he sneaked from his hiding place and left through the same hidden door through which he had entered an hour earlier. For now, his deed here was done.



February 14th, 1978

'Whatever are you smirking at?' Lucius growled and stared over his cup of pitch black coffee towards Severus. Judging from his sour mood and the way he flinched at any loud noise, last night's brandy had obviously not agreed too well with him.

'I am not smirking,' Severus replied, casually buttering his toast and making a big fuss over which marmalade to choose. If Lucius only knew.

The door flew open with a bang, which made Lucius groan in pain, and staggering in came Bella, her hair slightly messy and her cheeks flushed.

'Sorry, Lucius,' she breathed as she kissed her brother-in-law on the cheek. 'I know you hate it when your guests are late for breakfast.'

'I couldn't care less today,' Lucius replied grumpily and called for an elf to bring him a potion for his headache.

Bella's hands were shaking; Severus had noticed that already when she had unfolded her napkin. But when she filled her glass with pumpkin juice, the clatter was loud enough to make Lucius react.

'Anything the matter, Bella dearest?' he purred and reached out to tuck a stray lock behind her ear. But Bella flinched away.

'Don't touch me,' she hissed.

'Bitchy,' Lucius concluded and pushed the coffee pot towards her. 'Is it that time of the month again? Or am I not the only one with a hangover?'

While the two bickered like a long-married couple, Severus discarded the piece of toast which he had only buttered so far and slowly picked up a freshly-baked chocolate croissant. He tore it apart, and the liquid chocolate filling dripped all over his fingers. 'Messy stuff,' he muttered and brought his fingers to his mouth.

Bella's eyes widened as she watched Severus lick the chocolate off. And as he closed his lips around his index finger to suck off the very last smudge of chocolate, he saw her swallow hard and clutch her napkin so her knuckles whitened. He winked almost imperceptibly at her and then contemplated what other dish could be eaten in either a sensual or naughty way. He chose a peach and sank his teeth into it, gently sucking at the warm flesh so the juice wouldn't dribble down his chin.

He hadn't taken three bites when Bella excused herself and stormed out of the room, flustered.

'Severus, you sly little snake,' Lucius started as soon as Bella had closed the door behind her, a note of admiration in his voice. 'No wonder you are grinning like an idiot. You shagged her.'

'Shagged whom?' Severus enquired innocently, putting down the half-eaten peach.

Lucius snorted. 'Sly little snake, indeed. Tell me, how was she?'

'Hot and needy,' Severus said casually.

'Yes.' Lucius leant back in his chair and smirked. 'She usually is.'

Severus did not say anything else. If Lucius wanted to believe that he, Severus Snape, a half-blood with neither style nor class, had bedded Bellatrix Lestrange, he would not be the one to burst his bubble. Instead, he returned to his piece of toast. He would not have any marmalade on it after all, he decided. Just butter, plain and simple.

Five minutes later, Severus thanked Lucius for his hospitality and grabbed a handful of Floo Powder. He had told Lucius that he had to return to Hogwarts to study for his History of Magic exam. But the true reason was that he did not want to be at the Manor anymore once Bella had found his gift.

He had sent her a box of chocolates, Honeyduke's finest, accompanied by a card:

Dearest Bellatrix,

Allow me to return your chocolates. They are by now filled with a Calming Draught. I very much believe you are in great need of it.

Happy Valentine's,

Severus Snape

She would surely throw a fit, and some of Lucius' most prized antiques would certainly be reduced to dust by her rage. And if Severus crossed her path, she would most probably flay him alive. So Severus chose to retreat. He would deal with her rage some other time. He once more thanked Lucius and stepped into the fireplace, declaring his destination with a firm and clear tone.

As he stepped out of the fireplace into the Slytherin common room seconds later, he was hoping against hope that when he returned to his dormitory, there would be a Valentine's card lying on his pillow. A card from someone special. A card from someone he really cared for.

February 14th, 1993

Professor Snape's knuckles knocked tersely against the underside of the teachers' table. It was breakfast-time, and heart-shaped confetti was falling in showers from the clear-blue ceiling above, and landing on his serving of bacon and eggs, which had started to turn cold. Irritably, he removed his wand and cast both Shield and Warming Charms on his plate so that he might maintain some semblance of a normal breakfast.

Gilderoy Lockhart was wearing shocking pink robes, which matched the large cerise flowers adorning the walls of the Great Hall, and he clapped happily as students filed towards their House tables. The boys looked either appalled or bemused whilst the girls beamed and giggled.

Following the shocking events revolving around the Chamber of Secrets, the self-obsessed professor had organised this extravaganza as a morale booster for Hogwarts. But Snape knew Saint Valentine's Day would be all about Lockhart: it was the only subject in which the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor was truly interested.

Snape did not need to be reminded of the woeful lack of love in his life, or the dearth of Valentines he had received during his thirty-three years, and most definitely not in front of the whole school during breakfast: the scene of a past humiliation at the hands of the Marauders. He dug his fingernails vexedly into his thighs, resolving to face an onslaught of teenage angst and embarrassment, telling himself it was just another day without Lily.

Lockhart arose from his seat, and Snape turned to see Minerva McGonagall's cheek twitching with annoyance. The other professors remained stony-faced, and Dumbledore forced a smile when Lockhart threw his hands into the air and waved for silence.

'Happy Valentine's Day!' Lockhart shouted to the audience. 'And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all and it doesn't end here!'

With a flamboyant clap of hands, Lockhart summoned twelve surly dwarves from the Entrance Hall, each sporting a pair of golden wings, and carrying a harp. The cherubs marched insolently into the Great Hall, glaring at Lockhart as they passed rows of astonished students.

'My friendly, card-carrying cupids!' Lockhart's pearly-white, self-satisfied grin widened as he greeted his recalcitrant servants. 'They will be roving around the school today delivering your Valentines!'

Snape's fist banged loudly underneath the table and caused the knife and fork of Professor Kettleburn's full Scottish breakfast to rattle beside him.

'And the fun doesn't stop there!' Lockhart continued, undaunted. 'I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion!'

Snape fought the urge to ram Lockhart's peacock-feather quill up his pink-clad backside.

'And whilst you're at it,' the golden-haired fop continued, 'Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!'

Lockhart beamed inanely and cast Flitwick a cheeky glance, but the Charms Professor had buried his head in his hands.

Seething, Snape's nostrils flared, and he forced himself not to hex the impertinent idiot into next week. A Toenail-Growing Hex would certainly do the trick. Or he could force some Ageing Potion down Lockhart's slimy little throat, to see how he enjoyed losing his youthful good-looks, and his wavy blond hair. Alternatively he could hit him with a Leg-Locker Curse when the twerp was on his way to the bathroom...

Snape pushed away his bacon and eggs and reached for a stack of toast. By the time he had breakfasted, he had counted forty-six curses, jinxes and hexes fit-for-purpose: one for each Valentine card Gilderoy Lockhart had received.



The whole day was one aggravating headache for Snape. The ridiculous cupid-dwarves pushed and shoved their way around Hogwarts, delivering Valentine messages to students, and occasionally to the staff, causing disruption and red faces all around. Corridors were alive with the buzz of gossip; Valentine recipients tried to work out who their secret admirer was, and friends cajoled each other to send a card to someone, anyone, even if it was just for laughs.

Snape found the whole thing nauseating. He responded in customary fashion, by stating at the beginning of his lessons that any student requesting a Love Potion

demonstration would be cleaning bedpans in the hospital wing for the remainder of term.

Snape knew that supplies of Love Potion could still find their way into the school, so he changed his lesson plan. In the morning, his first-year and third-year classes had been instructed to make Love Potion Antidote, and at the end of the lesson each were given a small flagon to take away for personal use; the antidote was a simple enough potion to produce and would cause no harm in general circulation.

The card-carrying cupids continued to cause chaos at lunchtime in the Great Hall, and excitement amongst the students seemed to reach fever pitch. The professors were fast approaching their wits' end; yet the egocentric Lockhart remained distinctly unfazed. Perhaps he alone could cope with the pandemonium, because he was such an inept teacher.

Snape was stalking down to the dungeon after lunch for his last lesson of the day: double Potions with the fourth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors, when he found a canoodling couple sitting on the bottom stair, licking each other's faces like puppies lapping from a water bowl.

Snape reached for his wand. The purple flash of a Revulsion Jinx untangled their lips and tongues, and the boy and girl flew apart, pushed sideways into the balustrade. A mop of red hair identified the young male as one of the Weasley twins, and the girl was Miranda Bracegirdle.

A fiery serpent hissed with delight, deep inside Snape's stomach. How fortuitous that the trysting pair were two Gryffindors.

'Weasley and Bracegirdle,' he sneered, 'I have no desire whatsoever to witness you sucking face in the vicinity of my classroom. Twenty points each from Gryffindor, for woeful lack of technique and barefaced indiscretion.'

Weasley wiped his mouth and glared at Snape.

'You do not think forty points adequate, Mr Weasley?' Snape enquired sardonically. 'Well, then, let's make it a round fifty from Gryffindor.'

The young man seemed to know better than to protest, and the couple shuffled shamefaced towards the Potions classroom, where their fellow Gryffindors waited, outraged by the unfair punishment. The Slytherins, as usual, were smirking. Snape pushed past the queue for the classroom and led the students inside.

'There has been a change of plan,' Snape said when the students had settled into their seats. 'Today we will be brewing a potion to curtail ridiculous frivolity and tiresome antics.' Snape turned and flicked his wand, and the necessary ingredients appeared in his cramped handwriting on the blackboard. There was a groan around the classroom, and Snape relished his moment with a twisted smile. 'Can anyone tell me the purpose of Hate Potion?' he asked the class.

Various mutterings of discontent ended with the raising of one hand, belonging to a Slytherin. Excellent.

'Miss Turnstone?' Snape asked.

'Hate Potion reveals the target's worst habits and faults to the drinker, sir,' said the young girl.

She had recited the answer almost word-for-word from *Magical Draughts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger but for today's purposes, it would suffice.

'Very good, Miss Turnstone. Five points to Slytherin,' said Snape. 'Hate Potion could be considered the antithesis to Love Potion, as it removes emotional attachments to people who don't love them. It is, therefore, recommended by Agony Aunts as a potion to heal unrequited love.'

The students looked slightly dumbfounded. Snape sneered. They might be too young to understand the pain of unreciprocated love; nevertheless, it was never too early to prepare them for one of life's difficult lessons, and Snape most certainly intended to teach them.

An hour-and-a-half later, their cauldrons were bubbling merrily away. Snape had confiscated two Valentine cards, which had been covertly handed around the classroom underneath workbenches, and Vanished them to dust. He inspected each batch of Hate Potion personally, until they reached his exacting standards, and then instructed the fourth-years to clear their cauldrons away.

Suddenly, the door to the dungeon classroom flung open, and a ferocious-looking cupid trampled his way past the bodies of students, kicking shins and standing on people's toes, as he fought his way to the teacher's lectern.

'I told you no more interruptions, dwarf!' Snape shouted.

The room suddenly became silent, as everyone turned to stare.

'I couldn't wait any longer, Professor Snape,' the dwarf huffed indignantly. 'Lockhart says time's up when the last Valentine gets delivered, and, um... the last card's for you.' In his hand was a small red envelope, which he held up for Snape.

The teenage audience began to whisper and snigger, and Snape shot them a thunderous look, which silenced them in a trice. The dwarf made an impatient gesture, and shoved the card into Snape's hand. The menacing-looking cherub then ripped his golden wings from his back, grunted with relief, and left the room, banging the door shut behind him.

Snape turned the envelope over, to see his name, *Severus Snape*, written neatly in black ink. He felt a cramping sensation twist through his stomach, and his mouth was dry when he swallowed. The card must be a joke, a set-up, something meant to cause embarrassment and ridicule; it certainly wouldn't be the first time.

The class of students watched him expectantly.

'Aren't you going to open it, sir?' one of the Gryffindors bravely, *stupidly*, ventured.

Snape's eyes blazed with fury as he ripped the envelope down the middle, and dropped the two halves into a nearby cauldron. The students who stood close by flinched, and one girl, Alicia Spinnet, looked as though she might burst into tears.

'Class dismissed!' Snape growled.

The Gryffindor Chaser was first out of the door, clutching her books to her chest, closely followed by her best friend.

It wasn't long before the dungeon was almost empty, and Snape followed the remaining stragglers towards the exit, and closed and locked the door.

He looked at the offending cauldron again for a long moment, wondering what he should do. It was the first Valentine he had received as a teacher at Hogwarts, and he was at a complete loss to explain why someone would dare to send it, unless it was a prank or a hoax. Despite this, he could not deny that his heart beat a little faster, and nervousness fluttered up his throat at the thought of a secret admirer.

He approached the cauldron, and tentatively extracted the two halves of the torn card, matching them together at the seam.

'*Reparo*,' he said quietly, tapping the envelope with the tip of his wand.

The cardboard and paper were restored anew, and he slipped his finger slowly underneath the flap of the envelope, to pull out a hand-made card bearing a large, beating, red and gold heart. A silver and green arrow punctured the heart, and the words "*To Sir, With Love*" appeared below.

Snape's own heartbeat quickened, knocking uneasily in his chest, making him feel dizzy. He leaned against the workbench to steady himself, and it took much deliberation before he found the resolve to open the card and discover what lay hidden within. He cast a Shield Charm, just in case.

However, there was no curse or jinx inside the card, no malicious intent or words, just a handwritten verse, from a besotted schoolgirl.

Rubies are red

Pixies are blue

Potions enchant me

And so do you

The sender gave no name, no initial, and no request for him to "guess who"; there was just the poem, and one kiss in the bottom corner of the card.

Snape was staggered by the innocence of the message. Who would have thought he could inspire such affection in another human being? It seemed bizarre, after so many years spent keeping people at arm's length and treating the world with disdain. After all of this, here was a student having these thoughts about *him*.

He flushed with embarrassment. A schoolgirl crush! How mystifying, bewildering, and downright unsettling. Merlin knew he didn't invite such advances not from anyone and yet here was some young little thing brave enough to send him a Valentine.

Brave enough.

She had to be a Gryffindor.

He remembered Alicia Spinnet's reaction as she fled the classroom and wondered if...

Snape scrutinised the handwriting, but it yielded little information. The card had been printed in capital letters, and would be difficult to trace to one owner.

Perhaps, Snape thought, it would be better if the secret admirer remained just that. He knew he was incapable of returning feelings of love and most certainly not to a student he was teaching so uncovering the identity of the sender would change nothing, and would only cause embarrassment to both parties.

Her identity should remain secret, he decided.

Gently, Snape placed the card back into its red envelope, and tucked it inside his robes.

It wouldn't hurt to keep it, just for a little while...

February 14th, 1998

The Great Hall was alive with swooping owls and eager faces; even the staff seemed willing to join in the frivolity for once, and it took a great deal these days to raise a smile from McGonagall. Snape, however, was not inclined to spare a moment's reflection on the thoughts and feelings of the Gryffindor Head; his burdens were greater than anything *she* could envisage.

Minerva made no effort to hide her repugnance for the new Headmaster; it was evident in every utterance and every glimpse. Words had become few lately, but the looks were frequent, and always loaded with undisguised loathing. On a good day, he found her contempt amusing, but more often than not, her willingness to trust so wholeheartedly in his apparent betrayal disturbed him far more than he cared to admit.

Today was not a good day, and he was inclined towards bitterness as she threw him another death glare over breakfast. It mattered little to Snape that she was mourning the loss of a dear friend and respected colleague. She should try spending *her* every waking moment pandering to the whimsical impulses of a fanatical despot, or pacifying two sadistic and brutal "teachers", hell-bent on exacting cruel and vicious practices, and inciting hatred within the castle walls. McGonagall could take her cold, disapproving looks of sedition and shove them up her noble Gryffindor arse, he mused.

He could feel tension beginning to develop in his neck and shoulders, a sure sign of the headache to follow. Sure enough, within minutes, he felt the familiar throb of pulsating pain, and he longed for the luxury of kneading his fingertips into his temples, in an effort to massage the hurt away. He was acutely aware, however, that even the most diminutive alteration of his usual body posture would spark speculation regarding his ability to lead. It would ignite doubt and serve to call his authority into question. Snape could not afford the ranks to suspect him of weakness; he was walking a very thin and a very high tightrope. One lapse in concentration and he would fall into the abyss, dragging with him the hopes of an ungrateful wizarding world.

Breakfast was almost over. Snape contemplated a detour to his familiar old haunt, the dungeons, for another dose of Draught of Peace from Slughorn, but anticipation of the solitude his office would provide was too great. He stood to leave, aware, as usual, that all eyes were upon him as he swept out of the Great Hall, his dark robes billowing ominously behind him.



'Severus?'

A large portrait of an elderly wizard wearing purple robes, a long silver beard and a benign smile had spoken. Snape turned around from his desk where he had been furiously rubbing his aching temples and wishing with grim futility that this foul day would soon be at an end.

'Dumbledore!' he sighed.

'A word, if you please.'

He did not please, but he rose from his seated position and walked resignedly over to the portrait of the lately departed Headmaster. Snape sometimes wondered if Dumbledore had forgotten that he had recently been on the receiving end of a Killing Curse, fallen several hundred feet from the Astronomy Tower and died. The old fool certainly seemed under the impression that he was still running both the school and the struggle against Voldemort. Even in death, he held the strings, and Snape danced a jig to each benevolent tug.

'What is it, Dumbledore?'

'What day is it, Severus?'

'It is Saturday.'

'Yes. I am asking what *significance* today's date has,' replied the old wizard.

'Aside from the fact that two of my more *dubious* teaching staff want to introduce the Cruciatus Curse for students to practice on each other?'

'You seem to be under a great deal of pressure, Severus.'

'How observant you are, Dumbledore. You may be reduced to nothing more than burnt umbers and cobalt blues, but your powers of perception are, I am happy to see, as penetrating as they ever were,' replied Severus darkly.

Dumbledore peered sympathetically at his fractious ex-Potions master from the safety of his canvas residence.

'And I'm happy to see that the pressures of the job have not robbed you of your *unique* sense of humour,' he returned.

'It's all I have left, Headmaster. If it wasn't for the laughs, I fear the job of *Jackey to the Dark Lord* may leave me feeling... unstimulated.'

The purple clad portrait smiled at Snape's dark humour. 'You need a break, Severus, some leisure time.'

Snape folded his arms across his chest and gave the old wizard a withering glare.

'Are you suggesting a little holiday, Dumbledore?' he replied. 'Perhaps you are right. I feel sure the Dark Lord is having similar thoughts as we speak... in-between his quest for immortality and torturing innocents. Do you think I should summon him at once to make the request?'

'I wish I could say that sarcasm doesn't become you, Severus,' replied Dumbledore genially. 'A holiday is undoubtedly just what you need, and deserve, but I fear you are in no position to pack your bags just yet. No, that is not what I had in mind. I am talking of something connected with the day. Think again Severus, what day is it?'

'Well, judging by the flock of owls carrying lurid pink envelopes and heart-shaped packages, I would hazard a guess that we can safely rule out Saint Swithin's Day.'

'Quite. But a Saint's day it most surely is.' Dumbledore beamed. 'It is Saint Valentine's Day, the day of love. Love: "the joy of the good, the wonder of the wise, and the amazement of the gods".'

'And you bring my attention to this fact because...?' replied Snape, curling a contemptuous lip. 'I hope for your sake that you are not attempting to match-make. The amount of willing and eligible witches seems to have reduced dramatically since your demise, and the number was hardly substantial even then. I fear Minerva may have gone off me.'

'She was never your biggest fan, Severus.'

'Ah, perhaps it is Pomona with whom you wish to see me happily settled? Again, I have to disappoint you: if looks were Mandrake screams, I would be joining you as a canvas acquaintance.'

'Pomona, as you are well aware, is not the dating kind.'

'Hooch?'

'Certainly not.'

'Poppy is rather busy these days, what with treating the after effects of the Cruciatus Curse and administering antidote for Veritaserum. She hardly has time for socialising, but if you really think she and I would hit it off...'

'When you've quite finished indulging yourself, Severus, you may like to know why I bring up the subject, other than to provide you with much needed mirth,' interrupted the old wizard.

'Very well, Dumbledore, continue.'

'I happen to know of a certain someone who is rather, how shall I put it? Enamoured of you.'

Snape's scowl increased as he picked up his wand, which had been lying on the desk by his side; white knuckles betrayed his ever-tightening grip.

'You really do have too much time on your hands, Dumbledore. I always suspected an underlying touch of insanity when you were alive and twinkling, now I am convinced of it. You actually *are* attempting to match-make. Does your capacity to control and manipulate know no bounds?'

'Just hear me out, Severus.'

'Get on with it, Dumbledore.'

'I am not suggesting that you have either the time, the capacity or the energy to embark upon anything romantic; nor do I believe you would ever be inclined to do so... again,' he added softly. 'I merely wish you to know that there is someone, somewhere, who is unconvinced of your apparent devotion to Voldemort. She believes you to be loyal to the Order, admires your courage, and laments your situation.'

Snape drew his robes around himself, and considered having Dumbledore's portrait removed to the empty classroom on the seventh floor.

'Lost for words, Severus?'

'I would like to know how you happened to come by this information,' he replied.

'I am on very friendly terms with Laverne de Montmorency, whose portrait hangs in the library.'

'I'm not asking Madam Pince out.'

'I can assure you, Madam Pince is happily situated... elsewhere,' replied Dumbledore.

'Good for her,' mumbled Snape, in a tone suggesting resentment rather than good wishes.

'The lady in question, Severus, is the divine Professor of Astronomy.'

'Sinistra?' said Snape, frowning.

'Indeed, she was heard defending your actions most spiritedly when Minerva accused you of *brutality beyond reason*'. Minerva objected to your punishment of Miss Weasley and Mr Longbottom following the sword incident. Aurora would not have a word said against you. She begged Minerva to watch you closely; to judge you according to your deeds rather than your words and appearance.'

Snape turned his back on his ex-colleague, and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, in a futile attempt to obliterate this latest piece of unwelcome intelligence. He did not have the luxury of allowing himself even a moment's self-indulgence at Dumbledore's news. Dumbledore's inside information only added an extra painful beat to the pounding rhythm of pressure in his head.

'You have no choice, Severus,' said Dumbledore, gently reminding Snape of the precarious path he was constantly obliged to walk.

'I know,' he spat. 'But kindly tell me why you thought it pertinent to disguise this highly dangerous and undesirable situation as a piece of gossip I would embrace and find gratifying? Do you really think I have nothing better to do than to spend Valentine's Day bemoaning the absence of hearts and flowers from an admirer?' he lied.

'The outcome of the war against evil rests on your shoulders. Harry's too, of course, but he hasn't a hope without you. Perhaps I wanted you to see the silver lining aspect of this situation.'

'All you have done is pointed out that, for me, every silver lining has a great, thunderous black cloud, Dumbledore. And now I have no choice: if she suspects me of loyalty to the Order, then I must ensure that she is in under no illusions as to my devotion to the Dark Lord.'

Snape walked away from the Headmaster's portrait; his agitation forced him to pace the room as he formulated his plan.

'What do you intend to do?' asked Dumbledore calmly.

Snape ignored him, but carried on pacing until he was convinced that there was only one course of action left open to him.

'Well, Severus? You know you need to make it look convincing. What do you intend to do?'

Severus approached the portrait once more, a look of grim determination etched across the harsh lines of his forehead.

'I'm afraid I will have to announce my agreement with the Carrows' plan to allow students to use the Cruciatus. Let her judge me by my deeds then,' he added so softly that the old wizard barely caught his words.

Dumbledore nodded his understanding. 'I believe that will do it,' he agreed.



The final meal of the day was always a relief, but more so today. The staff had taken Snape's announcement as badly as he expected, all except Filch and the Carrows, of course. He had glanced at Aurora, seen the shock and hurt in her face as he spoke of "*discipline, a firmer hand, intolerance towards dissident behaviour*", and finally the "*extended use of the Cruciatus Curse as a means of keeping rebellious activities in check*."

He spared no mercy as he singled her out, and admonished her in front of the entire staff for her inability to maintain student obedience. He even hinted that certain former Unforgivables would not be confined to use on students if discipline did not improve. When her lip quivered, her cheeks reddened and she was obliged to lower her head to hide the threatening tears, he was satisfied: she could no longer be in doubt of his allegiance; he knew his cover was safe.

The owl contingent had reduced dramatically by supertime, and only a few stragglers remained, landing on the long dining tables in search of the lucky recipients.

Snape sipped meditatively from his goblet, nodding occasionally in response to the congratulatory comments made by the repugnant Death Eater sitting to his right, and avoiding the pale face of Professor Sinistra, and the fury-filled expression worn by McGonagall.

He was startled when the owl, which had been heading for the staff table, did not adjust its course to drop the odious-looking card in its beak onto the plate of Aurora Sinistra or Rolanda Hooch, but continued its trajectory until it landed gracefully onto the table directly in front of Snape. The small tawny owl dropped the scarlet rectangular offering and made off at once without waiting for either payment or a meaty treat.

Snape was aware that the usual degree of chatter which filled the Great Hall had reduced to a low-level murmur, as the entire room turned their attention to the staff table. He glanced down at the card, hoping to discover an owl blunder, but the name on the card was clear enough, and he was forced to acknowledge the recipient as himself.

He considered the possibility that his earlier public humiliation of Aurora had not produced the desired effect. It seemed her infatuation was worse than he had imagined, or supposed possible. He knew he should be feeling anger and concern rather than elation at the idea of inspiring such devotion from an attractive witch. With forced composure, he reached out a steady hand to retrieve the offensive communication of love, with the intention of opening the thing in his office, away from the intense public scrutiny of the entire school.

The scraping noise of Snape's chair on the polished wooden floor as he hastily pushed it backwards reverberated around the almost silent Great Hall; the envelope had jerked out of his grasp, just as he was about to retrieve it. Snape reacted instinctively, pulling out his wand, and pointing it at the object. His captive audience were almost united in letting out a harmonious intake of breath when the realisation filtered through: Snape had received a Valentine's Howler.

The envelope sprang into life without waiting for either an invitation to begin, or a Blasting Curse. It formed itself into a grotesque representation of crimson lips, teeth and tongue, rose to his eye level and began its magically-induced diatribe of jibes and insults, with enough venom to match Mrs Black's portrait in Grimmauld Place.

It spoke of treachery, deceit, brutality, malice and cowardice.

White-hot anger surged through his veins as he took in the full horror of the situation. Nervous giggles, swallowed up by the cavernous silence of the hall, sounded in his ears. This was no protestation of love, it was a seized opportunity to denounce and rebel against his regime.

A glance at Sinistra's pale, shocked expression lay to rest any suspicions he harboured regarding her as the source; but a smug look of triumph, etched on McGonagall's told a different story.

He stood, pointed his wand at the haranguing folds of paper, and blasted it into ashes.

'Minerva, my office. One hour!' he bellowed as he swept out of the room.



Snape dreaded the alternatives before him: he was well aware that retribution for this act of mutiny must be swift, harsh and public. He had to admit that the Gryffindor Head had more than lived up to the characteristics held in such high esteem by her House. The old bat had guts and stupidity to rank with any of her forebears.

He sat at his desk and looked around him. Dumbledore was now conveniently asleep, Phineas had finished his outraged rant, and all was relatively peaceful for at least half an hour until Minerva arrived.

As Valentine's Days went, this had to rank alongside his lousiest, and there were few memorable ones. He could still recall with intense clarity, the sweet sensation of pure joy, felt on receiving a Valentine's Card when he was sixteen. Short-lived hopes, soon to be denigrated into nothing but a cruel prank. The words "*in your dreams, Snivellus*", remained etched on his brain: a memory almost as painful to contemplate as the day he had called her a *Mudblood*.

At least he could gain some pleasure when he recalled the Valentine's Day he had spent at Malfoy Manor, just prior to taking the foolish leap into chaos and misery. It was little wonder that Bellatrix had never trusted him, once she realised just what a master of potions Severus Snape was, even then. The moments spent hidden in her bedroom, when she had screamed out for his touch, and been denied, was worth every moment of her subsequent loathing.

Snape could evoke few unsullied memories from the surplus of self-denial and atonement which constituted the greatest portion of his adult life; but the heartfelt innocence

of the Valentine's Card he had once received from an anonymous student had touched *his* iron heart, more than all forty-six of the sickly outpourings of love received by the foppish, Gilderoy Lockhart. If the card had indeed been from Alicia Spinnet, as he suspected, he wondered briefly how much she must now despise herself, for her foolish infatuation with a notorious Death Eater.

He stalked across the room to a locked cabinet, which opened at his command. Inside was a small wooden chest. He took it out and returned to his desk where he placed the object and opened it with a casual wave of his wand.

Inside was a card, handmade and curling slightly at the edges. The picture on the front was a childish drawing of a heart, entwined with a flower: a lily.

He rarely allowed himself this indulgence, but he felt the circumstances owed him a small moment of painful pleasure. He took out the card with reverence and opened it.

To Sev

Best friends forever.

Always...

Lily

A long pale finger traced the last two words as if the ink itself could connect him to her.

'Always, Lily,' he whispered to an empty room.

