

## *Valentine's Day at Slug Club*

Neville spent the most pleasant weeks he'd had in many months. He'd managed to reestablish a new Dumbledore's Army without Harry and his closest friends. All the members gathered in the Room of Requirement, right under the noses of Snape and the Carrows, who were too full of themselves to suspect that students were rebelling within the school.

During their last session, Neville was impressed by the progress the DA members had made. Even the younger ones were becoming quite skilled, though a few still struggled with certain spells. That day, Seamus took charge, introducing the other members to the Patronus Charm. He took particular pride in this lesson, as it was the one enchantment Harry had taught him two years prior.

"To produce a Patronus, you need to focus on a very happy memory," he announced. "The happiest one you can think of."

To demonstrate, he closed his eyes and recalled a holiday he had shared with Dean, his best friend. A smile spread across his face, and when he opened his eyes, his wand released a silver mist that slowly took the form of a fox. It trotted around the room, weaving in and out of the students, who watched it with starry-eyed amazement.

"Who wants to try?" he offered.

Several hands shot up instantly, everyone eager to discover which creature would emerge from their own Patronus. Seamus paired everyone up. Some of the older members who were already familiar with the spell helped guide the newer ones.

Neville was paired with Erine, but he could only manage a faint wisp of smoke from his wand. Despite all his concentration, the charm seemed out of reach.

"The Patronus requires far more magical ability than any of the spells we've practiced so far," Erine explained. "Few wizards can produce a fully formed Patronus; most can only manage a brief barrier."



She paused before adding, “Don’t feel bad if you can’t do it yet,” she reassured him.

Neville looked around the pairs and saw that many students were excitedly watching their silvery animals circle around them. Dogs, cats, birds, snakes—each Patronus was different.

Ginny Weasley’s Patronus took the form of a proud stallion, galloping across the Room of Requirement, neighing and rearing up. Luna Lovegood was playing with her rabbit, which was joyfully hopping about, rubbing its chin and bouncing playfully.

Ernie Macmillan had produced a boar, which he humorously sent charging at his friend, Rolf Scamander, who had joined the DA for the first time. Neville noted with curiosity that Rolf’s friend Attilius was absent once again, likely hiding somewhere in the castle.

Lost in thought, Neville barely noticed the silver shape flying toward him.

“Watch out!” someone called as a swan darted straight toward his head.

Neville ducked, and the swan continued its flight, gracefully swerving before it hit any walls. He stood up to see Hannah rushing over, looking horrified, her braids swinging over her shoulders as she knelt beside him, trying to suppress a smile.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Neville. I couldn’t control my Patronus.”

She knelt next to him. “Are you okay?”

Neville tried to respond, but his words got caught in his throat. Hannah made him nervous, standing so close that he could smell her soft floral scent.

Erine, noticing his silence, stepped in with a smile.

“You did a beautiful Patronus, Hannah!” she congratulated her. “Is that the first time you’ve managed it?”

Hannah shifted her gaze from Neville and smiled.

“It is! I struggled at first, but Ginny showed me her technique, and I finally got it.”

“You conjured a swan, didn’t you?” Erine asked.

“Yes! I was worried it might turn into something I wouldn’t like, but I have to say, I’m really happy with it.”

She looked back at Neville. “What do you think?”



He got to his feet and smiled sheepishly. "It's amazing. You should keep practicing; I'm sure you'll be able to sustain it even longer."

Hannah's smile faded a little. She thanked him and went back to join Ginny, who congratulated her on her success.

"Well done, Casanova," Erine teased.

Neville grimaced. "I find it hard to talk to her," he admitted.

Erine raised her eyebrows. "You don't say? I thought you were just giving me a masterclass in flirting by staying as silent as a fish."

Her tone was overly sarcastic.

Neville shot her a glare. "Oh, you can talk," he retorted.

Erine squinted, confused. "What are you talking about?"

Neville grinned. He knew she understood exactly who he meant, but he didn't hold back from delivering a teasing reply.

"I've seen you watching Attilius over the past few months, following his every move. It's like you can't help yourself."

Erine's face hardened. "You don't know what you're talking about, Neville."

Her sharp tone surprised him.

"No need to get defensive," he said calmly. "I was only joking."

Her expression turned dark. "Maybe you should focus on talking to that girl you keep staring at," she said, nodding toward Hannah, "instead of meddling in things that don't concern you."

She spun on her heel and left him standing there. He watched her walk over to Ernie and Rolf, interrupting their conversation to switch places with Ernie. He agreed without question and went over to join Neville with a wide grin.

"How's it going?" Ernie asked.

Neville shrugged. "Not great," he confessed.

"Don't worry," Ernie reassured him. "I'm sure you'll get the hang of it."

Neville stood up. "I'm not so sure."

Ernie shook his head. "You're too hard on yourself. The only thing stopping you from producing a fully formed Patronus is the mental barriers you put up."

Neville frowned, puzzled. "Mental barriers?"



Ernie explained that he had learned how the Patronus Charm required deep emotional conviction. The shield wouldn't appear unless the caster's emotions were strong and unhesitating, which Neville lacked at the moment.

"Ever since I've known you, you've relied on your friends to step forward so you don't have to," Ernie pointed out.

Neville was stunned. How could Ernie see through him so easily when they didn't even know each other that well? Sure, Neville hadn't been the bravest Gryffindor, but he had come a long way since joining Dumbledore's Army. He had trained hard with his friends, to the point where he could match students much more talented than him, like Hermione or the Weasley twins.

No other student could match him in most spells. So why was this one so difficult for him? Why couldn't he produce more than a thin, silvery mist?

He didn't want to go back to the way he'd been before the DA. He couldn't allow Neville the coward to resurface. He had to reclaim his confidence.

"What do you suggest I do?" he asked.

Ernie sighed. "I think you should have a serious conversation with Hannah."

Neville looked horrified.

"Oh, come on," Ernie laughed. "It's not as if you're subtle. I'm not the only one who's noticed there's something between you two."

They glanced over at Hannah. She was practicing with Susan Bones, summoning her swan Patronus once again. Neville was entranced by the smile that lit up her face when she realized she could summon it once more.

"She's really good, isn't she?" Ernie commented.

Neville nodded. He was captivated by how much progress Hannah had made. She'd become one of the DA's most improved members, mastering numerous spells, and very few duelists could best her.

Just like Neville, she had greatly improved in a very short time. Two years earlier, she had joined but remained very shy, preferring to practice on her own with Susan or Justin. Yet, with so many of her friends gone, she couldn't stand the thought of Hogwarts being just a place for Pure-Bloods. She wanted to restore her beloved school's welcoming spirit.

The lesson ended a few minutes later. Seamus thanked everyone and announced that the next session wouldn't take place for several weeks to allow each Quidditch team time to prepare for their next match.



“Keep practicing so you don’t get rusty,” he added. “We’ll meet again to work on a new defensive spell.”

The session concluded with a round of applause. An joined Seamus, and they were the first to leave the room.

Neville took his time, gathering his things before sinking down into the thick cushions piled in the corner of the room. He grabbed a book titled *What Form Does Your Patronus Take? The Question Every Wizard Asks* and began to flip through it.

Within minutes, the room emptied out, leaving only a few students here and there.

“Can I talk to you?” a voice asked.

He opened his eyes to find Hannah standing there, her bag slung over her shoulder, giving him a warm smile.

Neville sat up, cleared his throat, and nodded.

She dropped down beside him and took a deep breath.

“That was a tough session.”

Neville raised his eyebrows, surprised.

“It was,” he agreed. “I still have a hard time with that spell.”

She smiled at him. “Maybe I could give you a few lessons,” she teased.

He smiled back. “You think you can make something out of me?” he joked. “Apparently, I’m a hopeless case.”

She looked him over. “I think there’s a chance,” she said confidently.

They fell into a comfortable silence, each smiling without saying anything.

“Um...” she began awkwardly, “Professor Slughorn is hosting a Valentine’s Day party and encouraged us to come with someone.”

She paused before continuing, “Would you... like to go with me?”

Neville’s throat tightened, and he felt his stomach clench with nerves.

Hannah sighed at his silence.

“I understand. You probably have a lot going on,” she said, starting to stand when he grabbed her arm.

“I... I’d be delighted to go with you.”



His smile was a little tense, but Hannah didn't seem to notice.

“Really?!” she exclaimed.

He grinned and added, “I think it's worth considering.”

She threw her arms around him, kissing him on the cheek.

“Let's meet in front of the Great Hall before we go in?” she suggested.

She grabbed her things and headed toward the exit.

“You didn't tell me when it will be held!” he called after her.

Hannah turned back and winked at him.

“You'll have to guess.”

She laughed as she left the room, leaving Neville sitting alone on his cushion. He looked around to make sure he was truly alone, then raised a fist in victory.

He'd scored his first date.

“But I still don't know when the party is,” he thought.

He quickly gathered his things and hurried out of the room. He needed to get back to the common room, hoping to find someone who knew the date.

Taking several corridors, he finally reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, gave the password, and entered the common room. A few students greeted him as he passed by.

He searched all around and eventually spotted Ginny, sitting with some girls from her year.

He rushed over to her, nearly tripping in his excitement.

“I need to talk to you. It's urgent.”

Ginny looked like she was about to brush him off, but his expression convinced her otherwise. She excused herself from her friends and followed Neville a little further off.

“What's going on?” she asked.

“I got a date with Hannah,” he started.

Ginny's eyes widened, and she was about to reply, but he silenced her with a gesture.



“She wants me to go with her to Slug Club’s Valentine’s Day party, but I have no idea when it’s happening. Do you know?”

Ginny thought for a moment.

“From what he told us in Potions, he plans to hold the party this Saturday, if I’m not mistaken.”

Neville nodded, realizing he only had a few days to get ready. Luckily for him, the party coincided with the next Hogsmeade visit. He’d be able to find something appropriate to wear for his date.

When Saturday arrived, students gathered by the gate. Big, fluffy snowflakes fell gently, covering the ground in a thick white layer.

Neville had informed Seamus and An about his date, and they both cheered with excitement when they heard the news.

“You’ve got to look your best,” Seamus had said.

“Or she won’t take you seriously,” An had added.

His friends didn’t ease his nerves. As the day drew closer, he grew increasingly anxious.

They walked at a leisurely pace toward the village. The younger students rushed to Honeydukes to buy every type of candy imaginable—Pepper Imps, Fizzing Whizzbees, and Cauldron Cakes.

Meanwhile, those familiar with the village made their way to the Three Broomsticks to warm up with a Butterbeer.

Neville spotted Ginny and some other girls heading to the inn but didn’t follow. Seamus led him instead toward Gladrag’s Wizardwear, the clothing shop.

“We shouldn’t have too much trouble finding something suitable,” he said. “That’s where I bought my outfit for the Yule Ball.”

“The Yule Ball?” An asked.

Seamus explained the event that took place in their fourth year.

“That’s awesome!” An exclaimed. “You must’ve had a blast.”

“Oh, we did! We even got to see the Weird Sisters perform.”

An’s eyes widened. “You’re joking?! I love them!”



Seamus and An kept talking about the evening as they made their way to the shop. Once there, they greeted the shopkeeper and started looking for the right outfit.

“Can I help you, kids?” she asked.

Seamus explained that they were looking for a suit for a formal event happening that evening.

“A formal event?” the shopkeeper echoed, surprised. “How fancy!”

She turned to Neville with a knowing look.

“I assume you’re not going alone, young man?”

“No, I’m not,” he confirmed. “It’s actually a date.”

She nodded, a smile creeping up her lips.

“I think I have just the thing for you,” she said.

She disappeared into the back room and returned with a black robe with deep red accents.

She invited Neville to try it on so she could make adjustments, asking him to return in an hour once she’d finished the alterations.

The three boys left the shop and decided to grab a drink at the Three Broomsticks. As they made their way up the hill, several girls emerged from the inn, including Hannah.

She caught Neville’s eye, and he blushed as she noticed him.

“Oh, there you are!” she said, surprised.

“You too,” he stammered.

A silence fell over them as the others looked on, unsure how to react.

“Are you ready for tonight?” she asked him.

Neville nodded. “I just found my outfit.”

Hannah smiled. “Perfect. See you tonight, then.”

Neville waved goodbye as Seamus and An ushered him inside. An went to place their orders while Seamus led Neville to a corner booth, pushing him onto a bench.

“Well, you’re not exactly the king of small talk, are you?” he teased.

Neville frowned. “Like you’re one to talk. I don’t see you with girls very often.”





Seamus blushed in return. “That’s because I like to keep a low profile,” he defended. “But that doesn’t mean I’ve never dated a girl.”

Seeing his friend’s skeptical look, he decided not to push the point further. An returned just in time to hear Neville recap the conversation, laughing as Seamus tried to defend himself.

“You, a ladies’ man?” An scoffed. “I have serious doubts.”

“I swear I could date any girl I wanted,” Seamus insisted.

The two others stared at him in disbelief.

“If you’re so skilled, go try to flirt with that girl over there,” An challenged him.

Seamus took him at his word, stood up, and headed toward a group of fifth-year girls. He walked straight to the one An had pointed out and wasted no time speaking to her.

“Well, you’ve got to admit he’s got guts,” Neville conceded as he watched from a distance.

“He is a Gryffindor, after all,” An agreed.

The scene only lasted a few minutes. When Seamus returned to their table, he was sporting a grin he couldn’t quite hide.

“So?” they asked in unison.

“Her name is Victoria, and she agreed to go out with me,” he explained, grabbing his butterbeer and heading back to join the girl and her friends.

The two boys looked after him, stunned.

“Well, I’ve got to hand it to him,” An joked.

Neville burst out laughing.

He wasn’t the only one who had changed a lot. Seamus had become one of the most popular students. In his first two Quidditch matches, he had already distinguished himself as one of Hogwarts’ best Chasers. Ginny had even admitted that he was almost at her level — a rare compliment from her.

An hour later, they left to pick up Neville’s dress robes. On their way back, Seamus rejoined them and recounted his outing with Victoria. According to her, she had also been invited by Professor Slughorn and had suggested he accompany her.



“So I’ll be the only one left in the common room while you guys go off having fun?” An summarized, feigning disappointment.

The other two shrugged.

An shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked a pebble that flew down the path, finally landing in a snowman.

They spent the whole walk back trying to assure him that the party would be a disaster, but he wouldn’t hear it.

At around seven, Neville and Seamus came down from the dormitory, dressed in evening robes. Victoria was waiting in a stunning vanilla-colored gown that highlighted her slender waist.

“Wow! You look amazing,” Seamus exclaimed.

The young woman thanked him and kissed his cheek. She greeted Neville before leading Seamus by the arm.

Neville gave them a bit of a head start and then made his way to the Great Hall, where he found Hannah in a pale blue dress that complemented her blonde curls.

“You look very handsome tonight,” she complimented him.

Neville returned the compliment.

He offered her his arm, which she took with a smile.

They walked together toward the dungeons, where Professor Slughorn had transformed a room, lavishly draping it with Slytherin-colored tapestries. A warm fire crackled in the fireplace, and several students in livery carried silver trays loaded with hors d’oeuvres that guests eagerly helped themselves to.

They were greeted by Slughorn himself, who was dressed in an emerald robe stretched over his considerable belly. He encouraged them to enjoy the buffet and mingle with the other guests.

“There are a lot of people here for a Valentine’s party,” Hannah noted.

“Yes, that’s usually the case with Professor Slughorn,” Neville replied, taking the opportunity to mention that he’d attended a few of these gatherings before. “He really likes introducing his favorite students to prominent people in the wizarding world.”

Hannah smiled, impressed by his knowledge.

“Ginny told me he introduced her to Gwenog Jones of the Holyhead Harpies last year,” he mentioned.



Hannah's smile faded.

"You're very close with Ginny, aren't you?" she asked.

Neville sensed he'd made a mistake.

"Oh, she's just a friend, you know. We're close because I'm good friends with her brother and her boyfriend."

Hannah's expression softened, her lips curling into a reassuring smile. She moved closer and took his arm.

"Miss Abbott!" Professor Slughorn exclaimed, reappearing with a tall man whose long blond hair was tied back. His proud stance and piercing gaze caught Neville off guard.

"And in such fine company, no less!" Slughorn continued, turning to his companion.

"Mr. Longbottom, I'm delighted to see you at my little gathering," he said.

"The pleasure is mine, Professor," Neville replied.

The Potions Master turned to the man beside him and introduced him to the two students.

"This is Mr. Yaxley," he said.

Neville shook the man's hand, feeling it clamp around his own like a vice. Yaxley fixed him with an intense stare and offered a sly smile.

"Longbottom, is it?" he asked. "Would you happen to be the son of Frank and Alice Longbottom? The famous Aurors?"

A shiver ran down Neville's spine.

"Yes, that's right," he confirmed. "Did you know them?"

Yaxley's smile widened.

"I encountered them a few times while they were working at the Ministry. They were an absolutely charming couple."

He paused before adding, "My condolences for what happened to them."

At that moment, Neville realized he knew this man. He remembered exactly where he'd seen him before.

"Thank you," Neville replied. "I remain hopeful that we'll find a cure for their condition someday."



He held Yaxley's gaze, his tone growing colder.

"And that justice will be served to those responsible for their suffering," he added.

Yaxley's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. He'd understood the message and made it clear to Neville.

"It was a pleasure meeting you both," Yaxley said in a more pleasant tone. "I won't keep you; enjoy the evening."

He left, following Slughorn to other guests. Neville watched him, while Seamus and Victoria approached.

"Who's that guy?" Seamus whispered in his ear.

"A Death Eater," Neville answered quietly.

Seamus's eyes widened as Hannah choked on her punch, terror flashing in her eyes.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I've met him before, when I went to the Department of Mysteries," Neville admitted. "He was there when we retrieved the prophecy about Harry."

Hannah covered her mouth with a hand while Seamus dropped into a chair. Victoria, on the other hand, remained silent, struggling to process the unbelievable information.

"But what's he doing here?" Hannah asked. "How can he be allowed into our school like this?"

"He was likely invited by one of our charming new professors," Neville replied, casting a glance at the Carrows, who had just arrived at the party in their usual black robes.

Scanning the room, Neville noticed several students he knew well, including Rolf Scamander, Erine Warden, and, in a corner, Attilius Malkin, who seemed to be under the watchful eyes of the Carrows.

The Slytherin didn't look well. Despite his new lavender robes, his face was marked by dark circles, a sign that he had likely spent more hours in his secret hideout, away from his best friend, who had chosen to join the DA.

Attilius had really struggled with his decision to leave the Cave. Immersing himself in Slytherin's memories hadn't been helping—quite the opposite. Despite his many absences in the past week, Slughorn had insisted he attend the gathering.



“I’m certain it will lift your spirits,” Slughorn had assured him.

So he had dragged himself here to make an appearance.

Upon arrival, he regretted it immediately. At the door, Slughorn welcomed him, handing him a glass filled with a blood-red liquid that the young man was expected to drink before entering.

“This will give you a boost,” Slughorn said, lifting the glass to encourage him to finish it.

In seconds, the drink took effect. The fog that the Pensieve had cast over his mind lifted, and his thoughts became clearer.

Slughorn took the opportunity to introduce him to Yaxley, who feigned unfamiliarity but claimed he had enjoyed the acquaintance of Attilius's father.

Attilius also noticed the presence of the Carrows and acknowledged them with a look.

The Dark Lord was growing impatient. The lack of progress from his end wasn’t satisfying him, and he wanted to make that clear.

Attilius grabbed another glass from a passing waiter and downed it in one gulp, wanting to stay as clear-headed as possible. Without a moment’s hesitation, he made his way over to Erine, whom he had just spotted in a corner of the room.

She was chatting with another student, who went silent as Attilius approached.

“What do you want?” Erine asked him bluntly.

Attilius shot her a dark look, and her friend understood she was not welcome, quickly making herself scarce.

“Do you see the tall guy behind me, the one glued to Professor Slughorn?” he asked.

Erine shifted slightly to get a better view of the man before nodding.

"He's part of the same team as our two favorite professors," he continued. "And he was there the first time we met."

Erine looked momentarily bewildered but quickly composed herself.

"What does that have to do with me?"

Attilius locked eyes with her.

"If they're here tonight, it's likely because their beloved leader isn't far off," he pointed out.



This time, Erine's eyes widened.

"Don't worry, they don't know who you are, and it's best to keep it that way," he reassured her. "You need to make sure the other students keep as far from him as possible."

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked, surprised.

"Because I know why you're here at this school, and I'm here for the same reason."

He paused briefly before continuing.

"The problem is, those three fools are probably here because I'm not doing my job well enough, and they want to punish me for it."

Erine tried to respond, but he interrupted her with a gesture.

"The others can't find out who you really are, so I'll make sure they keep their distance so you can alert your little team and get them out of here quickly."

"What team are you talking about?" she feigned innocence.

Attilius gave her a mocking smile.

"Did you really think I hadn't noticed your weekly meetings?" he smirked. "You should really consider being more discreet."

Erine pretended to respond, but Attilius grabbed another glass, drained it, and quickly took another. Then another.

His face turned red as a peony, and his eyes grew glassy.

"I told you I don't want to go out with you!" he exclaimed loudly. "Can't you just leave me alone?!"

Taken aback by his sudden outburst, Erine was uncertain how to react, and he was counting on that. Her spontaneity was the best way to make her look innocent in the eyes of the Dark Lord's servants.

"What's going on here?" Slughorn asked, arriving as swiftly as his portly frame allowed, with Yaxley at his heels.

Yaxley seemed pleased to see who was causing the commotion. He placed a heavy hand on the professor's shoulder and offered to take charge of the boy and escort him to the infirmary.

"I can certainly give him something here," Slughorn protested.

Yaxley smiled.



"Don't trouble yourself, Professor. I think all he needs is some fresh air."

He grabbed Attilius by the arm and encouraged him to follow. For good measure, Attilius offered a brief and pathetic show of resistance, prompting the Carrows to join them.

He had succeeded. There were no more Death Eaters at the party, allowing the members of the DA to return to their common room without any risk.

Once they'd exited the room, Attilius ceased resisting and regained his composure. He straightened up and ran a hand through his hair.

"You just couldn't resist showing up here, could you?" he grumbled. "I can't operate with you constantly breathing down my neck."

Yaxley's pleased expression turned stoic. He glanced down the corridor to ensure no one was listening and motioned for the boy to follow him.

They took the stairs and climbed several floors to reach the top of the Astronomy Tower.

They ascended one last wooden staircase and arrived on a platform where a metal globe stood.

Just behind it was a tall figure, with skin as pale as a skeleton's, draped in a long black robe.

"Master," Yaxley greeted him with deference. "I have brought the boy."

The figure turned, and Attilius looked into two eyes as red as embers, slit by a vertical line.

"Thank you, Yaxley," he hissed. "If only you could bring me Potter as quickly as this one, you would be the most effective of my Death Eaters."

Yaxley looked as though he wanted to respond, but his master dismissed him with a gesture.

Yaxley pursed his lips, bowed, and withdrew.

"None of your Death Eaters can get you what you want," Attilius declared in Parseltongue.

"And you?" the figure replied. "Are you able?"

Attilius shrugged.

"Do I have a choice?"

The Dark Lord loomed over him, his height intimidating.



"I have allowed you the time you needed to accomplish your mission without incident, but I can no longer afford to wait," he stated. "I must be absent for a while to see that my affairs are in order. You have until my return to complete it."

Attilius thanked him with a bow.

"If you fail your mission or attempt to evade it," he continued in a language all could understand, "the Carrows will gladly make you regret it."

The young man turned toward the brother and sister with ox-like builds, who shot him a cruel smile.

"I won't disappoint you, Master," he declared.

He met his gaze intensely.

"It's too late for that," he hissed.

The Dark Lord turned and stepped over the balustrade, disappearing into the night.

Attilius moved closer to the railing and leaned on it.

The finish line was on the horizon. He didn't have much time left before his master decided to end things with him.

He didn't have much time left to put his plan into action.

