

Speak Now

by Elise_Wanderer

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One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: They belong to JKR, not me, but that doesn't stop me from messin' with what she planned for them. She gets the money. I get the satisfaction of making things turn out differently—the way they should have.

SSHG-compliant. That's why it's posted here.

A thousand blessings on the best beta a girl could have, the incomparable sshg316—Shug, how do you have time to do everything so well? And grateful thanks to keladry_lupin, who has come on board to give her wise and kind words, as well. I am mad for you both!

SPEAK NOW

What was this face he found himself looking at? Her hair—that horrid, bushy mass—had been transformed into burnished copper in the afternoon light. It was pulled back in a loose chignon, revealing the sweep of her firm jaw. From where he sat, he could just see one clear brown eye, slightly downcast, the lashes framing the edge. The soft down of her cheek was feathered by the rays of the sun, and as he watched, she raised one finger and brushed it against the delicate indentation below her lips.

The officiating wizard was droning on about the meaning of marriage and other sentimental drivel, but suddenly he couldn't make sense of the words at all. His ears were blocked by the sound of his blood rushing through his veins, and his eyes were seeing only her—that face.

He blinked twice in an effort to clear his vision of the woman before him. Hermione. Even her name sounded abruptly unfamiliar, as if it had just been presented to him for the first time. Hermione.

Almost as though he had spoken it aloud, she suddenly darted a look at him. He slid his glance smoothly away and focused on the groom. The youngest Weasley male was staring at the presiding wizard, looking rather like a mooncalf in heat. Snape wondered if anything that was being said to the youth was sinking in. He rather doubted it.

He let his head tilt forward, lowering the curtain of his hair and allowing him to glance again in her direction through its protecting wall. She had returned her attention to the proceedings, and Snape raised his head again to look at her properly. This was the face he had glared at for six long years, then had seen only fleetingly for one, the face that had insisted on hovering too close to his bed during his long recuperation from Nagini's bite, the face that had forced its way into his trial, the face that had smiled radiantly at him at his acquittal, the face that still returned to haunt and annoy him, just when he thought he was rid of her forever.

And yet it was as though he had never seen it before.

His eyes trailed down the curve of her neck. His fingers ached suddenly to trace the hollow at its base. Was her skin cool or warm? Would she startle at his touch? Would she welcome it?

His gaze skirted back up to her mouth, to lips that must be soft and velvet, though he had never claimed them with his own. Never wanted to before this moment. Never, he would swear it. He could make himself believe it. He could fool the world. Perhaps.

As he watched, the tiniest edge of her tongue flickered out to moisten her lips. Was she nervous? Did she regret . . . anything? Her lips closed again, and she swallowed.

Why had he never been able to see her before this moment? He had looked at her so many times before, but what had he really seen? She was a know-it-all . . . and she was also breathtakingly intelligent. She was ridiculously stubborn . . . and she was also tenaciously loyal. She was braver than even the most nauseatingly brave Gryffindor he could name . . . and she matched his own courage every single step of the way. He could despise everything that she was, and name it all in minute detail, and yet . . .

Dear Merlin.

He tried to still his breathing, but he only half succeeded in slowing the ragged, shallow breaths that suddenly came from his mouth. How many times had he stood impassively before the Dark Lord, outwardly calm in the face of probable death? He had been proud of his ability to appear impassive, even as his reason was nearly overcome. Yet now, sitting here in the quiet afternoon sun, he felt his vaunted control being ripped inexorably out of his hands. She had this power. How had she seized it?

He was lost, lost, utterly lost. This was impossible. Damn the girl! No, his mind corrected him brutally: this was not a girl. This was not a student, a child, an innocent under his protection. She did not need him. She had no need of him. She could not want him. She could not.

How could he want her, then? What could he hope to gain? More clearly, why would he dare to think he had any right to this fierce loveliness before him?

The voice at the front of the gathering was continuing to drone on, with words Severus could not translate into meaningful speech. This was a purely wizarding ceremony, no Muggle elements included at all. There would be no enjoinment to "speak now, or forever hold your peace," no reminder of the existence of a point of no return. He was glad of it. Physical courage was one thing. Emotional courage was quite another. He would never speak. He would hold his peace forever.

Yet her face remained the only thing he could see, and the clarity of his vision made him feel that he had never seen anything clearly before in his life. Every detail of her face, every particle of her being was crystallized into his perception. He could not touch her from where he sat, and yet he could touch nothing else. Hermione. It was a dull ache behind his heart. It was a melancholy that went deeper in a flash than any he had ever felt before.

He wanted her, and he could never have her.

And as he sat staring at her face, her gaze lifted. She began to turn her head fully toward him, with agonizing slowness, and this time he could not look away. The instant in which her eyes met his, everything around him dissolved into smoke. Her lips parted. She had simply turned her head to look at him, but it was as though she had been running toward him at breakneck speed and then suddenly stopped just in front of him, eyes locked on his, panting hard from the exertion.

He felt the burn of unshed tears.

Between them, in the still afternoon sun, hung a single word:

"Wait."

Wait.

Then, in another instant, the sound of the thing came flooding back into his conscious mind: the rustle of shifting bodies around him, the hushed murmur of confused voices. Not the presiding wizard's voice, though. That had stopped. That had stopped when the word was spoken. Aloud. Had he said it aloud? Or had she?

She broke their gaze, a blush creeping up her cheeks as she glanced at the wizard on the dais, at the red-headed groom, at the distracted bride. All three were looking down at where she sat in the front row of chairs, unsure how they had been interrupted or why or by whom.

Hermione spoke softly, shyly, "Sorry. Sorry. Didn't mean to . . . Please go on."

The wedding guests cleared their throats, shifted in their seats, and then returned their focus to the ceremony in progress. The presiding wizard stuttered slightly, struggling back to the point at which he had been interrupted. Then he resumed the ceremony, and the rest of the guests picked up the thread of his words once again, concentrated again on the bridal party at the front of the chamber.

But to Severus' ear, this was all sound without any meaning. She had looked at him. She had seen him clearly. And without articulating another syllable, she had spoken a lifetime of words.

And every one of them was wonderful.

~fin~