

Finding His Voice

by michmak

A companion piece to "She Never Stops Talking", a one-shot PWP I wrote that refuses to let me go.
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Learn to Be Lonely

Chapter 1 of 9

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Author: Michmak

Disclaimers: not mine, boo hoo.

A/N: I've been meaning to post this, along with my other stories, here since forever and am finally getting around to hopefully getting caught up.

I'm viewing this as a bit of a companion piece to 'She Never Stops Talking', which was supposed to be a PWP one-shot but just refuses to let me go.

He was not a social man by nature – or was that by nurture? It was hard for him to tell, sometimes, and he'd really given up wondering a long time ago. When he had been younger, had he been this way? Dark and brooding; quick to anger and unforgiving?

He didn't think so. He recalled a time, in the hazy past of his childhood, when he had longed for physical affection; the gentle squeeze of a hand on his shoulder and a 'well done son'; the soft caress of a mother's hand running through his hair. He even recalled a time when he had wanted friends.

But that was ancient history and these were things he no longer needed. At least, this is what he liked to tell himself, and the majority of the time he allowed himself to believe.

He was not a man accustomed to sunlight and laughter; shadows and secrets were the places he lived. And if loneliness was not his natural state, it was one he had learned to accept and even, at times, to relish.

He needed no one and no one needed him. He told himself he wanted it this way. He had learned his lessons well; lessons taught by the harsh hands of his father and the indifference of a woman never meant to be a mother. All he had was duty and pride – and sometimes, he didn't even have pride.

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Survival was the last thing he had expected. He had been prepared for his death and, if it was not something he was exactly longing for, it wouldn't have been unwelcome in the end.

Bugger Fate – the nefarious old bitch never gave one what they really wanted. He had come to realize over the years that Fate rarely gave one what they really deserved either. When the dust had settled after the final battle, once the bodies were counted and it became obvious that the Light had won, Snape had been left wondering how to go about picking up the pieces of his life and starting over.

What was he starting over with, was the question? It was a terrible thing when a man outlived his duty; outlived his usefulness. He still had his teaching position, of course – could still terrorize the dunderheads, could still fully live the persona of the 'greasy git', but what else was there for him?

He was not a man who had friends. The few he would have considered his friends at one point in his life were all dead or in Azkaban, more likely than not cursing his name to hell as they actively worked out ways to kill him. Albus was a friend, he supposed. The older man had certainly stood by him in the aftermath of the war, when his activities as a double agent and spy for the Order had come to light. But who else was there?

Everywhere he went, he was viewed with outright hostility and suspicion – it didn't help that The Daily Prophet featured him almost as prominently in their rag as Potter. Potter, of course, was the Wizard-of-the-Hour, the man-child who had almost single-handedly defeated Voldemort. Snape - well, with him, it was different. He was the double agent, trading his knowledge to whatever side seemed to be winning at the time. It was implied his status as a spy had basically given him free reign to commit whatever atrocities he so desired; that the only reason he had come out on the side of the light in the end was out of his own self-interest.

He should have expected that, of course. Years of isolation at Hogwarts, on top of his reputation as an anti-social practitioner of the dark arts and his own 'greasy bat' persona, all served to work against him now. Not that it mattered. He was used to living alone. He liked the solitude of the dungeons at Hogwarts. And he knew, no matter what anyone else thought about it, he would always have a job as the Potions Master at Hogwarts. Albus was never swayed by public opinion - deserved or not.

So, he retreated to his dungeons. When he was grudgingly awarded the Order of Merlin First Class for his participation in the downfall of Voldemort, it was done so via Owl Post, without much fanfare. Whereas everyone else was presented theirs at a large public gathering, with much fanfare and brouhaha, Snapes was dropped in his soup by some senile old owl that barely had the strength to carry it.

The letter that accompanied it had been short and to the point:

"For services to the Light, we are pleased to present Severus Caligula Snape with the Order of Merlin, First Class."

On a separate piece of parchment were the words,

"Severus, we regret that we cannot present you with this award at the public ceremony where the rest of the medals are being presented. Public opinion is very volatile at the moment, and for your own safety we must exclude you from the celebrations. Thank you for your understanding."

Respectfully,

Patroculus Paternoster,

Acting Minister of Magic,

Great Britain."

When Dumbledore found out the reason for Snape's absence from the awards presentations, he had been outraged on the younger man's behalf but Severus himself had calmly accepted the edict as a matter of course. The Wizarding World hadn't accepted him even before he had become a Death Eater – why should they do so now?

Snape was a proud man, but he was also a realist. He knew what he had done had been pivotal in the downfall of Voldemort and so he accepted his medal as his due. It didn't concern him in the least that almost everyone begrudged him his very life; that few were inclined to believe he had actually acted as a spy with the purest of motivations. He didn't need anyone's respect - he had never wanted to be a hero.

At least, that's what he told himself. Sometimes, he even believed it.

TBC?

AN Redux: with the angst comes the return of the sad songs – such as this lovely little gem, recently written to play over the end credits of Phantom of the Opera, which, btw, is a great movie with a truly sexy Gerard Butler looking especially good in tight pants and leather masks. (and I mean that in a non-BDSM kinda way, lol.)

Learn to Be Lonely

Child of the wilderness

Born into emptiness

Learn to be lonely

Learn to find your way in darkness

Who will be there for you?

Comfort and care for you?

Learn to be lonely

Learn to be your one companion

Never dreamed, out in the world

There are arms to hold you

You've always known

Your heart was on its own

So laugh in your loneliness

Child of the wilderness

Learn to be lonely

Learn how to love

Life that is lived alone

Learn to be lonely

Life can be lived

Life can be loved

Alone

The Shadow of Your Smile

Chapter 2 of 9

an expansion of my smutty short, She Never Stops Talking

Chapter Two: The Shadow of Your Smile

Author: Michmak

A/N: okay, I must admit I'm a little nervous trying to expand on the ideas from She Never Stops Talking and forming an actual story with extended plot around them. I hope no one is disappointed if you are, let me know. If you're not let me know that too. As always, I appreciate each and every review, the good and the bad. Let me know what you think. Thanks Zambi!

Hermione Granger had always been an annoyance to him. He disliked her. He didn't think that would ever change. If you asked him why he disliked her, he could ream of a myriad list of reasons, outside the obvious fact that she was best friends with Pot-head.

She was an irritating know-it-all chit who was too smart by half for her own good, or anyone else's for that matter. She was an incessant hand-waver; a show-off; a bushy-haired harridan who still had a slight overbite and a voice that sounded like fingers on a chalkboard. She was or would be with a little more experience and a few more years his intellectual equal. She had stolen his potions, solved his riddles, set him on fire and been a general pain-in-his-ass since she was eleven years old.

These were all good reasons for disliking the chit; all valid, all believable - none of them true. He disliked her because she was as close to a female version to him as he had ever met could have been like him, had she made different choices. Or, conversely, if he had made the right choices when he had been younger, he could have been like her.

Therein lay the real truth: he disliked Miss Granger because she had managed, despite her overbearing intelligence and her social awkwardness, to make a place for herself at Hogwarts and in the Wizarding World. This was something he himself had never been able to do, despite his longing when he was younger for acceptance. He hated Miss Granger because, where she had been embraced for her intelligence, he had been castigated for his. Where she had been able to make friends, he had failed. And now after the war, she was the one who was revered along with Potter and Weasley where he had been consigned to the dungeons, a disgraceful footnote to an otherwise wonderful story.

And now, here she was: sitting at a desk at the back of his classroom as if she belonged there when he walked into his first potions class of the new school year. Her presence had taken him aback momentarily, but he had quickly hidden his surprise behind his scowl.

"Miss Granger. What an unpleasant surprise."

"Good morning, Professor Snape," she had replied as if he had just wished her the pleasantest of days, "It's good to see you again, sir."

Snape looked around his empty classroom, noting with satisfaction that no stupid little dunderhead had decided to show up early in the hopes of brown-nosing their way into a better mark, before he turned his glare back on her. "I wish I could say the same," he replied silkily. "Alas, I cannot. Classes start in less than ten minutes, so if you would be so kind as to tell me what you are doing here and then get out, we could end this dreary reunion."

"Oh, that's not possible, sir," she replied, "It seems I'm here for good or, at least, the next two years. You see, I've decided to become your potions apprentice. Albus has already given his permission. Today is my first day."

Snape frowned at this. "Pardon me?"

"Is there anything you would like me to do, sir? Perhaps I can help you set-up the ingredients for this class?"

"The only thing you can do for me, Miss Granger, is leave. I don't appreciate this little joke of yours."

"But I'm not joking, sir. I am your apprentice."

"I was under the impression that, should I decide to take an apprentice, I would be the one responsible for choosing who that apprentice would be. I can assure you, Miss Granger, you would be the last person I would consider. I suggest you go and tell Albus he has made a mistake, or would you like me to drag you by that bushy mass of hair out the door and throw you into the hallway?"

His voice was deadly cold and whip sharp, his sarcasm honed to strip flesh from bone, yet the girl didn't even flinch. Instead, she reached calmly into her bag and removed a piece of parchment, which she handed over to him. "Perhaps you should read this sir it's from Patroculus Paternoster, the acting Minister of Magic, and signed by Headmaster Dumbledore in your stead. I received it when I received my commendations at the end of the war."

Snape grabbed it reflexively. "And what has this to do with me, you irritating piece of baggage?" he growled at her as he opened it up, quickly scanning the content before pausing to read it again. "This cannot be binding."

"It is, sir," Hermione replied rather smugly, "I made sure it was before I had Albus sign it. I've always been quite good at charms, you know."

"Goody for you, Miss Granger," was his sharp retort, "however, since I was not aware of this at the time of it's signing, it holds no sway over me."

"But it does," she pointed out. "If you recall, you yourself gave Albus signatory rights on your behalf when the Ministry had you and your actions as a double agent investigated immediately after the war. When the Ministry of Magic gave me this writ of command, stating that I was entitled to any position or job I so desired within the Wizarding World of Great Britain for my role in Voldemort's defeat, Albus still had signatory rights - you hadn't reversed them yet. He agreed when I decided that training for apprenticeship with the best Potions Master in Britain would suit my talents, and signed this contract along with the writ of command in your name."

Snape's head was spinning. "The bloody bastard! He had no right..."

He paused when he noticed Miss Granger was still standing there with a rather pleased little expression on her face. "Wipe that smug look from your face this instant, Miss Granger. I refuse..."

"It's too late to refuse," Hermione interrupted, "The contract was signed the first week of July. It could have only been legally dissolved within the first two weeks after it came into effect and it's been two months."

Snape growled at her, "Seeing as neither Albus nor yourself thought to tell me about this..."

"You should have asked him if he'd signed anything for you, shouldn't you have?" came her bright retort. "It's not my fault you failed to do so. By the way, sir, I can't express how angry I was on your behalf when the ministry decided to investigate your actions. I was even angrier when they failed to invite you to the presentation ceremonies. I didn't find out until after they were over that you were told specifically not to be there, or I wouldn't have attended myself. However, I did return my Order of Merlin in protest."

The angry tirade he was about to let loose caught in his throat. "You what?"

The girl smiled at him, "I told them to take their medal back, and that I would be more than happy to accept it after they publicly acknowledged your efforts in the war, sir."

He realized he was gaping at her and snapped his mouth closed in irritation, "Yet you kept the writ promising you any position you wanted within Wizarding Britain."

"It was the only way I could ensure your cooperation in becoming your apprentice, sir," she replied. "If there had been any other way, I would have given that back to them too."

"I don't want your pity, Miss Granger." He could feel his anger beginning to boil again, just at the thought. "I am not a house elf."

"No, definitely not, sir. And I don't pity you. I just despise hypocrites. You were more important to the war effort than anybody, I think even maybe Harry. It was you putting your life on the line every time you answered a summons. You sacrificed years for the cause, sir and what did you get for it?" She was gathering a fine head of steam, her eyes flashing angrily as she spoke, "I was ashamed to be part of it, Professor Snape. How could they think it was alright to let you risk all that you risked and then, at the end of it all, question your loyalty and fail to recognize you as the hero that you are?"

Snape looked at her stunned. "You are a foolish girl indeed, if you think the world is a fair or just place, Miss Granger. And I still do not wish to have you as my apprentice."

Hermione shrugged, "Whether you wish it or not, I am your apprentice Professor Snape. The contract is legal and binding and you cannot break it. So, what would you like me to do?"

Snape glared at her, "Nothing. You can sit in the back corner and do whatever you feel like, but it will be a waste of two years of your time. I refuse to teach you."

The young witch grinned at him, "You'll change your mind. I suppose I'll sit over there, then, where I was when you came in. And just in time too here comes your first class."

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She was almost as impossible to ignore now as she had been when she was a student. Of course, the hand-waving had stopped but her mere presence in his classroom was a distraction. What did she do, sitting so silently in the corner while he taught his classes? He found his gaze straying to her time and again, watching the way she nibbled the end of her quill when he spoke, occasionally taking notes.

She had already been there for over a week sitting in that same desk every day, for every class nibbling her quill and taking notes. Why hadn't she left yet? She was quiet enough when students were in class, but the minute they left she would jump up and start puttering around his classroom, chattering away like a lunatic magpie. She never stopped talking.

"Well, that was an interesting class today," she would grin at him brightly. "Who would have thought there were other Neville Longbottoms out there?" She said the name rather fondly, while he shuddered and made a silent mental note to throw salt over his shoulder at some point during the day to erase the bad karma saying the dolt's name in class could cause. She looked at him as if expecting an answer, and when he scowled at her she just shrugged and carried on, "I mean, how does one melt an entire cauldron with just shrivel fig and hippogriff urine? Those two items shouldn't react together so violently..."

The only times he ever spoke with her at all were to tell her to shut up, or threaten to hex her if she didn't get out of his sight. She would ignore him and continue prattling away. He couldn't even escape her at meal times, as Albus had seen fit to seat Hermione right next to him. "I'm sure you have many things to discuss with your apprentice," the old goat would twinkle at him when he attempted to voice a protest. "It's so nice to see you sharing your knowledge with a witch as intelligent as Hermione. Lemon drop?"

The only rooms he was reasonably safe from her incessant babbling were his own and he escaped to his private library with great relief every night at the end of the day. He supposed she wouldn't be that awful if she could just learn to hold her tongue. Albus was correct in that she was reasonably intelligent. Even with no instruction from him, she could see when his stores were getting low and took it upon herself to keep his potions supplies fresh and well-stocked. She had even started preparing the ingredients he would need for the weeks classes over the weekends, which freed up a considerable amount of his time for other work.

She had access to his private lab, of course. Albus had given her the password her first week when Hermione had mentioned that he had failed to do so. She was often in there, chopping and dicing things, watching him intently when he brewed this potion or that, asking him questions which he always failed to answer. She had left her notebook behind once and he had picked it up and read some of her notes despite himself, amazed to see she had correctly figured out he was trying to create a new treatment for botched memory charms. She had even written a few ideas of her own in the margins of her book *'Must ask Severus if lecithin might be beneficial in this mixture'*, or *'Could Muggle herbal extracts be beneficial to Wizarding potions research? Must enquire further...'*

She thought of him as Severus. How...bizarre.

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She had been his so-called apprentice for five weeks before he finally gave her something to do. Poppy had reminded him earlier that morning that, with Quidditch season starting soon, a fresh batch of Skele-Gro would not be remiss. That morning, in class, he had looked up and seen her making her usual notes when it suddenly occurred to him that he should make her do it. He hated making Skele-Gro.

"Miss Granger!" he had barked suddenly, causing more than half the class to jump in surprise and the young witch in question to look up at him with her big brown eyes.

"Professor Snape?" she replied.

"Instead of sitting there, doing whatever it is you do day after day, perhaps you could bring yourself to brew some of the Skele-Gro Madame Pomfrey needs. I refuse to tolerate a lazy apprentice!"

The smile she flashed in his direction was enough to rival the sun. With stunning sudden clarity, he realized she was beautiful.

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"How can you bring yourself to mark these things?" she moaned at him a few days later. "Honestly, where do these children come from? I'm amazed Hogwarts is still standing if the knowledge displayed here is anything to go by. How in the world have you managed to keep anyone from blowing themselves and the school up for more than twenty years?"

He smirked at her as he carefully stirred the tincture in his potion counter-clockwise, but didn't reply. She didn't expect him to, after all. His silence was something she accepted, much as he was getting used to the sound of her voice.

He could hear the sharp scratch of her quill on the essays she was marking, her occasional snort of disgust or exasperated comment the only thing breaking the silence. It was a pleasant change, not having to mark the dreadful essays of the first and second year students it was worth having her do it, even if it meant he had listen to her prattle.

Now that he was getting used to it, he found he didn't dislike the sound of her voice as much as he initially thought. Perhaps he had been too hasty in comparing it to the horrendous screech of nails on a chalkboard or the incessant buzzing of a particularly irritating gnat. No, her voice was like neither of those things it was more like the sound of waves lapping gently at a shore, or a soft breeze whispering through the trees. He could easily consign it to the background of his consciousness when he chose to do so, but the majority of the time he found it rather soothing. At the very least, her incessant chatter proved that there was someone other than Albus or Minerva who would talk to him, even though he was sure the girl often talked just for the sake of flapping her gums.

"You know, Professor Snape now that you've finally admitted I'm your apprentice, wouldn't it be customary for me to take you out for a drink somewhere to officially seal the contract? I think I remembered reading something about it somewhere..."

Snape jumped in surprise and darted a quick look at her. She was no longer marking papers, but lining them up neatly on the desk she had been working at. A dab of red ink was smeared across her chin and the quill she had been using was sticking haphazardly out of her hair. She was looking at him expectantly.

He scowled at her, "Customary drinks? I don't remember ever reading anything about that, Miss Granger."

"That's another thing, now that I'm your apprentice now that you admit it shouldn't you be calling me Hermione? After all, we are colleagues now. 'Miss Granger' sounds so...stuffy."

"And I suppose you'll want to call me...what?" he retorted.

"I can continue to call you Professor Snape, if you'd like," she replied. "I just want you to call me Hermione."

"But if I start calling you Hermione and you're calling me Professor Snape people will wonder about it. I get enough lectures from Minerva on social etiquette without having to worry she'll show up at my doorway to berate me for treating you with a familiarity I deny you."

Hermione grinned at him, "If you want me to call you Severus all you have to do is ask. I have no problem with that and I wouldn't want to inflict Minerva in high dudgeon upon anyone Severus."

"You are like water torture, Hermione," he growled.

"Yes, I know," she agreed happily. "Now, about that drink..."

"I don't think it would do your reputation any good to be seen with me, Hermione. However, if you insist on a drink to seal the deal, I could have Dobby spike your tea with brandy the next time he shows up." He kept his voice carefully blank as he said this, noting the sudden amusement that lit her eyes.

"It's not the same thing at all," she replied. "No what we need is a real drink, in a real pub. And it is customary. If you don't believe me I can *accio The Comprehensive Apprentice*. Albus gave it to me when I signed the contract last July, and on page 52, paragraph 4 it clearly states...."

"Sweet Merlin, girl, you've memorized page numbers and paragraphs of where you've read things?" Snape was appalled.

Hermione grinned at him, "Not for everything I've read, just for references I think I'll need to use at some point in time. I might be a little obsessive compulsive, but I'm not so totally anal that all that minutia is important to me."

Snape could feel his lips twitch slightly and realized the irritating baggage had almost made him smile. "Sometimes I think you were sorted into the wrong house, Hermione. Memorizing facts that can be used to blackmail people into doing what you want is very Slytherin."

"Oh, I'm not trying to blackmail you, Severus," she replied, letting her lips wrap around his name in a long drawn out sibilant hiss, "I just know what I want. And right now, I want to take you to Hogsmeade for a drink to celebrate my apprenticeship."

"Does it even count if we have the customary drink so many months after the initial signing of the contract?"

"Considering you just admitted what has been fact for months now, I think the drink is necessary. Besides, you've always struck me as a very traditional man, Severus."

Snape looked at her intently, before nodding his head slightly in acknowledgement and sighing. "Fine. Traditions are important, so we shall go and you can buy me a fire whiskey. However, I must warn you now that I will stay for one drink only not a moment longer."

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Everyone was looking at them. Snape sat stiffly at the small table she had led him to, his back firmly against the wall as he tried to keep his glare from wandering around the room. He knew this had been a bad idea.

Hermione, for her part, seemed quite capable of ignoring everything around them including the horrified looks frequently sent her way. Everyone recognized them of course; Hermione Granger, part of the triumvirate that had saved them all from Voldemort and Severus Snape, the black-hearted bastard who should have died with the rest of the Death Eaters.

"So, Severus, I believe you said you wanted a fire whiskey," she smiled at him. "I think I shall have a margarita I feel the need for tequila."

Snape shrugged, but didn't otherwise respond. Over at the bar, a rather large man was staring at them, his gaze hostile when it caught his. "I don't believe this is a good idea, Hermione," Severus muttered at her. "Perhaps I should leave you and return to Hogwarts before things get ugly."

"Then you wouldn't be fulfilling the terms of the traditional drink," she retorted smoothly.

"Hermione..."

"Well, wot 'ave we 'ere." The large man was upon them, his bulk casting a shadow over their little table as he glared at Severus. "I'd 'eard you were still alive, but seeing as no one ever saw you, I t'ought it was only a malicious rumor."

Snape did not reply, but Hermione turned to glare at the man. "If you don't mind, sir, I don't recall inviting you to join us. Please leave us alone, or I will be forced to call the manager."

The man snorted at her, obviously not concerned. "Call away, missy. 'e's not welcome 'ere, I can tell you dat. No one's saying you 'ave to leave, Miss 'ermione after all, if't weren't for you, Voldemort," and here he spat on the floor, "would still be alive. But dis bastard, 'e's not wanted."

"Severus Snape did more than any of us to destroy the Dark Lord," Hermione replied calmly. "Without him, victory would not have been possible. Everyone in the Wizarding World owes him a great debt."

Snape stared at Hermione in surprise as she asserted this fact, before she turned her back on the large man, "Now, will you please leave us alone to enjoy our drink in peace?"

The larger man reached out to grab her shoulder, his eyes flashing angrily, but before he could lay a finger on her Snape found himself on his feet, nostrils flaring as he pressed his wand into the fleshy part of the rotund man's throat. "I believe Miss Granger requested you leave." His voice was cold and menacing. "I suggest you keep your great meaty paws to yourself and do as she asks."

The pub was so silent he could have heard a pin drop. Even Hermione was staring at him, but her eyes flashed with something inexplicably like pride as she rose to her feet to stand beside him. Her hand lifted to touch his, fingertips cool against the back of his wrist, before gliding upwards to lightly stroke his wand. "Always trying to rescue me, it seems," she murmured to him softly, before turning to face the silent crowd.

"You should all be ashamed of yourself, treating one of the greatest heroes of the war this way, as if he were a pariah. What did you do during the war? I don't recall seeing any of your faces at the final battle, or any of the battles before hand, working for either side. It's much easier to have convictions when they're no longer needed. I will not tell anyone else again to leave us alone to enjoy our drink in peace. The next person that disturbs us unnecessarily will be hexed, and not only by Severus Snape." She turned an icy glare on the large man Snape still held at wand point. "As for you, you overgrown pile of putrescent flesh, I suggest you leave before Professor Snape and I lose all patience with you. Consider yourself lucky to have escaped with a warning." She cast a cool eye over the crowd, focusing on the man behind the bar. "I'll be sure to tell Rosemerta how we've been treated tonight the next time I see her. I would like a margarita, please, and my dear friend would like a fire whiskey. Immediately."

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They stayed a little over an hour at the pub, nursing their drinks and conversing quietly. Several people attempted to send cocktails to Hermione, but she refused each and everyone with a cold glare and an icy enquiry as to whether or not his own had been forgotten.

"You don't need to do that, you realize," Snape offered bluntly as she turned away yet another complimentary drink. "Not on my account."

"I'm not doing it solely for you," she retorted. "I just refuse to accept 'peace offerings' from a pile of rabid jackass hypocrites. How can they treat you this way?"

They were both quite aware of the glancing looks and softly whispered conversations taking place around them, despite Hermione's earlier warnings. "They have every right to detest me, Hermione. I was a Death Eater."

"Not really," she replied. "Not for long."

"More than half my life," he retorted. "Longer than you've been alive."

"You were a spy there's a difference."

"Don't fool yourself. Even though I was Dumbledore's spy, I was still an active participant in many of the atrocities they committed." His voice was cool, his eyes empty and bleak as he admitted this. "You should remove those rose-colored glasses of yours, Hermione. I'm not a nice man."

Hermione smirked at this statement, "Whoever said you were nice? Trust me, Severus I'm under no illusions as to what you had to do during your tenure as a spy for the Order. There's a difference between the other Death Eaters and you, however they acted out of malice and bigotry, whereas you ... you did what you had to do to avoid suspicion and keep yourself alive. You were invaluable to the cause and you know it."

"It won't do your reputation any good to be seen with me," he tried again, nursing the last of his drink. "I'm a pariah in the Wizarding World, in case you haven't noticed."

"Only because you allow yourself to be. Besides, I'm your apprentice people will get used to seeing us together eventually. I'm sure that given enough time, they'll even stop whispering about you at least, where you can actually see them." She reached out suddenly and placed her hand on top of his again, giving it a slight squeeze. "You are a hero, Severus. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"Only a Gryffindor could say something like that and mean it," Snape replied. But he didn't move his hand from underneath hers until they stood to leave, and when she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow, he allowed himself to enjoy its warm pressure.

TBC

A/N Redux: I know I normally end my angst chapters with a song, but I'm changing that today, and ending with a poem I wrote while making mac'n'cheese for my boys. I like it, but I'm in a particularly emotional mood today and find myself tearing up at the slightest provocation, so if it's horribly maudlin and cheesy, I apologize in advance.

The Shadow of Your Smile

The shadow of your smile is written on my soul

Like shadows in a moonbeam and footsteps in the snow.

I was a man of silence, I had no words to give

Lonely in my solitude, unsure how to live.

But your voice wrapped around me; made my heart take flight,

And while I hid in shadows you were shining in the light.

How can you love my darkness? This frost-bite on my soul?

I'm nothing but a hollow man, broken long ago.

Your touches are so gentle, like waves upon the sea,

And deep inside your body you set my spirit free.
You fill my empty spaces with your tender smile
And you let me live inside you I think I'll stay awhile.
The shadow of your smile is written on my soul,
Like words I've never said before, with love that makes me whole.

In Dreams

Chapter 3 of 9

"What's this for?" he asked her irritably, even as he felt an electric shiver pass through his palm when her fingertips skimmed it.

"It represents your new beginning," she answered.

Chapter Three: In Dreams

A/N: Thanks to Jade for betaing. Hope this chapter is enjoyable. Sorry for the delay.

They were on the front page of The Daily Prophet the next day.

Snape discovered this almost immediately upon entering the Great Hall for breakfast the next morning. Several students and all of the staff had already received their morning paper and it would have been impossible for them not to see the picture plastered on the front page: Hermione seeming to restrain him as he held a wand at the neck of the man who had been bothering them.

The silence when he entered the Great Hall had been deafening, followed almost immediately by the irritating buzzing of several hundred voices whispering to each other. Snape, having not seen the paper yet, had no idea what was going on.

Glaring at the students nearest to him, he quickly made his way to the head table and took his customary seat next to Albus, who was twinkling at him like he was the world's biggest lemon drop.

"Ah, Severus, my dear boy," the older wizard smiled; "I would have thought you would be in better spirits this morning, all things considered."

"What in Hades is going on now?" Snape muttered back.

"You've made The Daily Prophet," Minerva inserted from Dumbledore's other side. "You and Hermione both."

"What?" Snape snatched the paper McGonagall offered him and frowned in consternation at it. The front page read:

'Can Beauty Tame the Beast?'

by Wilma Windfeathers, Special to The Daily Prophet

The infamous Severus Snape and the heroic Hermione Granger shared drinks and toasted each other last night at The Three Brooms in Hogsmeade. This reporter has learned the duo have been inseparable since Miss Granger returned to Hogwarts to begin her potions apprenticeship with Snape.

"She's in his class all the time," fourth-year student Pomander Parvolone told me. "They eat every meal together and I've even seen them heading to his private lab in the dungeons on more than one occasion."

Rumors have been running rampant that the two are actually a couple, but no one has been able to prove it until now: just last night, the two shared a romantic drink at The Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. When several patrons questioned Snape's right to be at the establishment, Granger was quick to rush to his defense, declaring:

"Severus Snape did more than any of us to destroy the Dark Lord. Without him, victory would not have been possible. Everyone in the Wizarding World owes him a great debt."

A few minutes later, when Mr. Horatio Higglesmith disagreed with Granger, Snape pulled his wand and pressed it to the man's throat, threatening to hex him within an inch of his life if he didn't leave them alone. (see photo above)

This reporter is positive Snape would have surely cast an Unforgivable if Granger hadn't quickly stood and deflated the situation. With a few calm words and the simple touch of her hand, she managed to subdue his anger and saved Higglesmith from what surely would have been a most painful end.

The couple remained another hour at The Three Broomsticks, having an intimate conversation in the far corner holding hands, before leaving the establishment arm in arm.

What this reporter and surely all of Wizarding Britain wants to know is this: just how close are they? Several people reported that Granger actually stroked Snape's wand as he held it at Higglesmith's throat. She also appeared quite at ease with the dark wizard, smiling often in his presence and refusing to talk to anyone else the entire evening. Has there been some sort of enchantment cast upon her? Why else would Britain's brightest witch seem so content in the company of a known Death Eater? What has Snape done to her?

For more information on Hermione Granger and her role in Voldemort's defeat, turn to page six

For more information on Severus Snape and his lifelong career as a Death Eater and spy, turn to page eight

Will Ministry Aurors be investigating this sudden relationship to ensure Miss Granger isn't being charmed against her will? Turn to page eleven to find out!

Snape glared at the article in disbelief. Who had taken that damnable picture without either he or Hermione noticing it? How in the world could any rational person think that Hermione had a romantic interest in him?

His eyes were drawn back to the picture, watching the sepia form of Hermione reaching out to him over and over, drawing his hand away from the worthless Higglesmith's neck. His collar suddenly felt rather tight.

The gossiping voices of the students stilled again, as they had when he had first entered the Great Hall and he glanced up with a sneer as the woman in question glided towards the head table and took her seat next to him.

"Good morning, Severus!" she smiled at him. "I trust you slept well?"

He didn't reply, instead he slapped the paper down in front of her and scowled at her.

Hermione barely glanced down. "Yes, yes. I've seen it already. What a load of rubbish! You really should look at suing them for defamation of character."

"You understand now why I didn't want to go out last night, *Miss Granger*?" he gritted out angrily. "I told you being seen with me would be hazardous to your reputation, let alone the fact that I absolutely abhor contributing to such blatant gossip!"

"You said you'd call me Hermione and I don't give a fig about what they say any one who knows me would realize immediately what a load of claptrap that is! As if you would ever need to drug me with potions to get me to spend more time with you. It's just silly."

"Silly?" he hissed at her. He could feel his left temple start to pulse, "Silly?"

"Silly," the irritating girl confirmed as she buttered her toast. "For one thing, I believe it was I who threatened to hex Higglesmith, not you. I've already sent a letter to The Prophet to clarify that. And the last time I looked, I was still an adult and therefore perfectly capable of deciding whom I want to spend my time with. Besides, you are the only Potions Master in all of Wizarding Britain and it's my right to learn from the very best, isn't it? Shall I pour you a tea?"

During their little exchange, Snape had almost entirely forgotten they were sitting at a table for of his colleagues. Before he could think of a suitably sarcastic reply to Hermione's offer of tea, Flitwick spoke up.

"I shouldn't take anything that paper prints too seriously, Severus," the little wizard squeaked from Hermione's other side. "Everyone knows what a rag it is. I think it's perfectly lovely you finally left the castle for a change, especially with such pleasant company. You should get out more, I say!"

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation but didn't reply. Instead, he took the tea Hermione offered him silently as he glared at Flitwick.

That night was the first time he dreamed of her. He had been thinking about her all day, irritated that she didn't seem more concerned with the article in the paper and their spurious accusations of coupledness. As if Hermione would ever be interested.

Still, the feel of her hand on his last night could not be forgotten, nor could the warm press of her body against his side as she walked back to Hogwarts together. He found himself searching out a copy of The Daily Prophet after dinner in order to look at the picture again. She certainly was a beautiful girl. He wondered when that had happened, because he recalled a time not so long ago when he had thought of her solely as a bushy-haired harridan.

Working in his private lab later that evening, he found himself distracted by her graceful movements and the subtle scent of her hair. He was preparing ingredients for the fifth years' next potions class and she was marking the third year essays, humming to herself as she grimaced at the pages in front of her.

She had pulled her hair back from her face, tying it low at the nape of her neck with a little bit of leather, but some tiny curls had sprung free. Every once in a while, she would raise the hand that wasn't holding the quill and brush at them absently. He had never really noticed before last night how slim her wrists were, but now he couldn't seem to stop noticing.

Sometimes she would glance up at him and he would quickly shutter his gaze and try to pretend he was engrossed in peeling the membrane from the inside of the Chimera eggs. When she finished the papers, she came to stand beside him and - still humming - started carefully slicing the membrane he had managed to remove already.

"You're awfully quiet tonight." The humming stopped.

"You're always saying I talk too much."

He continued peeling the membranes and didn't reply. Hermione moved the sliced membranes carefully into a clean jar, "Do you want me to talk?"

Snape shrugged. "Suit yourself." He had a sudden strange feeling she was grinning at him, but he didn't look up from his task to see if she was.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Can I stop you?" he retorted.

"Probably not." Silence.

"Well?" he demanded.

Hermione sighed. "I was wondering...last night, at The Three Broomsticks you didn't bother trying to defend yourself against what every one was saying. Why?"

He didn't respond for the longest time. "Why should I?" he eventually replied. "It won't make a difference."

"It might," she disagreed.

"It wouldn't," he argued. "I was a Death Eater, Hermione. It's public record. And as a Death Eater I participated in some truly horrifying things don't think that I didn't."

"You didn't have a choice."

"There's always a choice." His voice was curt but it didn't seem to phase her. She leaned forward and steadied the last egg as he carefully skinned it.

"If you hadn't, you would have been killed."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, "That wouldn't have been a bad thing, Hermione. That was one of my choices. I could have told Albus I wouldn't go to any more meetings."

"But your Dark Mark..."

"Would have burned until I went insane, yes I know."

"How's that a valid choice then?"

"I'm sure death and insanity would have been preferable to some of the things...I'm...suffice it to say, I chose to save myself rather than save others. People have it right when they say I should be in Azkaban, at the very least. Malfoy..."

"You are not Lucius Malfoy," Hermione hissed at him, suddenly angry. "Lucius was a complete and utter bastard and deserved far worse than death in Azkaban. He murdered innocent people, Severus, just because he didn't think they were good enough!"

"As did I." His voice was soft and grim. "Why should I be able to walk around freely, to continue working at this school, when I chose to join Voldemort in the first place? The things I did are no less worse than the things Malfoy did, in the end. People are right to detest me. I've never been punished for what I did."

"Over twenty years as a spy isn't punishment enough for you?" Hermione retorted. "You risked your life, every time you answered a summons. You brought Albus and the Order back information that was invaluable to our efforts to defeat Voldemort. You cut yourself off completely from society in order to save it and spent more than half your life living in the dungeons here and protecting a group of snot-nosed brats and I include myself in that group who not only failed to recognize your genius but actively disliked you....isn't that enough?"

"I helped, in part, put Voldemort into a position of power in the first place. I created potions for him, I went on raids for him....I killed because he told me to. Do a few useful pieces of information cancel out everything else I did?" His voice had risen as he spoke, until he was glaring at the girl beside him, hands clenched futilely in rage. "I should be locked up with the rest of them."

"Severus -"

He cut her off: "It's true, Hermione. What people are saying - it's all true."

"That's just silly," she replied; "without you, we wouldn't have won. The insider knowledge you provided us with was invaluable. It's easy for people to point fingers when they did nothing for either side during the war. If you had played your hand too early, you would have been dead and the Order would have been working blind! You were like our very own Enigma machine!"

He cocked an eyebrow at her and she had shrugged, "Muggle history, WWI...it's a long story."

"Regardless..."

Hermione cut him off. "How does locking yourself in the dungeons solve anything?"

"I'm not 'locking myself in the dungeons'," his voice was sharp. "Has it occurred to you I prefer my solitude? I like being alone, Hermione."

"Bullshit." Her reply was succinct. He noticed they had given up all pretense of preparing ingredients. The chimera egg membranes lay forgotten in a small pile.

"Pardon me?"

"You don't prefer being alone, you just tell yourself you do." When he tried to protest, she held up her hand to silence him. "I'm not saying you aren't a solitary figure, because you are, and there's nothing wrong with that per se. However, I think you cut yourself off from everyone else because you think it's better that way you think you deserve it, or perhaps it's better if you turn away first. It's always easier to reject someone before they reject you, after all."

"Are you finished?" Snape gritted out. "I didn't realize you had been reading books on Muggle psychology."

Hermione shrugged, "I don't need to read books to figure you out. I've had nine years to study you and I'm pretty sure I understand your motivations."

He sneered at her, "So you're here to what? Save me from myself?"

"If I must," she retorted. "Some people might view what you're doing hiding in your dungeons here as either an admission of guilt or cowardice. Now, I know you're not a coward..."she said this quickly, before he could bellow at her... "but I do think you feel guilty and you shouldn't. Besides, didn't you enjoy yourself last night, despite the fact we were surrounded by a bunch of vapid, gossiping, narrow-minded idiots? I know I did - when you actually start talking, you're a stimulating conversationalist."

"You're getting terribly cheeky, Hermione." He was scowling at her, unsure whether he should be angry at her analysis of his motives, or horrified she seemed to be able to read him so well. On top of that, the little minx was teasing him now. He wasn't sure how to react. Hermione smiled at him and picked up a fragile membrane from the pile, gently stretching it out until the skin was so thin it was transparent, running her fingers over the tears and carefully piecing the edges back together again.

"If refusing to let you lock yourself in the dungeons and wallow in guilt and self-pity is cheeky, I guess I am," she agreed.

"I don't wallow, girl."

"Good." Hermione smiled at him again, before putting a solidifying charm on the membrane she had stretched out and handing it to him. It was still thin and very fragile looking, but where the tears had been he could barely make out small scars. He knew he would never be able to break it. The chit was exceedingly good at charms.

"What's this for?" he asked her irritably, even as he felt an electric shiver pass through his palm when her fingertips skimmed it.

"It represents your new beginning," she answered. They finished the rest of their work that evening in silence, and when she finally left his lab, he gently picked the membrane up and took it back to his quarters with him, placing it on his desk beside the picture he had removed from The Prophet.

Later that evening, he thought of that thin skin, transparent and fragile-looking, yet repaired with nary a mark to show where it had been torn. He wondered if that's what she was doing to him, too: trying to repair him and charm his pieces into something unbreakable, and wondered why she would even bother.

He fell asleep, dreaming of her and her soft voice, and in his dreams he realized he was happy.

TBC...

Ghost In You Psychedelic Furs

A man in my shoes runs a light and

All the papers lied tonight

But falling over you

Is the news of the day

Angels fall like rain

*And love (love, love)
Is all of heaven away
Inside you
The time moves
And she don't fade
The ghost in you
She don't fade
Inside you
The time moves
And she don't fade
A race is on, I'm on your side and
Here in you my engines die I'm
In a mood for you
Or running away
Stars come down like rain
And love (love, love)
You can't give it away
Inside you
The time moves
And she don't fade
The ghost in you
She don't fade
Inside you
The time moves
And she don't fade
Don't you go
It makes no sense when
All your talk and supermen just
Take away the time
And get in the way
Ain't it just like rain?
And love (love, love)
Is only heaven away
Inside you
The time moves
And she don't fade
The ghost in you
She don't fade
Inside you
The time moves
And she don't fade
The ghost in you
She don't fade.....*

Solitude

Chapter 4 of 9

What was the girl doing to him? He had always been content to while away his hours on potions work or research. Before she arrived uninvited into his life, he had enjoyed spending the night drinking fire whiskey in front of his fireplace. He had never felt lonely before, had he?

Chapter Four: Solitude

She was quickly becoming part of the fabric of his existence, her voice weaving in and out amongst the interminable minutes of the day, bringing color to a life that had always seemed to him somewhat colorless. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

He found himself listening for her in the hallways in the morning if he reached his classes ahead of her. Throughout the course of the day his gaze would, more often than not, stray to her as she worked on whatever he had assigned her. If she was sitting in the corner desk she seemed to favor, he would watch her surreptitiously as she scribbled down her notes and chewed her quill. He even admired the way she would patiently instruct a student on the proper way to dice licorice root. He was losing his mind.

How had the girl become so important to him in less than three months? He feared that when she finally decided she had had enough of his silences and moods, she would leave and his life would unravel before his eyes.

He couldn't figure out what she was doing with him. The time she spent with him went beyond that of apprentice and teacher it seemed to him she spent every waking moment at his side, or at the very least, within his line of vision. And when she wasn't by his side such as today he realized much to his dismay that he missed her.

It had started this morning. He knew Hermione wouldn't be at breakfast and would, in fact, be gone until Sunday evening, but that fact hadn't kept him from looking up every time the doors to the Great Hall opened.

"Severus, dear boy," Albus had beamed at him, "where is Hermione today?"

"Muggle London," Snape had replied irritably. "A cousin is getting married and she needed to be there, apparently."

"Ah," the older wizard had replied sagely, "whatever shall you do without her?"

Snape snorted, "Enjoy three days of peace and quiet, without her incessant nattering, I expect."

Minerva, sitting to Albus' left, had leaned around the older wizard and tutted at him, "Severus, you know you enjoy her company. Why, ever since she's come back to Hogwarts you've been much more social I don't believe you've missed a meal!"

Snape had grimaced at her. "I should have missed this one."

His morning classes had been disastrous. Her empty desk seemed to mock him and when one of the students raised her hand to enquire where 'Miss Granger' was, Snape had reduced the child to tears in less than a minute.

He decided to skip lunch in the Great Hall just to spite Minerva. He needed to pull ingredients for a particularly complex potion he was planning on having the fifth years' attempt, but the storeroom smelled so much like Hermione he couldn't concentrate and decided to give the class a surprise test instead.

He missed dinner that evening as well. He had work to do he was very close to finishing his initial test potion for botched memory charms, and decided to take advantage of having his lab to himself for a change. He could get a lot done without Hermione around, chattering away and distracting him with her questions and theories.

But the lab was too silent. He gave up on the work he was doing when he realized he was humming the same tune Hermione often sang to herself when she was engrossed in a task. It was difficult to work without the white noise she provided.

Snape spent the rest of the night drinking in the armchair next to the fireplace in his room, trying to drive all thought of his absent apprentice from his mind. He refused to miss her. He didn't need her. He was glad she was gone.

And he was deluding himself if he thought he believed that.

What was the girl doing to him? He had always been content to while away his hours on potions work or research. Before she arrived uninvited into his life, he had enjoyed spending the night drinking fire whiskey in front of his fireplace. He had never felt *lonely* before, had he? *Had he?*

Scowling at the half- empty glass in his hand, he tossed the remainder back with one quick gulp and tried not to remember the unruliness of her bushy hair.

He awoke Saturday morning with a terrible ache in his back from sleeping in the chair all night long. His head was pounding with the mother of all hangovers and he cursed himself for drinking almost an entire bottle of fire whiskey as he stumbled to his bathroom and grabbed a vial of hangover potion.

He had just finished drinking it when he heard Albus' voice calling from his fireplace. "Severus, Severus? There you are! I was wondering if you were going to join us for breakfast this morning. We missed you yesterday for lunch and dinner."

"I was busy," Snape gritted back.

"Yes, yes," Albus replied cheerily, "I can see that from the bottle by the foot of your chair."

"Your point, Albus?"

The older wizard smiled, "Now, Severus...really...what would Hermione say?"

"I don't give a rat's arse," Snape replied stonily. "She's my apprentice, not my wife!"

"Who said anything about wife, Severus?" Albus twinkled back at him. "Are you coming to breakfast or not? The house elves made pancakes and I know how you enjoy a nice plate of pancakes with a dollop of maple syrup. If you're coming, I'll make sure to save you a plate."

"Can't a house-elf just bring a plate to my rooms?" Snape growled. "I'm not feeling overly socialable this morning."

"What else is new?" Albus retorted gently. "And no, if you want pancakes you must join us. It won't do to have you slip back into your old habits of isolation with Hermione gone. She will be coming back you know."

Severus fussed with the cuffs of his wrinkled frock coat. "I don't know what you're on about, you old goat, but leave off. I'm not in the mood."

Albus sighed, "Fine. So, I'll see you at breakfast?"

"Yes," Snape retorted. "I'll be there."

The day was long and dull. He should have been thrilled he didn't have classes to teach or essays to mark, but oddly enough, he wasn't. He could have prepared the ingredients for the next weeks' classes but was oddly reluctant to spend any time in his lab doing a job he had come to think of as Hermione's.

"Irresponsible chit," he muttered to himself. "She knows it's her job to stock the ingredients. Why have an apprentice at all if I need to do all their work for them?"

He decided to read a book instead one he had just received from Flourish Botts. He had ordered "Anciente Majiks of Arabia" more than a year ago and it had finally arrived yesterday evening. The book itself was very old, with leather ties binding the stiffened satin weave cover to the thick sheets of papyrus the text was written on, but he couldn't concentrate on the words in front of him. Instead, he found himself thinking about how excited Hermione would be when he told her about this book. She would want to see it right away and would exclaim over the illuminated calligraphy and the strange texture of the papyrus beneath her fingertips. He had never met anyone more enamored of books than she.

He could almost picture it now Hermione sitting in his armchair in front of his hearth, reading. The light from the fire would cast a warm glow over her form and every once in a while she would look over to him and share some interesting piece of information she had just read. They would discuss different ingredients or theories; she might even share an amusing story with him then, as it grew later, she would carefully put the book away and take his hand, and tell him it was time for bed.

His eyes closed at the sudden rush of heat that ran through his body at the thought of Hermione joining him in his bedroom. Over the past few weeks he had become accustomed to these unwanted imaginings. He knew it was something that could never be she was a beautiful young witch with the world at her feet while he was an ugly, bitter and jaded wizard, more than twice her age. He couldn't help but wonder though, what it would be like...what she would be like. Was her skin as soft and luminescent as it appeared? Would the weight of her lithe young body feel as good against him as he imagined it would? He often wondered what she would taste like, if her lips were as succulent as they look. Would she stop talking if he kissed her?

It came as a shock to him when he realized how much he wanted to find these things out how much he wanted to love her not just physically, but emotionally as well. She made him want things he had long ago convinced himself could never be a home, someone to talk to at the end of a long day, someone who made him feel as if his existence was important, someone who wanted his touch as badly as he wanted to give it.

It just wouldn't do. He couldn't allow himself to care for her. If he had managed to convince himself otherwise over the past few weeks, her absence of less than 48 hours was proving otherwise to him. He only had her for two years and then her apprenticeship would be up and she would leave him with nothing except a hole in his life where she used to live. What was she trying to do to him? If it was her goal to show him how empty and friendless his life was, she had accomplished that already. The longer she stayed the worse it would be when she finally left him and got on with her life. And when she did leave, everyone would know. They would know that he Severus Snape ex-Death Eater and bastard had somehow let a mere slip of a girl become the center of his life and they would laugh at him.

Thrusting the book away with an angry growl, he jumped to his feet. Images of her would not keep him from doing his work he had ingredients to prepare and projects to oversee and he was going to go do them.

She was in the lab when he stalked in. Her presence, where he had been least expecting it, gave him pause. Before he could ask her what the hell she thought she was doing, she looked up at him and smiled.

"Severus! I was wondering where you were. I thought you said you were going to spend Saturday in the lab, finishing some projects."

He blinked at her and scowled. "Aren't you back earlier than you anticipated?"

"Yes, actually, I am, but have you ever been to a Muggle wedding?" She laughed when his glare darkened, "Of course not and you should count your lucky stars. I was glad to escape as soon as I could."

Snape merely cocked an eyebrow at her, "That does not explain what you are doing back a day early."

"I couldn't stand the thought of spending one more night at my parents' house," Hermione replied. "Honestly, my mother is insane if she thinks that Janey's white marshmallow wedding has given me any incentive to get married myself! The horror, I say. Worst of it is, Janey went and married a dentist! A *dentist!* I'll never hear the end of that, let me tell you..."

"So you decided to rush back to Hogwarts and wreck my weekend? How kind." He was being snide and he knew it, but he couldn't help himself. His bad humor didn't seem to effect Hermione anyway she just kept chopping and dicing and grinning at him.

"I thought I'd come back to get everything ready for next weeks classes, yes," she agreed, "because I thought that tomorrow you and I could go to Diagon Alley and..."

"No. Absolutely not."

"No? You don't even know why I want to go, Severus."

"I don't care. I am not going to Diagon Alley with you for any reason whatsoever, and that's final."

"Not even to help me pick up a special order from the apothecary? The Bearded Chinese Dragon skin you've had on backorder since September has finally arrived. I know you need it for one of your projects and you know that they won't release it to me. I'm not a potions master yet and it is a highly-controlled substance..."

"No one has informed me of it's arrival," Snape responded coldly.

"I ran into Bill Weasley last night after the wedding dinner he's the one that told me about it. He's brought it himself, but couldn't deliver it direct to you because of import regulations."

Bill Weasley *the good looking son*. Snape scowled. "How convenient, for you to 'run into' him."

Hermione blinked at his acidic tone, but otherwise ignored it. "So, shall we plan to go to Diagon Alley then? What time should I be ready?"

"I don't need you to accompany me, Hermione. I'm a grown man I've no need of a nurse-maid."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, "Honestly, why are you being so difficult? Of course I want to go I need to pick some things up myself. Why shouldn't we go together?"

Snape didn't know how to respond to that question, so he moved to the workbench on the far side of the room away from her. She was still wearing Muggle clothing and her arms were bare of material, the skin pale with just the slightest hint of tan. She was wearing a dress of some sort, buttoned up the back with a relatively short skirt attached. For someone as diminutive in size as she, her legs seemed remarkably long. Even her hair was different, pulled back into some type of plait not the normal

riotous mass of curls and frizz he was accustomed to. It made her look different, somehow. Less like the image of the student he tried to keep so firmly planted in his mind and more like the young woman he was trying and failing to deny she had become. She was going to destroy him.

He checked the progress of some of the potions he had brewing, trying to ignore the rhythmic chopping noises coming from her workbench. Over and above that, he swore he could hear her breathing, and even though she was on the other side of the room from him, he could smell her freesia and citrus and Hermione. He hated the fact that his first response upon seeing her in his lab had been one of relief that she had returned. His initial relief was quickly turning to anger, however. She had no right no right at all to make him feel this way. He had been content without her in his life. And now he knew that with her gone, he would never be content again.

It would only get worse, the longer she stayed. He would come to depend on her for far too much, would eventually start allowing his apparent longing for her to take over entirely. She scared him. With every thwack of her knife against the work table his anger grew. Finally, he could take it no more.

"Why did you come back?" he growled at her, "Haven't you had enough of this, wasting your time in my dungeons when we both no perfectly well you need never work at all?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise, "I've already told you why I came back. Did you honestly think I wouldn't? I like being here, Severus. I enjoy being your apprentice; learning from you. I'm not the type to be content with an idle life I want to work, I want to be successful for me, not because I'm a friend of Harry Potter's."

She had put down her knife as she spoke, moving towards him until the only thing separating them was his workbench. Snape leaned over it, his voice cold, "I don't need you here, you foolish girl. I don't want you here. But you've always been selfish, thinking about what you want before what others want it shouldn't surprise me that you continue to force your irritating presence upon me. What must I do to rid myself of you?"

Hermione had flinched slightly at his words but failed to step back. "You must fulfill the contract of my apprenticeship."

"Why me?" he demanded. "Do you think somehow that your being here makes things easier for me? That perhaps, if the heroine of the Great Battle can stomach the presence of a traitor such as myself, the Wizarding world might change their minds about me? Are you so altruistic that you would sacrifice two years of your life thinking to help me? I neither want nor need your pity, Hermione. I don't need you. Go back to the world and let the sycophants kiss your feet, because I won't be."

His words were stark and he looked away from her as he spoke. He couldn't bear to watch her leave and was surprised when instead of heading for the door, as he had been so sure she would she rounded the edge of the table until she was standing directly in front of him.

"Why would I want any of that?" her voice was gentle, "when all I've ever wanted was to be left alone to learn and spend time with people I care about?"

He flinched when she said this; flinched away from the hand she placed gently on his arm.

"Then why don't you go find these people you care about and leave me alone?" he had sneered. "I'm sure they're wondering where the hell you've disappeared to."

"Harry and Ron know where to find me if they need to. Besides, I wasn't talking about them, I was talking about you."

He looked at her then, noting the earnest expression on her face as he absorbed her words. He refused to believe what she was saying. "I assure you, Miss Granger, I don't appreciate your idea of a joke."

She cocked an eyebrow at him in a style eerily reminiscent of his own, before running the hand on his arm up to his shoulder and then the back of his neck. Her fingers slid across his nape and he felt himself being drawn closer to her. She was looking up at him now, her eyes glittering with something Snape had never seen before. He felt the breath catch in his throat, felt the tightening in his chest as she whispered, "I'm not joking."

And then she was kissing him, her lips gentle and firm and warmer than anything he had ever felt before. He felt like his blood was turning to flame in his veins. He couldn't think; couldn't breathe. "I would never lie to you." Her words slid along his mouth and his lips opened slightly, as if to taste them. Her breath was minty and clean and he barely had time to register how good it felt before she was kissing him again.

Her fingers were feathering through his hair at the back of his head. No one had ever caressed him like this before. It was wonderful. Her other hand had somehow managed to find its way under his arm and around his waist, the heat of it against the small of his back branding his skin, despite the layers of material wore.

His hands still hung uselessly at his side, although his palms were itching to touch her. He wondered briefly, in the small part of his brain still capable of coherent thought, what would happen if he tried to taste her fully would she be repelled? Before he could decide she would be, he felt her mouth open slightly and felt the warm tip of her tongue running inside the seam of his mouth.

It was his undoing. With a barely bitten back groan, his itching hands grabbed her to him, lifting her bodily against him. His mouth opened under her gentle onslaught and returned one of it's own more tentative and uncertain than her own exploration but all that he knew how to give.

It was the feel of her pulling away from him that brought him to his senses. Her arms were gripping him tightly around his neck now and he realized he was holding her several inches above the floor. Lowering her to her feet, he tried to find his scowl as he waited for her to tell him the kiss had been a mistake.

The words never came. Instead, she traced his face with the palm of her hand, before leaning into his chest and burrowing against his frock coat. Finally, she spoke.

"So, what time do you want to leave for Diagon Alley tomorrow?"

A/N Redux: I hope y'all don't mind the fact that I throw song lyrics on the end of most of my chapters / stories. It's just that I have music playing around me all the time and I honestly hear certain songs in my head as I write. It's weird, I realize this but if movies can have soundtracks, why can't my stories?

Possession by Sarah McLachlan

Listen as the wind blows from across the great divide

voices trapped in yearning, memories trapped in time

the night is my companion, and solitude my guide

would I spend forever here and not be satisfied?

and I would be the one

to hold you down

kiss you so hard

I'll take your breath away

and after, I'd wipe away the tears

*just close your eyes dear
Through this world I've stumbled
so many times betrayed
trying to find an honest word to find
the truth enslaved
oh you speak to me in riddles
and you speak to me in rhymes
my body aches to breathe your breath
your words keep me alive
And I would be the one
to hold you down
kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
and after, I'd wipe away the tears
just close your eyes dear
Into this night I wander
it's morning that I dread
another day of knowing of
the path I fear to tread
oh into the sea of waking dreams
I follow without pride
nothing stands between us here
and I won't be denied
and I would be the one
to hold you down
kiss you so hard
I'll take your breath away
and after, I'd wipe away the tears
just close your eyes...*

Words He Doesn't Say

Chapter 5 of 9

It seemed to him he was a different man when he dreamed – one more accustomed to joy and less accustomed to melancholy. His dream-self never had a problem holding up his end of the conversation and was adept at small talk; he laughed with her and shared things with her and told her he loved her. In his dreams she always stayed with him. When he dreamed of her, he was happy.

A/N: here there be lemons. Thanks for the reviews and support - everything is truly appreciated. Sorry for the delay in getting this up as well, but things have been hectic around here lately. In other news, I have a LJ now - michmak - if anyone is interested.

Their visit to Diagon Alley the next day produced another article in The Daily Prophet. Snape scowled as he read it, but did retain the picture that had been with it - a lovely photograph of Hermione, arm wrapped under his and smiling up at him as they walked past the shops and curious people on the street.

The girl had spent the entire time out alternately talking to him or berating the poor fools who were stupid enough to make a disparaging comment about him within her

hearing. A few people had gone so far as to suggest he had placed some dark charm on her, to keep her so firmly at his side. She had glared at them and told them he needed no magic to keep her beside him, because that was right where she wanted to be.

The idea still shocked him. Where before, his trips to Diagon Alley had been most unpleasant, this one had actually been bearable. Truth be told, he had enjoyed the looks of outrage on many of the faces they had passed. He had also enjoyed Hermione's staunch defense of him the way her eyes would light with anger and her voice would lower with a biting scorn almost as nasty as his own. He had never had anyone so firmly in his corner in his entire life he realized he liked the feeling.

They had visited Florish and Botts and picked up several books each and browsed through several apothecaries including one on Knockturn Alley he had been ambivalent about taking her too. She had surprised him by not only agreeing to go with him, but by purchasing several hags' teeth and a bottle of pickled dragons breath as well.

She had convinced him that stopping for ice cream would not be a waste of his time and he had to admit if only to himself that he had forgotten how wonderful the creamy treat tasted. He had not had ice cream in years.

Their last stop had been to pick up the dragon skin the package was large and bulky, extremely awkward to hold and could not be charmed smaller for fear of damaging it. Hermione grinned at him when he had tried to carry it without her assistance, but had otherwise refrained from commenting when he finally allowed her to help him.

They returned to Hogwarts late that afternoon and, after placing the skin in his private stores, had gone to his lab to continue to work on his test potion. Hermione had insisted in bringing food back with them so they wouldn't need to eat in the Great Hall that evening and could work undisturbed, something for which Snape was grateful. Albus had heard from Hermione at breakfast that morning that they were going to Diagon Alley for the better part of the day, and he didn't think he could stomach the old man's sly looks and pointed questions. The day had been far too enjoyable to allow that interfering old goat to ruin it for him.

Later that evening, after they had finished what research they could, Hermione had leaned into him and hugged him, her lips pressing and opening against his in the same manner they had the day before. It had seemed to him she had pulled away from him somewhat reluctantly, although that could have been wishful thinking on his part. Regardless, it appeared the girl had enjoyed their day and he found himself absurdly pleased at the thought.

That night and for the rest of the week - he dreamed of her. The dreams were not the purely sexual dreams of recent nights, although there was some of that too. Instead, he dreamed of her curled into his side on the large overstuffed sofa in his sitting room, reading Dante's 'Inferno' to him. In his dreams, she would laugh when he tried to determine just which circle of hell would best suit Potter and Weasley, although she had admonished him gently for saying it.

It seemed to him he was a different man when he dreamed one more accustomed to joy and less accustomed to melancholy. His dream-self never had a problem holding up his end of the conversation and was adept at small talk; he laughed with her and shared things with her and told her he loved her. In his dreams she always stayed with him. When he dreamed of her, he was happy.

Invariably, however, the night would end and he would wake up and realize they were just dreams and probably always would be. Yes, she kissed him had made quite a habit of it over the past few days but that didn't mean she would ever do anything more. He knew physical intimacies of a different nature were out of the question, despite the fact his dreams told him otherwise.

Hermione was not the type of girl one fucked just for physical release. That type of girl worked at Knockturn Alley and, to be perfectly honest, he hadn't been in need of such services for quite some time. Hermione was the type of woman one needed to love and to cherish, a witch deserving of a young man with a whole heart to give her a man who would know how to 'make love'. That man was not him.

Friday night found him drinking in front of the fireplace in his rooms again. Hermione had gone to Hogsmeade to meet Harry and Ron at The Three Broomsticks and he hadn't felt like continuing in the lab without her.

He was getting quite pathetic, mooning after the girl the way he was. She had told him she needed to leave at 8:00 to 'meet the boys' and had said she'd be back by 10:00 if he wanted to meet her in her quarters for a hot toddy before bedtime.

It was the first time she had ever invited him to her private quarters, even though they were only two hallways down and one hallway over from his own. He had debated with himself for the two hours she was gone as to whether or not he should join her and find out what this 'hot toddy' she referred to was, but when he finally knocked on her doorway at 10:00 precisely there had been no answer.

The girl had been toying with him, just as he had originally suspected. He had returned to his own rooms post-haste, black robes swirling behind him, cursing himself for a fool. She had plied him with her kisses, wormed her way into his life and made herself indispensable and now it was over. She had fooled him and was probably laughing about it right this instant with Weasley and Potter.

The fire whiskey burned on the way down and could easily be attributed to the cause of the ache in his chest and the hot sensation at the back of his eyes.

He was well into his second drink when he heard the knock on his door. "Go away, Albus!" he hollered. "I'm not in the mood."

The knocking continued. He ignored it. It got louder.

Sliding to his feet he stalked to the doorway and threw it open. "Sod off, Albus!" he snarled. Only it wasn't Albus. It was Hermione and she was holding two steaming mugs in her hands.

"Severus! I hope you don't mind I decided to come here instead. I was a bit late getting back from Hogsmeade and thought I'd take the chance you were still up. Did you come to my rooms?"

He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, scowling at her.

She tried to hand him a mug while she peeked around his body. "Oh lovely, a fire! I'm still a little chilled. Are you going to invite me in?"

"No." His reply was succinct and to the point. "Leave me alone, Hermione."

She raised an eyebrow at him, "After you tell me what's bothering you."

He was about to reply in a way that would have left little room for her to doubt how much he detested the little games she was playing with him when he noticed a scratch on her neck.

It was long and thin and red, marring the smooth column of her throat. Of its own volition, his hand reached out and very gently traced it.

"How did you get this scratch?" he asked abruptly, pulling his finger back as though burned.

"I was walking home from Hogsmeade when I noticed some blue-moon flowers just inside the forest. I thought you could use them, but managed to whack myself in the face with a tree limb while retrieving the damnable things. That's why I was late I took them right to the lab and put them in stasis before they could wilt. I didn't realize my neck was scratched though is it bad?"

"Bad enough, you foolish girl. You were walking home by yourself?" He turned away from her as he asked this and stalked across the room. "You need some salve scratches like that can be deceptive." He kept his tone purposely snide, trying to hide his sudden confusion.

"I left Harry and Ron at the pub, if that's what you mean," Hermione replied. She had followed him into his rooms and was now standing almost immediately behind him in his bathroom.

"I can't believe those two dunderheads let you walk back here by yourself," he growled. "I know you think you're perfectly safe but there are still plenty of wizards out there who would like to see you hurt, Hermione. And you know better than to go into the woods by yourself it's not called the Forbidden Forest for nothing."

"I didn't want to be late for our date," she replied mildly. He hoped she didn't notice the way his eyebrows had arched slightly at her words. "I know how punctual you are and didn't want you thinking the worst if I wasn't there when you arrived."

"I didn't say I was going to meet you," Snape retorted, finding the jar he'd been searching for and handing it to her. "Here, put this on the scratch. It will heal it right away."

"You did go though and I wasn't there. That's why you were so angry when you opened your door."

"I was angry because I was looking forward to an evening of peace, in front of my fireplace," he snapped back. "Give me that; you're not doing it properly and you're not getting the entire scrape. I'll do it."

"Fine." Hermione stepped a little closer to him and tilted her head to the side, barring her neck to him. He grabbed the jar from her and coated his fingers with the clear gel, before gently coating the scratch. Where the salve touched, the skin quickly knit together and turned pink, before healing completely. It took him less than ten seconds to apply the potion, but his fingers were still tracing her neck.

Biting back a curse, he quickly dropped his hand and turned his back to her as he replaced the lid on the jar and set it back on the shelf. He could feel the heat radiating off her and the fingers that had stroked her neck tingled from the magical heat of the gel.

Hunching his shoulders, he gripped the counter in front of him. "You can leave now," he said tightly. "Your neck is fine."

"I don't want to leave," she replied. "I've still got two semi-hot drinks here."

He looked up from under his lank hair and caught her looking at him through the reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were glittering and her skin seemed oddly flushed. Her bushy hair sprung out wildly around her head and he noted that she was, indeed, still holding the mugs in her hands.

Feeling oddly trapped by her gaze, he barely reacted when she leaned forward and reached her arms around his sides and deposited the mugs on the counter.

"I don't want that damnable hot toddy," he gritted out.

"Nor do I," she agreed. Her hands were still on the counter, beside his and he could almost feel the press of her body against his back. He dragged his eyes away from her to study her hands. They were small and dainty, the fingers rather short for someone so adept at preparing potions ingredients. She had a rather dark freckle just below the knuckle of the index finger on her right hand. Her fingers had never been broken, unlike his which were long and slightly malformed from the time Lucius had thrown a joint-bender curse at him during the final battle. It had only caught his hand, but it had taken Poppy weeks to get the bones to mend properly and even now it ached in the damp weather.

"Hermione..."

"Severus..."

It appeared they were at an impasse. He looked up again, but refused to believe what he was reading in her eyes through the mirror. "I'm not a man to be trifled with, you little witch." His voice was silky and he was certain only he could hear the uncertainty in it.

"I'm not trifling," she replied just as smoothly. "We're both adults."

He turned as she said this, his side brushing against the front of her as he did so. He felt as if he'd been scorched. "I'm old enough to be your father."

"But you're not."

"I don't want this."

She leaned into him as he said this, rising slightly onto her tiptoes until the tips of her breasts brushed his chest and he could feel her warm breath on his neck. "Yes you do. I do too."

Her hands which had thus far remained behind him on the counter slowly lifted until one was pressed firmly against the small of his back and the other was drifting up his chest. "Hermione..." he breathed, "this is not a good idea. You're my apprentice for goodness sake."

"So teach me then," she interrupted. "I've been wanting to learn what the skin on your back feels like for ages. Are you paler under your robes than I think? What will your hands feel like on my breasts..."

She nipped his chin at this, before her hand slipped into his hair and angled his head down for a kiss. Her lips tasted of butterbeer and he could smell the faintly earthy scent of the salve he had rubbed into her neck. He closed his eyes against the wave of longing that crashed through him.

"Hermione," he tried again, "I don't want to hurt you."

"You never would," she sighed against him, "and I'll never hurt you, Severus. I promise. Just please...take this chance. I promise everything will be fine..."

She stepped away from him slightly and reached for his hands, curling her fingers against the palms and squeezing, saying nothing as she led him from the bathroom. When they were out in his main living area again, she dropped his hands and lifted her own to the front of the white shirt she wore, slowly undoing the top few buttons. He couldn't tear his eyes away.

When she was about halfway done, she reached for his own collar and started undoing it. "I've never seen you without at least a vest on over your linen shirts," she murmured as her fingers brushed against the base of his throat. "I like this relaxed look on you."

As she exposed his collarbone she leaned into him again and kissed it gently. He was gripping her shoulders now, holding her closer even though he wanted to push her away. She would break him in the end. Was it worth it? Was a night or perhaps a few nights with Hermione worth the inevitable pain he knew it would cause when she left him?

Her tongue flicked his nipple and he shuddered at the hot surge of lust that drove straight to his groin. She had his shirt almost completely unbuttoned and her hands and mouth were tracing against his flesh until he felt every nerve was on fire.

The hands on her shoulders had migrated to the front of her blouse and started unfastening buttons where she had left off. She moaned in appreciation when he half-slid it from her shoulders, exposing a bare breast to the coolness of the dungeon air. The nipple was already peaked and pink and he allowed his fingers to skim it briefly before he freed the other breast.

She was pushing his shirt from him as well, sighing with frustration when she realized she hadn't undone the cufflinks. With a muttered spell, they fell to the floor with a heavy clinking noise and he was standing in front of her shirtless.

She quickly shrugged out of her own top, before allowing her fingers to trace against his rib cage. He closed his eyes against the feeling; trying to lock the tingle of his skin at her gentle touch and the pounding rhythm of his heart into his memory. Her mouth was against his chest again and he could feel her breasts poking against him. He buried his head in her gloriously bushy hair and inhaled. "Just this one night," he thought to himself, "Just for one night, let me have this."

He had never been with a woman like this before. Ever inch of flesh before him was a revelation. Her breasts were small and firm like plums, the nipples dusky and wide and delicious. Her tummy was slightly bowed, and the sweet curve of it filled his palm gently when he ran his hand over it. She undid the zip on her skirt and let it fall, easing him out of his own trousers as his long fingers slid her panties down her lovely toned legs. The patch of curls at her apex, guarding her femininity, were neatly trimmed and decidedly unlike the bushy mass atop her head. He wanted to bury his nose in those curls as well and see if she still smelled as sweet.

Her hands and her mouth were everywhere and between her kisses she was talking to him. He found her voice highly erotic; her words seemed to cause his blood to heat faster than even the feel of her skin did.

"I always knew your hands would feel like this," she would gasp as he traced the dimple above the cleft of her buttocks.

"That feels so good," she would moan as he rolled her nipples between his fingers before laving them with his tongue.

"Please," she begged, "please Severus, take me to your bedroom."

So he did.

When he first slid into her and felt her velvet flesh wrap around him, he almost groaned at the feeling that swamped him. As he drew himself away from her, he almost cried out at the thought of his desertion. When she welcomed him back again, he barely bit back her name as it flew to his lips.

He didn't need to say anything to her anyway she was talking more than enough for the both of him. Most of her words were incoherent, but the odd one like his name, or a deeply sighed 'Yes'; what even sounded to him suspiciously like 'love you' spurred him on to greater heights.

Sliding into her was like finding a new place to live; a place he never wanted to leave. She was whimpering against him now, her fingers spastically gripping him as he flexed through her, her feet pressed against his thighs and drawing him rhythmically against her.

"Please Severus, please, please," her voice was keening in his ear, low pitched and breathless, causing his whole body to tighten until she finally pulsed around him so firmly he could hold back no more. Gritting his teeth against her neck, he choked back the words of devotion that wanted to spill from him and exploded into her hot depths.

The backs of his eyes were stinging again as he let himself sink against her, a slight smile gracing his features when her arms wrapped around him and her fingers traced lightly up and down his spine. He fell asleep with her murmuring his name, his head against her breasts, the words that would destroy him lodged in his throat.

He would give her his body, but he refused to give her his heart. He refused to make himself any more vulnerable to her than he already was. Besides, he didn't have a heart to give.

TBC

A/N Redux:

Moonlight, Passing Through a Window

from the musical Romance, Romance

I was thinking something rare

Something precious we could share

Something done with great respect

Which we'd always recollect

Which would have no more effect

Than moonlight, passing through a window

I imagined something sweet

Something tender and complete

Just a moment to explore

What goes on beyond the door

Which could bruise our hearts no more

Than moonlight, passing through a window

That was all I meant

On singular event

Brief and innocent

As moonlight, passing through the window.

Run and Hide

Chapter 6 of 9

He found himself thinking of her at the oddest times – when he was marking essays, or berating some dunderhead, or docking house points – she was always there, in the back of his mind, a little niggling conundrum that wouldn't go away.

Chapter Six: Run and Hide

He stared at the toothbrush in his bathroom with a weird sense of dread, noting the splayed bristles and the decidedly un-Slytherin-like color: red. He wondered if today was the first day it had made an appearance, or if she had smuggled it in earlier in the week and today was only the first day he had actually noticed it.

She had a habit of doing that sneaking things past him and, by the time he realized what she was doing, it was normally too late to put a stop to it. She had taken over half the drawers in his dresser just a few days ago, filling them with underwear and the lacy bras she bound her firm young breasts in, along with a few pairs of those infernal Muggle jeans and t-shirts she favored. She had even hung a couple of her apprentice robes in his wardrobe. When he had cocked an eyebrow at her upon discovering this, she had merely shrugged and grinned, "It's easier if I have some things here to put on fresh in the morning, instead of rushing back to my chambers to dress."

When a replicant of the desk in her room appeared in the small nook next to his larger desk, she had said, "It's better to have all my notes here. I'm here all the time anyway and I prefer having my reference material at my fingertips in case I need to ask you something."

When her red silk dressing gown joined his own dark green on the hanger in the bathroom, and her myriad hair products began cluttering the side of his large tub, she had just smiled at his look of astonishment, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him until he forgot about them...at least, until he next took a shower and managed to knock them all over the floor.

He couldn't quite figure out what it was she was up to, but he knew she was up to something. Pretty young witches like Hermione didn't just sleep with men such as him for no reason. He had thought, for a while at least, that she was looking for some sort of leverage over him. After all, a Slytherin would have no compunctions about using sex as a bargaining tool or even as a weapon, but Hermione was not like that. Nor would she let him use her body because she pitied him, which was something a Hufflepuff might do. She wasn't with him because of what he could offer her he had already accepted her as his apprentice before their affair began and besides, a motive like that would be too clinical and Ravenclaw for her.

And, despite her declarations of love, he didn't really believe she loved him either. Yes, she was a Gryffindor, but even Gryffindor's wouldn't be so foolhardy.

He found himself thinking of her at the oddest times when he was marking essays, or berating some dunderhead, or docking house points she was always there, in the back of his mind, a little niggling conundrum that wouldn't go away. For the first little while, he questioned why...why was she with him? She had nothing to gain from any of this, did she? Gradually, the question had changed to what...what was she doing with him? She could certainly find someone better.

Lately, the question was this: How? How could she claim to love him? Was it true? When he thought no one was watching him, he would take this glimmering question out and study it; admire its sparkle and allure, all the while wondering if he was being tempted by fools gold.

It was a Tuesday morning, between classes. He was watching her absently as she placed fresh cauldrons at each work station, trying to puzzle through the mystery of her when she was suddenly in front of him, standing on tip toe and kissing him. He blinked as her sweet fragrance invaded his senses and cocked an eyebrow at her when she pulled back slightly and grinned at him.

"What was that for?" he murmured.

"You just looked so...sexy...slouching against your desk," she replied saucily, "I couldn't help myself."

"Hermione," he started to reply, but was cut off when she kissed him again. He hadn't realized he would ever be a man who would enjoy kisses, but he found himself oddly enthralled by hers. Her lips were always so soft and moist, the damp cave of her mouth hot and surprisingly tasty, the feel of her tongue and teeth highly erotic. This morning she tasted of cinnamon buns and strong tea. Her hands gripped the lapels of his robes, and his were slowly caressing her arms when a startled "Holy fuck!" and the sound of a cauldron hitting the stone floor surprised him.

Pulling himself away from the sweet ambrosia of Hermione's mouth, he met the startled gaze of Barnaby Bitts. The sixth-year Gryffindor was gazing at them with something akin to stupefied horror, his mouth slack with shock. He imagined the same shocked expression must have been on his face as well.

"I'm..." the young man gulped, the hot blush that had taken over his face leaving just as abruptly at Snape's glare, "I thought...I just wanted to get to class early, sir. I didn't mean to...that is, I didn't know..."

Snape glanced quickly at Hermione, who was looking rather amused.

She found this amusing! She found HIM amusing.

"Get out of my classroom," Snape snarled at Bitts. "Isn't it enough that I have to deal with you dunderheads all day long? Class does not start for another ten minutes the next time you arrive so early, you will regret it."

Bitts scurried from the classroom.

"Severus, really," Hermione murmured, "was that necessary?"

"Indeed it was," Snape replied coldly, trying to ignore the small grin playing about the corners of her mouth. "I will not be made a fool of, Miss Granger."

Her grin faltered slightly at his cold tone. "Whatever are you on about now? Who's making a fool of you?"

"You are, for one, and I've had quite enough. Do you suppose that 'kiss' -" he sneered the word "will be enough? Do you think it will be that easy to rehabilitate my image?"

"I'm not trying to rehabilitate your image," she retorted, "I was merely kissing the man I love."

"You don't love me, you annoying wench, anymore than I love you. You're just sowing your wild oats and slumming."

"Slumming?" Hermione replied, aghast.

"What else would you call fucking the pariah of the Wizarding World? Does it please you, Miss Granger; does it excite you? You were always such a wound-up little bushy-haired know-it-all prude when you were a student here but perhaps, deep down, you longed to do something wicked...something that would shock and titillate all your friends..."

He was looming over her as he spoke, gripping her shoulders so tightly he could feel the fragility of her bones. Her eyes were wide and shocked, and he tried to ignore the little jolt he felt when they filled with angry tears. As suddenly as his anger had hit him, it fled, leaving him feeling empty. He roughly pushed her away from him, turning his back on her as he slumped over his desk. "Just get out," he muttered.

"Severus..."

"Leave me, Hermione. Just leave."

"Severus..."

He could hear the tears in her voice, but he couldn't look at her. He didn't want her to try to fix this to try to fix him and he knew that was what she would attempt to do.

"Think of your reputation, you silly girl. It will be all over the school before the end of the day it will be in the Prophet tomorrow! This isn't a game, Hermione. It was harmful enough to you when people only thought we were involved."

"Severus..."

He flinched at the sound of his name; his chest was aching with the cold inside him. "I can't be the man you seem to think I am, Hermione. That's not me. A leopard doesn't change its' spots."

"I don't want you to change," she sighed, "If you did, you wouldn't be Severus Snape. My Severus Snape." She moved towards him as she spoke, her hand drifting out to his shoulder, touching it briefly, before falling back to her side. "I don't think you are anything other than what you always were; just a man. A brilliant, sarcastic, man who's been damaged by life but still manages to survive. I love you for that."

He didn't respond. How could he? Instead, he turned away from her and picked up the quill lying across his desk, running his fingers across the feather, trying to block out her words. She sighed again, and was about to say something else, but the sound of students coming down the hallway stilled her tongue. He knew he should have been relieved when she turned away from him and headed to her small desk in the corner of his classroom, but he found himself strangely bereft. He missed the sound of her voice already.

A/N:

And now, for a song. This one is from Paul McCartney's newest disc, and is just beautiful. The first time I heard it I immediately envisioned Snape in my mind my Snape, that is. Not the Snape currently being (character) assassinated by JKR (although I do have my theories, and still believe in his inherent goodness).

At the Mercy

At the mercy

At the mercy

At the mercy of a busy road

Who can handle such a heavy load?

At the mercy

At the mercy

At the mercy of a busy day

We can think of nothing more to say.

If you show me love

I won't refuse

I know you'd never make me chose

Between the love I've got

And the love I'd lose

Sometimes I'd rather run and hide

Than stay and face the fear inside.

At the mercy

At the mercy

At the mercy of a busy day

Who can bear to turn their head away?

At the mercy

At the mercy

At the mercy of a busy road

We can watch the universe explode.

If you take me up

I won't say no

I guess you'd rather see me grow

Into a better man than the one you know

Sometimes my head is hanging low

But it's time to get on with the show.

At the mercy

At the mercy

At the mercy of a busy day

I can think of nothing more to say.

Coming Back to You

Chapter 7 of 9

At lunch time, she sat beside him in the Great Hall but spent the entire hour conversing with Hagrid. Snape spent it sneering into his soup, wondering what was so fascinating about the Two-headed Sand Sphinx that it took sixty-minutes to discuss them.

She allowed him to sulk for four days, and it was hell. He had become so used to having her nearby that when she wasn't, he didn't really know what to do with himself. He still saw her of course she was his apprentice after all, and she had his classes to attend but the easy camaraderie wasn't there. She did her job as efficiently as always, but when the day was done and classes were over, she'd drift away.

The first day, he told himself it was what he wanted. He would not be made a mockery of, not by anyone and certainly not by Hermione Granger. He knew that word had gotten out to the student population about the interrupted kiss but was determined to ignore the slightly repulsed looks the obnoxious brats kept sending his way. In other words, he acted the same as he always had and by the end of the day he was pretty sure no one believed a word Bitts had said.

That night in the Great Hall for dinner, he told himself he was relieved when Hermione sat between Albus and Minerva. When the meal was finished he returned to his rooms determined to read his most recent acquisition from Flourish and Botts. He had not spent a quite evening reading in a very long time and it was something he had always enjoyed. But the book wasn't as interesting as he'd imagined it would be and he couldn't seem to focus on the words in front of him. Instead, his eyes kept drifting to Hermione's small desk and the mess of parchment lying across the top. He didn't understand how someone as brilliant as she was could be so unorganized.

He decided, after spending an hour gazing from his book to her empty desk that he was too tired to read. He retired to his room.

Her robe was lying across the foot of the bed.

Muttering under his breath, he picked it up as if it would burn him and stuck it on the hanger beside his own. The fact that he ran his fingers lightly over the fabric and smelled the collar before letting it go was completely attributable to the fact he was a very tactile man. His senses all of them were very keen. He loved the feel of silk between his fingers and he couldn't help but be aware of the various scents around him. He didn't miss the girl. He didn't even spare her a thought, except to wonder if she was cold without her robe and thinking if she was it served her right for being so presumptuous as to leave it here.

Mumbling a brief spell to dim the lights, he climbed into his bed and lay awake for the rest of the night, determined not to think of her.

The next day was no better. She had smiled at him and wished him good morning when she walked into the classroom prior to the first lesson. She had made some random comment about the essays she had finished marking for him before placing them neatly on his desk. She had moved to her customary seat in the back corner and sat down.

She was more distracting than ever before.

At lunch time, she sat beside him in the Great Hall but spent the entire hour conversing with Hagrid. Snape spent it sneering into his soup, wondering what was so fascinating about the Two-headed Sand Sphinx that it took sixty-minutes to discuss them.

The afternoon preceded the same as the morning had. Dinner followed the same pattern as the evening before. Snape cancelled their lab work that evening on the pretext he had other obligations to attend to and spent the rest of the evening acquainting himself with Old Ogden.

He did manage to sleep that night, but it wasn't restful. When he woke up the next morning, he realized the side of the bed she normally slept on was completely undisturbed.

Trying to pretend he didn't miss her, he stumbled to his bathroom and was immediately distracted by the sight of her red toothbrush sitting on the sink, next to his. He wondered what she was brushing her teeth with as he started the shower and didn't even realize until it was too late that he was washing his hair with her shampoo.

He avoided breakfast in the Great Hall altogether, but couldn't avoid his classrooms. She was already there when he arrived, setting out the ingredients for the days lessons. Scowling at her when she smiled at him and wished him good morning, he barked that she was in charge of his morning classes and made a hasty exit. He ate his lunch in the back of the library, alone.

He had her instruct his afternoon classes as well, under the pretext that he was going to assess her teaching skills. As she lectured and monitored the students, he sat at his desk and glowered at her from underneath the hair hanging across his face. When classes were over, he told her to straighten up the room and swept out into the hallway, hoping he could grab dinner at the Great Hall and make his escape before she showed up.

No such luck. Either Hermione had ignored his explicit instructions, or the room hadn't needed much cleaning. She entered the Great Hall practically on his heels and was seated beside him before the meal was even served.

He ate his soup with stoic silence, steadfastly refusing to even look at her.

Finally, between the first course and the second, she said "Are you almost finished sulking yet? This is getting rather silly."

"I am not sulking," he had hissed back, "nor am I silly."

She smiled at that and he almost jumped when her hand squeezed his knee from under the table. "Do you like my shampoo?" she asked instead.

He scowled, "I used it without realizing what I was doing. I shall box your things and have them returned to you this evening. It shan't happen again."

"I'd rather you leave my things where they are, or else I'll just have to drag them all back when you stop acting like a child."

He ignored her the rest of the meal, but he didn't return her things to her.

By day four, the lack of sleep was starting to get to him. Her toothbrush seemed to mock him from its place on the sink and the unrumpled side of his bed made him sigh. He taught his own classes that day, but was so distracted he didn't even hand out one detention and he didn't make any one cry.

"Maybe Bitts was *almost* right," he heard a student whisper in the hallway when he was on his way to dinner. "Maybe Snape's in love with Miss Granger, but she's too smart to have anything to do with him. That's why he's been acting so strange these last few days."

"Whatever the reason, I hope it keeps up," came the hushed reply, "*I* like not having homework in potions."

Dinner was a mostly-silent affair again. He ate his food without tasting it and wondered if Hermione had meant what she had said, about him not returning her things. Conversations ebbed and flowed around him, but he participated in none of them. Instead, he thought about the way she had kissed him in his classroom just a few days prior. He thought about the smile on her face when they'd been caught, and how she had told him she was kissing him because she loved him. He thought about what he'd snarled at her and how it had almost made her cry.

"Hermione," he said, looking up at her suddenly and catching her slightly off guard. It was the first time he had spoken to her since that day, without her speaking to him first.

"Severus?" she replied. Her fork was halfway between her plate and her mouth, and the small piece of apple pie on the end of it smelled richly of cinnamon.

"Would you care to join me for tea in my quarters later?" he asked.

"Why wait?" she responded, placing the fork back on her plate, the apple pie forgotten. Her hand reached over to cover his own, and he brought it to his lips, kissing it gently before rising from his chair and pulling hers out for her.

"Why wait indeed?" he agreed with her, as they made their excuses and left the Great Hall.

A/N:

This chapter was completely inspired by Leonard Cohen's beautiful and evocative song **Coming Back to You**

Maybe I'm still hurting

I can't turn the other cheek

But you know that I still love you

It's just that I can't speak

I looked for you in everyone

And they called me on that too

I lived alone but I was only

Coming back to you

Ah they're shutting down the factory now

Just when all the bills are due

And the fields they're under lock and key

Tho' the rain and the sun come through

And springtime starts but then it stops

In the name of something new

And all the senses rise against this

Coming back to you

And they're handing down my sentence now

And I know what I must do

Another mile of silence while I'm

Coming back to you

There are many in your life

And many still to be

Since you are a shining light

There's many that you'll see

But I have to deal with envy

When you choose the precious few

Who've left their pride on the other side of

Coming back to you

Even in your arms I know

I'll never get it right

Even when you bend to give me

Comfort in the night

I've got to have your word on this

Or none of it is true

And all I've said was just instead of

Coming back to you

Ablution

Chapter 8 of 9

If I were truly a good man, I would send you away for your own sake. The fact that I can't seem to only proves that I am incapable of doing the right thing.

Chapter Eight: Ablution

-slight lemons ahead-

He found he didn't know what to say to her once they'd arrived back at his chambers. He knew he should say something but words – as they often had in the past – failed him. He noted the way her eyes traveled around his room, widening slightly when she saw the empty bottle of fire whiskey lying on the floor in front of the armchair he had slept in last night.

He adjusted the cuffs of his frock coat and kept a wary eye on her as she moved around the room, taking everything in as if she hadn't been there for weeks instead of days.

"You've a new book, I see," she said, indicating the tome he'd been trying to read the other night. "It looks interesting."

"I'm sure it is," he replied. "I haven't really read all that much of it yet."

She cocked an eyebrow at him and approached her desk, shaking her head at the scattered papers. "I really should straighten this up. I know how you hate clutter."

He shrugged to indicate he heard her, but didn't reply. A strained silence filled the room – at least, it was strained on his end. He didn't think it bothered her at all and the thought made him uneasy. When had she become so comfortable with his silences? When had he become so uncomfortable with being silent in her presence? The things he wanted to say to her - the questions he wanted to ask - seemed lodged in his throat and she didn't seem all that eager to talk.

He took a step closer to her, watching the way her slim hands settled her papers into a neat pile, her fingers sliding against the parchment, the feather quill rubbing between her fingers. He envied the way she touched them; longed to have her fingers trace the blade of his cheek and the bridge of his nose with just such a caress. He was watching her hands so intently he didn't realize she was looking at him until she spoke his name.

"Severus." Her eyes were glinting with the emotion she never tried hiding from him; awash in tears. He knew it was his fault and felt even worse than he normally did. He was making her cry.

"Hermione...I..." he paused and searched for the proper words, his hands clasping together. "I shouldn't have yelled at you, the other day. Don't let me make you cry."

She was in his arms before he could blink. "It's not you making me cry," she murmured against his chest. "Well, it is you – but not the way you think. I just...I don't know what I need to do to show you how...you're not the awful man you seem to think you are."

"I am," he replied. "I've seen and done too many horrible things to ever be anything other. Don't whitewash me, Hermione. The reputation I have is well-earned. You sully yourself just by being in my presence. If I were truly a good man, I would send you away for your own sake. The fact that I can't seem to only proves that I am incapable of doing the right thing. I am greedy. I don't want to let you go."

"Than I am greedy as well," she responded, lifting her face to look at him. "I don't want to let you go, either. I love you, Severus. I know you don't believe it – I know you think you don't merit love – but I can't change my heart."

His hands were in her hair now, fingers running through the curls and snagging in them every once in a while. Her hair was warm, like she was. He imagined wrapping them both around him like a cocoon and not emerging until he somehow became the type of man she deserved. "You cannot save me, Hermione. You cannot redeem me. It's best you realize that now – I am who I am."

"If you were anything other than what you are, I wouldn't love you." She was looking at him intently and her hand had come up to trace his face. He closed his eyes against the pleasure and tried not to let her words mean too much. "You're a dichotomy and a mystery. You have the capacity within you to do great good and great evil; yet you have chosen the good – despite the cost to yourself. It would have been easier for you to stay a Death Eater; to have never become a spy for Dumbledore; yet you chose the harder path. If you were the evil man you think you are, we would all be dead. Don't you understand that?"

Her words flowed over him like water as she pulled his face towards her and kissed him tenderly on the lips. He could taste the salt of her tears when he kissed her back. When she opened her mouth to his, he groaned against the heat of it and tried not to drown in her emotion. His heart was beating painfully against his chest as her words continued to wash through him, ferreting out all the hidden shadows of his soul and cleansing them.

Could it be enough for him that she believes he is worthy of her? He thinks, for the first time, that maybe it could.

-0-0-0-0-

She is a tangle of pale limbs and honeyed skin, whispering his name a million different ways as his fingers slide against her. Her hands grips his hair and hold him to her breast as he laves her nipples, moving from one to the other as they pebble under his ministrations. She moans when he dips into her belly button before he slides lower and feasts on the very essence of her. He wonders, in an abstract way, if he has become addicted to the feel and the taste of her, as his tongue whispers his longing for her with each stroke against her clit. He wishes he could tell her with words, but trusts she is intelligent enough to hear what he is saying without them.

He feels open and vulnerable when they are together like this, as if she could look into the heart he denies is there and see that it beats only because of her. She moans his name again and her hands, beating spasmodically against the sheets of his bed are suddenly gripping his shoulders and drawing him up her body.

Her thighs are hot against his sides as she flips him over, the muscles tense as she lowers herself down the length of him, her silken core creating a liquid friction that almost undoes him. His hips flex into her and she bends at the waist until her pert young breasts are rubbing against his chest. Her eyes are wide with need, her teeth sharp as she nips at the cord of muscle inside his neck.

"Severus," she hisses again as their movements turn from measured and rhythmic to frantic and wild, "I love you. I love you. I love you..."

He is lost and found with her words, his world exploding around him, but he finds he doesn't care. He's found a new life with her. He thinks he's going to keep it.

What You Already Own – Amy Grant

I give you my heart, broken and bruised

But still beating and wanting to trust you

I know I'm unfaithful, I know I do wrong

Do you protect what you already own

I give you my body, naked and meek,

Burning with passion, human and weak,

I try to be faithful, and then I go wrong

Can you protect what you already own

Can you protect what you already own

I know I'm unfaithful, I know I do wrong

Do you protect what you already own.

I give you my life, precious and rare

Knowing wherever I've been you were there

Sometimes I'm faithful, sometimes I'm strong

Will you protect what you already own?

I will be faithful, help me be strong,

Cause you will protect what you already own

You still protect what you already own

HERMIONE

Chapter 9 of 9

He wants to tell her...something...but his uncertainty holds him back. Love is as intransigent as smoke. He knows that what he feels is real, because he has never experienced anything close to this his entire miserable life, but Hermione is young and could come to her senses any day. He cannot tell her how he feels because the words are trapped in his throat.

She is sitting in the overstuffed green armchair, in front of the fireplace, reading one of his books. Her legs hang over an arm, swinging slightly. They are bare from just above her knees to the tips of her toes. He knows if he walks over there, he would see the slightest hint of her plain cotton knickers peeking at him from underneath her ridiculously short skirt.

For a moment he debates doing just that, but she is a discerning witch and would immediately realize what he was doing. He doesn't want to upset her. The few days they were estranged still haunt him, because he knows that sooner or later he will do something else to offend her, and she will leave for good.

So, he watches her and listens to her and enjoys her smiles and her voice. He memorizes the smell of her hair, and maps the soft skin of her body with the rough skin of his fingertips, and wonders what the rest of his life will be like without her.

There is a part of him that wants to believe her when she tells him that she loves him, and he finds he doesn't banish the thought as quickly as he used to. *She must love me in some way, he tells himself, or why would she stay? Why would she smile at me, why would she kiss my brow and caress my back and sigh my name as I spend myself inside her? She is a Gryffindor, without subterfuge. She must love me, just a little. I know I love her.*

The sudden realization jolts him, and he quells the urge to ask her if he has finally figured it out. He can't express the way he feels with mere words. *How do you tell someone that they make your life worth living without sounding foolish? She has filled my days with companionship and joy, and my nights with passion and heat. She has taken this broken man and pieced me back together again, using herself as the mortar that makes me whole. I do not have the words to give her, because nothing I could say could show her what I hold within my heart.* He wants to tell her...something...but his uncertainty holds him back. Love is as intransigent as smoke. He knows that what he feels is real, because he has never experienced anything close to this his entire miserable life, but Hermione is young and could come to her senses any day. He cannot tell her how he feels because the words are trapped in his throat.

Instead, he approaches her and leans over, touching his lips to hers, words of love poised on the tip of his tongue. The book she is reading drops to the floor, and her hands flutter up to caress his shoulders. She tastes of summer-ripe berries and smells like home.

When he finally pulls away and hands her back her book, she smiles at him and he finds himself smiling back.

aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

It is Saturday, and they are still in bed. Hermione is curled against him, arm thrown over his chest, and knee curled over his waist. Her bushy hair tickles his neck and nose, and the heat of her body makes him drowsy. He had surprised her with a kiss earlier that morning when she exited their bathroom. Needless to say, they never made it to breakfast. He feels like he is wrapped in a cocoon, and realizes as he drifts off to sleep that he is a different man than he was before Hermione entered his life. Instead of making him panic, the thought makes him smile.

He has come to know her in a way he doesn't know anyone else. She can say his name a million ways - 'Severus' - and each way is merely a different version of 'I love you.' She tells him this too, of course, 'I love you,' and he finds he doesn't flinch, when she says it, anymore.

'Hermione,' he whispers softly against her hair, as he drifts off to sleep. 'Hermione.'

aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Right now, this very instant, her voice is hitching in that sweet little way of hers, gasping as he fills her, sighing with every slide of his body into hers. Her arms are around him, her hands sliding from his buttocks to his shoulders and back again, alternately squeezing and scratching him as their rhythm takes over. He can feel her heels, pressing into the top halves of his calves as she lifts her pelvis to meet his thrusts. His hands are fisted in her hair, those glorious curls wrapping around his fingers like ribbons. Her head is arched back and she is gibbering his name now - 'Severus, Severus, Severus...' Her voice coats him like lava, so incredibly hot that he feels his body burning from the inside out. 'Tell me,' she's begging him, 'give me your voice; I need to hear you, Severus....'

He can feel his balls tighten with each stroke, his throat aching with all the pent up words he's been longing to tell her - how he loves her too, and he's so thankful she's there. That the feel of her, tight and hot and wet around him is heaven; that her voice is a balm and an irritant, alternately soothing and inflaming him.

The pressure is mounting and her soft cries are urging him onwards. He wants to tell her she has taken a broken man and somehow, against all logic, made him whole - that the very essence of her completes him in a way more elemental than the strongest of magicks. She has become his very heart and soul...

Instead, all he manages to say as he explodes inside her is her name: 'Hermione.'

He can tell by the way she shudders around him and kisses his neck, her eyes bright with tears, that she has heard him - and understood.

FIN

This last chapter is short, I realize, but I've taken it as far as I can go, based on the happenings in it's sister one-shot story, 'She Never Stops Talking'. And, because I must, I leave you all with this last verse of a song, written by John Denver, one of the greatest (IMO) folk singer/songwriters ever.

I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free

And I wish I knew how

It would feel to be free

I wish that I could break

All the chains holding me

I wish I could say

All the things that I'd like to say

Say 'em loud say 'em clear

For the whole round world to hear

I wish I could share

All the love that's in my heart

Remove every doubt that keeps us apart

And I wish you could know

What it means to be me

Then you'd see and agree

Every man should be free