

And The Stars Never Rise

by *HogwartsClassof91*

Severus Snape was a bitter man.

One

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: The title comes from the last verse of Poe's "Annabel Lee." Many thanks to my beloved beta, Karelia, for grammar skills extraordinaire.

And The Stars Never Rise

Severus Snape was a bitter man.

This had not always been the case.

As a child, he could hardly have been described as 'happy,' although there had been certain things from which he'd taken delight. Those things had faded as the years had passed. Decisions. Mistakes. Consequences. His life had been a circuitous journey through a minefield of poor choices and an ocean of regret. And then he had died, broken and alone, on the floor of a dusty old shack. A fitting end to an existence laid bare by its own vile actions.

If only.

If only she'd forgotten his lifeless body.

If only she hadn't noticed his missing portrait.

If only she had let him die.

Hatred etched deep lines into his face. He lifted a crystal glass to his lips, and although the whiskey warmed a path down his throat, it did nothing to chase the cold fingers of reality wrapping around his mind. Once a year, he drank a glass of the finest spirits his Galleons could buy. Once a year, he pulled an old, wooden box from the back of his closet and settled himself near the fire. Once a year, he indulged himself with memories of the past. An anniversary of sorts, for a day he'd do well to forget. A day he would always remember.

Another sip of whiskey eased the shaking from his hands. He placed the glass upon a table and removed the lid from the box. Faded papers were stacked inside...newspaper clippings, letters, cards, hastily penned notes...all arranged in perfect chronological order. He removed the first: an article cut from the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. Dark eyes narrowed when he read the heading.

He Who Must Not Be Named Vanquished By The Boy Who Lived!

Death Toll Rises in the Wake of the Battle at Hogwarts

He did not bother to read the article but focused on the list of the dead. His own, familiar name jumped out at him. He set the cutting aside and moved to the next.

Snape: 1, Snake: 0!

Severus Snape Alive! Saved by Former Student!

Again, he skimmed the jumble of words on the page and dropped his gaze to the pictures beneath the headline. The image of Healers working over his prostrate form was given the briefest of glances before his eyes focused on the other photograph. A self-conscious smile played across the face of Hermione Granger. She pushed her abundant hair behind her shoulders and turned shy eyes to the camera, as if she expected the lens to capture nothing but her final pose.

No amount of whiskey could cease the tremble in his hands now. Anger roared through his body until it squeezed the air from his lungs and filled his head with the din of a thousand waterfalls. The edges of his vision became a blur that rimmed the image of the smiling girl in a hazy vignette.

"Damn you."

His words pierced the stillness of the room. The walls offered no reply to his whispered vehemence. They had heard the same refrain last year. And the year before that.

And as happened every year, he was struck by the sudden, overwhelming desire to crush the article in his fingers, to hurl it into the fireplace where her photo could no longer haunt him. He resisted the impulse, but the effort left him drained. His limbs were cast of lead, and he took great care in setting aside the clipping before moving onto the next.

The Heroes of Hogwarts

War Heroes Honored at Anniversary Ceremony

The paper was quickly moved to the table, placed facedown atop the pile. He had no desire to relive the events of that afternoon. The Order of Merlin medal had felt foreign around his neck, heavy with the weight of hypocrisy, the souls of the sacrificed. He had nearly suffocated beneath the thin, red ribbon, and he'd removed it the instant he'd left the castle grounds. It had been tossed into the bottom of the old box where it had remained to this day, laying alongside its identical twin.

Knowing the next item he'd encounter within the box, he reached for the crystal glass. He was not the first to seek courage in alcohol. When he could no longer avoid the inevitable, he set aside his drink and snarled at the words on the yellowed envelope.

Professor Snape

He had recognized the precise handwriting the instant the owl had delivered it. His mind had filled with dread when he'd first read the contents of her letter. He unfolded the fading parchment, and dread filled his mind once more.

I hope this letter finds you well and you are enjoying your life after retiring from Hogwarts. I apologize for intruding upon your privacy, but I have encountered an unusual problem with the brewing of Veritaserum. I have exhausted the Ministry's resources in my search for a solution. It is my fervent hope that you can help shed some light on this mystery. I believe you may be the only wizard who possesses the unique knowledge and skills to solve it. Would you be amenable to meeting with me at your earliest convenience? I shall anxiously await your response.

Kind regards,

Hermione Granger

Department of Magical Law Enforcement

A dozen replies in varying degrees of nastiness had been written and rewritten before being burned in the fireplace. At one point, he had entertained ideas of using the opportunity to rage against her, to inform her of just how infuriating her decision to save his miserable life had been. In the end, he had sent no reply at all. He should have recognized the folly of such inaction.

He added her letter to the stack on the table, repeating the process with a second, identical envelope she had sent the following week. She had given him the benefit of the doubt, accommodating the possibility of unforeseen circumstance. When her second inquiry had also gone unanswered, the volume of notes had increased. She had been relentless, inundating his house with a swarm of owls, sending notes at all hours of the day and night. His anger for her impertinence had finally pushed him into action, and he had journeyed to the Ministry, ready to battle her in person. Which, in retrospect, had been exactly what she had wanted.

His lips curled as he remembered their first meeting. His ire had not fazed her. His disdain had been ignored. Every insult he had hurled had been dismissed, as if she had been able to see right through him. She had become immune to his taunts, hardened by the war. She had seen too much death, yet somehow she'd radiated life. Time and circumstance had changed her, matured her. She had become a woman.

He had been powerless against her.

Against his better judgment, she had drawn him into the puzzle surrounding the diminished efficacies of Veritaserum. No one had been able to discover why the truth potion had stopped working. The Ministry had always relied on the serum when dealing with criminals and had considered it a vital tool. Support for a solution had been high. He had spent months working alongside her, researching every aspect of the time-consuming brew. Their eventual success had been well publicized.

He pulled the next cutting from the box.

The Truth Shall Set You Free!

Mystery of Weak Veritaserum Solved by Hermione Granger and Severus Snape! Muggle Impact on Climate Change to Blame!

Once more, he ignored the text of the article. A small photograph showed them together, answering questions on their research and findings. His fingertip brushed over her picture and lingered on her hair. Such ridiculous hair.

She had refused to let him go after that. He had tried to return to his previous life, but his desultory refusal had proved no match for her tenacity. She had made it her mission to involve him in projects at the Ministry. Worse, she had seen fit to drag him along on social events. She had ignored his protests. Dismissed his arguments.

Defied his logic.

The whiskey glass was half empty, but he allowed himself a large swallow. He forgot their work on Veritaserum when his fingers reached into the box and touched a splashy page torn from the gossip section.

Romance in the Stars for Snape and Granger?

Taking their relationship beyond the Potions lab, the couple was spotted dancing together at the Minister's Ball. My sources at the party noted they rarely danced with anyone else, spending the entire evening side by side. One wonders if they'll wake up the same way!

The image of a grinning couple turning circles on a long-forgotten dance floor occupied his gaze as the minutes ticked by. He remembered the black dress she had worn as if the ball had been yesterday. The silk had felt cool beneath his palms, a striking contrast to the heat of her skin. He recalled showing her the article, bracing for her embarrassment, her shame, her bleak regret. He had expected mumbled excuses. He had received resounding laughter.

Her delight had poured over him, washing away old doubts, as cleansing as a soft spring rain. He would have been less anxious showing her the article if she hadn't been lying naked in his bed at the time. He had been certain she'd make a hasty retreat, but she had surprised him. She had always surprised him. Tearing the page from the magazine, she had rubbed it across her exposed skin, claiming that Rita Skeeter's article had just seen more action than the woman could ever hope to report.

The page trembled beneath his fingers. He ignored the warning that screamed through his mind and raised the sheet to his nose. Her scent filled him. Soap and parchment and woman. A faint memory of lilacs. How often had he taken those smells for granted?

After several moments, he relinquished the page and stared at the next item in the box: a cheap paper napkin with a silly heart drawn upon it, the word "yes" scribbled inside. The ice cream shop hadn't been his intended locale for a marriage proposal, but she had looked so enchanting that the words had tumbled from his mouth before he could stop them. She had laughed when he had saved the napkin, accusing him of gathering proof then assuring him she would not change her mind. She couldn't have guessed how many times he had reread the simple word, how often he had fingered the dark smudge in the corner where she had wiped an errant drop of strawberry sauce from her lips. His stomach twisted at the thought of the sweet syrup, and he set the napkin aside.

Hours passed, and still he continued to remove items from the box. There was a bevy of clippings from newspapers, as the press had always been eager to report on the unusual couple. Snapshots from holidays taken together: Paris, New York, Venice. Cards given for no reason. A flower she'd pressed between the pages of her old schoolbooks, its color decayed by time.

Their wedding invitation.

The parade of happy images never seemed to stop. But then they did. His hand stilled over another article, another Minister's Ball.

A Notable Absence: Snapes a No-Show at Minister's Ball

For the first time in four years, Severus and Hermione Snape did not make an appearance at the annual Minister's Ball. Sources on the scene have suggested Mrs. Snape has been under the weather lately. Can the pitter-patter of little feet be far behind?

When she'd begun to lose her appetite, he hadn't worried. When the sounds of retching had filled their mornings, he had been seized by strange emotions. He had been certain she was pregnant. He had been wrong.

The Healers at St. Mungo's had been baffled by her intense pains, her constant nausea. Against his better judgment, they had visited her parents' Muggle doctor. The diagnosis hadn't made sense to him. It was a zodiacal sign, a constellation. Not a disease. She had smiled at his consternation.

Treatments had been arranged. Options had been discussed. Her small hand had squeezed his so tight the tips of his fingers had turned white. The fear in her eyes had been fleeting. Haunting. She had thought she'd hidden it, but he had seen. The sight had spurred him into action. He was a Potions master, dammit. Surely between all the science of the Muggles and all the magic of the wizarding world, they could beat this thing.

They could not.

The Muggle injections had done nothing but weaken her body. Every strand of her ridiculous hair had fallen out. She had refused to cry, had insisted straight, luxurious tresses would replace the bushy mop when it all grew back. She had fought the disease just as she had fought all adversity in her life: fearlessly. She had been relentless. Strong. His brave little Gryffindor, scared of nothing.

Privately, he had been scared enough for both of them. He had refused to sleep, had dared not risk the time away from her care. She had slept often. He had used the time to test new potions, try new methods. *Anything.*

If only he could develop an antidote.

If only he could halt the effects of the disease, or at least slow its blasted progress.

If only he could stop the sight of her fading before his eyes.

If only.

His hand reached for the glass. The last sheet of paper was removed from the box, leaving nothing but a pair of matching Order of Merlin medallions behind. His. And hers.

War Heroine Buried in Private Ceremony

Hermione Jean Snape (nee Granger) was laid to rest on Saturday after losing her battle to cancer, a Muggle disease rarely seen in witches or wizards. She is survived by her husband, Severus Snape, and her parents, Eleanor and John Granger, of Oxfordshire.

Changing his habit, he read the words but ignored the photograph. He hardly required a picture to remember the heavy rain that had fallen, drenching the flowers strewn across her casket. The force of the downpour had destroyed the delicate lilac blossoms, breaking them apart until a river of tiny, purple petals had spilled onto the ground. She had wanted to be buried with her favorite flowers, had begged him to have lilacs at her funeral. But even in this, her final request, he had failed her.

As he had five years ago, he welcomed the anger coursing through his veins. For a moment, he allowed it to flow away from his own rotten life and focused it on her.

How dare she? What right did she have to bring him back from death just to succumb to its endless embrace herself? How dare she allow him a fleeting glimpse of Heaven only to send him right back to an eternity of Hell?

How dare she leave him alone?

Recriminations raced through his mind, hatred for the cruel whims of Fate that would take such light from the world when his useless, blackened soul should have gone instead. Blame warred with guilt, but remorse was the ultimate winner. He reveled in his private wrath, knowing the fury was better than the emptiness, the constant void that would return the instant the box went back into the closet. As dawn colored the horizon, the last vestiges of his anger ebbed, leaving him cold and numb. And alone.

Always alone.

His whiskey glass sat empty, the yearly ritual, complete. The papers and mementos were returned to their makeshift vault in precise order. He resisted the temptation to bury his nose amongst them, to breathe her scent one last time. He replaced the lid and cradled the box in his lap, fingers caressing the smooth, worn wood.

Although his eyes stared into the hearth's glowing embers, he saw nothing but her face.

Smiling.

Laughing.

Deathly still forever more, eyes closed in final slumber.

"Damn you," he whispered again. And again, the walls remained silent.

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