

You Are Not Alone

by themistresssnape

Three years have passed since the defeat of the Dark Lord, and Hermione Granger has returned to Hogwarts alone and broken hearted. The Golden Trio splintered after the victory and Hermione has been alone and drowning in studying abroad. Upon her return to Hogwarts, she must face the man she hasn't seen since her graduation and learn if he could ever forgive her for the pain she dealt him those years ago. Can they learn to trust each other or will their pain and pride get in the way?

Learn To Be Lonely

Chapter 1 of 14

Three years have passed since the defeat of the Dark Lord, and Hermione Granger has returned to Hogwarts alone and broken hearted. The Golden Trio splintered after the victory and Hermione has been alone and drowning in studying abroad. Upon her return to Hogwarts, she must face the man she hasn't seen since her graduation and learn if he could ever forgive her for the pain she dealt him those years ago. Can they learn to trust each other or will their pain and pride get in the way?

It ended on a June day in a foggy moor that had been the beautiful grounds of Hogwarts. Coated in mist and blood and mud and smoke, the victorious stood to survey the damage and to take stock of who had been lost in the battle. Comrade and enemy alike lay side-by-side in the blood-blackened field, their lightless eyes staring off into distant nothingness. The black of the Death Eater's robes were mingled in among the black of the Hogwarts robes, born upon the backs of students who had graduated moments before the battle began.

Yes, Voldemort and his followers had finally decided upon the time when they would wage their final battle against Dumbledore and the Order. Graduation Day, they reasoned, would be the day they would least expect. Everyone would be caught up in saying goodbye to their friends and taking a bittersweet look at those hallowed halls of learning for the last time. *Oh, yes, Voldemort hissed in his twisted little mind, Dumbledore won't see it coming. The dimwitted fool will be befuddled by saying goodbye to Potter and the rest of the lot to be wary of what is going on under his nose.*

The plan would have worked, had it not been for a tall and silent, black robed figure who was listening intently to Voldemort's plans. In the three years since his return, Voldemort had yet to doubt the one Death Eater whom all the others questioned. He punished the doubtful while allowing Severus Snape to quietly and methodically gather up the information the Order needed to stop him once and for all. It seemed that Voldemort, with all his power as a Legilimens, couldn't, or more logically wouldn't, see the truth that was in his most favorite follower. And it was here, when Voldemort had given himself over to that emotion of the foolish, to love and trust, that he was undone.

Dumbledore and the Order had been warned with sufficient time to prepare the students. An announcement was made that the graduation ceremony would take place two hours earlier than originally planned. Dumbledore told Harry that they would be going into battle with Voldemort that day and to prepare himself. And prepare himself he did. Harry dug up the coins Hermione had made for the D.A. in fifth year and warned them all. If Voldemort had the bullocks to attack Hogwarts Castle itself, Harry Potter was going to make sure it was the last thing he ever did.

The day of graduation dawned pale and overcast. It seemed as if all the teachers were on edge when the students made their way to the Great Hall for the ceremony. Snape had been summoned early that morning to the Riddle House for final instructions and was the only teacher absent from the hall. Dumbledore made his excuses, that he had taken ill the night before and wanted to wish the graduates the best of luck in their future pursuits. Harry and the others knew, of course, that he had been

"New office?" she chirped. The look on her face was something of relief. "So you weren't sacked?"

He forced back a smile. "No, far from that. I am the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," he said smugly as he turned on his heel and disappeared.

Masquerade

Chapter 2 of 14

Hermione is beginning to settle in at Hogwarts in her new teaching position. But she isn't as happy as she should be. Snape seems to be in a foul mood as well.

CHAPTER 2: Masquerade

The start of term came off without a hitch. Hermione had taken her place at the High Table between Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick, where the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher usually sat. Snape had grumpily informed them, as they filed up to the High Table on the night of the start of term feast, that he refused to give up the seat he had occupied for the last twenty-one years. He had been forced to give up the rooms and office he had lived in and made his home, he groused. He was not about to give up his chair as well. He sneered a bit at Hermione before tossing in, "I can't see my Slytherins as well from all the way over there, either."

Dumbledore had been wonderful with her introduction. He had acclaimed her a war hero, who had played a key part in the downfall of the Dark Lord. The stories were more for the benefit of the new students who were Muggle-born. Those who had at least one magical parent had heard the stories of the war and knew perfectly who she was. Dumbledore couldn't resist throwing in a passing reference to Professor Snape as a war hero as well and smiled slightly, as he had elicited a very dark sneer from the younger wizard. When Dumbledore had finished introducing her, Hermione stood for a moment to a great round of applause that echoed off the walls of the Great Hall. She blushed slightly and nodded her head, her loose curls bouncing a bit, before sitting back down again.

Hermione had been petrified the next day. Her first class was with the third year Gryffindors and Slytherins. She remembered quite well the terrible taunting that went on between the members of these two Houses, knew how pointless and ruthless it was to begin with. She had left the classroom door open as she prepared for their arrival, realizing for the first time how terribly stuffy it was down in the dungeons. She sat at her desk, idly glancing at the clock every few minutes as she tried to put some finishing touches on her syllabus. It was only moments before the bell when she noticed several faces peeking around the edge of the doorframe. She drew in a deep breath and steeled herself. *It's just like taking an exam*, she thought to herself. *You can do those. You can do this, Granger!*

She stood from her desk and walked steadily and briskly to the back of the classroom. "Well, come on. We haven't got all day," she said firmly to the students who had lined up outside the door. "When the door's open, feel free to come in from now on. Find a seat, quickly. We've got a lot to be getting on with."

The first half an hour or so went smoothly as she had planned on spending the first day explaining some of her rules and what kind of work load they could expect from her. She was just outlining the first reading and essay assignment when she caught sight of two rather large sized Slytherins heckling an impish looking Gryffindor at the back table. Hermione felt her face go red with indignation as she slammed her book onto her podium loudly. Every eye in the room was fixed upon their tiny teacher, who now looked as if she could have taken on the Dark Lord single-handed. She cleared her throat loudly and gripped the edges of the podium until her knuckles were white.

"I am sure you are all aware that paying attention is of the utmost importance in this class. Now, if it is too difficult for you to get along with your classmates *no matter what House* they are in, be prepared for me to delve out punishments. House rivalries beyond those for the House or Quidditch Cups are pointless. For every snide comment I hear from any of you... yes, Gryffindors, I mean you as well... for every snide comment I hear from any of you about a member of another House, I will not only remove House points, you will also serve detentions," she said, almost through clenched teeth. She looked at every face in the room before she continued. "Have I made myself clear?"

The students were quick to agree, and the two Slytherins at the back table quickly clammed up and began ignoring their Gryffindor tablemate. Hermione quickly finished giving them their first assignment and allowed them to pack up a few minutes before the bell. She exhaled a long breath as the students filed out of the room. Perhaps she had been too harsh on them. She didn't want the students to hate her, but she didn't want them to walk all over her either. It didn't matter now; her first impression was made and there was nothing she could do to take it back. She gathered up her papers and made her way into her office where she waited for her next class after lunch.

It had been a week since that first class, and Hermione was beginning to hit her stride with the students. The word went around quickly that it was dangerous to misbehave in Professor Granger's classroom. The whispers filled the Great Hall as students whipped from one House table to another, Slytherins as much as anyone else. Although they wouldn't admit it, it seemed as if the Slytherin students were glad someone had finally called them on their bully tactics. It was quickly established among the student body that Potions was now a class to look forward to rather than one to dread unless your House color was green.

Hermione was sitting at the High Table that morning, talking to Professor Flitwick about her year studying Charms in France. He seemed quite interested in the spells the French Charms master had developed and was begging her to teach them to him as soon as she got a chance. Hermione tried to be nice, as she had always been fond of Professor Flitwick, and claimed she already had a multitude of grading and planning to do. The truth was, she didn't want to be around anyone more than she had to. It was bad enough to sit at the High Table and watch the students laughing and joking about with each other and wish she could have that. She grimaced slightly, realizing that she hadn't laughed in two years, not since Ron had ended things with her.

It was more disturbing, however, to sit at the High Table and try to make pleasant conversation with McGonagall and Flitwick when a man who so obviously despised her sat four chairs away. Snape had not spoken more than a grunted, "Good morning, Professor Granger," to her since he had helped her reset the wards on her private stores. When he did condescend enough to look at her, he sneered, and his dark eyes flashed with malice. A week into the term and he had already deducted over two hundred points from the various Houses and given six detentions with Filch. He was in a foul mood and it seemed, at least to Hermione, that it was her fault.

Of course, it probably was. She hadn't exactly been warm and inviting to him since she had arrived. It was difficult for her to be that way these days and more so if she was trying to be that way around Snape. He must have been annoyed with all of those letters she sent begging for an internship. No doubt Dumbledore had tried to influence him somehow, which certainly wouldn't have helped the situation. If Hermione knew one thing at all about Severus Snape, it was that he would rather be in control of a situation or be dead. How hard it must have been for him, to be forced to rely on Harry, the son of the man he hated so much, for his salvation all those years. The battle couldn't have been any better, standing by and protecting the Boy-Who-Lived while he garnered the glory of the Wizarding World yet again. And then, at the victory celebration, what it must have cost him to...

Oh, don't think about that, Granger; Hermione berated herself as she stared into her cup of coffee. *Think about that and sooner or later you'll start thinking about Ron... See what you've done now, you prat? Don't go getting all teary-eyed in front of everyone!* She swiped absently at her watering eyes and busied her hands with pushing her eggs around on her plate with her fork and knife. The stupid prat of a Weasley was still tearing her heart to shreds, and there was nothing she could do about it. How had she let herself be so blind? She thought she loved him. She thought he loved her. The first few times his eyes, and his hands, roamed she thought he was just having

Think of Me

Chapter 4 of 14

Hermione finally goes to talk to Snape about the victory celebration. Will he be willing to listen to her, or will he push her away forever?

CHAPTER 4: Think of Me

Hermione cried herself to sleep that night, something that wasn't unusual for her these days. The music box on her mantle played her songs over and over throughout the night, acting as if it wanted to milk every tear from her eyes. The episode with Snape in the staff room had been horrible. Hermione didn't think she had ever been more humiliated in all of her life. Sure, she could live through a war. She could live through seven years under the man's annoyingly watchful eyes. She could live through Ron turning his back on her the way he did. She could live through the loneliness with only her myriad of tears and her music box for comfort. But she didn't think she could live through hurting Snape again.

The victory celebration played itself over in her dreams. She felt her head spin at the déjà vu of watching herself from a few feet away, sitting in her chair next to Ron. Hermione watched her dream self with anxiety as he released her hand and stood. He looked down at her with love in his eyes, the only time she could ever remember him doing so, and told her he was going to get her something to eat. He disappeared into the crowd seconds later, and Hermione's blood began to run cold. She knew what was coming. Any second now she would hear...

"Is this seat taken at the moment, Miss Granger?" he purred from his stature above her.

Hermione looked at him with fear in her eyes. *Oh, please, please just turn around and go back to the shadows,* she begged in her mind. It was useless, she knew, but the thought of having to relive this again was tearing her apart. She winced in almost physical pain as he sank languidly into the seat that had belonged to Ron only a few moments before. The words were out long before she was ready to relive them.

"Yes, sir, it is. Ron was sitting there. He's just gone to get me something to eat," Dream Hermione said harshly. "I'd rather he not have to fight with you over his seat. He's been through enough lately, and I would appreciate it if you would leave us both alone."

From her vantage point near them, Hermione noticed the glint of hurt that swam through Snape's ebony eyes. She saw him visibly steel himself. His back went painfully straight, and his features looked as if they were made of stone. *You stupid little girl! How could you have sat so close to him and not seen how that had hurt him? Gryffindor know-it-all be damned. Gryffindor heartless bitch is more like it!* Hermione was seething as she listened to their exchange.

"I promise I will leave as soon as Mister Weasley reappears. Until then, please indulge me and allow me to enjoy your company for a short while," he said. He looked at her for a moment, and his eyes softened a bit. "Besides, I am under the impression that you will be leaving us permanently after the celebration is over. I would not want to miss this opportunity to thank you for everything you have done."

Dream Hermione's eyes widened incredulously. "I believe you have had too much to drink tonight, Professor Snape. Otherwise, you wouldn't sully yourself to speak to me in a civil tone."

The look that fell over Snape's face was enough to make Hermione cry as she watched him. His ebony eyes glistened so much so that it looked as if he was going to cry. Whatever color he had in his face drained away, and his hands began to shake in his lap. He tried to regain his composure and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I can assure you that I am not inebriated, Miss Granger. The habits of a life of spying do not fade away so quickly. And, I feel I must apologize for the way I have treated you all these years." He smirked as she mimicked his movements and crossed her arms over her chest disbelievingly. "You are bright, Miss Granger. I had hoped you would have figured out long ago that I could not praise you as I would have wished. It has been an honor to teach you, to watch you grow into the fine, brilliant young woman that you are now."

"I watched you in the battle. I saw you do whatever was in your power to protect Potter. You were willing to give up your life to make sure he finished what he started. I was in awe of your bravery that day, Miss... uh.... Hermione. I have never known anyone quite like you. You are an extraordinary witch."

Hermione shuddered as she saw Dream Hermione grimace at these words. She knew what was coming next; she knew the words he was about to say. If only she could stop her dream self from speaking, from laughing at him. She would even settle for keeping him from saying those words, as precious as they were to her now, to stop the hurt she was about to cause him. *Keep your mouth shut, you stupid twit! Please, for the love of Merlin, don't laugh at him. Don't you see how much this hurts him, how his pride is bruised right now? Please, just this once don't say anything; let's see what happens if things went differently.* But Snape continued on, getting the words out before whatever minute amount of Gryffindor courage he had in his Slytherin soul failed him.

"I have thought so for a while now. Your bravery, loyalty, and intelligence have awed me. At the battle, as I watched you go so willingly to whatever fate Potter was leading you to, I knew that if we both survived I would not leave these things unsaid. Hermione..." Dream Hermione winced visibly again as her name dripped from his mouth. His voice began shaking, and the real Hermione was silently pleading with him to remain silent. His features softened, and his eyes looked at her with more gentleness than anyone had ever seen from him. "I must confess that I have found myself quite fond of you, Hermione. To be truthful, I have found myself very much in love with you."

Dream Hermione's jaw dropped, and her eyes glinted in disbelief. She stared at Snape as he sat in front of her, a nervous muscle in his jaw ticking as he ground his teeth and waited for her reply. Mirth flickered into Dream Hermione's eyes, and she began to laugh. She doubled over in her lap, laughing without abandon into the palms of her hands. Snape's eyes darkened, and his features fell back into their cold, stone-like mask.

Dream Hermione swiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and looked him in the face. "I never would have thought you had a sense of humor, Professor."

Snape cleared his throat painfully and sneered, "I was not trying to be funny, Hermione. I told you the truth." Hermione felt so terrible for him.

As suddenly as Dream Hermione had started laughing, she stopped. Her face contorted like she was about to be sick. She scooted away from him on her chair and eyed him with suspicion. Real Hermione made one last attempt to salvage what she could of the situation. *Apologize! Please, just say you were caught off guard, and you didn't know what to do. Don't say those things to him; you'll save yourself a lot of heartache.* It was to no avail.

"You've had too much to drink, Professor. I can't believe you actually said that," she seethed. She wrapped her arms around herself for protection. "I'm eighteen years old! You're... you're... you're older than my father! That is a terrible joke. I've dealt with enough of you all these years. Seven years I've listened to you berate my friends and me. Seven years I've watched as you refused to acknowledge my presence and insult my intelligence. Seven years I've been petrified of doing one thing wrong in front of

have a long weekend, so I'm aiming to get Chapter 7 up sometime then. Please don't come after me with pitchforks and torches! *innocently batting my eyes* You know I love you all! By the way, you can check out the lyrics that inspired this chapter by going to http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/1157334420/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Wishing_You_Were_Somehow_Here_Again

Measure of a Man

Chapter 7 of 14

A chance meeting in The Three Broomsticks after Harry's wedding leads to some tender confessions. Is it the beginning of something new, or is it the beginning of the end?

CHAPTER 7: Measure of a Man

Hermione jumped when she heard the deep baritone of Severus Snape rumbling in her ear. She thought it was a figment of a drunken haze brought on by a few too many glasses of mulled wine. She smiled lazily, a becoming, beautiful blush spreading over her features. "More than sorrows, sir. I'm trying to drown you," she mumbled as if she were speaking to herself.

Snape narrowed his black eyes at her for a moment, watching her slip out of the winter jacket she was still wearing. There was a glow coming off her as she smiled at him again, obviously still thinking he wasn't really there. "I see, and why are you trying to drown me, Professor Granger?" His voice was rough and thick as he spoke to her. Every fantasy he'd ever had about her came flooding to his brain as he watched her.

Hermione reached her hand out and took his large hand in her own. She rubbed the pad of her thumb over his palm and laughed quietly. "Please, at least while you're here in my mind, don't be formal. Call me Hermione, or whatever you feel the urge to say as long as it isn't 'Professor.' As long as I've had you in my head, you've been this way. I want you to be Severus, just this once."

A warm hand clasped over hers as she continued to ramble on. He began stroking the sensitive skin of her wrist with his fingers. He brought her hand to his mouth and lightly kissed where his fingers caressed, letting his hot breath drift over her skin. The small, barely visible hairs on her arm started to prickle. "I am whatever you want me to be, Hermione," he purred against her skin.

She drew a sharp breath and chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. Heat pooled at her core as her Figment Severus continued to lovingly caress and kiss her hands. "If only that were true. I would give anything to have the real you, the real Severus to touch me the way you always have. You are a comfort to me, but I feel so empty when you are gone. I will never be whole as long as you are the only part of Severus I possess."

Hot, stinging tears were rolling down her cheeks as she spoke. She sniffled and grasped at the hand locked over her own. "Hermione, you could have more, if only you were to ask. I would give you the moon, the earth, the skies, if you would have me," he murmured softly. He swept the pad of his thumb under each eye, collecting the tears that had spilled from their honeyed depths. He touched her nose gently before reverently sliding his fingertips over her lips. "I have dreamt of this, of you, for so long. Say you'll have me, my Hermione."

"You know I couldn't want anything more, but nothing I say to you here will matter. Only I will know, and it will do nothing but tear my heart to pieces each time I think of it," she said, her voice cracking. Her eyes were beginning to turn red and swollen from her tears. "I wasted all those years chasing after Ron and running all over the continent. I went back to Viktor for a while, but all I could see was your face. How I've loved you since I realized how much I hurt you. What it must have cost you, Severus! The real you could never forgive me for all that I've done. You will never love me."

Hermione's breath caught in her chest as she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her to pull her close. She had just enough time to take in the thick, masculine smell of him before she felt two soft, warm lips descend upon her own. The kiss was tentative and shy as Severus tried desperately to show her that he was real. Her words were branded on his soul the second his lips touched hers, his fingers twisting gently around her chestnut curls.

Kissing Hermione Granger was more than Severus had ever imagined it to be. He longed to coax her to open her lips to him, to let him explore the warmth of her with his tongue, but he refused to push her. More than anything, he was desperate for her to realize that she was not imagining this. He held her tightly in his arms, and nearly groaned when she relaxed into him. Her hands, which were trapped between them, splayed against his chest. He held her back from him, letting his gaze take in the flush that colored her cheeks, the way her eyes had drifted serenely closed, the slight plump in her lips as she turned her face up to him. *Merlin help me, but she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!* He placed another chaste kiss on her lips before he released her.

None of the other times have been like this, she thought as she felt those soft lips pouring emotion into her. *It's almost as if this isn't a dream. If only it were real! Oh, Severus, how I wish it were real! If there is any mercy in the heavens, when I open my eyes, please don't let this have been a dream. But it can't be, it just can't...*

Honey eyes met black as Hermione's lids fluttered open to find the flesh and blood version of her dreams gazing back at her. Her hand flew to her mouth as she sucked in a startled breath. *It can't... oh, hell, what have I said!* Her mind began to race against the lethargy induced by too much alcohol. She could remember everything she had uttered when she thought she was speaking to her own conjured Snape. Moreover, she could remember everything he had said in return.

"Professor Snape, I..." she mumbled, her eyes casting around for anything but those eyes. They were pulling her in, threatening to drag her under the tidal waves of emotion raging in their black depths. For the first time since he had known her, Hermione Granger was speechless.

Severus smiled, a genuinely happy smile that reached his eyes. "Please, at least while you are here in my arms," he murmured, pulling her close again, "don't be formal. Call me Severus, or anything you have the notion to say as long as it isn't 'Professor.'" Her own words echoed in her ears as she turned her face up to him, taken aback somewhat by the smile on his face and the force of emotion churning in his eyes.

He pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead, relishing the feel of her warm body pressed against his. From somewhere nearby, he heard Rosmerta mumbling something that sounded remarkably like, "It's about damn time, daft bastard." Hermione sighed contentedly against his chest and rested her arms around his ribs.

"I meant every word of it, Hermione," he whispered against her hair. It smelled of jasmine and lavender. He would remember it until the day he died, and it would always be a comfort to him. "If you will have me, I will give you anything you would ask of me."

"How could you want me after everything I've done to you? I was so hateful and cold. Severus, I must've torn your heart to shreds!" She felt like sobbing against the warm strength of his chest. His wool jacket was a bit scratchy against her cheek, but she would never feel the coarse fabric again without remembering the feel of his soothing arms around her.

"I think I might have been a mother by now, too," she murmured, pulling back to lock her eyes with his. "I would like to be a mother some day, Severus. What do you think?"

"I would like for you to be as well." Before she could answer, he descended his mouth upon hers in a tender but possessive kiss. He crushed her to him and groaned as she tentatively begged entrance to his mouth with her tongue. Her fingers twined in his hair and tugged gently, sending bolts of electricity straight to his groin.

Breathless, Hermione pulled away from him and rested her head against the crook of his neck. She kissed what she could reach of his neck and sighed, her warm breath washing over him. He shivered and inwardly groaned as she shifted against him, her arse rubbing against his growing erection.

"I'm sorry, Severus," she muttered thickly, tears stinging her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm just not ready yet."

He pressed a chaste kiss to her lips and stroked her hair. As much as he wanted to finally find himself buried to the hilt in her tight, wet heat, he had promised he would not push. It was one promise he refused to break, no matter how difficult it was. "It's all right, little one. We have time."

A/N: First off, if anyone had trouble reading chapter 5 "Invisible," I've fixed the problem of the screen width. Just thought I'd let you know, it's much easier to read now. Secondly, a Clay Aiken song inspired this chapter. You can find the lyrics here: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/clayaiken/runtome.html>

When You Say You Love Me

Chapter 9 of 14

Snape and Hermione spend a quiet evening in his office. Hermione asks a few questions and some pleasurable mayhem ensues.

CHAPTER 9: When You Say You Love Me

For as long as he could remember, Severus Snape had never been a happy man. It was his nature. He'd learned long ago that when good things came his way, they often came with a price that was too great to bear. He did not hold those good things too close for he refused to be ripped apart when they were taken from him. He had learned to live with the disappointment, hopelessness, and loneliness that had marked his life since he was a teenager. Sometimes, he wondered if there was any possibility for him to believe in joy again. Lately it seemed as if the Fates were smiling on him, taking pity after all those years of hard, harsh living. As callous as he was to all other things, Severus had given in whole-heartedly to the ray of hope that was Hermione Granger.

She was what he lived for these days, nothing more, nothing less. He woke up each morning for the moment he could take her into his arms and tell her he still loved her. He trudged to meals with the sole purpose of seeing her, even if from afar. He kept extra hours in his office in the hopes that she would show up after dinner, as she was want to do these days. So often would he be sitting at his desk, grading the myriad of pathetic and sickening essays he was forced to endure, when her head would pop around the cracked door.

"Are you too busy for company, Severus?" she would ask brightly, smiling her heart-melting smile.

He would try to look annoyed and sneer, but he always replied with, "Not for your company, little one."

It had become an evening routine for them. She would always appear after dinner, a bag over her shoulder with essays or samples to grade. Sometimes she simply brought a book, and, by the end of the night, had read so many bits of it out loud that he would give up his grading in order to have her read to him. It was very domestic and a bit disconcerting for him. Severus had never been a domestic creature, but in the here and now, with Hermione curled up in an expanded armchair, it was right.

Hermione had come to love her evenings with Severus, even when they were sitting in silence, each absorbed in their own tasks. His presence was comforting as the smell of leather, books, and brandy wrapped around her. The scent still clung to a few of her jumpers even after being washed. She secretly slept with one beneath her pillow. This was true intimacy, sitting in such complete comfort and seemingly knowing the other's every thought.

Intimacy. The images that single word conjured were enough to make her blood boil in her veins. His nearness made her body sear with fire, and his touch shot electricity through her every limb. The sheer maleness of him, his height above her, those broad and sturdy shoulders, that utterly masculine smell, made the insides at the pit of her stomach rush hot and wet. And yet his kisses and his touch seemed to frighten her as well. She didn't know why, she only knew that she wanted it to stop. She wanted to be ready to really be intimate with him, to know him inside and out, and for him to know her as well.

"Severus," she asked timidly one evening near the end of February. She had been there for nearly two hours, curled in her chair and reading *Pride and Prejudice*. He was grading third year essays on grindylows.

"Yes, little one?" he replied without glancing up from his work. Hermione marveled at his ability to almost wholly devote his mind and attentions to two completely separate tasks.

"Why do you call me that? 'Little one?'" She folded her book in her lap, keeping her finger inside to mark her page, and looked up at him with questioning eyes.

Snape looked up from his papers a little startled. He seemed lost in thought for a while before he locked her eyes with his. "What would you prefer me to call you? Hermy? 'Mione? Granger? Miss Granger? Something else perhaps?"

She giggled slightly. "It's not that I don't like it. I just want to know why you use it. And for heaven's sake, none of the others please. I am a different person than the girl who answered to those terrible nicknames." Her eyes sparkled at him, and she smiled.

He gazed at her intently for a moment, taking in her crackling honey eyes, the faint blush on her cheeks, the way her grown up curls rested over one shoulder. "I honestly don't know where it came from, Hermione. In my mind it just seems to fit you. Perhaps it is because I have this overpowering urge to protect you. Maybe it's because you are much shorter than I, and you seem to fit in my arms perfectly. I cannot give you an answer other than that."

Hermione opened her book and put it face down on her chair to hold her place. As if he'd taken that move as a sign that she was finished talking, Severus went back to grading his essays. He didn't hear her as she came up beside his chair and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He stiffened for a moment, and then relaxed into her touch as she rested her chin on his shoulder. Her warm breath tickled his neck when she spoke.

"Say it again, Severus," she whispered softly before beginning to press gentle kisses along what she could reach of his neck. Something akin to a purr rumbled low in his

throat, and his shoulders began to rise and fall in time with his rapid, shallow breaths. "Call me your little one again."

"Little one," he murmured huskily. She was getting braver as one hand came up to undo the tiny buttons at his throat. Soon, she had the collar of both his coat and the white linen shirt open. He groaned softly as her fingertips began to stroke the skin where neck and shoulder meet. Her lips soon followed, flicking her tongue tentatively to taste him. Severus twisted his head to the side slightly to give her more room. "My little one."

"Yes," she murmured against his skin, sending shockwaves of pleasure through him. Her fingers began dipping lower into the collar of his clothing, the tips grazing against the sparse black hairs on his chest. She scratched her nails lightly over his skin as she pulled her hands back upwards. Gently, she began kneading the tense flesh of his shoulders as she kissed her way from his neck, pausing at that sensitive spot behind his ear, to the crown of his head. She placed a chaste kiss to his hair and sighed. "Severus, would you do something for me?"

It took him a moment to find his voice, lost as he was in the soothing ministrations of her hands. "Anything, Hermione, anything your heart desires."

Her hands stilled and were removed as she walked around to stand at his side. He pushed his chair back from the desk when she pushed his shoulder slightly. Severus blinked, and found Hermione moving the papers on his desk. When she had safely gotten them out of the way, she turned to lean against the edge of his desk in front of him. A bright blush colored her face, and her darkened honey eyes were staring nervously at her hands.

Severus reached out to her and stroked her hips soothingly. Hermione jumped visibly as the heat from his palms seeped through her clothing and running straight to her core. Her breath came in quick, shallow gasps as she tried to get up the courage to make her request. She squeezed her eyes shut and chewed her bottom lip as she focused on the feel of his hands. Her voice was thick and hoarse when she spoke. "I want to feel your hands..."

He applied a little more pressure as he stroked her hips. "They are here, Hermione," he purred. He felt her body shiver beneath his hands and smirked. Perhaps the point had come... "Would you like them somewhere else?"

She nodded stiffly, unconsciously shifting to get his hands where she most desperately wanted them. Hermione almost groaned in frustration when his hands moved away from her tender core as they slid beneath her arse. He lifted her slightly and planted her swiftly on his desk. "Where would you like my hands, my Hermione?"

Hermione squirmed until her thighs were splayed open. Severus sucked in a started breath when the musky scent of her arousal hit his sensitive nose. When he realized what she was asking him for, Severus felt the rush of blood to his groin. His trousers were unbearably tight as he thought of sheathing himself in her dripping heat. His usually steady hands were shaking as he reached up to undo the clasp of her robes.

The black work robes, so similar to the ones she wore as a student, slipped from her arms and pooled like ink on his desk. She wore a pale pink jumper and a loose, knee length black skirt. Soft, black leather sandals dangled precariously from her feet. Severus deftly removed the sandals and let them fall to the floor as she perched her bare feet on his chair on either side of his knees. She looked as if she were shaking.

He bent slightly and kissed each of her knees in turn. "It's okay, little one. I promise you that I will not hurt you," he purred as his hands began slowly stroking her legs from ankle to knee. "Let me give you what you seek, Hermione. I promise it will be an overture to greater pleasures."

Hermione opened her eyes and stared down into the velvet depths that were gazing so lovingly at her. She cupped his cheek, feeling her fear start to ebb away. Severus loved her; he wouldn't hurt her or turn her away as unsatisfactory. Not like Ron. *No, don't think of him now. It's Severus who is here with you. It's Severus whose hands are working such magic. He isn't rejecting what you offer to him, he wants to make you feel pleasure, to make you feel loved beyond all else.*

Severus saw the momentary flicker of fear in her eyes before it rolled away. Encouraged, he stood up and captured her lips with his. His kiss was demanding and possessive, his tongue darting out to demand entrance into the hot recesses of her mouth. She returned the kiss with as much passion as she could muster and felt a new rush of liquid fire where she so desperately wanted him to touch. He pulled back from the kiss to breathe, but continued fluttering gentle kisses along her jaw and over her neck, hoping to distract that part of her that was afraid of the hands that were sneaking up her thighs.

One long finger stroked teasingly along the crotch of her knickers. She shuddered around him and opened her legs wider. Severus hooked his finger into the crotch of her knickers and slipped them from her body. He wrapped the other arm around her back and pulled her closer until her chest was pressed flush against his. Her taunt nipples seemed to sear into him through their layers of clothing, evidence of how desperately she wanted his touch.

Her knickers fluttered to the floor at his feet as his hand returned to its place between her thighs. He rested his palm over her mound for a moment, allowing her to adjust to the feel of him so intimately. His dilated eyes raked over her face, her bottom lip plumped from his kiss and her constant habit of nibbling on it, a hot blush rising in her cheeks. Her breath was coming in quick gasps as she stared up at him lovingly.

"I will not do anything you do not want, little one," he murmured reassuringly, resting his forehead against hers. "Are you ready? Are you sure?"

Hermione's eyes drifted closed, and she nodded slightly against him. Severus began to remove his hand, letting his ring finger dip between her folds as he brought his hand forward. Her juices coated his finger as he passed lightly over her opening, across her labia, and onto that deliciously sweet spot begging for his attention. He swiped his finger over it gently, curling it and letting his fingernail graze slightly as he ended the stroke. He repeated the entire motion a second, then a third time before adding his middle finger.

Her breath coming in shallow pants, Hermione fisted her hands in the open collar of his jacket. She shivered every time his fingers grazed over her opening, making her feel desperately empty. She prickled with liquid fire as his fingers rubbed her clit, pushing her higher and higher upwards toward her breaking point. Her head fell forward against his shoulder, her mouth hanging open.

"Please," she begged softly. "I need something... something..."

He kissed the top of her head and murmured in her ear, "What do you need, little one? Tell me." He continued teasing her, increasing the pressure at the top of each stroke.

She gasped as he hit that sensitive bundle of nerves and arched provocatively into his hand. "More... I... oh... I'm empty."

He groaned at the thought of sheathing himself deep into her at that moment. Repositioning his hand, Severus slowly slipped his index finger into her opening and growled at the tightness grasping at him. He pushed into her gently and rubbed her clit with his thumb. She keened into his shoulder, her teeth grasping the wool of his coat. He pumped his finger into her with long, curling strokes, drawing out her shivers and cries. She was positively dripping over his hand, and he was sure there would be a stain on his desk by the end of this.

"More," she pleaded, slipping her hand beneath her skirt. She clasped her hand over his and positioned two fingers at her opening. He let her guide his movements until he had two fingers sheathed in her tight opening, his thumb still pressed against her button. He thrust his fingers into her until they hit a barrier. *Holy fuck!* he thought desperately. *She's still a virgin!*

His resolve to please her strengthened, and he began his ministrations with renewed fervor. Soon she was digging her fingers into his arm and panting against his chest. Her hips bucked toward him, adding to the pressure on her clit. Her rational mind shut down, the only thought running through her was a keening cry for more. She felt as if she was teetering on the edge of a precipice as he gave one last, long stroke and murmured huskily in her ear. "Let go, little one. For me."

It was her undoing. She fell over the edge of her precipice with a crash into a million pieces. She came apart in his arms, keening out his name and fisting his jacket until her knuckles were white. He was painfully hard as he felt her slump forward against him and wrap her arms around him as she came down from her climax. She pressed fleeting kisses along his throat and sighed against his chest.

Severus kissed his way up her body, stopping to tease her breasts languidly, as she came down from her high. "Hermione," he whispered softly in her ear as he held his body above her on his forearms. "You're beautiful when you're sated."

She smiled and trailed soft kisses over his shoulder. "I'm not quite done yet, Severus," she said boldly, trying to fight the blush rising on her cheeks from her brashness. She pushed at the waistband of his boxers with the heels of her hands before mumbling, "OFF! Get them off!"

He chuckled as he twisted over her to push his boxers over his aching cock and down his legs. He kicked them off impatiently and turned back to engulf her in a penetrating kiss. His heart began to race as the moment of truth sped toward him. He would have to be gentle with her. Keeping her mind occupied elsewhere with his mouth, Severus guided himself to her opening and pushed into her slowly. He felt her tense around him at the intrusion.

"Look at me, Hermione," he said, his voice raw and husky from holding himself back. "Do you trust me?" Her dark honey-colored eyes fixed on his ebony ones as she nodded. Severus dropped his forehead against hers and pushed in a bit further. "I will never hurt you, love."

Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her pelvis upward, pushing him in more. She hissed in a breath as he tore through her hymen and sheathed himself to the hilt. Severus held still for a moment, waiting for her breathing to slow a bit. It was such sweet torture to be clasped in her tight, wet heat and not being able to move. It felt as if hours had passed before Hermione began to writhe beneath him, begging for something more than what she already had.

Severus pulled out almost halfway before thrusting back into her again. *It hurts*, Hermione thought as she bit into her lip to stifle a scream. *It hurts, it hurts! Oh God, please...* The turmoil in her mind ebbed away as he picked up a rhythm of long, slow thrusts. The sting that emanated from the friction he caused gave way to an overwhelming sensation that peaked when he hit that spot deep inside her and his pelvis ground against her clit. She raked her nails down his back and arched up to meet him, wanting more.

It was as much torture for him as it was for her with his slow movements. He was on the verge of losing his resolve at being gentle when she began thrusting up against him with a bit of force. Taking that as an invitation to pick up the pace, Severus began thrusting into her faster and deeper. He nipped at the flesh of her breasts and kissed her feverishly as he felt the onset of her orgasm set in. She pulled away from him, her breath coming in ragged gasps as he hit that delicious spot within her over and over. She gave a keening cry as stars flashed before her eyes, and the strongest wave of pleasure she'd ever felt washed over her. She arched against him, trying to keep her body in contact with his, and threw her head back against the mattress, whimpering and screaming.

When her inner walls began contracting around him, Severus could hold on no longer. He thrust into her urgently as he came, spilling himself deep into her. He collapsed against her, unable to hold himself on his shaking limbs any longer. Their sweat-streaked bodies lay entwined together as she stroked his hair and kissed his shoulders.

Rolling off her, Severus pulled her back against him. He swept her tangled curls away from his face, piling them on top of her head, and pressed lazy kisses on the back of her neck. Her hands traced along his arms as they wrapped around her, his left hand settled low over her abdomen while his right rested between her breasts. "Severus..."

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered, tickling the tiny curls at her neck. Somehow, it was easier to say when she couldn't see his face. It would get better, but for now, he didn't want her to see the tears in his eyes.

"I love you, too." With that, Hermione whispered a cleaning charm over the blankets before pulling them over their sated bodies. They were asleep before the candles burnt out.

There was no going back for either of them now.

A/N: There you go, Hermione's first time and a first for Severus, too, I guess. I conceived this chapter coming a little later but it just fit here. As for the title, my favorite song from The Phantom inspired it. You can find the lyrics here: http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/185563755/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Past_The_Point_Of_No_Return

Seasons of Love

Chapter 12 of 14

The morning after. Severus does some thinking and asks Dumbledore a very interesting question.

CHAPTER 12: Seasons of Love

The early morning sun trickled through the curtains of the enchanted window in Hermione's bedroom. The light cast a golden glow over the lovers curled together in the bed beneath the warm blankets. They lay facing each other in the growing light. Hermione's tangled curls were tucked beneath her cheek and splaying over the buttercup pillows behind her. Her lips were slightly parted, her warm breath washing over the relaxed fist that rested on the mattress in front of her. A slight tinge of pink graced her cheeks as she snuggled further into the warmth of the blankets and the body next to her.

Severus had been awake for some time before the morning sunlight began peeking through the curtains. He was disoriented for a moment before he remembered where he was and who was in the bed with him. When he realized that it was Hermione whose hair was tickling his nose and whose knee was slipped between his thighs, he sighed with contentment at the memories of the night before. He could smell the scent of lavender from her hair and the faint traces of sex. His lips curved into a satisfied smile and his eyes drifted closed as Hermione shifted closer and rested her arm across his ribs. Her warm breath bathed his chest in small puffs and tickled through the sparse black hairs there.

I don't deserve this, he thought as he brushed a few curls away from her face gently. She looked so peaceful and happy as she slept with the golden light of a Scottish morning reflecting off her skin. *Maybe there is some justice in this world. After all the hell I've been through, she is the light of hope and contentment that has always eluded me. If there's any redemption for me, it's here, in her arms, with her at my side.*

It was then, as he let his thoughts wander over the warmth of her next to him, that he realized his pesky little bitch of a conscience had neglected to plague him these last months. Not since early January. Four months of peace and contentment without that voice of distain and depression nagging at him. Perhaps it was because his insecurities about Hermione had lessened as they spent more time together. Perhaps it was that he was beginning to live for himself for the first time in his life. He didn't know why, just that he relished in the peace he had in his grasp and longed for more.

Hermione stirred and rolled onto her back, dragging him back to the present. The buttercup sheets clung to her form, accentuating the curve of her breasts and the feminine swell of her belly as the blankets fell away. Severus traced the curve of her stomach lightly and felt his chest tighten with the longing to see her swollen and round

right."

There was a soft groan as Hermione awoke from her dream to find his arms around her. She sniffled and moved away from him, swiping at the tears haphazardly. "I'm sorry, Severus," she mumbled, looking anywhere but into those eyes. She knew he was looking at her with that tender light in his ebony eyes, and, right now, she couldn't bear to see it. "I think I'm just going to go to bed."

Severus tried to look into her eyes, but she refused to look directly at him. He grasped her chin with his finger and thumb and forced her to face him. "Look at me, Hermione," he ordered softly. "What's the matter? Have I done something to upset you?"

Hermione felt the tears welling up again as snippets of her dream began flashing through her mind. "It's nothing. I'm just..." She made the mistake of looking up into his black eyes, flickering with concern and love. She could see her reflection in them. The words came before she could even taste them, let alone stop them. "You've been going away so often lately, and you don't tell anyone where you're going. You've been distracted when I've come to see you, and you lose interest in whatever we're talking about in a few minutes. It feels like you've gotten tired of me, that you don't want me any longer."

"I understand if you have, Severus. It wouldn't be the first time I've offered myself up and been rejected," she said, her voice shaking with unshed tears. "Ron didn't want me either. Frigid. Sexless. Undesirable. Take your pick, Severus. I'm sure you could come up with more. No wonder you haven't wanted to sleep with me anymore. Ron was right; I'm not supposed to be loved. I'm a walking textbook to be used when desired, a brain to keep handy in battle then stuck in a library with books, the only lover I'll ever have."

Hermione stood up and stumbled off in the vicinity of her bedroom, leaving Severus kneeling on the rug and feeling as if he'd been hit. Her words rolled around in his brain, trying desperately to make some sense. After a few moments the words began coming together, the thoughts becoming cohesive. The more sense Severus made of what she had said, the more his anger with Ronald "the Prick" Weasley grew. What had the prat done to her that had broken her so badly?

He followed her as though he were hypnotized. His feet were moving of their own accord. His brain was working in overdrive as he found himself in the doorway of her room. Tears stabbed at his eyes for the first time in years as he caught sight of her, curled into a ball on her bed and sobbing until her eyes were dry. Severus went to her side and sat on the edge of the bed, stroking his hands through her curls.

"Hermione, whatever Weasley told you is a lie. You are a beautiful, desirable woman. It's not that I haven't wanted to make love to you again. Believe me, I have. It's just that I didn't want to push you," he said softly, planting soft kisses on her hair and shoulder through her blouse. "I haven't gotten tired of you, little one. I cannot bear to think of my life without you now. You are so much a part of me that I can't breathe when you aren't near me. I love you, Hermione. I always will."

She turned over to look at him. His ebony hair was hanging over his face, hiding his eyes from view. Her hand found his and linked their fingers together. Her voice cracked when she spoke. "Where have you been going, Severus?"

This wasn't going the way he wanted it to go. He didn't want to ask her this way, but he couldn't refuse her anything, no matter how many plans he had made. "I've been making trips to a few shops in London and Hogsmeade. I was looking for something for you," he murmured. He reached into his robes and pulled the green velvet box into view. Severus opened it and looked at the ring for a moment before turning it toward Hermione. "I've been looking for this."

Hermione's eyes fell on the box. She clamped her hands over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. Tears seeped out from beneath her lashes as her breath hitched deep in her throat as she felt Snape's voice wash over her.

"I don't know if you will have me, Hermione, or even if you want me, but I can't see myself whole without you. I would be honored if you would consider taking me as your husband, and allow me to take you as my wife." Severus fell onto one knee at the edge of the bed and stared up into her honey eyes. His breath halted, his heart froze, and his entire being was wrapped up in the one word that could make or break him. He would either be a husband to the woman he loved most in the world or his heart would shatter into a thousand pieces among the fires of hell. One word, that was all he needed. One word.

Hermione opened her eyes and looked from his expectant face to the ring in his hand. She watched the diamonds dance in the candlelight, the black onyx seeming to fade to deep purple. The black stone reminded her of his eyes, the eyes that could always see right through her. She looked down at his face again. A smile spread across her lips and some of the tension eased out of his face. Hermione slipped the ring from its box and felt the cool metal tingle against her skin as she slid it onto her left ring finger. It glittered on her hand as she cupped his cheek in her palm. She nodded at him softly.

"Yes," she breathed, kissing him lightly on the forehead. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close to her as she rained kisses onto the top of his head. "Oh, Severus! Please forgive me for being so stupid. Everything was going so well, my mind just kept telling me that something had to go wrong sooner or later. And seeing Ronald at Christmas with that... that *woman*... well, I just haven't forgotten about it. I haven't forgotten about anything he said to me before we split up either. I love you so much it hurts sometimes, and I don't want you to settle for someone beneath you. I'm not worthy of you, but I don't want to lose you, Severus."

He smiled and kissed the soft swell of her stomach as he knelt on the floor in front of her. "You are a beautiful, intelligent, extremely desirable woman, Hermione Granger. I cannot understand for the life of me why Mr. Weasley would turn down anything you would offer him, but I am not so blind and stupid. I will do whatever it takes to keep you in my life because I love you more than anything I've ever known," he murmured, standing up and situating himself on the bed next to her. He took her hand in his, lightly brushing his thumb over the back. "There is no life for me without you."

For a long while, Severus stared at the ring on Hermione's finger, wondering if those words had actually come out of his mouth. So long he had guarded his thoughts and actions, and yet he felt himself letting go when he was with her. He could be who he would have been if Voldemort had never come to power. There was something in Hermione's honey eyes that soothed him at the darkest part of him. It was a balm to the sores so many years of living a double life had caused. If ever he had met someone with a pure heart, it was Hermione. His Hermione. His life. His wife.

The gentle hand on his cheek roused him from his thoughts. He turned his head to look at her and saw the calm longing in her eyes. Slowly, he pulled her to him and kissed her. It was gentle and languid, every part of his brain consumed with the feel of her lips against his, her tongue tangling passionately with his. Severus stroked her back and her hair as he lowered them back onto the bed. Hermione lay half on top of him, her hands grasping handfuls of his robes. When she felt warm hands sliding beneath her blouse, Hermione pulled away from him and gasped for air.

She closed her honey eyes and rolled onto her back. A soft sigh escaped her as his warm hands trailed over her skin before he began undoing the buttons of her blouse. A spark went through her as Severus lifted her and pulled the fabric from her body. Her soft chestnut curls tickled across her skin and pooled behind her on the bed. Severus was on his knees on the bed beside her, holding her up with one hand while the other worshiped the swells of her breasts and the gentle curve of her stomach.

Hermione dropped her head back and gave in to the feeling of his fingers against her flesh. She dimly registered that her bra had been removed as she felt the satin straps sliding down her arms. Her eyes snapped open again when Severus lowered his head and took one taut nipple in his mouth. His breath was hot against her already fevered skin as he nipped gently before soothing her with swift strokes of his tongue. As he moved his attention to her other breast, Severus snaked his hand across the soft curve of her belly and began undoing the buttons and zipper of her trousers.

Before she was aware of it, Hermione was completely naked. Severus had lowered her back to the bed, eliciting a whimper of protest from her, in order to slide her trousers and knickers down her legs. He proceeded to place gentle kisses from ankle to hip on his way back up to her. He tarried for a moment at her knees, stroking the soft skin at their backs and teasing them with feather light kisses. Her legs opened willingly for him, her hands absently reaching down in search of him. Hermione's head was tilted back, exposing her delectable neck, her honey eyes lightly closed and soft, panting breaths escaping her lips.

Severus rested on his forearms and stared up the length of her body from his vantage point between her thighs. *Good gods, she's beautiful*, he thought with a smug grin. She had agreed to marry him. He felt his heart swell at the thought. He sighed contentedly, blowing a rush of warm air over her wet flesh. She shivered and gasped as his fingers gently opened her folds and his mouth descended upon her. He lapped at her opening with long, broad strokes as his nose teased her tight bundle of nerves. She felt the tension beginning to knot in her abdomen when he deftly slid two fingers inside her. He pumped them in and out slowly, curling them against that deliciously sensitive spot within her. Her walls shuddered around his fingers as she came, gasping his name and flexing her fingers painfully in his hair.

