

Semantics

by Pyttan

Lucius shows Snape the pièce de résistance in his art collection.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Lucius chose the decanter containing the Forest Flower of the North over the one with Ogden's Old Firewhisky. It was very close to impossible bringing the beverage into Britain these days, but he had never liked Firewhisky. With its distinct tang of seaweed and peat, it had always struck him as brash, vulgar and intrusive. The Forest Flower, on the other hand, was a drink as clear as water, and it burnt your mouth and throat until the burning was the only thing you could sense. The sensation reminded him of the Dark Lord's Cruciatus, the way it burnt the spine, making it vibrate and twitch for hours after the assault. Delicious, in its unique way.

The risk of smuggling it into the country was well worth his while, too. It satisfied his own tastes, true, but the profit the smuggling venture also generated was so high it bordered on the indecent.

He tipped the decanter and poured a generous measure into each of the two crystal tumblers in front of him.

"For you, Severus. I know you'll enjoy it," he said and offered Severus one of the glasses.

Severus Snape: the only one from the old Death Eater ranks, besides himself, who had succeeded in rebuilding a life and a viable career after the Dark Lord had fallen.

There were arguably a few others, of course. Wizards like Macnair, who had survived by crawling into the darker corners of the Ministry of Magic. They did the Ministry's dirty work, but in the end they were all still under suspicion and not welcome among the more exclusive set of the wizarding world.

"To a new beginning." Lucius lifted his glass in a toast.

"You can always hope." The sneer that accompanied the words contorted Severus's face in a way that wasn't at all attractive. Especially not combined with that bloody awful hair and his ancient robes.

"Have you tried that new tailor I suggested?" Lucius asked. "You've been looking rather glum lately. The small luxuries in life are more important for one's well-being than one might think."

Severus, who had seated himself in an armchair in front of the fireplace, gave him an indifferent glance.

"No, I haven't."

"And you haven't visited my barber either."

Sometimes Lucius didn't understand Severus at all. The man's penchant for ascetic living had always amazed him.

"Obviously not." Severus shoved an oily strand of hair behind his ear. The movement was deliberate, a provocation, and Lucius felt the urge to box his ears, the same way

he boxed Draco's when he was stubborn, insolent or just plain stupid.

"I'm surprised you even suggested it." Severus's slow drawl conveyed a world of contempt for the idea.

Lucius couldn't help it: he chuckled. Severus Snape was, in the end, one of the few people whose company he enjoyed.

"Presentation isn't everything, Severus, but it does help."

"When you talk like that, you sound like Lockhart. Never a good thing."

"Are you comparing me to Lockhart? That's not very kind of you."

"Since Lockhart is unable to produce a decent Expelliarmus, I suppose you're right. I am sorry. You are, of course, quite able." Severus toasted him, sipped the contents of his glass and returned to staring at the fire. It was amazing how Severus, with the merest inflection of his voice, managed to turn an apology into an insult. It was a very annoying habit of his.

"Still, as far as women go, looks seem to mean a lot. Just look at that book signing of his. Almost an all-female gathering, ranging from girls to old crones," Lucius said.

Severus drummed his fingers on the armrest of the chair and smiled back at him. The smile was all crooked teeth and more of a grimace than anything else.

"Speaking of reading ... did you see my latest article? Clear poisons in alcoholic solutions?"

Severus's gaze was unnerving at the best of times, Lucius conceded, and at this moment it was quite frightening. Lucius looked at his glass, hesitated, but drank anyway. While drinking, he touched his pocket. The small lump was there, well within reach.

Severus smirked. Lucius suspected that Severus had caught the movement of his hand and cursed himself.

"Yes, I did. Very good work. I think the Dark Lord would have been pleased," he said and made a deliberate pause. Severus didn't elaborate so he continued, "I was impressed by the way you extended the definition of the term 'clear'."

Severus smirked again.

"I was criticised for that particular definition."

"Why? I found it apt and the concept very useful."

"The opposition claimed it was too stringent. That absolute clarity was too hard to achieve. A lot of ridiculous discussion that, for the most part, boiled down to semantics. I never did understand what they were trying to get at, since I didn't present a theory. I presented a fact. I have already proven that it's possible. It was the whole point of the article."

Lucius laughed.

"I'm amazed that they tried to discuss semantics with you in the first place. Shouldn't they know better?"

This time Severus smiled for real, and for a moment, he looked more like the young man he once was.

"So, how is Narcissa?" Severus said, changing the subject. He was looking more relaxed now than Lucius had seen him in a long time.

"Restless," he answered. "She always is when Draco has left for school."

"Oh." Severus looked at him and then cleared his throat before continuing. "You look worried."

"Who wouldn't be? A restless Narcissa is dangerous. Like most women, she shouldn't be given time to brood. It makes them question their place. Their purpose in life."

And Narcissa was very dangerous that way. As Lucius had learnt early on, she was sometimes too much like her sister.

He looked up and realised that Severus had been watching him.

"I am able to keep her in line," Lucius said, resenting the defensive note that had crept into his voice.

"Yes, of course." Severus inclined his head, took another sip from the glass and then looked away, hiding his expression.

Severus's tells were so small, yet so obvious if you were observant.

"Come. I'll show you," he said, making it a command rather than a request.

A quick look over his shoulder assured him that Severus was following him. He opened the door to the gallery with an aggressive yank and went to the farthest wall of the room. Lucius pulled his wand from his cane, and with a sharp flick of it, the air in front of them blurred, rippled and folded away.

When the orb was revealed, Severus's reaction pleased him. Lucius hadn't expected him to react at all, so the fact that he curled his upper lip in something that could have been dismay or even disgust, taking a step back, was very satisfying.

Lucius turned his attention to the skull and watched as it spun inside the orb, slow enough for an audience to appreciate the craftsmanship and marvel over the glittering diamonds that covered every millimetre of its surface, with the exception of the teeth.

Severus was staring at the display, showing no expression or animation at all, in control again. He was always able to regain an air of indifference faster than anyone Lucius knew. An admirable personality trait.

"Interesting," Severus said. "I assume it's a human skull, not a replica?"

Lucius chuckled.

"Of course it is."

"Who made it? Or don't you know?"

Lucius sipped his drink as he watched as the skull turn full circle, the diamonds throwing reflections all over the room.

"His name is Thorn. He sells his work to Muggles. It helps finance our ... cause. He started the venture when the Dark Lord was ascending. I think the irony of the idea appealed to the Dark Lord. I know it appeals to me," he said and smiled at Severus. "He's a genius, just not in the way the Muggles think. He doesn't use his real name among them, of course."

"And you bought this piece from him as a sign of good will. For the sake of the ... cause?"

"No. I commissioned it, in fact." Lucius felt calm now. He felt secure. He always did, watching the revolving piece of art that he had been so much a part of creating. "I also provided him with the materials for the piece."

"Ah." Severus made a long pause before adding. "But I seem to remember that we were discussing Narcissa, were we not?"

It was no wonder the two of them got along so well. Severus was one of the few people who measured up to him, as far as intelligence went.

"Yes. We were." Lucius fell silent for a moment, watching the skull complete another rotation. "Do you remember Gideon Prewett? A couple of years older than me. Gryffindor. Brother of Molly Weasley. I believe you are teaching most of her blood-traitor spawn."

"I only know him by reputation. He was powerful, if you are to believe Dumbledore." Severus was now leaning so close to the display that his over-large nose was almost touching the orb.

Lucius gave an involuntary scoff. "He's dead, isn't he?" he said.

Severus didn't even look up from the orb. "But then, the odds weren't in his and his brother's favour, if I remember the story correctly. I'm all for using every means at your disposal, as you know, but there is such a thing as overdoing it."

Lucius stiffened.

"How do you mean?"

"It took five Death Eaters to bring them down, despite the fact that the Prewetts were ambushed. And two of the Death Eaters involved are still residents at St Mungos." Severus voice carried a mocking note Lucius didn't like at all.

"True." Lucius straightened his cuffs, annoyed at Severus. Trust the man to be exact in the extreme.

"So, either he was as powerful as Dumbledore claims, or the Death Eaters present at the time weren't at all as apt as you would have hoped, were they? The word 'inept' comes to mind."

Severus Snape could be very nasty when he found other people lacking, and he had strange ideas about fair play. It had always amazed Lucius, the way Severus used to go into battle. Alone when possible and never relying on the others when he was forced to go with a group.

"He was courting Narcissa at the time our marriage was negotiated. No one knew at first."

Severus looked up, and Lucius saw something flicker in his eyes before he looked at the skull again.

"I wasn't pleased when I discovered that she was encouraging him. Poor as he was. She would never have been happy with him, you understand. I have Bellatrix to thank for ... bringing the problem to my attention."

Severus nodded, watching the skull with avid interest.

"The large gem ... it's a pink diamond?" Severus said, making the comment more of a statement than a question.

"Yes. The skull had a hole in the forehead. A rather large one. It was necessary to place a larger gem there, to cover it. Beautiful, isn't it?" Lucius waved his wand again, and the skull stopped turning, facing them.

"What does Narcissa think of the exhibit?"

"Narcissa isn't very fond of this piece."

Silence stretched between them as they watched the now-stationary skull hovering inside the orb.

"The skull is the symbol of repentance, did you know?" asked Severus, sounding almost absent-minded.

"I thought it was the symbol of death."

"Yes, obviously, but also repentance."

Severus straightened his back, and Lucius was somehow surprised at how tall he was. He had known Severus for a long time, ever since Severus had come to Hogwarts. He had been a short, scrawny, half-starved eleven-year-old at the time. In Lucius's eyes, he still was to some extent. And Lucius had never noted how tall he was as an adult. It was strange how people close to you changed, without your noticing, and how your perception of them changed accordingly.

"Repentance. A difficult concept ..." Severus's voice trailed off, and he smiled, looking as absent-minded as he had sounded earlier.

"Difficult how? I would say it's a very straightforward thing." Lucius made a deliberate and theatrical gesture, indicating the skull.

"You can't help wondering whose repentance though," said Severus, not taking his eyes off the skull.

"I would think that was obvious. I'm sure Narcissa agrees."

Severus reached out and touched the orb.

"Yes," he said. "It seems very simple when you put it that way, doesn't it? But per definition, repentance requires remorse. I do wonder about the remorse in this instance. Whether it's there, who feels it and how it manifests itself." Severus made a long pause and then continued, "Isn't it strange how death never changes your feelings for someone? How they linger. You might find a replacement for lack of a better word to focus on, but it will never be the same. You never feel the same. Hate. Love. It doesn't matter. It stays alive." Severus gave Lucius a bland smile. "And you don't even need a reminder."

Something in Lucius's chest clenched hard. He looked down at his glass. It still contained a fourth of what he had poured into it.

"I'll probably sell it at some point. I view it more as an investment than anything else," he said, making an effort to sound bored. "Now let's go to dinner. The alcohol is making you maudlin."

He could see Severus smile. A tight lipped smile, half-hidden by the angle of his head.

He should have heeded his own words, Lucius admitted to himself: never discuss semantics with Severus Snape.

Lucius emptied the glass in one slow draught. One mouthful left, and it was enough. Thankfully.

A/N: This story was first published at the LJ Community one_bad_man, and it is dedicated to the Adorable D, or as we know her here: Diabolica.

This story was written when I complained about my lost inspiration, and D set me off writing again by sending me this prompt:

Picture prompt:

<http://blog.sfmoma.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Hirst-Love-Of-God.jpg>

Quote prompt:

Never pray for justice, because you might get some. -- Margaret Atwood

Idea prompt:

Blue. Confession. Glass.