

L is for Love

by scaranda

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One Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Old wives' tales, Severus snorted to himself as he threw the apple peel he had so meticulously shaved from the fruit, in one long curling piece, to land on the flag floor behind him. Old wives' tale or not, he had performed the same ritual for the last twenty-six years, ever since he'd been nothing more than a hopeless hapless love-struck lad, albeit a surly ugly unpleasant one too. Poor, as well, he mused somewhat sourly as he turned to look to where the already browning apple skin formed the letter it always had, twenty-six times in total.

Shackled, he snarled to himself, hoist by mine own petard, and shackled to nothing but a fleeting fancy. He picked up the apple skin and threw it into the fire, where it hissed for a moment as the flames drew the moisture, and curled away to nothing, much like his pitiful existence had done when he'd done the deal that had damned him to a life of loneliness.

He'd been fixated, that much was true, but hardly so much in love that he hadn't even then recognised his innermost desire for her as little more than spite. After all, he had only been nineteen, and love was something one held for a few weeks until the fire in one's loins was temporarily doused. Spite, on the other hand, was more enduring, and Severus had known then that if he had been able to usurp James Potter for Lily's affections, he could repay the damned Gryffindor's impertinences in spades.

He hadn't looked much beyond that though; after all, when one is nineteen, the rest of one's life doesn't seem to stretch much beyond that next few weeks. He hadn't thought of getting older, or indeed becoming old, not when he had done the deal; he hadn't thought of her never getting older either. In truth, Severus hadn't really thought at all beyond his desire for vengeance. What a catch he had been for his own folly.

As he gazed into the fire to where the apple skin no longer was, he pondered again his stupidity, as he always did: peeling that first apple, and throwing the skin over his shoulder; Dark Magic incantations, thoughtlessly read from a book he had borrowed from Lucius; a poem of his own creation. He snorted his self derision as the trite immature lines flowed through his mind.

Dark magic tie her to me, and I shall tie myself to thee;

And neither the power of heaven nor hell can release me from this spell.

Neither life nor death can pull us apart, and she'll dwell forever in my heart.

The poem sounded cringingly embarrassing to him now; yet he had managed to damn himself with his own utterings, his own adolescent idiocy. He had tied himself to Dark Magic, and her death had not released him from the obligations. In his vanity, he hadn't even bound her to him, only him to her.

He squared his shoulders and looked quickly at the mantle clock. He supposed he should hurry. It would not do to be late for Malfoy Manor's annual display of bad manners and worse taste, not when Lucius had invited so many non ex-Death Eaters to this year's Halloween Ball, in some sort of attempt to reintroduce himself to the

human race.

The Samhain beacon fires were already lit by the time Snape Apparated to the grove of trees to the west of the seat of the Malfoys, welcoming both the invited guests, and the unquiet spirits who lingered just beyond the veil of death, waiting for this night at its thinnest to slip through to the world of the living. As Severus passed the first fire, he saw a group of elves and a half a dozen wily goblins throwing deadfall apples into the fire, and he knew it was their offering to their own dead.

He always used the faraway Apparition point, pretending he preferred to use the walk to the manor as some kind of buffer against the stifling atmosphere of the great house, dripping as it did with deceit and malice, and not that wartime habits died hard, and that he still found himself casting his mind through the house before he got there, searching for the long dead Voldemort, or anyone else he didn't care to come across unprepared.

Lucius was running true to tasteless form, Snape decided, as the door was opened by what appeared to be a man-sized chimpanzee, and he wondered, not too unkindly, if it were Crabbe or Goyle in fancy dress. As he handed his cloak to an elf, he saw another of the beasts wheeling a dinner gong into the hallway; maybe they were Crabbe and Goyle.

Glide was too kind a description, Severus decided, as he watched Narcissa slither across the floor to meet him. Perhaps he was imagining that her discontented pout was even more discontented tonight, or perhaps her dress ... no, not dress... perhaps her white mink sheath was so tight that the action of walking the short distance to where he stood had forced the air out of her lungs, and she was pursing her lips to stop exhaling it into the room in a great gust. He assumed she had spelled it on.

All of his nonsense thoughts slipped through his mind in the few seconds it took his hostess to reach him. At least they had mercifully blotted out the rest of the party-goers, and he wondered if he would be able to preoccupy himself in a similar fashion for the rest of the evening. He quickly scanned the braying wine-soaked medley of Lucius's guests: those of his acquaintances who had managed to grease enough palms to remain at liberty, those whom Lucius considered to be almost as important he thought himself to be; and a smattering of who would, by any fair standard, be regarded to be decent people.

He caught sight of Harry Potter and his ubiquitous sidekick, the Weasley boy; they were talking to Draco. Weasley was dressed in what seemed to be colourful rags, and he was wearing a false moustache, and a fez that clashed with his hair; he had a small monkey perched on his shoulder. Potter was draped in what looked like a bed sheet, and a masked woman, whom Snape assumed was his wife, appeared to be wearing very little apart from some coins attached to scarves and belts, wound around her slim body. Every now and again she flipped her hips, and the coins tinkled obligingly, much to the amusement of her friends, and Snape's lip-curling disgust; even Draco laughed, dropping himself ever lower in Snape's estimation. Severus wondered if it would be worth sticking around until Weasley's monkey became bored and decided to take a piss in the redhead's ear.

'It's supposed to be fancy dress, Severus,' Narcissa scolded from behind her mask as he turned to her. 'Then again, at least you came, and it is so good to see you.' She bestowed an icy kiss on each of his cheeks, and he stood with his hands at his sides, making no attempt at all to return whatever dubious compliment she had paid him.

'And what, if one might enquire, is that supposed to represent?' Snape asked as Narcissa drew back from her one-sided embrace. He gave her a lingering up and down look, one that he was pleased to know she would take as the insult he intended, and not any desire to look at her for any longer than necessity dictated.

'I am the Ice Queen,' she replied, with the sweetness of rancid fat.

He forwent the obvious retort of not requiring to dress for the part, glancing across the hallway instead to where one of the chimpanzees had opened the door to yet more ludicrously attired guests. 'I shouldn't try the dress in brown, Narcissa, if I were you,' he said offhandedly as he watched a striking masked woman, who appeared to be alone, hand her cloak to an elf. 'You might be mistaken for one of the monkeys.'

He was about to move away when he found Lucius had wandered to his side. He was dressed in shimmering cloth of gold, and Severus resisted the urge to ask the question he had asked of Narcissa. Maybe he was supposed to be the Ice King; more likely he was just supposed to be rich.

'Alone again, Severus?' Malfoy asked, his silver-blond eyebrow almost disappearing into his hair. 'And so many rich and powerful widows around nowadays.' His pale grey eyes slid to where a voluptuous, masked black-haired Bellatrix stood watching him back.

'No,' Snape replied.

'Not alone?'

'No, to your generous offer of your harpy of a sister-in-law.'

'You could do worse,' Lucius hissed.

'You mean, I could get her off your back?' Snape countered.

'That too.' Lucius's limited attention span was diverted by the sound of an overenthusiastic house-elf hammering on the dinner gong.

'You had better not have sat her at my side for dinner,' Severus growled to Malfoy's back, and then turned to see if he could catch another glimpse of the woman he had seen arriving alone, but she seemed to have been swallowed up by the rest of the guests.

'Is this seat taken?'

Severus turned and looked up at the woman he had admired earlier.

The voice was low and throaty, with a somehow breathless anticipation to it, and yet for all that it didn't seem to be contrived. There was something about it that Snape recognised. One of his former pupils, he suspected, trying to trace it back through his mind, concentrating on those who had caused him most grief over the years. Saving the abominable Granger though, it was hard to pick out any of the girls. Unlike the boys, they had seemed to pay attention to his teachings, possibly waiting with collective bated breath for the love potions to begin. Of course, they never had, not even the year that imbecile Gilderoy Lockhart had been at the school.

He tried to peer behind the silver mask she wore, past the charmed golden hair and glamourised features, but to no avail. 'Miss...' He trailed off, inviting her to supply her name, as he stood and invited her to take the seat at this side too, but she only laughed. Severus gave a quick glance to where Potter was crossing the dining room with his cronies, to check that Granger-Weasley was still with his party, so satisfying himself that was he not the butt of some cheap joke.

'Severus Snape,' he said, by way of introduction, as he sat back down, pulling his seat close to hers.

'Yes,' she replied. 'I know who you are.'

'Are you alone?' he asked rather more quickly than he should have, but it seemed like a safe question, as the seat beside the one she had taken was already occupied by a fat woman; then again the clock of his life was ticking, and any woman on her own, excepting the likes of Bellatrix Lestrange, should be considered fair game for an evening's entertainment.

'I'm looking for my husband, Severus,' she said candidly.

He felt a slam of disappointment, and couldn't think why that should be. After all, he had long since been ruled out of the marriage stakes, so long in fact that most people,

himself included, took that as personal choice, that and the fact that few women would be desperate enough to take on anyone as sour as he undoubtedly was. 'Has he still to arrive?' he asked. 'Or have you just lost him since your own arrival?'

'Still to arrive?' she mused, as though savouring the notion. 'In a way, yes. He has still to arrive. As to whether I have lost him, just let us say that I hope he has not passed me by, nor I him.'

He pretended to be satisfied with her cryptic answer, and contented himself to hoping that the said husband was indeed lost, for that night anyway; he'd rather talked himself into the possibility of a post party shag.

'You don't know what I mean, do you?' she queried, her disconcerting gaze looking from behind her mask, and he wondered if her eyes were truly blue, or if she had charmed them to appear so.

'No,' he admitted, his intrigue upping another notch.

'It was ever thus, Severus,' she said with a charmingly affected little sigh. 'Nobody ever understood me... then again, I never wanted them to.' She laid a slim white hand on top of his, and he felt a frisson so intense that he quite failed to notice the puzzled look, not only Potter and his band of faithful sent his way but also the speculative look Lucius flashed. 'They don't understand you either, do they?' she went on.

'Severus...' Lucius's voice called across two tables, breaking into the pleasantly intriguing exchange like a Bludger to Snape's balls, and it was only then that he realised that Minerva McGonagall was standing, and the rest of the diners were watching him. 'With your permission...' Lucius went on with amusement that Snape vowed he would wipe off his face at the earliest opportunity, resisting the urge to hex his privates off right there and then. '... And that of your charming companion,' Malfoy went on, in a way that made Snape realise Lucius didn't know his mystery woman's identity either. 'Can Minerva proceed?'

Bereft on a suitable retort in the face of so many amused glances from people he loathed, Severus let his lip twist in a sneer, and sat back. As Minerva cleared her throat, Severus felt a slim ankle twist around his under the table, and something rather pleasant twist its way through his stomach to his nether regions.

"Some hae meat, and canna eat

And some wad eat, that want it;"

Minerva intoned the Selkirk Grace, the words of which were often mistakenly attributed to her countryman Robert Burns,

"But we hae meat, and we can eat,

Sae let the Lord be thankit."

'And amen to that,' Severus's companion said, with a mischievous smile on her lips.

As Minerva sat down, and the conversation around the tables rose once more, Snape turned again to the woman at his side. 'You were explaining about your husband?' he prompted, his eyebrow raised slightly.

'Ah, yes,' she replied. 'Not so much my husband, as my future husband.'

'I see,' he replied, totally confused, as he was served a plate of white and orange vegetables as the traditional starter to the Halloween meal.

There was an empty seat at each table, a setting reverentially placed there once all of the guests were seated, so that it would not be taken by mistake, and the diners sat back until the elves placed the same hors d'oeuvres that everyone else had, at the empty places at the ten round tables. All of the tables waited, except of course, Snape noticed with malicious satisfaction, for the table where Potter sat, the table where Ronald Weasley's monkey had begun, with apparent gusto, to tuck into the plate of bashed neeps and champit tatties reserved for the souls of the dead, who had been set free to roam the hallowed hallways of Malfoy Manor that night. Good, Severus thought viciously; hopefully the monkey would crap on Weasley's shoulder as well as pissing in his ear.

'Neeps and tatties,' his companion offered. 'Or are you going to pretend that you don't care for turnip?'

There was something vaguely challenging about her question that made Severus fail to ask about her mystery fiancé, and lift his fork and prod it first into one mound of mashed vegetable, then into the other instead. 'Not at all,' he replied, catching sight again of the table where Potter and his cohorts were staring at their plates, as though they had been served a helping of worms. 'Unlike some, I am aware of Halloween traditions, and am, I confess, quite fond of this one.' He popped a forkful of the sweet hot mashed potato and turnip into his mouth, as though to prove his point.

'Ah, yes, Halloween traditions,' she replied as she swallowed a mouthful of her own vegetables.

Ever a fool for women's charms, or the few that rarely came his way, and so engrossed was he in the charming company in which he found himself, that Severus found the meal was over before he noticed much of what he had eaten: the foie gras and pickled pears that succeeded the neeps and tatties, the racks of Welsh lamb, or the ridiculous confection that was served as an impossible to eat dessert, and before he knew it, an elf was offering him cheese and oatcakes. He caught Lucius's glance, and was too late to ignore the meaningful nod Malfoy cast to the door of the grand dining room. He excused himself and rose from the table. As he passed the table where the insufferable Gryffindors were chomping their way through everything but the table decorations, he noticed that someone had moved Ronald Weasley's fake moustache from his top lip, and had affixed it to the bridge of his nose instead.

'Who's the woman?' Lucius demanded.

'Your guest, not mine,' Snape countered, having decided that discretion may indeed be the better part of valour; that apart, tripping himself in any snare Lucius had set him didn't appeal to him at all.

'The ghost of Lily past perhaps?' Malfoy offered in his usual crude attempt at humour.

'Have you dragged me away to make cheap jokes?' Severus snapped, glancing again to the dining room.

'No, I have dragged you away to tell you Bellatrix would react favourably to any approach you might see fit to make in her direction.'

Severus grabbed Lucius's gold ensemble in his fist, shoving it to under his chin. 'The only thing I would do in Bellatrix's direction, is about turn and run,' he hissed. 'Foist her off onto someone else, Lucius... or kill her, if you want. I don't care much, one way or the other, as long as I'm not party to your plans.'

'You're not very gracious, Severus,' Malfoy replied, pulling away and straightening his ridiculous outfit.

'I don't need to be gracious,' Severus snapped. 'I'm a guest.' He turned away, and marched back into the dining room, but he was only halfway to his table when he realised that she hadn't bent down to pick something up, or gone to another table to chat with an acquaintance, or anything like that; she had left Malfoy Manor.

He didn't wait for the ghosts' walk; or the stupid apple dooking competition, that was apt to almost drown the drunken participants; or the messily inane treacle-covered scones to descend on unseen ropes from the dining room ceiling, to be caught by the mouths of blindfolded guests, with their hands tied behind their backs, so deeply in their cups that they didn't even notice that their faces were smeared with black sticky marks for the rest of the night; or even for Weasley's monkey to relieve itself in whatever way it saw fit. He stalked out of the dining room, without as much as catching anyone's eye, and summoned an elf to bring his cloak. He was back in Hogwarts before the traditional one minute's silence as the midnight bell rang at Malfoy Manor, heralding in the ancient dark season of Samhain.

He felt a chill in his bones as he walked down the dungeon steps. He didn't know why that should be, why a woman in whose company he had only spent a couple of hours should have suddenly made him feel so alone by her absence. Halfway down the steps, he met Peeves, the horrible poltergeist swooping from nowhere to blast him with an external chill to match the one inside.

'Getting your leg over tonight, Professor?' he cackled, diving down between Snape's legs, and grasping his balls in a way that almost made him choke with fury.

Severus pulled his wand from the slim pocket on the inside of his left thigh, and let out a volley of vicious incantations, many of which the very walls of the castle seemed to disapprove of. He missed the offending Peeves completely, and succeeding only in bringing down a shower of gritty dust from the abraded stone above his head.

'Temper, temper, Snape,' Peeves called from behind him. 'You'll never get it up if you're that angry. Anyway, you're supposed to be nice to ghosts tonight,' he reasoned, swooping in front of Severus yet again.

Snape took a long steadying breath, telling himself there was absolutely no point in trying to reason with the unreasonable. He satisfied himself with promising to hex Peeves when he was in better control of himself and the damned emotions he didn't realise he had. He got to the bottom of the steps, as Peeves zoomed back up the passage, as though coming from the direction of Snape's rooms, which lay just around the only bend in that part of the corridor.

'I told her you'll not be long, but you're in your usual rotten mood,' he cackled. 'Pretty little thing; too good for you, Snape ... Who is she anyway? Can't say I recognise her under her charms.'

Snape felt something flood through him, anticipation, expectation, he couldn't name it, as he rounded the bend and saw a cloaked figure standing in front of the door to his rooms, with her back to him. She was looking in a mirror, and she didn't turn round at first, and as the Hogwarts midnight bell tolled, he thought of yet another Halloween custom, that of a spinster looking in a mirror on the stroke of midnight to see the face of her future husband.

'I hoped you would come straight here,' she said, turning at last, as Peeves swooped along the corridor again, only to stop between them, and look from one to the other, his eyebrow cocked speculatively. 'Be a sweetheart, Peeves, and go away like a good ghost,' she said, smiling at the poltergeist in a way that would have disarmed a mountain troll, and it was only then that Severus realised she was no longer wearing her mask; yet he still did not recognise her.

'But I'm not a good ghost,' Peeves replied, spinning to Snape with a cackle. 'Am I, Severus, old bean? ... Very old bean, has been, in fact... forty-five and counting, if I'm not mistaken. And how many times have you peeled...' He doubled over in feigned pain, as Snape's hex caught him square in the pit of what would have been his stomach, had he been alive.

'That's enough,' Severus snarled. 'Now, go away, or I'll call the Baron, and have him deal with you.' He couldn't find much in the way of anger now though, not as he reached the side of the fascinating woman, who could only have been waiting for him, unless of course, she was two timing him with Peeves. He took her arm, almost surprised at what a good fit it seemed to be for his own, dropped his wards, and led her into the cold welcome of his private domain.

She looked about herself, and Severus wondered for the first time what sort of impression his rooms made on other people, not that he had many visitors to impress.

'It's just what I expected,' she said, shoving a few books out of the way, and sitting on his worn dark leather settee.

'So, you have not served detention in this room, I take it?' he asked, turning from lighting a fire in the cold grate.

'Detention? No,' she replied, shaking her head.

He sat down at her side, feeling less awkward at doing so than he might have. 'Who are you?' he asked, taking one of her small pale hands in his. 'Why have you come here?'

She looked away for a moment, and when she turned back to him, her gaze had become disconcertingly direct. 'To be with you, of course,' she said, her voice small but firm.

'Why me?' he asked. 'I'm not the most eligible of men.'

'You mean you're not rich or handsome?' she teased, in her odd way of putting things, the strange manner that tried to tug a chord in his memory. 'No, I don't suppose you are. These things don't interest me, Severus; they never have and they never will.'

'What's your name?' he asked. 'You know mine, you know who I am. Surely I have to call you something?'

'Perhaps you could just kiss me instead,' she replied, moving closer to him until he could feel her light breath dusting his face.

What did a name matter anyway, he thought, as her lips met his, and he felt himself stir with delicious warmth, and his body responded as her kisses became bolder, and he felt himself draw her close to make a proper job of it, pushing her back so her head rested on the cushions at the end of the settee, and the books fell unnoticed to the floor.

She was gone in the morning, and he supposed he had expected she would be. He looked at the pillow where she had rested her head, still indented, but no longer warm, and wondered if she had only waited until he slept, to slip away, to make her escape.

It was Saturday, and he supposed that Merlin should be thanked for at least the small mercy that he did not have to teach that day. He dragged himself up and padded into the bathroom, took a long pee, and turned on the shower.

He stood under the warm water for a long time, reliving the night before: sitting with her at dinner, kissing her, making love to her, and almost wondered if he had dreamed it all. It was all so surreal that he almost convinced himself that he had been enchanted, or that he was the butt of a very elaborate prank, neither of which appealed to him much at all. He felt disconsolate, ill at ease, as though he had been sought out for a purpose beyond that of his understanding. Yet for all that, he had detected no malice in her. He wished he knew her name.

It was only when he padded back into his bedroom that he realised that he had a visitor; he knew it wasn't her though.

'Where did you disappear to last night?' Lucius sprang to his feet in accusation. 'I needed your help.'

'I wasn't aware that there was any sort of curfew on leaving early,' Severus replied. 'How did you get in here anyway?'

'The door was open,' Lucius snapped back. 'Isn't that a touch careless, Severus?'

'What do you want, Lucius?' Snape asked, pulling on his black academic gown before he remembered again that it was Saturday. 'I had quite enough of you last night.'

'Perhaps I thought you were ill,' Malfoy replied.

'So you waited until this morning? Presumably to make sure I was dead... was that it?' Severus sat at his table, and poured hot water, from the kettle that sat on the hob of

the banked fire, onto a sprinkling of dark leaves in a small porcelain cup. 'What do you want, Lucius?' he repeated.

'Who was the woman you left with?' Malfoy asked, evidently unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean by you don't know?' Lucius scoffed. 'Filch said she didn't leave here until a couple of hours ago.'

'Is there anyone in Hogwarts not on your payroll, one way or another?' Severus asked, manly trying to ignore the feeling of pleasure that spread though him, that he had indeed lain with his mystery woman for the better part of the night, and if she were a figment of his imagination, she was also a figment of Lucius's, and indeed Argus Filch's too.

'Come now, Severus, you can tell me,' Malfoy wheedled in the way Snape had always meant to tell him hadn't melted hearts since he had been about four years old, and possibly not even then.

'Do you have your invitation list with you, by any chance?' Snape asked.

'You really don't know who she was, do you?' Malfoy smiled. 'Funny,' he mused, 'no one seems to know who she was. Even Potter asked Draco who old sour-face Snape was attempting to chat up. You caused quite a stir, disappearing as you did.'

'Lord above,' Snape replied. 'The rest of the entertainment must have been as horrific as usual, if my comings and goings interested anyone but me.'

'It was awful,' Lucius replied, his face twisting in what Severus recognised as distaste. 'Weasley's damn monkey ran amok, and severed the ropes holding the treacle scones up; they were everywhere. One got stuck in Bella's hair, and she went berserk.' He shuddered, as Severus stifled the unthinkable laugh that threatened to break free without his permission. 'Then the apple dooking started, only for Draco to inform me halfway through, that not only had the chimpanzees been pissing in the water, but half of the male guests had been too, thinking they were urinals left handy behind the kitchen door, to save them going to the bathrooms.'

'I'm sorry I left, Lucius,' Snape said dryly. 'I would have rather enjoyed all that.'

'Very funny, Severus,' Malfoy snapped. 'Now, back to the lady.' He tapped his finger against his expensive dental work, the way he did on the few occasions in which he thought. 'I shall send an owl, and get Draco to send me the invitation list, and we'll take it from there. Meantime, a Hogwarts lunch would not go amiss,' he said.

'Oh, very well,' Snape replied as he frowned at the sight of a small white card propped beside his mantle clock. 'You're not hanging about all day though.'

'When are you seeing her again?' Lucius asked, oblivious to the brush-off, but he tended to be fairly thick-skinned where Snape was concerned.

Severus had lifted the small card, and read it. *'I'll be at Florean Fortescue's at lunchtime tomorrow. Meet me at one o'clock. Xxx'* 'We're having lunch tomorrow,' he replied, pocketing the card, and trying to still his heart. He was going to see her again, and for some reason he was very pleased about that.

He had drawn a blank on the invitation list. Every female guest Lucius had asked was either present anyway, or, for whatever reason, just didn't fit the bill. Lucius had even suggested a man; after all, he reasoned, she had been under powerful charms, until Severus relieved him, almost violently, of that particular notion, and suggested that he should keep his fantasies regarding Snape to himself, and not to ever think that the letter 'L' his apple peel always landed in, stood for Lucius, a chestnut that Malfoy had presented him with several times over the years.

He got to Diagon Alley at half past twelve the next day, Disillusioned himself, and spent a fruitless twenty-five minutes scouring the immediate area around Florean Fortescue's for his wonderful mystery woman. He'd just dropped his charms and sat at a table outside, in the chill November sun, when he felt her behind him.

'Sorry I had to run away yesterday,' she said. 'I had work to do for Dad. Anyway, you got my note.' She put her hand on top of his, and he felt his heart stutter in a way it had ever failed him before.

'I need to know who you are,' he said, breaking off as Florean approached the table, and noticing in deep pleasure that she had not moved her hand. She hadn't moved her charms either though, and he felt less uneasy about that than he should have.

'Can I just have milky coffee with lots of whipped cream on the top?' she asked Fortescue. 'Maybe we'll have something to eat later.'

'You want your usual coffee, Professor Snape?' Florean asked, not looking at Snape at all, but at the beautiful young woman opposite him, managing not to raise his eyebrows in surprise.

Severus nodded him away. 'Please,' he said, once Florean was out of earshot. He turned his hand over and squeezed hers, feeling the firmness of her cool grasp in his. 'Please tell me. Who are you?' he asked. 'And why me?'

Her gaze was direct, totally guileless, yet brimming with what he recognised as intelligence: more than that, a fierce intellect, one he suspected would be on a par with his own. She watched him carefully, but said nothing.

'I've scoured Lucius's invitation list,' he said. 'I just can't place you... And yet I know you, I know I do.'

'I wasn't on the invitation list, Severus,' she replied. 'I gate-crashed.'

'What?' he replied, confused anew.

'I had to go,' she said. 'I knew you would be there.'

'Why?' he repeated. 'Why me? Someone as beautiful as you... not that that matters,' he added in a hurry, in case she was ugly, and mistakenly thought he would think less of her for being so. 'But someone as beautiful, in thought word and deed, could capture any man's heart, without raising whatever charms you've raised to do so.'

'It's your name, Severus,' she said at last. 'Well, not so much your name, as your initial that short-listed you.'

'What do you mean?' he asked, although he already had half an idea.

'It's a silly thing,' she said, taking his hand again across the table. 'It binds me for all that.' Her piercing blue eyes held his, and he wondered again what colour they really were; perhaps it was best if he never knew. She began talking again, oblivious to the fact that the tables were filling up around them. 'My mother wanted to make sure that I had a long and happy marriage. I was born in November, the first of November, and the night before I was born, of course, was Halloween. Mother indulged herself, and threw an apple skin she had peeled in one piece, over her shoulder, binding me to a man who would always love and protect me, with the initial of whatever shape the peel fell in. It was a letter 'S.'

'I see,' he said quietly. Something in Severus's guts gave a warning squeeze, as he remembered his own deal with an initial, and he was already wondering how to explain that to her.

'Of course, I knew nothing of it, until my father told me after my mother died,' she said. 'I suppose it slipped into the back of my mind, like one of those things you forget that you know. For a while I thought it was Sirius Black, when I got older ... and I thought I had lost my chance.'

Snape bridled at the reference to Black, and then he remembered how he had lost his chance too, and not only with this woman, whoever she was. 'You knew Black?' he asked, trying to keep the bite out of his voice.

'I met him,' she admitted. 'I was almost glad when he died,' she said. 'Oh, I know that sounds awful, but I didn't like him much.'

Severus raised his eyebrow at her candour, knowing it was without malice, and was just her odd way of expressing the truth. 'How far down the list was I?' he asked. 'If you worked through everyone you liked, and even got to those you didn't like?'

'Oh, you were at the top,' she said. 'You were just unapproachable. In fact if I hadn't heard about Lucius Malfoy's party, and the fact that I could meet you without ... well, without you knowing who I was, I doubt I would ever have got so far.'

'Of course, if you weren't invited,' he mused, 'that's why I couldn't find out who you were on Lucius's invitation list.'

'No... I gate-crashed,' she repeated.

He felt his lip twist in amusement. 'I scoured that damn list,' he said. 'You didn't fit in with any of the Gryffindors, neither those who had accepted Lucius's invitation, nor those who had declined. I wondered why I couldn't work it out.'

'I wasn't a Gryffindor,' she said.

'A Slytherin?' he queried. For some reason that surprised him; in fact, he had not even given the list of Slytherins more than a cursory look.

'Really, Severus,' she chided, 'you Slytherins and Gryffindors seem to think you're the only houses.'

'Not a Hufflepuff, I suspect,' he murmured. 'So ... a Ravenclaw,' he breathed, in a slam of realisation. He drew back as though he had been slapped, as though someone had thrown a bucket of icy water at him, and then stopped in his mental tracks, as he watched her face crumple in disappointment. Of course, now he had guessed who she was, he could see below the charms to the face beneath; to the eyes, a more powdery blue than they had been, yet somehow even more sincere; and to the hair, a soft golden cloudy mess of waves and curls and wisps and braids that looked unsure of what direction in which to point themselves; and the fine but pointed little nose and chin; and the pink lips, already down-turned in what looked to Severus to be genuine chagrin. Those were only fleeting notions though, as his gaze was really drawn to her tiny ears, to where the earrings she had worn now showed themselves as two lengths of apple peel, both shaped in the letter 'S'.

'Luna,' he breathed, as the understanding brought with it a greater truth. 'L-una,' he tried again, his mind flicking for a moment to where he had thrown the damned letter 'L' into the fire for twenty-six soul destroying years.

'I'm sorry,' she stumbled. 'I... I did so want you to be the one... I was so sure.'

'I am,' he blurted out. He was already thinking of her offbeat ways, and her vegetable accessories, that seemed to so annoy everyone else, and whilst they had not particularly endeared her to him, he had always admired them as her fearless statement, not that she was slightly crazy, but that she was proud to be different, to dance as he had always done, to a different tune to everyone else.

She had jumped to her feet like the excited schoolgirl she had not been for five years, almost knocking the table over. 'You'll marry me?' she asked. 'And look after me? And love me forever?'

Heads at other tables were beginning to turn and watch them, mainly in gentle amusement, as Luna sat on Snape's lap and threw her arms around his neck.

'If you do not strangle me first, Miss Lovegood, I believe I shall,' he said dryly. 'Now sit down nicely when we are in a public place, and take off...' He trailed off. He had been going to tell her to take off her apple peel earrings, but they rather suited her.

'Miss Lovegood, Professor Snape?' she asked. 'We don't have to go all the way back to the start, do we?'

Floean arrived back at the table, and he had just placed Luna's cream-topped coffee in front of her, when two men and two women stopped at the table.

'Luna!' Ron Weasley said in surprise, drawing Snape a long suspicious look, as though he maybe had a reincarnation of Voldemort stuffed in his robes. 'What are you doing here?'

'We're having coffee and discussing wedding plans,' she replied.

'You're getting married?' Potter chipped in brightly, as his wife let out a shriek of delight. 'Well done, Luna. Who's the lucky man?'

Severus savoured his moment, as Fortescue put his own strong dark coffee in front of him. 'Floean,' he said, 'would you bring Luna a cocktail umbrella and a maraschino cherry for her coffee please? Oh, and maybe some of those awful multicoloured sprinkles.'

'How did you know?' Luna asked, turning away from the uncomfortable foursome, who were beginning to look as though they rather regretted having stopped, and Floean walked away, shaking his head.

'Intuition,' Severus replied smugly.

'Who're you getting married to, Luna?' the Granger-Weasley girl asked, reminding Severus of their unwelcome presence again.

Luna gave them all a long look, as though something so obvious to her shouldn't be beyond their limited comprehension. 'Severus, of course,' she replied. 'Who else?'

'I told you she was nuts,' Ron murmured.

'Nuts, Weasley?' Snape called after him, in a moment of recklessness that he suspected would not be his last. 'Go feed them to your monkey.'
