

Offerings in the Darkness

by h_vic

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Severus Snape raised his head to watch the priest intone the words he distantly remembered as, all around him, the faithful bowed theirs in prayer. The service had provided no answers. The restless emptiness that pursued him throughout his waking hours had hollowed out his heart too long ago for anything to touch him. He had gone to church on Christmas Eve hoping that the once-familiar ritual would engulf him and seep into the withered depths of his soul. Yet it only left him cold, which was all that he knew he should have expected. Severus watched the candles float above him and the figures in the stained glass wander from window to window as the liturgy continued without him.

Those elements were amongst the signs of the subtle difference between this ceremony and the ceremonies of his childhood. Here, robes replaced the priest's cassock, remembered from his youth, and runic figures were embroidered on the white stole around the priest's neck. It perhaps appeared to be a far cry from the Muggle churches he recalled, but in essence it remained familiar.

When the service ended, he shook hands with the priest mechanically and received the benediction, knowing that it did not have the power to cleanse his sins, however well-meant the blessing was. He was too far gone to be saved. He was the lost sheep of the flock, lulled to the ways of the wolf and unable to return to what he had once been.

Before he left the small chapel, Severus drew aside from the smiling throng to stare at a small rack of candles.

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Dropping a Sickle into the collection box, Severus took a candle from the rack, grasping it like a lifeline, and lit it from another flame, forsaking magic. As penance to the tattered shards of his life, he still kept the traditions of his youth, but now for the sake of a different soul. He stood briefly, alone amidst the crowd, watching the amber light dance across the ancient stone, before following the other 'lamb's' from the church, feeling unfulfilled.

Walking through the chilly streets of Hogsmeade, he wondered once again just what had drawn him to the chapel on this night of all nights as he had throughout the past hour since he had left the seclusion of the empty school (he had allowed no students to remain for the holidays so as to protect them from the Carrows, and perhaps, if he was honest, himself, leaving him in perfect solitude). It was the last day of any on which he would have expected to find himself seeking forgotten faith. Yet, there he stood in the icy darkness, quite as alone as when the evening had started.

As he began to walk, the snow fell.

"We'll get caught!" Severus whispered.

"Shush," Lily cautioned him yet again, easing open the heavy door.

Any objection he might have raised was rapidly quelled by the perfect vision that greeted him. The grounds of the castle stood caked with a fresh, unbroken layer of snow that stretched all the way out to the Forest as shining flakes tumbled in the moonlight. Nothing had yet disturbed its beauty; the stain of humanity had not spread to it. It was pure and unsullied, and Severus drank in the sight, storing the picture in his mind. He was, in his own way, grateful for the chance Lily was offering him to share it with her, just as he prized every opportunity to be near to her. The innocence that she shared with the still night was so foreign to his own soul.

"Come on, Sev," Lily entreated him, venturing out into the blanket of white. "If we wait until tomorrow, everyone will have ruined it!" She strode impulsively onto the flat ground below the steps, spreading her arms wide in the moonlight and spinning. Snow settled lightly in her hair as it fanned around her, and the flakes caressed her flushed cheeks.

Severus forced himself to focus instead on the careless footprints she left, but he found that they, somehow, did not mar the perfection of the sight as they ought. He chose not to be darkly reminded of what could never be his and the many ways in which he could never touch her. He tried to fool himself that he would not waste his time on impossible dreams, but his eyes stole unbidden to her lips.

"Come and dance with me, Sev," she whispered, her face shining.

Severus watched her green eyes sparkle with challenge, bright flashes in the darkness.

Retreating once more into the familiar isolation of his office, Severus knew he could not escape the avalanche of memories that threatened to overwhelm him. Instead, he lit the half a dozen votive candles that lined his desk his one concession to the festive season. Trickle of wax had run in rivulets, a testament to long use, pooling on the dark mahogany, as if the candles shed the tears that he could not. Each one was an offering of sorts, an apology or consecration perhaps, in his mind at least.

Each candle told its own story and beseeched him with a voiceless plea. Yet, there was little variation in the stories that replayed themselves mercilessly in his mind, and in the flames, as they all shared a resolution. Charity Burbage, Albus Dumbledore, Mary MacDonald and the nameless, faceless others each was a life that weighed heavily on his conscious. Every flame mapped the course of a life extinguished before its time. They were the crimes to which he had borne complicit witness, or those wrought by his own hand. He offered only a candle now in recompense for their lives, but then what else did he have to give?

"A new cauldron?" Mary suggested.

Severus shook his head. "Too impersonal."

Mary sighed in frustration. "Why ask for my help, if you're going to turn down every present I suggest?" she demanded, standing to leave.

"Because I have to get her something perfect!"

"Lily'll love whatever you get her because it's from you. Something will come to you," Mary reassured him, patting his shoulder in a motherly fashion on her way past.

"Severus..." Horror was etched in every line of Mary MacDonald's comely face, and the terrors of her captivity ripped through her voice.

Severus resolved not to think of her as Mary, not to think of her as the girl he had known, definitely not to think of her as Lily's friend, not to even think of her as a person at all.

"Do it!" a high, cold voice commanded from behind him.

Do it! a voice echoed in Severus' mind. Prove yourself!

He had to prove himself worthy to bear the Dark Lord's Mark. Mary was to be his vow.

Severus slumped deeper into his chair. Knowing there was only one way he might drive the memories from his mind, even if just for one night, he dragged a heavy crystal tumbler across the desk towards him. Carelessly, he slugged a generous shot of Firewhisky into it and raised the glass to his lips.

'Cheers!' he muttered grimly, a bitter toast to those who haunted him.

"Firewhisky, Severus?" Dumbledore offered. "It is the New Year, after all a cause to celebrate."

Severus lifted his gaze from the flames of the fire. "Your last?" he enquired coldly.

"Undoubtedly," the older man replied, sparing Severus a calm smile. "I am ready when the time comes..."

Severus nodded reluctantly. He understood the need, but it had been many years. He had not thought he would kill again; he did not wish to kill again.

"Severus... please..." For the first time that Severus could remember, Albus Dumbledore looked old, old and frail, but yet unafraid. Severus raised his wand before him in the darkness, curling his fist tightly around it so that its shaking would not disgrace him.

Severus slammed the tumbler violently onto the desk, the harsh, amber spirit spilling across the scattered parchments. He closed his eyes, pressing his fingertips hard against them to shut out the judgement of the candlelight, but he could not shut out the past. He could not shut out the truth, the things he had done. So many were simply unconscionable.

Severus stepped into the room unannounced, his knock having gone unnoticed. He stood in silence, uncharacteristically loath to announce his presence and break his colleague's concentration, as the young woman's light fingers continued to fly over the ivory keys. The silver candelabra resting on the piano bathed her in an almost ethereal glow.

The tune she played was both melancholy and yet oddly comforting. Severus settled himself against the door and folded his arms to listen. A half-smile pulled at his lips as the music flowed around him, tempered only by concern that Charity would resent the intrusion just as he would have.

She glanced up and, seeing Severus framed in the doorway, nodded for him to turn the page for her. He stepped forward and obliged, her eyes tracing the newly revealed lines of notes. She smiled at him in thanks as the warm shadows of the candlelight played across the parchment.

"Severus! Help me!" Charity Burbage span in the air before him, above the ornate table that dominated the Malfoys' drawing room, begging the man she thought she had known to save her.

A familiar, numb sense of purpose settled over Severus as he watched her turn away from him again. He followed her spiralling progress in the polished surface of the table, too much of coward to meet her eyes. He could not afford any slips now. He could not grant himself the luxury of regret.

"Ah, yes," he answered his Master calmly, his voice a careful study in languid control. He would give away nothing. He would leave Charity to her fate. Too much was at stake.

Severus placed a heavy fist on the dusty, forgotten piano as he took one last, long look around the empty office that would soon belong to Amycus Carrow. Slowly, he uncurled his fingers, revealing the delicate filigree chain laced between them, which had slid from Charity's wrist into his lap as her lifeless body had struck the Malfoy's table.

Dropping the bracelet into his pocket, he gruffly seized the leaves of sheet music that stood on the piano stand and strode from the room, his heels beating a hollow, staccato rhythm on the stone.

Opening his eyes, Severus watched as the flames danced to the long-dead music. Unable to bear the company of ghosts any longer, he blew them out. All but one...

Alone at the heart of his vain altar of regret sat a dipped taper, weeping its lifeblood the centrepiece of his shrine.

The candle cast haunting shadows that writhed before him on the wall, looming large. The shadows did not threaten him, though; they begged him to dance with them, just as the owner of the soul he honoured once had. Their lithe grace stirred his memories. His palms, planted on the desk before him, convulsively curled into grief-stricken fists, sliding protectively towards his body, crumpling meaningless papers in their wake.

Seizing his left sleeve, Severus roughly dragged the fabric back to his elbow, baring pale flesh marred by the blackened outline of his captivity the witness to youthful folly and arrogance that shaped the horror his life had become.

It seemed odd to think how proud he had once been of bearing the Dark Mark when now it repulsed him. His face contorted into an anguished sneer as he stared at the indelible mark of his sin, the brand that set him apart from those blissful fools who spent their life in ignorance of power, of glory... and of regret.

As the candle flickered on the edges of his vision, Severus was seized with an absurd urge to sear the stain from his skin. The fiery pain could scarcely compare to the agony of his Master's summons after all, and then it would all be over. His nails cut into the soft flesh of his palm, and his eyes traced the sinews that tension made visible. His hand shook. He could end his enslavement so simply.

Except, it was not simple. No one denounced the Dark Lord and lived long enough to even contemplate walking away. Not that he had anything to live for. His bitter laughter bounced off the walls, as did the shards of the crystal tumbler, which he hurled across the room. No, he had nothing to live for, but he had a role to play. Life was not finished with him yet; Dumbledore's machinations had seen to that.

He had to avenge Lily's death, and he was so close. Now that the end was in sight, the memories tore at him more viciously than ever. She was gone, and Severus could blame no one but himself.

He had blamed her husband and the fallible headmaster for not protecting her; he had blamed her son for merely daring to exist; he had mistakenly blamed Black for betraying her; he had blamed that old fraud Trelawney for her damnable prophecy; he had blamed his Master for not sparing her, and most of all, he had blamed her for her nobility and sacrifice. The truth, however, was that he knew he ought to blame himself.

Christmas was the hardest time. It had been the darkest time in the Snape household during his childhood, but the lightest in her presence. She had loved Christmas, and she had shown him the briefest glimpse of its sparkling joy before she walked away from him.

Severus slid open the lowest drawer of his desk, scattering old parchments and quills. From the very bottom of it, he withdrew a faded bundle of Christmas cards. The cards, with their well-thumbed edges, were a familiar weight on his palm as he went to pull off the band that bound them together, but he could not bear to open them. The familiar looping patterns of her script would be too much for him that evening. He did not have the strength left to find comfort in the past.

Severus' eyes found her candle once more instead. Copper tones skirted the edges of the taper's flame and, as he watched, coalesced into a shingly familiar fall of russet at the heart of the glow. He saw her turn, her face shining at the heart of the blaze as she smiled.

The cards spilt from his fingers, sliding unheeded across the pitiless stone floor.

"Merry Christmas, Lily," he whispered, his breath extinguishing the candle and her life once again.

Author's Notes: *This story started life as a humble drabble for a festive challenge over on MNFF with the prompt of a picture of a candle. The drabble just wouldn't leave me be though once I'd written it.*

Thanks go to Snape's Talon and thegirlkeme for beta-ing.

The dialogue in Charity's death scene is from 'The Dark Lord Ascending' in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, and the dialogue in Dumbledore's death scene is from 'The Lightning Struck Tower' in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.