

The Crossroads

by HogwartsHoney

Snape ponders his past in the last hours before Harry's final confrontation with Voldemort. Based on a song, but not ?strictly? a songfic.

At The Crossroads

Chapter 1 of 5

Snape ponders his past in the last hours before Harry's final confrontation with Voldemort. Based on a song, but not ?strictly? a songfic.

A/N: This fic was inspired by the words of the song "Here Without You" by 3 Doors Down, the lyrics of which have been partially reproduced here.

Thanks to Nishles for working the storyline with me, to LariLee for her suggestions, and to Sun for fixing things!

+++++

A hundred days have made me older

Since the last time that I saw your pretty face

The chill in the night air was unmistakable, as was the shape of the boy who slept restlessly at his feet. *Man*, he corrected himself, for Potter was certainly no longer a boy. Months of searching, of very near misses and eventual successes, had led them here, to this point, this night and this inevitability. Here, in the approaching dawn, was the day foreseen in a prophecy spoken some seventeen years earlier, the day that Harry Potter would challenge Voldemort. He had known for some years now that this day would eventually come, but they had always known that it wouldn't be easy. Their journey had been fraught with danger, arguments, mutual mistrust, and long days and nights of mental and physical battles. 'No,' he mused 'it *certainly hasn't been easy*.' Then again, very little in Severus Snape's life was easy.

Snape had never been a man of emotion or sentiment and had, as such, never cultivated close relationships with those around him. The fact that he had been forced, *FORCED*, to kill Albus Dumbledore, his mentor, was something he was still battling within himself. Dumbledore had taken him in, had trusted him when no one else did, and had remained his champion even during the very worst of suspicion. His death had been hard for Snape to orchestrate without drawing too much unwanted attention to himself and was even harder to implement. Here, in the wake of all that had followed, the consequences were almost too much to accept. Severus Snape was not comfortable with a conscience.

Another problem that gnawed away at him was the matter of Miss Granger. Whereas she had always been impossibly intelligent and insufferably knowledgeable, there was really more to it. Snape considered her to be a most interesting and worthy adversary. Were he true to himself, he acquiesced that she was quite a bit more than that.

~*~

A thousand lies have made me colder

And I don't think I can look at this the same

In retrospect, it seemed to Snape that his entire life had been comprised of lies and counter-lies. Deception, while a natural requisite of all things associated with the Dark Lord had, in recent months, become wearing, sapping his usual strength and eroding at his carefully constructed self. 'Ha,' he chided himself silently, because in the very deepest recesses of his heart, he knew that it was more than just the deception. It was the constant and *needless* deception of those he held in highest regard, and of those he ... yes ... those he loved.

He grimly acknowledged that his future was sketchy at best, with so much hinging on the forthcoming battle. He knew Harry to be a powerful wizard, fiercely loyal to his friends, uniquely favoured by magical forces, and more than capable of standing up to most wizards, but Harry had only limited knowledge of the true capability of Voldemort. Snape mentally closed his eyes against the horrors in his past, both of those he had performed himself and those he'd been a party to far too many to count. Forgiveness of others would come; forgiveness of self was another thing entirely.

He shifted soundlessly against the rough bark of the tree beneath which they had taken their shelter, meagre though it was. He glanced down once more as Harry murmured in his sleep and hoped that tomorrow's outcome would be something they could both live through. And live with.

But all the miles that separate

Disappear now when I'm dreaming of your face

I'm here without you baby

But you're still on my lonely mind

I think about you baby

And I dream about you all the time

Closing his eyes and shivering despite the Warming Spell he'd cast over himself and Harry, he could picture Hermione's face, so open, so eagerly interested, so yearning for knowledge. Late in her sixth year, she had yearned for a great deal more than the knowledge gleaned from mere books, and he had responded with a great yearning to teach her. After several weeks of working together in his office on secret business for the Order, one particular night their mutual attraction had been blatantly obvious, and it swelled between them with a tangibility that could not be ignored. She had appealed to his mind, his body and his long-forgotten soul, as he had appealed to hers.

Perhaps it was the danger of their work, of the unknown or the yearning for *some* kind of relief, but they had coupled that night, forcefully and carnally at first, then with more attention to each others' bodies as they cemented their affair again and again. Much later, as they lay sated in each others arms, Hermione had quietly confessed her feelings to him, and reluctantly, as though uttering them would somehow make them elusive, he had conceded his own. He had dimly wondered whether he had just sentenced to death the one person who might be his salvation, and that question had held fast in his mind as he was lulled to sleep by their hearts beating in unison.

~*~

I'm here without you baby

But you're still with me in my dreams

And tonight it's only you and me

Snape allowed himself one moment in this night to remember the last time he'd seen her, to free the memory from the very deepest recesses of his mind, to shake it out like gossamer cloth and see all the beauty that it contained.

He had seen her during Bill Weasley's wedding to Fleur Delacour. It had been a somewhat subdued celebration, heavily tinged with the ominous portents of what the future might hold. While the last of the invited guests had danced and laughed into the night, he had met Hermione at a pre-arranged spot not far from the Burrow. He had arrived before she did and had stood for a moment considering his options. There were none.

Hermione had Apparated with a soft pop and cautiously glanced around to ensure she had not been followed. He had swiftly closed the distance between them as his eyes devoured every detail of her, and he had burned her image into his mind so that he could hold it there forever. She had been resplendent in bottle-green robes (a silent nod to her Slytherin lover), and her normally bushy hair was tamed and gathered in gentle waves atop her head. She wore a pair of emerald drop earrings, which were a present from him, and a slim gold chain gifted from her parents upon completion of her O.W.L.s. She was, in a word, magnificent, and had seemed to him so radiant that she almost glowed. Everything, that is, except her eyes, which had been clouded by worry for him, worry for Harry and their impending travels.

"Stay with me a while, I only want to be with you," he had urged.

"I can't be long, Severus," she had whispered, automatically looking behind her. "Nor can you."

Those words had borne a dull certainty that they had both felt at their core. They both knew that words were no longer necessary; they had argued and discussed and fought and wept in the preceding days, and neither of their positions could be changed.

She had looked both disapproving and worried, torn between wanting to accompany him, and knowing that her involvement with the Order and her part in the war must take place on a different field of battle.

He had cupped her face in his hands and tilted the angle of her head so that her eyes met his. His body had shivered as she placed her hands over his and met his gaze with love and sadness. They had kissed then, a slow, lingering, longing kiss that was less about passion and more about acceptance, acceptance of their love of each other and of their fates. Funny thing, fates.

~*~

The miles just keep rollin'

As the people leave their way to say hello

He and Potter had travelled great distances in search of Voldemort's Horcruxes and had managed to find them all, or so they'd thought. Tom Riddle's diary had been destroyed by Harry in his second year, and Salazar Slytherin's ring had been dealt with by Dumbledore himself. Slytherin's locket, however, had taken the Order the most time to acquire, and Kingsley Shacklebolt had spent several weeks at St. Mungo's clinging to life after he had finally destroyed it. Helga Hufflepuff's cup had also proved problematic, and it had taken the combined efforts of Tonks, Mad-Eye and the Weasley twins to eventually destroy it. The Horcrux of Rowena Ravenclaw was hard come by and had almost cost them both their lives.

The brooch had been deceptively simple an oval shaped clasp fashioned out of bronze, and etched with a eagle poised to take flight from a base of a flowing capitalized 'R'. The intricacies of the layered spells and strengths of the curses placed upon it by Voldemort had led Snape and Harry to believe that this was the penultimate Horcrux, the one created most by Voldemort at his most powerful, possibly even upon the night that James and Lily Potter were murdered.

~*~

Snape shifted and stretched out his long legs as he eased his tight muscles. He considered a conversation that he'd had with Harry several days prior. They had received word via Fawkes that Hermione had been successful in locating and destroying another Horcrux, Tom Riddle's Medal of Magical Merit, which had been in the trophy case at Hogwarts. Snape had felt a warm surge of pride at his former student, whose brilliant mind was what truly set her apart from all others. Hermione had also sent word that

she believed the final Horcrux to be Voldemort's wand, as Dumbledore had mentioned one night in deep despair.

Were that true, then he and Harry's certainly had their work cut out for them. The Dark Lord didn't know of Snape's involvement with the Order, nor of his present situation, and he hoped that they would be able to carry out their plan successfully. The Boy Who Lived had possibly become doubly vital to the success of their mission, and in this matter Snape could not fail.

I've heard this life is overrated

But I hope that it gets better as we go

The dawn finally broke, casting its pale light across the countryside. Reluctantly, Snape distanced himself from his memories and carefully set them in their proper mental place, safely warded against the most powerful of Legilimency. He would leave nothing to chance. He rose to his feet and stretched his tired muscles into groaning obedience, then moved to where Harry was stirring. As the younger man got to his feet and put on his glasses, blinking in the early morning rays, their eyes met, and the knowledge of the day ahead hung heavily around them like a Dementor's cloak.

"Ready?" muttered Snape.

Inhaling deeply, Harry nodded and bent to gather his few possessions into his travel case. He slung his bag over his shoulder, and without another word, they both set off for the graveyard at Little Hangleton.

And when the last one falls

When it's all said and done

It gets hard but it won't take away my love

+++++

TBC

Beyond The Crossroads

Chapter 2 of 5

Snape reflects on his past and the choices he's made.

The two men had spent most of the grey daylight hours hidden among the Muggles in the village of Little Hangleton. They had circumvented the graveyard upon their arrival and then had walked uneasily through the town, each man occupied with his own thoughts while keeping their eyes open to any dangers around them. Snape once again recalled Mad-Eye Moody's mantra of 'Constant Vigilance' and knew that the old fool would be doing his nut were he to see them walking about in plain view.

Severus and Harry had barely spoken to each other as they ate a light meal at a small deli on a quiet street, and Snape had leaned back in his chair to look at the younger man. Harry sat with downcast eyes, completely absorbed in his own thoughts, the weight of an entire world on his shoulders. Snape knew that Harry would fight to the death to complete their assignment and that, were their plan to prove successful, tomorrow could hold a glimmer of hope. Severus Snape was not a man who tended towards optimism; he had seen and done too much to believe in 'things working out for the best'. Those were the sentiments of Albus Dumbledore. Snape preferred not to waste time in the present thinking of his non-existent future. His past was difficult enough.

He had subconsciously rubbed his left forearm, but his Mark hadn't burned in many weeks. He wondered ...

~*~

Snape remembered the night when he had sat in Dumbledore's office and glared at the older man across his desk. The Headmaster was becoming weaker by the day, and Snape knew him well enough to realize that almost no sacrifice would be too great in order to save Potter. Severus Snape could not allow that to happen.

He had once more pleaded with Albus to release him from their Unbreakable Vow, but, typically, the Headmaster had smiled knowingly and gently, but had firmly denied him.

'Then I am sorry, Headmaster, but I cannot comply with your request,' Snape had said as strongly as he could, standing and drawing himself to his full height, hoping that his actions would lend some weight to his statement. He had known that they were empty words before they were uttered; Dumbledore had his balls in an iron-clad Unbreakable Vow that would make any lawyer proud. Every possible scenario had been covered, and Snape was bound to him and to it.

'Severus.' Dumbledore's voice was gentle, and it was all that Snape could do not to cringe from the man, cringe from the things he was asking him, no -- COMMANDING him to do. He had committed atrocities for the Dark Lord, but *this!* He had dropped into his seat and held his head in his hands as he pressed the flats of his palms into his eyes, hoping to quell the fierce headache that threatened.

'Headmaster, there must be another way.' Snape, never an optimistic man, had still dared to hope.

Dumbledore had risen with difficulty and walked around to Snape's side of the desk. He had paused for a moment before he placed his good hand on Snape's shoulder.

'You know there is no other way. You above everyone else know what is to happen, Severus, what you must do and what I must do. Harry must be protected at all costs, Severus; he is our only chance. Voldemort has seen to that.'

Snape bowed his head in defeat. He knew that the Headmaster was a stubborn old fool, but he knew that he was bound by magic to this unthinkable fate. He had not been prepared for the statement that followed.

'Severus, I will need you to complete one further task.'

Snape's eyes had narrowed at the very tone of Albus' voice -- he knew that tone, and it never bode well.

'I am listening,' he said, grimacing. He knew full well that he was Dumbledore's pawn and had very little choice in the matter.

'I will need you to accompany Harry ...'

'NO!'

'Severus ...'

'Albus, no. I have a duty to you, but that does NOT mean I will babysit that boy ...'

'Severus.' Dumbledore's voice had been a little more insistent and surprisingly strong, considering the man's physical state. He held Snape's eyes with his own, and the younger man had recoiled against the mental image of what Dumbledore had initially requested of him. The weight of that knowledge burned in his gut, but the additional burden of Harry Potter ...'

A long moment of silence had passed between the two men as Snape fought with himself. No, he would refuse ... This was too much ... Surely someone else could do it? No sooner had the words flashed through his consciousness than he knew the answer. He could not refuse, nothing would be too much, and he knew that Dumbledore would entrust nobody else with this task. He sighed.

'What must I do, Albus?' His voice had been flat and without emotion.

'I will need you to accompany the boy on his journey to find the remaining Horcruxes. Although Mister Weasley and Miss Granger will want to go with him, your knowledge of the Dark Arts and Dark Magic will serve him better.'

Snape's gut had wrenched again at the mention of Hermione's name.

~*~

In the days immediately following Dumbledore's death, Snape had gone into hiding. He had known that his life would be for naught were he to be found by any member of the Order, and he had doubted whether even Hermione would believe his story. He had not been able to attend Dumbledore's funeral, and sat in a dingy room in a dingy pub contemplating his next move, as he grasped a Galleon in his palm. He flipped the coin through his fingers as he pondered what was left of his future and the dubious wisdom of Dumbledore's request. He knew that, were he to start down this path, the outcome would not be certain, but he grudgingly admitted to himself that he had no choice whether he started down the path or not. Dumbledore may be dead, but his final wish could not be denied.

He swore extravagantly and tapped his wand against the edge of the coin. It glowed for a moment, and he had fervently hoped that Hermione still kept her coin with her at all times, and that she had not dismissed him as a murderer. He was a murderer, of course he was, many times over, but this was different. He had to make her understand. She was, after all, a very clever witch.

The Galleon had glowed briefly in his open palm, and in the dull light of the room, he could clearly make out the words *Eat Shit* on the face of the large coin. A clever witch with an extremely vengeful side.

He had dropped his wards before he tapped the coin once again, and she had Apparated into his room almost immediately. Her face had been contorted by many emotions, fury, anger, fear, sorrow and ... he searched for it ... yes, there it was. Love. Almost hidden, but there. He wordlessly re-warded and sealed the room; she was always careful, but times were very different now. He was a wanted man.

He had met her eyes with difficulty and moved to catch her hands as she had rushed at him, screaming and pummeling his chest wildly. He was thankful for the Imperturbable Charm on the door; he had thought that their meeting would go badly. She had collapsed against him, weeping openly, and he could do nothing more than lower her to the ground at his feet. He had Summoned a chair and sat quietly as she cried, not touching her or uttering a single word.

Her sobs had eventually quietened, and she leaned wearily against his legs, wiping her eyes. He rested a hand on her head and had smoothed her unruly curls. She lifted her tear-stained face and looked at him searchingly. He nodded and helped her rise before pulling her to sit on his lap. She had wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.

'Why?' she had whispered, her voice still shaky with emotion. His resolve had threatened to crumble and he savagely tightened his mental grip on it.

'Hermione, I need you to understand something.' He had carefully considered his words as he didn't want her to leap to the wrong conclusion before she had heard him all the way through. He had disentangled her arms from his shoulders and had stared into her eyes. She met his with difficulty, but he held her chin firmly until eventually she had held his gaze.

'I had an agreement with ... Albus.' His voice had almost broken with the emotion of uttering the Headmaster's name. 'He and I made an Unbreakable Vow many years ago, and he held me to it to the very last ...' His voice shook slightly with barely controlled emotion. 'He ordered me to ...' Snape could barely say the words. '... sacrifice his life in order that Harry might live to defeat the Dark Lord. I was, regrettably, unable to prevent that situation from coming to pass and had to ... comply with his wishes, even though they were against my own.'

Hermione's gaze had never left his, and he had felt oddly exposed, as though by admitting his culpability, he had somehow become less controlled. He had not relished the feeling.

He fleetingly remembered Hermione's face that fateful night, when she and the Lovegood girl had come into his quarters to warn him the night of the attack on Hogwarts. Mercifully, it was after he had Stunned Flitwick, and he'd seen the terror so evident on both their young faces. He had wanted to suspend time so that he could ensure her safety, and had done the only thing he could have: he tried to delay the inevitable by ordering them to help the fallen Professor as he had swept from the room.

'I am sorry, Hermione. I tried to save him. I ... had ... no ... choice.' His voice shook with a weakness that had infuriated him, but she had firmly prevented him from descending into his familiar place of darkness. She had refused to let him go.

'Severus.'

Hermione's eyes had reflected her understanding, and her gentle voice broke through his thoughts as she had brought her hand up to touch his face. He had felt his skin burn at her touch, as though the atrocities of his life were being purged from his body by her faith and her love. He shook his head and was unable to understand how she could believe him, why she could still find it in herself to love him, to care, to trust.

'There is something further,' he continued, and she had leaned back slightly to survey his face, cocking her head slightly and raising an eyebrow. He was uncomfortable with her open stare, but had been unable to escape, so he had continued quickly.

'The ... Headmaster has instructed me to accompany Potter in search of the remaining Horcruxes.' He had raised his hand to silence her outburst and proceeded. 'Dumbledore felt that my considerable knowledge of all things associated with Dark Magic would be of invaluable assistance to Potter. I, unfortunately, believe the boy to be useless, but I am still under an obligation to comply with Dumbledore's orders.'

Hermione's eyes had widened as Snape revealed the plan to her, and he had imagined the many wheels turning in her mind. He knew that she would, of course, have wanted to go with her friend on his quest, but he had insisted that she desist from any such plans. As usual, she had far too many questions that could not be answered, and they each had become furious with the other's refusal to change their positions. They had argued fiercely that night, their screams made private by the charms and other wards that he'd placed on the door. She had attempted to leave at one point during their argument, but the wards on the room had prevented her from Apparating. She had turned towards him then and had tried to maintain a modicum of logic.

'Severus, you must let me go.' Her words, although quietly spoken, had carried with them more force than he had expected.

His logic had been as irrefutable as hers.

'Hermione, you must be aware that I am completely unable to do so.'

His simple statement had surprised them both. Of course, *he* had known that his feelings for her were dangerous, the ones that troubled him deep within the recesses of his own heart and mind -- *those* feelings. He had doubted whether she knew just how dangerous loving Severus Snape could be.

She had pushed her small body against his chest as they lay in bed later that night, shifting her backside until she lay flush against him. She had reached out for his hand and draped his arm across her, entwining her fingers in his. He was still not comfortable with such intimacy, and he felt the need to pull away, to guard himself as he always did. Her grip had tightened as though she had read his mind and anticipated his thoughts. *Clever little witch.*

~*~

Snape was abruptly brought back to the present as Harry shifted, knocking his feet against the table. With a start he realized that the sun had moved across the sky and was beginning to set. The surrounding buildings cast shadows that lengthened towards them, and he shivered as their cold fingers touched his face.

TBC

+++++

Against the Darkness

Chapter 3 of 5

"Snape glanced once more at Harry as they felt the air around them grow cold ..."

Disclaimer: JK Rowling owns and rocks the Potterverse! I just like playing with her toys.

+++++

They stood, and the sound of their chairs scraping against the ground startled the two men. Harry finally met Snape's eyes, and although the boy was young, Severus could see his grim determination, oddly reminiscent of his red-headed, green eyed mother. Yes, Lily Evans would surely be proud of her son.

Snape remembered for a moment the Lily of his school days, her hair flowing carelessly down her shoulders, but the image soon shifted into another schoolgirl with careless hair. Hermione. To be sure, their relationship was unconventional and, if discovered, would mean more than merely his dismissal and her expulsion from Hogwarts. Were the Dark Lord to discover their bond, the implications would be too severe to contemplate. Severus Snape had never before felt the need ... the *compulsion* ... to protect someone, anyone, but his young Gryffindor had given him more than he had ever dared hope for. She had given him love, and that love he jealously guarded, holding it closer to his heart than the very blood that flowed within it.

He closed his mind as an unnamed fear twisted in his gut. Images of the horrors of his past flashed through his mind, and the fear twisted again, gripping his heart. No, he could not allow himself any distractions today. Today he *must* remain strong, focused, and insensate. That would be his *true* power.

As the darkness finally fell about them, Snape and Harry set out for the graveyard. They moved quietly as they snaked their way through the cemetery and eventually came to a stop in front of a large statue on the top of a grave. The battered and worn tombstone was etched with the barely visible words 'TOM RIDDLE'.

They stood in silence and waited.

Snape glanced once more at Harry as they felt the air around them grow cold, and his hand tightened its grip upon Harry's upper arm. A slight shift of Harry's muscles confirmed that he had understood. Black robes billowed in a phantom wind as the Dark Lord swept out from behind the crypt and fixed his malevolent glare upon them. Snape could feel the tension rising as the Dark Lord surveyed the two men before him.

'So it is you, Severus. My most loyal and trusted servant has brought me the boy. You alone are worthy of the rank of Death Eater, and you shall be rewarded after this uprising has been quelled once and for all.' Voldemort's high and hissing voice was chilling, and Snape felt Harry's shiver as they both fought to keep their minds clear of emotion. Of thought. Of everything.

Snape bowed elegantly, and his grip on Harry's arm lessened fractionally.

'Thank you, my Lord,' he supplicated, awaiting the Dark Lord's next move, careful to occlude any intrusion into his mind.

The tall and menacing spectre circled the pair slowly, dangerously, his hissing breaths cutting through the chilly air like knives. Snape slowly straightened until he was once more standing upright next to his charge. Harry's eyes had never strayed from those of his enemy.

Voldemort's eyes glittered like gemstones as he proclaimed his victory.

'Look at me, boy, for tonight I shall have my final revenge. That which I have sought for so long has finally come to pass. Harry Potter stands before me a captive, and tonight I shall be rid of him forever!' The unmistakable finality of those words drove home into Snape's heart the knowledge that failure tonight would certainly end in more than just their deaths. Were Voldemort to gain full power, the entire Wizarding world would be plunged into chaos and anarchy. He carefully occluded that thought as well. They could not let that happen.

'Leave the boy to me, Severus,' he commanded, and Snape's fingers shifted imperceptibly.

'Of course, my Lord.'

Snape's voice was surprisingly steady as he shoved Harry to one side and silently *Accio'd* Voldemort's wand. The look of rage on the Dark Lord's face was second only to his look of absolute horror as Snape closed his fists tightly around the ends, bringing the wand down sharply against his raised knee. The wand snapped cleanly in two with a sound like a gunshot, and it glowed momentarily with an eerie red light before the light exploded in Snape's hands, searing his flesh, and arcing past the three human

figures as it disappeared into the night.

Snape's body convulsed horribly as his hands gripped the two halves of the Dark Lord's wand. His every nerve felt as though it were being ripped from his body as waves of Dark magic tore through his chest, threatening to excise his very soul, momentarily stunning him and rendering him breathless. The final Horcrux had been destroyed, and the residual magic inside dissipated.

Snape staggered backwards clutching at his burned hands, barely keeping his feet as Voldemort screamed in fury and lunged towards his former Death Eater. Before Snape had time to recover, the Dark Lord struck him across the face with the back of his hand with enough force that Snape spun around, staggering, as he tried to retain his balance. Quicker than thought, Voldemort relieved Snape of his own wand, and his Dark fury was immeasurable as he rounded savagely upon his most trusted *traitor*.

CRUCIO!

Voldemort's reptilian face glowed with an eerie light as the curse bit into Snape, and his victim writhed pitifully, eyes staring in horror, mouth open in a silent scream. Severus could hardly breathe, and every movement, every thought, was pure agony. He had endured this curse before, many times, but the absolute fury of his betrayal gave Voldemort's curse a power and potency that Snape had never before experienced. His mind could barely grasp at reality, and in the recesses of his mind, he heard Harry screaming curse after curse at Voldemort.

Impedimenta!

Expelliarmus!

CRUCIO!

The curses only served to distract the Dark Lord, but suddenly, Snape was no longer on fire, although his entire body still shook violently. The distraction lasted long enough for Harry to half drag, half shove Snape headfirst behind the tomb. As he fell roughly to the ground, Voldemort hurled another curse in their direction, and Harry flung himself out of its way. The force of his momentum slammed him into the edge of the crypt, and he raised his arm to protect himself. Snape heard Harry's scream as the impact tore the flesh from his arm, bruising the bone. Harry staggered against the crypt using his other arm for support, and although Snape's vision was still blurred by his own pain, he could clearly see that Harry was in trouble.

Snape struggled to his feet, still breathless as he examined Harry's wound, desperately trying to ignore the pain of his own charred flesh.

'Foolish boy, don't you know that you must be the one to defeat him!' he rasped, and his mind swam with rapid images, snapshots of the ghosts of the past, the noble ones who had died to sacrifice so much for this war. An uncharacteristically concerned tone belied the harshness of his words. 'Too many have died so that you may live, Harry. Too much has been lost. Too many have been indebted to ensure that he dies tonight! You. Must. Not. Fail.'

He could see that Harry was momentarily taken aback by the force of his words, but they both knew that Snape was right. The fates had seen to it that they were in that place, on that night, to put an end to the horror that was Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Severus retrieved Harry's wand with difficulty, and waved it quickly as he muttered a spell. Harry felt the wound begin to close, and the pain lessened to a dull ache. He moved his arm experimentally and then nodded to Snape as he then took his wand and cast a spell over the older man's hands. Once mended, they stood and prepared to face the enemy once more.

They emerged silently from either side of the tomb, their ears and eyes alert to any sound of movement that would betray their quarry's whereabouts. Although he was wandless, Snape moved in front of Harry as they threaded their way through the rubble of headstones and dead trees in the cemetery. The only sounds in the grey landscape were the soft scuffing of their shoes on the ground and the gentle crunch of dried leaves underfoot. Even the wind had ceased to blow, resulting in an odd deadening of all noise. They both turned quickly when they heard the unmistakable swish of robes behind them.

INTEREO DOLOR!

Both Harry and Snape saw the movement at the same time, but Snape was a fraction quicker as he instinctively lunged at Harry. He knew that incantation; it had been contrived by Voldemort himself many years ago, and it was much worse than any Unforgivable. He grabbed Harry from behind, and spun them both around as he muttered a Shielding Charm against the boy. His own body absorbed the punishing curse, and he stiffened, gasping, as he felt it rip through his body, efficiently destroying him at every level, while still allowing him to feel the pain of that destruction. A brilliant spell, to be sure.

The spell would keep his mind magically intact so that he could see, feel and understand what was happening to him and how he was dying. To a highly intelligent man like Severus Snape, this particular death was infinitely worse than a mere Avada Kedavra.

He felt Harry stagger under their combined weight as the momentum threw him off balance, and he leaned against a tall crypt to steady them both. He appeared to be so taken aback by Snape's actions that he didn't initially realize what the outcome had been.

Snape barely felt Harry shift his weight as he tried to get them both into a standing position, but the man already felt as though he were nothing but dead weight slipping through Harry's arms. Snape looked up into Harry's face and saw his alarm while the life drained from his own tired, wretched body.

Severus was able to understand everything as his physical body was destroyed, and although he was certain that his death would be fairly rapid, his brain would be the last to die. The mind can take a moment and weave it into an eternity, and he could feel his memories fading and his vast knowledge withering as his higher brain functions slowed.

Fleeting images of Hermione grazed Snape's failing mind, and he was finally able to let go. His iron grip on his emotions was liberated, and their rush threatened to break him, so powerful and all encompassing that, even in death, they staggered him. He concentrated hard with what was left of himself. Unable to speak, he forced the thoughts and emotions into Harry's mind.

'Finish it, Potter.'

He could no longer keep anything intact, and he fought against the ebb of his life, but even conscious thought was slipping further away from him. His vision was blurred, he felt cold, and the world didn't seem to make much sense to him anymore. He was dying faster now; it was finally happening; his primitive brain understood, and he settled into the darkness.

~*~

Many miles away, Hermione awoke, screaming.

TBC

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

intereo: to perish, die.

dolor: pain, grief, misery, suffering. Source: www.freedict.com

=====

A/N: I know. I'm sorry.

A Dark Light--The Devil Gets His Due

Chapter 4 of 5

Severus Snape had been in love with Hermione. Harry knew that there had been some involvement between his friend and the Potions master...

Disclaimer: Jo Rowling owns and rocks the Potterverse, and would probably be very upset at what we do to her characters.

'A dark light---The devil gets his due' KISS

=====

"Finish it, Potter."

The words pressed urgently into Harry's mind as the body of Severus Snape hung limply in his arms. He desperately clutched the man to him as he lowered him gently to the ground, but Snape was already dead. The horrified shriek that ripped through the cold night air came from Harry's mouth, and he dropped to his knees beside his former tormentor, a man who had become his mentor and friend. He looked over Snape's thin body as he frantically searched for life, but he knew that his quest would be in vain.

Harry still felt Severus' words burning in his mind, but the image of Hermione, and the force of emotion that had accompanied that image, had left the young Gryffindor momentarily stunned.

Love. Burning, impassioned, all-encompassing love.

Harry crouched over Snape's lifeless body as if to protect it while he felt for his wand. His hands closed around it, and he performed a Disillusionment Charm to buy himself some time.

Severus Snape had been in love with Hermione. Harry knew that there had been some involvement between his friend and the Potions master, but throughout their travels, he and Snape had initially tried to simply co-exist. Although they had talked occasionally, and in recent times had even discussed their strategy, they had only barely begun to touch the edges of friendship. As he looked down upon the peaceful face of Severus Snape, he realized that the man had tasted the freedom of Love.

"Finish it, Potter."

~*~

Harry heard Voldemort's high pitched laughter as it echoed through the graveyard, sinister and as cold as a blade. There would be time for tears and sorrow later, but the evil that was Voldemort must be destroyed, and Harry straightened up with savage determination. He heard the rustling of leaves as the man searched through the rubble of headstones and crypts for his quarry, hurling insults as he moved from grave to grave. Harry knew that his position was in no way safe, and he rapidly searched his mind for options.

Harry gripped the handle of his wand tightly, and felt pain lance through his arm. He looked once more at Snape's body, and an overwhelming sense of loss swept over him. Here before him represented yet another casualty of this war, another life destroyed because of one man. *Lives* destroyed. Severus' love for Hermione had come as a shock to Harry, but its power was undeniable. He barely heard the mocking words that Voldemort hurled in his direction as his sorrow and loss gave way to an entirely different emotion.

Love.

Harry knew in his heart that he fought not just for himself, but for all the people he loved. Ginny, his beautiful, wonderful Ginny, who loved him unconditionally. Ron and Hermione who loved him like their brother and had been with him through the many twists and turns of his life. Molly, Arthur and the rest of their family who had welcomed him without question or reservation. Sirius, Remus and Tonks who helped him through many difficult times, and Dumbledore, the only father he had ever known, who had loved him and treated him with kindness and respect.

Finally, his thoughts turned to his own parents whom he loved fiercely, although he had no memories of them. He had often wondered how his mother could have sacrificed herself so willingly to save him, but now, as he stood in the midst of impending death, he finally understood. It was love, true and simple, so complete in its honesty that it had been able to withstand death itself.

'Finish it, Potter.'

He walked out from behind the crypt and raised his arm, barely noticing the pain as he levelled his wand at Voldemort. Voldemort balanced Snape's wand in his thin fingers as he stood beside the Riddle grave and casually outlined his plans for Harry's death. His eyes, mere slits, gleamed with a diabolical light as he raised his own wand in response to Harry's movement. While Voldemort plotted his demise, Harry felt a wave of emotion rising from deep within him, a wave that gained momentum as he filled his mind and heart with the images of his loved ones. He would defeat the man with all the love he had, the love for all the people he had lost, and for all those he hoped to save.

Harry could feel the power of that love build up inside of him and radiate from his core. He was suddenly suffused with an enormous burst of pure emotion that coursed through his body and out through the tip of his wand. He barely had time to register the power of that feeling, when his mind enunciated the Killing Curse, and there was a blinding green light.

He watched as the bolt of green struck Voldemort squarely in his chest. His slitted eyes opened wide in surprise as the curse flung him backwards, and he landed heavily upon the headstone of his father's grave. Harry heard the stone crack with the force of Tom Riddle's body, and a cloud of dust rose that seemed to envelop the broken, lifeless form. Harry watched in astonishment as the dust coalesced, resembling a cloak that engulfed Tom Riddle's body. It drew him down into the opening as it wrapped around him, morphing his body until it no longer resembled that of a man. The river of grey flowed through the gaping hole in the Riddle tomb and disappeared.

Harry stumbled towards the grave and sealed the opening with a wave of his wand. His hand shook so badly that, for a moment, he wasn't sure that he had succeeded, but the complete absence of any sound other than his own ragged, retching breaths was enough to know that his curse had done the job.

It was finished.

+++++

Harry stood over Tom Riddle's grave and tasted his first breaths of a life without Voldemort. His mind was scattered in a thousand directions, and with effort he raised his wand into the air, sending off a shower of red and gold sparks. He knew that his signal would be seen precisely as intended, and he made his way back to the crypt, where he slumped to the ground near Severus' body. He touched the lifeless face of his former Potions master, and memories of their long and turbulent past flooded his mind. Snape the hated teacher, Snape the tormentor, Snape the tormented, Snape the conflicted, Snape the man, flawed and cruel, brave and callous and finally, Snape the hero. Completely and truly alone for the first time in his life, Harry covered his face with his still-shaking hands and wept uncontrollably.

The signal had alerted Fawkes to his position, and before long he heard the song of the Phoenix as it swept out of the darkness into the graveyard at Little Hangleton. As always, the sound lifted him out of his deepest despair, and upon landing, the bird regarded him solemnly.

'Hullo, Fawkes,' he said quietly as they nodded to each other in recognition.

Fawkes cast a critical eye at Harry as its gaze took in his battle scars and the bloody gash on his upper arm. The phoenix gave a single cry and crooned gently as its tears fell onto Harry's injured arm. He felt the warm tears as they washed into his torn flesh, healing and mending his wounds. The comforting presence of Dumbledore's bird seemed to nurture his wounded soul as well.

Harry smiled wearily.

'Thanks,' he muttered simply. The Phoenix merely nodded.

Harry dug through his bag and found some paper and his Muggle pen. He closed his eyes and took a deep, steadying breath before he began writing. Fawkes would take Snape's body back to the Order, together with his letter explaining how Voldemort had been defeated. His letter to the Order detailed Snape's part in Voldemort's defeat, as well as what still needed to be done. Harry was sure that there was still much work to be done in rounding up the remaining Death Eaters, and that the Order would be kept busy for some time to come.

His letter also insisted that no one come looking for him. Harry knew that there would be much debate over that point and could almost visualize the arguments put out by Molly Weasley and her offspring, but he needed time to himself, time to come to terms with the past, and time to prepare for his future.

With shaking hands, Harry also wrote a separate note to Hermione. He was unable to say much, even though the memories were still fresh in his mind, so he hastily signed his name and folded it. He carefully addressed it and tucked the paper into Snape's breast pocket. He knew that she would find it.

He stood with difficulty and regarded the Phoenix once more.

'Fawkes,' he began uncertainly, 'I need you to take Professor Snape back to the Order. Take him to Headquarters, please, and deliver him to Minerva. Make sure she gets this letter, and, if you can, make sure they comply with the instructions.'

He wasn't sure whether or not the bird understood him, but Fawkes bowed serenely, a strangely familiar twinkle in his eyes. The Phoenix flew over to Snape's body and gripped his clothes firmly, before spreading his spectacular wings and rising into the air, disappearing quickly from sight. Utterly alone for the second time in as many hours, Harry turned and picked up their travel bags before glancing once more in the direction of the Phoenix's flight. He straightened his shoulders, turned his back on the graveyard, and walked away until he was swallowed by the darkness.

TBC

=====

A/N: I know that this chapter is very Harry-centric, but he WAS the only one left to defeat Voldemort, and I also wanted to get someone else's point of view of Snape's final moments. Harry was the only witness to Severus' destruction, both physical and emotional, and I thought that the enormity of that event was too important to just be 'left in the air'. I promise to tie things up in the next chapter!

I know, poppet, I know.

Melting The Darkness

Chapter 5 of 5

Snape ponders his past in the last hours before Harry's final confrontation with Voldemort. Based on a song, but not ? strictly? a songfic.

Disclaimer: JK Rowling owns and rocks the Potterverse. I just love playing with her toys.

'And as the morning steals upon the night, Melting the darkness...' *William Shakespeare, The Tempest*

=====

The Order of the Phoenix learned of Voldemort's demise when Fawkes arrived at their Headquarters with Snape's body and Harry's message that the enemy had been destroyed. He had also sent explicit instructions that no one was to come looking for him, and that he would contact them when he was ready to return. Hermione had not been at Headquarters then, but had returned shortly after Fawkes' arrival. She had felt queasy since she'd awoken the night before, screaming and bathed in sweat, crying from an unknown dream. Her first instinct was to curl up in bed and wait for it to pass, but always a practical girl, she knew that a walk in the brisk spring air would do her a world of good. She wanted time away from the Order, time to think.

She pulled her cloak closer around her body as she bent her head into the wind. She couldn't shake the uneasiness that she'd felt ever since she woke from the dream; it was a clinging, cloying, sick-making feeling that not even the sunlight nor the promise of spring could remove.

She returned to Headquarters feeling slightly lighter, but was greeted by a roomful of stunned and distressed expressions. She felt fear clutch at her heart, twist in her gut, and she knew. The look on Remus' face, the stunned expressions of the twins and Ron, the sobbing gasps of Molly Weasley, all told her that the final battle had come.

There had been death, of that she was certain, but *whose* death?

'What's happened?' she asked, her mouth dry. She didn't move, couldn't move, wouldn't move, until someone told her something. *Anything*.

'He's been defeated, Hermione. Voldemort. He's gone.' Ron's voice was tinged with relief and disbelief, as though by uttering the words he could somehow convince himself of their truth.

She looked from Ron's face to Remus', then to Minerva's. Yes, Voldemort was destroyed, but Harry? Severus? What about them?

'Harry is alright, dear,' Molly hastened to add as she walked over to embrace Hermione.

Although Hermione felt a blast of relief that her friend was alive, the knots in her stomach twisted further as she heard herself ask, 'And Severus?'

Molly stiffened slightly in her embrace and held Hermione at arm's length. She looked to Remus helplessly, and Hermione could see that the werewolf was struggling with himself. She looked around wildly at the other members.

'Fred? George? Remus? MINERVA? What about Severus?' The panic was now evident in her voice, but she didn't care. She had to know. Where *was* he?

Remus' voice was calm.

'Hermione.'

'Remus.' Her voice was barely a whisper.

'Fawkes brought his body back a couple of hours ago. Voldemort got to him before they... before Harry was able to kill the bastard.'

The flow of adrenaline was like cold water that washed over her, and her initial reaction was to run, to scream, to rend her swollen heart from her chest and put it aside so that it would not suffocate her. She couldn't breathe properly; it was hard to breathe... She felt herself swaying, spinning, and her knees gave out as the room went grey...

~~

She awoke in her room, lying fully clothed on the bed, a cold compress on her forehead. She remembered being downstairs, talking with Remus, and she looked around for a sign that it, too, had been a dream. From the heaviness in her heart, she knew that life had twisted once more and had taken Severus with it. His body was somewhere in the building, but she couldn't bear to see him, couldn't begin to think of him as anything other than alive. Minerva would see to his body. Hermione sat alone and cried long, wracking tears for the man she loved and for all that they'd lost. There was a careful knock at the door.

'Come in,' she said, wiping her eyes and trying to control the tremor in her voice.

The door opened to reveal the lined, concerned face of the Headmistress. She moved slowly towards Hermione and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Hermione felt her tears flow afresh, and she looked up helplessly into Minerva's face. She was surprised to see her own sorrow reflected in the face of her Head of House.

'I loved him too, child,' she whispered and gently pressed a letter into Hermione's hands. She turned quickly and left, closing the door softly behind her. Through teary eyes Hermione recognised her name in Harry's untidy handwriting, and with shaking hands, she unfolded the piece of paper.

Hermione,

You were right, his wand was the final Horcrux. Severus destroyed it himself, and we fought Riddle together. His plan was brilliant, Hermione, he was brilliant, and he loved you. I didn't know until the end, but I felt it, and I know. You and Severus, I know, and I'm sorry.

Harry

She had been almost blinded by her grief then, had almost allowed herself to slip too far into misery, but the voice, his voice, silky and comforting inside her head had somehow pulled her to safety. *Control your emotions*. He had always purported that she was too emotional a creature, and he had tried to school her in Occlumency, but she preferred to keep her emotions where she could see them. This time, however, out of necessity, she had swallowed the feelings and kept them tightly occluded until she could spend time with them and have proper time to grieve.

~~

Fawkes had accompanied them to the funeral, and the Phoenix's song had been carried by the cold April breeze that blew over the small, shivering gathering as Severus Snape, Order of Merlin First Class (posthumously), was laid to rest. Afterward, Fawkes had appeared at the Order's Headquarters, and nobody saw reason to object. Dumbledore had always said that the Phoenix was a power unto itself, and the bird had come and gone at will. They all had felt privately honoured that Fawkes had chosen to make their Headquarters his home, if only for a while.

Hermione had spent that night pacing back and forth in her room. She felt that she was rapidly coming undone and railed against her inability to keep herself together. She could not have known that her mind needed release and that her emotions were instinctively preparing for her to grieve. She found herself close to tears at all times, and the floodgates finally opened when she received Severus' personal effects from Hogwarts. Blinded by her tears, she had locked herself in her room and had refused to come out, even to eat. Molly had made several attempts to persuade her, but she was adamant. Ron had tried to talk to her, but her scathing verbal attack had made him retreat even further.

Hermione had gone through Snape's small chest of personal items, lovingly fingering his Slytherin cufflinks and the green, leather-bound book that had been her gift to him the previous Christmas. There was also a letter, magically enchanted to appear only to her and readable only after a series of incantations which must be performed in the correct order. She had smiled wistfully it was a little game of theirs, to see who could be tricked into failure first. She had never failed his tests, and tonight was no exception. She whispered the spells as though he could somehow hear her, and her heart jumped as the seal on the envelope opened. She carefully withdrew the sheet of parchment, and her eyes filled with tears as his careful, spiked handwriting materialized on the pages. She held the letter in shaking hands and took deep steady breaths before reading his words.

My love,

How is it that an insufferable know-it-all would come to capture my heart? None other than a brave Gryffindor would even chance to try, and for that, I am eternally grateful. To have known you, and to have feasted on your love, is more than this man could dared have hoped for, and I am forever yours.

Know this -- were the outcome of this war any different, I would have made you mine. Alas, all that is fire does not burn, and you must, in time, seek another life. Be happy my darling, and be safe.

Your

Severus

Hermione had cried uncontrollably then. Her tears seemed to have no end as they washed over her and engulfed her, sweeping her away to distant shores of despair. She

cried for all the losses in her life, for her youth that had been stolen by the war, for Harry and Severus, Bill and Dumbledore, Neville, Dean, Lee, Sirius... and all the countless others who were victims. She felt her grief like a solid entity within her, heavy and forever immovable. She cried until her sorrow broke like a fever, and on the other side of that long dark night, she felt a lightening of her grief, as though the weight within her had been somewhat lessened. She didn't know it then, but her road to healing had begun.

~fin~

=====

A/N: Finally, it is finished. The story actually continues along a different vein, as the question to Harry's whereabouts is still unanswered. Reviews eagerly welcomed, and thanks again to all the people who encouraged me throughout this story! Y'all rock!