

Mercury Poisoning

by OpalJade

Madam Pince's feeble attempts to lure Professor Snape back into her library have unforeseen consequences.

Mercury

Chapter 1 of 4

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A/N: A special thank you to my dear friend Lariope, whose encouragement, wisdom and insight helped me get this story started. My gratitude, also, to my very patient grammar beta tbj and to lullabelle72, for her support and helpful suggestions.

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Irma Pince, Head Librarian at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, sat behind a large, mahogany desk, charming her new purchases against theft. Fussily. Unnecessarily. The entire library was already warded against robbery, vandalism, or any other crime that could be committed against the written word.

Order was the greatest force in Madam Pince's life. Order and precision. She had sent more than one careless librarian's apprentice home in tears over a failure to align the spine of a book with the edge of a shelf. That task, she felt, could not be achieved precisely enough using a spell.

Today, Irma was ahead of schedule. She finished her task with brisk efficiency and glanced at the small antique (and very quiet) clock on her desk. With a sigh, she realized that this was, indeed, going to be a long day. It was barely eight in the morning, and her entire Friday routine was already completed.

The library had not been entered since yesterday afternoon, by a second year Ravenclaw who had forgotten her quill by the reservation desk. By the time the young, petrified student had returned, Irma had already cleaned it and written a warning to the young witch about the dangers (and she didn't feel danger was too strong a word) of leaving one's quill dripping with ink so close to the catalogue entries and the display of new books for the spring collection.

Another quick, nervous look at the clock confirmed that she needed to keep busy, or else she was going to drive herself crazy with anticipation.

She stood up and made sure her black robe hung straight down like a stovepipe; she did not approve of the flowy, shorter robes (just below the knee) that Pomona claimed were the latest style for this season. She moved with military precision, in brisk, no-nonsense steps, on practical, low-heeled shoes as she cast dusting spells on the furniture, top of the books, and under bookcases. Again, unnecessarily, since her library was already spotless.

Finally, after admitting to herself that there was not much left to do other than wait, Irma gave herself permission to just rest. She glanced around to make sure none of the paintings on the library wall were in attendance, but she need not have worried; the library had become an abyss of boredom to the occupants of these particular paintings, and they rarely entered their frames anymore. She then sat down at *his* favorite cubicle, in the far left corner. With a shaky hand, she gently let her hand move across the smooth oak surface, imagining him sitting exactly there in a few hours. *She hoped fervently.*

In the solitude of her sanctuary, Irma let her thoughts drift to her younger colleague, Severus Snape.

How had she come to be *soinfatuated* with this brilliant professor? It's not as if she was the sort to partake in foolish fantasies involving members of the opposite gender. But, regardless, here she was, desperate to just *see* him.

"What if he doesn't come? What if today is the day he decides he no longer cares about the arrival of the *International Journal of Modern Alchemy*?"

Once again, she felt trepidation enrobe her heart like the unwelcome pressure of Apparition.

She stood up abruptly, as if her sudden momentum could dislodge the negative force gripping her internal organs.

Irma walked over to the panoramic windows overlooking the courtyard. She noticed a group of students sitting around in an almost perfect circle, exchanging pieces of parchment and scribbling away quickly in their notebooks. *Probably copying each other's homework before class*, she thought, trying to distract herself.

However, the truth was, there was nothing that could distract Irma today. She was not an overly imaginative person, and when her mind was focused on something, it did not easily take to meandering about other interests, whether they be real or fantasy.

Today, all she could think about was the fact that the prestigious bimonthly periodical had arrived at the library this morning, and this meant the end to her fifty-nine day wait. Severus Snape was sure to come to read it. After the War, this was the *only* article of reading material that was powerful enough to make *him* visit the library. She had tried ordering obscure digests and procuring rare manuscripts that only *he* would be interested in, but her efforts had not paid off. Professor Snape persisted in ignoring her frequent notes announcing the arrival of the new books. She still only caught a glimpse of her beloved (she blushed at the fact that she even had such a romantic word in her vocabulary) every two months.

And seeing him was all she needed. She never deluded herself that her feelings (if ever discovered) might be reciprocated. She was certain he could never share her affections. She didn't even want her feelings returned. Seeing him had always been enough.

How had she, being such a sensible person, come to be in love with this incredible wizard for so long?

It was his respect for the library that had made her notice her young colleague. He, like her, understood the library to be a place of solitude, not socialization. She had never even heard him speak in the library; he always wrote down his requests for her. Over the years, she had collected them like love notes.

She recalled clearly her early days as the Head Librarian, when she had first taken notice of the intriguing young man. There were several criteria by which Irma Pince judged her library patrons. Footwear, decibel level, non-disruptiveness, and respect for books and furniture. She had become accustomed to the Hogwarts staff using the library as either a meet and greet session, or as a place to snooze and drool, so it had been a pleasant surprise when young Professor Snape had passed her screening on all counts.

She'd rarely seen anyone read with such intense concentration. He only moved to turn a page, occasionally shutting his eyes as if validating the information given to him. Also, he neither slouched nor abused the furniture by resting his feet on it. And even after reading for hours, his book always remained flat on the table where it belonged, instead of leaning down towards him, which was exceedingly hard on the spines of the books (charmed or not). Furthermore, he didn't lick his finger before turning the page, a disgusting, germ-spreading habit in her opinion.

Respect had become more the day Irma cut herself with a spoon in the staff room. Minerva had coincidentally Transfigured the spoon she had reached for into a knife to cut a watermelon into slices. It had been Dumbledore's idea that everyone take turns bringing a snack to make staff meetings more pleasant. Severus had seen the whole thing happen and had shot Minerva a dirty look, then he had turned towards Irma, gently taking her injured hand and said, "Let me."

It was the most intimate touch Irma Pince had ever experienced. Wizards were usually put off by her, and she had never found anyone who had caught her interest anyway, so it had never bothered her. Though she had accepted her celibacy a long time ago, her reaction to the young Professor had startled her. When young Snape had healed her hand, she had forgotten she was shaped like a flagpole and old enough to be his mother. Her heart had fluttered like a hummingbird's wing, and ever since that day, she had fancied him.

Finally, at 15h03, she heard the library door open softly. She swallowed her smile with difficulty and tried to appear calm and serene.

She took a deep breath before turning her head towards the entrance.

Her heart plummeted faster than gravity could possibly dictate when she realized it wasn't Professor Snape.

Irma cringed, her mouth puckered, and her brows dove down as she glanced at the unlikely visitor. It was that Granger girl. Wasn't she supposed to be studying in France?

"Good afternoon, Madam Pince!" said the young witch, her voice ringing off the twelve foot ceiling.

Irma had always found the girl's presence to be tedious. One would think a knowledge seeker like Miss Granger would be a Librarian's dream come true. However, that was not the case. Granger had failed Irma's screening within the first few minutes of entering the library for the very first time. If she was with friends, she treated the library as a tutorial hall with her incessant, patronizing explanations and chastising. If she was by herself, it was even worse. She would take over an entire table as if she were in her own office. Furthermore, she was in constant motion, either annoyingly rocking back and forth in her chair or bouncing up like a popcorn kernel to get another book. Did she really need to cross-reference everything? The young witch always left a stack of books taller than herself on the table.

Yes, the girl had always irked Irma, and it went beyond her thoughtless transgressions of library etiquettes. Deep down, she knew it might be jealousy. If she, herself, had tried to help others, would she be alone right now? The fact of the matter was, Ms. Granger was no prettier, and no smarter, than she herself had been at the same age, but Granger had a force of character Irma had never possessed, an energy or passion that made her tirelessly seek answers. She fought valiantly for what she believed in, and she was persistent to a fault. She had proven that over her years as a student, and everyone knew she had been instrumental in the defeat of Voldemort last year.

Hermione Granger was the sort who was difficult to *ignore*.

And that's when the idea entered her mind.

Could Severus Snape *ignore* Hermione Granger? Could she use the young witch to lure the professor back into her domain?

"Oh, Dewey!" Irma chastised herself, shaking her head slightly. "Why would Granger be library bait just because she is difficult to ignore?"

She didn't know the answer to that. It certainly seemed like a farfetched conclusion for a witch as logical as herself.

But when had logic helped her these past fifty-nine days?

It was the dreadful thought that tomorrow, at dusk, she would be resetting her pitiful countdown to see him again back to day one that made her throw caution to the wind.

Just the possibility that there might be something to this illogical deduction rendered Irma so impulsive that she broke her own golden rule, when she called out in a voice that wasn't so quiet...

"Miss Granger, how nice to see you!"

Hermione Granger couldn't have been more shocked if Madam Pince had pulled up her sleeve and revealed the Dark Mark on her forearm.

She had been prepared to go into a firm and succinct explanation as to why she needed to use the Hogwart's library, despite the fact that she was no longer a student at the school, but the Head Librarian's friendly greeting had paralyzed her vocal chords. Not an easy feat; anyone could attest to that.

She set down her heavy school bag on the carpeted floor and cast a quick spell to prevent it from keeling over. She turned towards the older witch and finally replied warily, "Madam Pince, I need to--"

"Of course, you may use the library!" interrupted the librarian, "But first you must tell me if you are enjoying your studies in France. Such a beautiful country! Did you know I grew up in France? Pince is the French word for Pinch."

The name suited her, thought Hermione, but she was once again rendered speechless at Madam Pince's loquaciousness.

"Tell me about your research," continued Irma. "I believe you are working with Monique LaRochelle?"

"Yes, she's my thesis advisor," Hermione answered, surprised that the older witch knew so much about her, forgetting the many articles that had been written about her after the war. "I'm looking to see if heavy metals can be transfigured to decrease their toxicity."

When Hermione saw a strange expression cross the librarian's face, she added, almost defensively, "I'm worried about the environment. It's not just a potential disaster for Muggles, but for the Wizarding World as well. All living creatures, in fact."

Irma Pince had always been a quick thinker and seldom lied; however, a desperate situation called for desperate measures.

"Well, then, may I suggest you take the latest *Journal of International Alchemy*? It just came in today, and it has an excellent article on the use of lead versus porcelain cauldrons; it doesn't directly pertain to the environment, but nonetheless, the discussion does mention heavy metal toxicity exposure to potions Masters."

It wasn't exactly what Hermione was looking for, but if she were able to use such a prestigious journal in her lit review, it would be impressive. She took the journal with her free hand and grabbed her heavy school bag with the other. She whispered a quiet 'merci' as she crossed the imaginary line beyond the circulation desk, where she felt certain talking would no longer be tolerated.

Hermione felt happy to be back in the place where she had spent so many hours as a student. The library had always acted as a calming agent for her fits of anxiety during the school year. She breathed in the unique smell associated with old books and century old furniture as she set the journal on her favorite table, located underneath a small window with a ledge.

She noticed Madam Pince giving her a pointed look, and she sat down to read the journal that the librarian had so strongly recommended. Before she knew it, she was immersed in the article, soothingly rocking back and forth on her chair. The article was extremely interesting and well written, even though it was somewhat off topic for her needs.

Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the black fabric moving close to her. She looked up to see Professor Snape scowling at her, arms crossed over, body language doing all the talking. He wasn't happy.

Finally, in a quiet tone that was by no means friendly or even cordial, he said,

"I believe you have my journal, Miss Granger. The library is closing shortly, and since you have no business being here, I would suggest you hand it over immediately."

Hermione listened patiently to Professor Snape's rude request. She found it hard to concentrate on why he seemed so exasperated with her. Whenever she saw him, all she could think about were the memories he had left Harry the previous year. She knew Snape would be absolutely furious if he ever found out she had been privy to the details of his past. Her flashbacks of his incredibly tragic life typically occurred in rapid succession like a movie on fast forward, but somehow, the reeling always got stuck at the same spot, and each time it did, it brought Snape's face sharp and clear into her mind. The intensity of his feelings for Lily so plainly displayed on his face always surprised her in a way she could not explain. The hunger in his eyes, and the physical intensity with which he had stared at her, had emitted waves of passion greater than his own magnetic field.

Who could have ever imagined Professor Snape able to feel so passionately? Holy shit! If Ron ever looked at her the way Severus Snape had stared at Lily, she'd feel--well, she had no idea what *that* would feel like and would likely never find out, as Ron still had the emotional range of a spoon.

Scowling thin lips, furrowed brows, and annoyed black eyes were what she was used to and were, in fact, what she was staring at.

She made herself focus on what he was saying. *Oh, he wants the Periodical.*

"Sure, Professor, I'm almost done reading; I'll bring it over to you when I'm finished," Hermione said in a conciliatory whisper.

Snape sighed, stared at an empty painting as if looking for an ally in this matter, and replied, "One would presume that you are educated enough to know periodicals may not be removed from the premises. I need the journal now, if I am to read it before the library closes."

Hermione glanced across the sunlit room to find the librarian's censoring eyes taking in the entire scene with a strange expression on her face.

Despite her aggravation, she lowered her voice even more and answered in what she hoped was a polite tone, "Well, perhaps you'll have to come back tomorrow to read it. You will have all the time in the world, as I am sufficiently educated to remember that there's no school on Saturday."

Without another word, Snape left the library abruptly.

Irma Pince was overjoyed that her interference had worked so well. She didn't even care that Severus Snape had stormed off without even giving her his customary curt departure nod.

He was coming back tomorrow. Of that, she was sure!

But now, she had to figure out a way to get their interaction going despite the fact that the Granger girl was studying in France. She would need to think of a way to bring these two minds together, and bring them together in her library.

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At 4:25PM, Hermione started tidying up her books and notes promptly. It seemed Madam Pince's stress level always rose around closure time. The atmosphere in the library became so charged with anxiety that any sign of dallying on Hermione's part could act like a lightning rod on her head. And even though Madam Pince seemed friendlier today, she didn't want to aggravate her and lose her library privileges.

She thoughtfully left the tower of books that she had used to cross-reference her discussion on the table (Madam forbade reshelving) and headed out towards the exit. Perhaps she would drop in and say thank you to Headmistress McGonagall for letting her visit.

Hermione whispered a soft "au revoir" to Madam Pince as she struggled to open the tall library doors.

"Oh, wait, Miss Granger!" Madam Pince said urgently. "I saw you talking with Professor Snape..."

Hermione let go of the heavy door and turned towards the Librarian worriedly.

"I'm really sorry, Madame Pince, I didn't mean to talk, but he--"

"No, my dear, talking in the name of collegiality is quite all right," said Madam Pince, cringing at her outward lie.

"Collegiality?" repeated Hermione puzzled. *Perhaps she's under the Imperius curse.*

"Well, yes, my dear, you are no longer a student here, and I was under the impression that you were discussing your common areas of research with Severus. Surely, you know he's an expert on heavy metals?"

Another outward lie.

"Really?!" exclaimed Hermione, clearly surprised. "But-- but, he's a Potions Master."

"Oh, dear! I guess, you'll have to ask him about his undergraduate research on heavy metals, specifically mercury, as a catalyst in potions making."

Hermione gasped out loud.

"No! He didn't!" she exclaimed incredulously. "But mercury is at its most dangerous form when it *evaporates*; surely, he would've never used mercury as a catalyst while brewing a potion!"

Judging by Miss Granger's surprised facial expression, Irma acknowledged she might've stretched the truth by proclaiming Severus Snape an expert on heavy metals. Irma had read every single article her brilliant wizard had ever published, and he had, in fact, written a short essay on mercury and catalysts. Close enough...

However, from Miss Granger's reaction, perhaps not in that particular context. The girl was still asking questions "Are you sure? Was any of his research published?"

At least she had the girl's interest.

"Well, come back tomorrow afternoon, and I'll gather up all the articles that you need, and I'll speak to Professor Snape on your behalf if I can't locate the old periodicals his research was published in."

Irma thought she was getting quite good at this lying thing. As if she would ever have a hard time finding an old periodical! Ha! She was almost insulted that Miss Granger had bought that fib.

Hermione left the library utterly puzzled. She wasn't sure what shocked her most, the fact that Madam Pince was lending a helping hand or that Professor Snape had experimented with heavy metals in the past.

She would definitely drop by the library tomorrow. She had planned on perhaps getting together with her friends at the Burrow, but now she was glad she hadn't told Ron she was visiting this weekend.

She just had too much work to do, and now, with the possibility of reading more about Professor's Snape research on mercury, she just wouldn't have the patience to pretend to be interested in the Professional Quidditch season opener.

She hoped her former Potions teacher would agree to let her peruse his research and even, perhaps, discuss it with her. She knew the man was intellectually gifted. Her directrice de thèse, Madame LaRoche, had often praised his past academic contributions. Other faculty members had even mentioned his instinctive ability to interpret studies and hone in on contradictory findings without being influenced by redundant data. She had never known Professor Snape in that context and probably never would; he had lost all interest in research a long time ago.

Professor McGonagall had confided that she was more worried about his lack of interest in life than in academic pursuit.

Hermione now wished she hadn't annoyed him earlier. Perhaps she should've tried harder to engage him in a conversation. But why did he have to continue to push everyone away using extreme hostility?

After the girl left, Irma snapped her book shut, but held it a moment, studying the door.

Now, that was an intriguing situation.

She hadn't expected the girl to take the bait so easily. The young witch had seemed positively interested in the Professor's research; she had seen something there, she was sure.

And suddenly, as if her recent success at manipulation had activated her creativity, Irma extracted a fresh, crisp piece of parchment from her bureau and prepared herself to brainstorm the perfect way to keep Hermione Granger and Severus Snape in contact.

The key, she was sure, was to get Severus Snape annoyed at the validity of Granger's research, so that he wouldn't be able to help himself but correct her fallacies. If he were once again immersed in academia, he would, without a doubt, need the library on a regular basis.

Could the darling witch of the wizarding world be up to the task?

Irma fancied herself an astute judge of character, particularly when it came to inquiring minds. Yes, the young witch was bright and inquisitive, but it was the fact that she was strong enough to hold her own against Professor Snape that could make this work.

Yes! She would need to play intellectual matchmaker and somehow have them communicate through her. And then, she would need to review everything she knew about mercury, this being their common research area. And then--

Irma, you need to calm down and devise a plan in a methodical way.

Irma took a deep breath before dipping her quill into the inkwell and dabbing the excess briskly on the side of the bottle. She put quill to parchment.

The Plan

There she stopped. She still had some misgivings about deceiving the unsuspecting pair. However, her impromptu scheming had worked so well... Surely it was meant to be this way?

As if to confirm this thought, an overdue book appeared in the after hours box. Irma Accio-ed it over before it hit the bottom and damaged the cover. When she flipped through the book for inappropriate marking, she noticed the Muggle Periodic Chart of the Elements printed on the inside cover.

Element number 80, Mercury, jumped right out at her.

Irma took it as a sign that she was doing the right thing, for it was no coincidence that the chemical symbol for Mercury was Hg, Miss Granger's initials.

And that was all she needed to further crystallize her plan.

Bygones

Chapter 2 of 4

Madam Pince's feeble attempts to lure Professor Snape back into her library have unforeseen consequences.

A/N: A huge thank you to my amazing betas, Lariope and lullabelle72, for all their help, suggestions, and encouragement. Also, special thanks to Aloracat for her helpful insights.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all.

It was an unusually warm day for early May on the grounds of Hogwarts Castle. The sun was shining brightly, enticing the lime green buds on the elm trees to burst out into tiny, fleshy leaves. Even the slight wind had a warm feel to it as it helped dissipate the smell of freshly mowed grass into the air. It was indeed a perfect day for hosting the First Anniversary of the Fall of Voldemort.

Despite the excitement vibrating in all corners of the castle, Snape was not in the mood to celebrate or play War Hero alongside Potter. Classes had been dismissed shortly after noon for the day, and he had decided to disappear for a few hours to get the peace and quiet everyone claimed he deserved.

His heavy woolen cloak floated over to his chair, and he draped it over his left arm without realizing that he had wandlessly summoned it.

Such had been his way of operating for the past year. On automatic. Unconsciously completing tasks and routines.

After the war, Snape could not be bothered to take up a new career. In fact, he couldn't be bothered about a great number of things. After seventeen years of spying and the constant tension that had attended it, the end of the war had brought relief, yes, but also a kind of supreme apathy. It was difficult to care whether the Hufflepuffs could accurately brew a Hiccoughing Draught after finally defeating the Dark Lord and narrowly escaping his own death. Somewhere, in a mostly unexamined part of his mind, Snape knew that he should leave the job to those more suited, more committed, but that would mean figuring out another option, and truth be told, he was far too tired for that.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden sound:

Tap, tap, tap!

The glass on his office door window shivered again, indicating yet another owl coming to deliver mail.

Why did they even bother with the 'peace and quiet' platitudes if they were going to bombard him with non-stop mail?

Resigned, he stood abruptly, making his chair screech on the hardwood floor in protest. He opened the door a mere five centimeters and obtained the rolled up note from the owl who seemed to be annoyed at having to work during a civic holiday.

Snape unrolled the missive, pulling with both thumbs in opposite directions, hoping to read that his presence at this afternoon's ceremony was no longer required. No such luck.

For a moment he was struck with disbelief. Another note from Granger? What the hell was the matter with her? This was the fourth one in the two weeks since he had seen her in the library the day that his journal came, and each missive was more bizarre than the last. Snape reread the note, trying to determine her true intent. She had never been the type to jeer at him behind his back, and yet the words on the page were preposterous.

Dear Professor Snape,

As you are surely wondering about my secret identity, I have decided to reveal my physical being to you in the library on Saturday, May 3rd, at 14h00. I am looking forward to learning whatever you have to teach.

Please reply via my owl still waiting by your door.

I shall see you tomorrow, Mercury

Tap, tap, tap. That damn owl was tapping again. Tap, tap, tap, waiting for a reply. Severus pivoted back towards his desk, grabbed his quill from the ink pot and scribbled his reply directly below her note:

No, You shall not.

I do not have time for this nonsense, he thought as he dropped her note impatiently into the owl's beak on his way out.

Snape headed out the long stone hallway of the Dungeon despite the fact that he had no real destination in mind, only escaping the castle and the nonsense that surrounded him. As he walked to the Apparition point on the outside of the front gates, he caught a glimpse of the monstrous stage the Ministry had set up at the far end of the Quidditch pitch. Suddenly it felt like his lower limbs were filled with lead and his upper body filled with helium, the combination rendering him instantly nauseous. He

knew then that, without a doubt, he would have to break his promise to Minerva. He would not be returning for the ceremony.

Snape pictured in his mind the place where no one could find him and proceeded to Apparate into the living room of Treacle cottage. The blinds were already shut all the way down around the bizarre circular windows--hublots, Dumbledore had called them--but they did not deter the sun from shining brightly, surrounding the circumference like an eclipse of the moon. The place still had a cheery air to it, despite its owner having been absent for two years, as though twinkling were a permanent condition of Dumbledore and his possessions. And to make matters worse, a small, joyful elf was suddenly standing next to him, grinning.

"Remy," said the elf brightly, pointing his long finger towards his own chest to remind Snape of his name.

Snape looked down at the keen house-elf with resignation. Remy appeared to be jumping out of his skin with eagerness for Snape to call on him. He was briefly reminded of Granger during her first few years at Hogwarts.

"Can you go see if there is any liquor in this doll house?" ordered Snape as much to get rid of Remy as anything else. "And I do not mean anything sweet and sugary with a proof less than 45%. Understood?"

Remy was already happily heading towards the basement door, and if elves had tails, his would be wagging frantically.

Snape stood in the middle of the room for a minute or two, unsure if should stay or find another venue to disappear to. The place absolutely reeked of Albus, and therefore, everything he was trying to escape from today. It was only his second visit to the cottage, and he felt no strong urge to move in. Of course, Dumbledore had to bequeath Severus Snape his private residence, a veritable gingerbread house filled with equal parts gaiety and tackiness. He would rather Albus have left him the ashes of one of his brother's goats than this bright, inanely cheerful place.

Severus scanned the décor of the room. At least it had no overly annoying theme like the other quarters of the house. Just stepping into the cowboy room, for instance, made him want to stab his eyes out on the spines of the large cacti residing there. No, the walls of the sitting room were an uncharacteristically subdued dark ochre colour and had only one large painting of a Narwhal scene. In the middle of the room, two small sofas faced each other in front of the stone fireplace. They looked quite comfortable despite the fact the fabric resembled the McGonagall tartan. Directly to his left, the living room had an extensive private library; ornate wooden bookshelves, which appeared to be made up of elder wood, surrounded the perimeter of the all brick-walled reading room. Two large Queen Anne chairs, with an ottoman in front of each, stood side by side with a soft myriad of candles floating overhead with the ability to adjust to the lighting needed by the individual reading.

The small, jovial elf returned with three rather large bottles of unlabelled liquor, one in each hand and the third tucked under his right armpit, making him tilt slightly to that side. He set them awkwardly on the large oak coffee table located in the middle of the two loveseats. He then snapped his fingers, and a fine crystal glass appeared on the table. He plunked some ice cubes in the glass and handed it proudly to the professor.

"Does the professor want food with that too?" inquired Remy, still eager to please, ear tips wagging in anticipation

"No, that will be all," said Snape distractedly before adding a curt "thank you" that was more of a dismissal than a word of gratitude.

Snape poured himself a generous amount of something resembling scotch and uncharacteristically slouched down on the dusty tartan sofa. He held the crystal glass with both hands while staring down at the amber liquid still swirling around. He knew the first taste would be more bitter than savoury, but eventually it would not matter, as that very substance would gradually numb his senses.

All of his senses but one, that is.

It seemed he had inherited more than his father's crooked bottom teeth, for drinking, just like his patriarch, made him horny as hell.

But the way things were right now, it mattered not. He would probably end up sitting here for the remainder of the afternoon in a drunken stupor, which sounded infinitely better than being paraded about a Ministry party.

True, the War Hero nonsense could've garnered him more than the occasional free drink at Rosmerta's, but typical of his luck, not only had redemption passed him by, but the details of his private life had been broadcasted for everyone to hear. He still couldn't bring himself to even think about Golden Boy spilling his guts to Voldemort about Lily (as if that had been the time to be sharing confidences with the Dark Lord). Were they not supposed to be trying to kill each other instead of bickering whether it was love or lust that had motivated him to switch sides?

Now, thanks to Potter, witches young and old (apparently the greatest number falling between the age of thirty and forty according to a poll in Witch's Weekly) wanted to *reform* him and *heal* his tortured soul. He did not want their pity or attempts at recovery. In fact, he still preferred the witches who had circulated within Voldemort's circle. At least they had understood that a quick fuck was, indeed, just that. Not to mention, women unconcerned with the state of their own souls were certainly disinterested in the state of his. However, his role in the War did not seem to have overly impressed them, and most of them were probably cursing him from their new accommodations in Azkaban.

Snape gulped the content of his glass in one big shot, as if it were Polyjuice Potion that would turn him into someone else. Someone with more luck.

A quick look at the clock, located on the mantelpiece next to an empty picture frame, indicated that the ceremony was about to officially commence. Images of Potter, Ministry Officials and endless speeches floated to the forefront of his mind until he imprisoned them safely in the back to where they belonged, behind a screen of alcohol.

Snape did not regret skipping out. He did not want to be reminded of the events that had taken place a year ago. He was just beginning to remember what it felt like to have the earth underneath his feet again after dangling between the Dark Lord and Dumbledore for so long.

Now that he had somehow accepted his unlikely survival, it was time to plan for the future. A future that did not include Hogwarts, teaching and conducting research.

Snape refilled his glass for a third time, adding more alcohol and less ice. Again, he stared at the golden swirling liquid in the glass much like Trelawney did when reading tea leaves, trying to determine where and what he should do after this school year ended in a few weeks.

Minerva had been pressuring him to take up academia again (likely in an effort to keep him at the school). Come to think of it, she was not the only one who was suddenly interested in his past research. Hadn't Irma Pince sent a note asking him to drop by the library with his original essays on mercury? Probably on behalf of Granger.

Mercury. Hg. Hermione Granger.

What the hell was the matter with her anyway?

Surely she knew he would figure out she was the not-so-mysterious Mercury.

It was so transparent! In fact, this had Minerva McGonagall written all over it. But why insult his intelligence with the "Mercury" intrigue? Why not just send her "permanent student of the month" over in person to discuss his research?

Still, what did it matter? Even if the young witch had come in person, the results would have been the same. He would still leave the school. But what was Minerva thinking... research with Granger?

Drinking away that disturbing notion, Snape muttered to himself, "I would rather be hexed!"

Remy poked his head in swiftly when he heard a noise coming from the family room, hoping to be of service again, but Snape waved him off with a hand gesture that looked like he was swatting a fly. Remy smiled brightly and waved back before retreating behind the door again.

Was no one scared of him anymore?

Obviously not Granger. The girl was not stupid, so why would she even abase herself by agreeing to send him these notes? Especially the last one.

The first three missives of her attempt at correspondence had just been to inquire about his thoughts on Mercury toxicity and her ideas regarding its removal. What had annoyed him was the fact that she had used a generic handwriting charm and signed the missive Mercury as if he would not figure it out. Seriously, had she already forgotten he had been a bloody spy?

But what about that last note? *I am willing to learn whatever you have to teach.* What was she trying to get at with that line?

McGonagall was playing mind games with him. Making him think way too much about this, and the sad part was... it was working. Had he not been analyzing this way more than it was worth?

He had almost been tempted to take the bait too. It would only do Miss Granger a favour to have someone tell her to her face that her whole thesis proposal was absolutely idiotic and that the only reason she was allowed to proceed with it was her War Hero status. Was it not always the way with institutions of higher learning? It would certainly add prestige to Beauxbâtons Académie to have such a high profile graduate as Granger.

But after this last note, there was no way he was getting involved in these childish tactics.

Snape got up from the sofa to get more drink, and the extent of his stupor became clearer as the counterclockwise spinning of the room forced him to sit back down again.

He noticed that almost all of the liquor Remy had brought was gone, yet he still needed some type of alcohol to keep his memories confined. Perhaps he should just go finish his debauchery at the Anvil Tavern, the seedy dive where he had Confused Mundungus into suggesting the seven Potters to the Order. He was confident that the patrons there would not fit into the category of War Hero Worshipers, and he would be left alone.

At precisely 13h00, Irma Pince closed her library for the rest of the day. She efficiently performed all the proper charms to safeguard the written institution and made her way back to her private quarters before heading out to the Remembrance Day Ceremony.

She walked rapidly towards the faculty's residence located at the back of the castle, just behind the southern gardens.

She hoped Pomona, whose residence was right next to hers, was still in the Great Hall eating her lunch. They had shared a few drinks last night, and truth be told, Irma had perhaps consumed a bit too much.

"C'mon Irma, one more drink won't hurt you! We're celebrating being rid of "You-KnowVol!" her jolly colleague had pressured.

A few Martinis later, Irma had shared her "cousin's" difficulties in getting two individuals with like minds together.

"Food, Irma; I tell you, food is the common denominator to all living creatures," Pomona preached importantly while popping another olive into her mouth. "Tell your cousin to throw a dinner party for them."

Irma tried to picture Snape and Granger discussing research over a meal but the images just would not form.

"My cousin just wants them to collaborate on a research project," interjected Irma, interrupting Pomona's long list of entrée ideas, an amazing number of which involved cheese in some form.

"Easy! Use humour or intrigue," replied the Herbology Professor, clearly not fazed by Irma's impatient tone.

Upon returning to her own quarters, Irma had decided intrigue suited her Professor best, and because she was slightly under the influence, her patience had dissolved, and she had just scribbled the quickest and easiest way to see him again. She had written a most desperate and idiotic note to Severus Snape on Mercury's behalf. The previous three had been decently mysterious and subtle, but this one had been outrageous. Now she was regretting it profoundly.

Irma came to an abrupt stop in front of her door. She glanced at her outgoing mail basket outside her door, and what she had dreaded most was confirmed.

Rats! The note was gone. Her owl had already taken it, determined to get the afternoon off like the other employees of the Castle.

Her door flew open as soon as she whispered *watermelon*. She stepped through and closed the door with a little too much force, making the lone picture on the wall tremble, and its occupant, her mother, frown.

She hurried to her large desk, sat down on the matching wooden chair and opened the third bottom drawer to her right. She pulled out a small box of cereal and Accio'd a bowl and some milk to savour her favorite lunch that she ate every day using the re-transfigured spoon from that momentous day long ago.

The discarded plan was still lying in the middle of her desk, and she felt no need to remove it while she ate. It did not matter if a drop of milk fell on it or if an entire bottle of permanent ink tipped over it. The truth was that the plan, so far, was a failure.

Phase One had been to send Granger's abstract to Snape anonymously and to inquire on his past research dealing with mercury. That had not brought her beloved anywhere near the library.

Phase Two: *Research Library for Material on Intellectual Matchmaking* had yielded nothing. She had tried different key words, even performed an advanced Boolean search but still nothing.

Apparently, the keys to luring intellectual minds together were grant money and the promise of prestige. Severus Snape was certainly not interested in any sort of status, and where would she get grant money anyway?

That left her only with Matchmaking, the traditional romantic kind, where two individuals are brought together in the hope that they could fall in love.

The idea was utterly ridiculous. She just wanted him in the library on a regular basis, not in love with someone else!

Suddenly, her boomerang owl (such creatures were usually only used for interlibrary loans) was notifying her of its return.

A reply!

She read the note quickly and then ran her index finger over *'No, you shall not'* as if reading Braille.

"Well," sighed Irma, "this reply was expected."

What a fine mess she had created!

Her revised plan now consisted of convincing Miss Granger to come to the library tomorrow in case Professor Snape changed his mind and wanted to meet the mysterious Mercury. A flimsy plan at best, and one destined for failure, she was certain.

Still, she would have a word with the young witch at the ceremony, and in the meantime, Irma consoled herself with the fact that she would see Severus Snape in thirty minutes' time. Surely that would re-energize her and inspire her to find a way to get him back in her library where he belonged.

Irma arrived at the ceremony twenty-two minutes ahead of schedule. She sat in the fifth row from the front. She didn't want to seem too obvious by sitting any closer. Snape, a War Hero, no less, would be sitting right on stage. She usually had no patience for these types of gatherings. What was done, was done, dust to dust, ashes to ashes...really, just let people get on with their lives. These sentimental services were usually just in place to convince the masses that the Ministry cared at some level or other, and Irma was hardly swayed by Ministry propaganda.

Today, however, her eyes would be fixed on her prize, and the longer it took the Minister to say whatever he felt needed to be recalled, the better.

After saving her seat with a spell that wrote her name on the back of the chair, she went looking for Miss Granger. There were already small clusters of attendees gathered around on the grounds, talking and reminiscing. Irma finally spotted the Granger girl talking to the Weasley boy next to a large evergreen tree on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They both appeared to be crying.

When Irma returned a few minutes later, the ginger headed boy was gone, and Miss Granger was sitting on a small wooden chair behind the stage, trying to console some poor woman who was sobbing. Irma moved a bit closer and recognized the woman to be a certain Mrs Creevey. She remembered reading in the Global Wizarding Times (not a trashy newspaper like the *Daily Prophet*) that Madam Creevey had lost her son in the war a year ago, but was still mourning as if he had been killed yesterday.

Irma noticed Hermione Granger patting her on the back and touching the woman on the arm. Again, Irma decided that perhaps she would just talk to the young witch after the ceremony.

Irma made her way back through the crowd of well-wishers. She found her seat and greeted her surrounding neighbours with a brief, polite hello, but her attention veered immediately in search of Snape. Her eyes went up to the stage, and after scanning the long row of chairs back and forth like a lighthouse beacon, she came to the dreadful conclusion that Severus was not in attendance. Involuntarily, her eyes filled up with tears. The new Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt had started his speech, and the audience grew respectfully quiet.

What is the matter with you, Irma? Her tears would not subside, and she hoped that those around her mistook them for tears of sadness about the war.

Suddenly, Mr. Shacklebolt's speech was interrupted by a loud, squeaky, distorted sound that was half cry and half plea.

For a quarter of a second, Irma thought it was she who had made that sound, such was her inner turmoil.

But the sound was coming from the front row. Mrs Creevey was now crying loudly, her shoulders heaving up and down as her younger son, Dennis, was desperately trying to make her stop. The crying was followed by dolorous wailing like a desperate plea to her departed son.

"Whyyyyy? Please! Oh, Why?" followed by stretches of "Noooooooooooooooo... nonoooooo!" she chanted over and over in a tone only a bereaved mother could produce.

The audience seemed to be frozen, uncertain what to do, as that poor mother had single handedly reminded everyone what the War had truly cost. Finally, Molly Weasley got up from her chair and went to kneel down next to the woman, taking her in her arms, and rubbing her back in great big circles. Molly was soon followed by the usually reserved Andromeda Black, who handed over baby Teddy to her husband before kneeling down on the other side of Mrs Creevey, whispering words of fortitude to her and showing the audience what else the end of the War had brought the dissolving of bloodline alliance. Pureblood and Muggle held unto each other as they struggled to cope with the loss of their children.

Madam Pince removed her rimless eyeglasses and dabbed her tears with a tissue, feeling shame at her previous callousness. But as she made her way back to her private quarters, she could not help still feeling disappointed that she hadn't seen Snape.

Hermione watched as parents put their arms around their children, walking slowly to the Great Hall, appreciating life, the bright sun, and perhaps each other more than they had in the past few days.

What an emotional service it had been. There was not a dry eye in the audience or up on stage when the true meaning of remembrance had been presented to them.

Hermione stood beside the entrance to the Great Hall, where the more festive reception was now taking place. A flute of champagne appeared in her hand, and she drank it fast as the day was very warm and muggy, but her flute kept refilling itself, and soon she could feel the effects traveling in her bloodstream.

It felt like ages ago since she had returned from France and gotten ready at her parents' place for the ceremony. She wasn't excited; the war was still too fresh in her mind, the faces of all those who had been lost still vivid in her memories, for her to be excited and in a celebratory mood. Instead she felt out of place, uneasy, and unsure as to how exactly she should feel. To quell her nerves, she had drunk half a bottle of chilled Rose before meeting Ron and her friends at Grimmauld Place just after lunch. She had hoped that their presence, their warm familiarity, would ease her unsettled mind. That hadn't worked out as planned, not at all, but she would not let herself think about Grimmauld Place until she was truly alone.

She felt somewhat left out when she noticed Harry and Ginny both chasing a toddling Teddy while Ron chatted with Cho.

She felt so conflicted and could not believe she had ended things with Ron just before the ceremony started, exactly on their one-year anniversary. She had worked so hard to make it work, but it felt like their relationship was more complicated than it needed to be, unlike Harry and Ginny's. She always envied them tremendously that certain elusive something that made their relationship truly special. They laughed often, teased and had common interests. It was also obvious that they could not keep their hands off of each other. She and Ron argued constantly, had very few common interests, and the sex had been inconsistent and mostly a chore, but she had been determined to wipe those glitches away and make it work regardless.

As she glanced at Molly talking with Mrs Creevey, Hermione tried tallying up her blessings for which she should be grateful: First, she and her best friends were alive and healthy. Second, she had good parents who loved her. Thirdly, she was tremendously happy with her decision to go back to school.

Hadn't she wished she were single during orientation week at the Académie? Really, she should not be feeling so down.

Still feeling somewhat melancholic and emotionally drained, Hermione decided to leave the reception early and meet up with Viktor Krum. He had owed her a quick note two days ago, saying his team was playing in London and asking if she and her friends would like to meet up at the Anvil Tavern for a few drinks after his match. Hermione had originally declined due to the ceremony, but had reconsidered since it could provide a distraction, and frankly, she had no desire to continue her alcohol consumption in front of everyone she knew.

She Apparated to the junction of Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, just under the lamppost that illuminated the names of both streets. She was glad that she had managed the feat without Splinching herself, for she was quite inebriated.

"I wonder why the Wizarding Community doesn't educate young wizards and witches about the dangers of drinking and Apparating like Muggles do with drinking and driving? Someone should look into that," she muttered to herself. She would need to write a memo to the Ministry to inquire about this issue.

Even though it was not quite dark outside, more on the brink of dusk, Hermione felt uneasy being so close to Knockturn Alley. She peered down the shadowy, narrow streets, deserted except for a large rat that was getting a head start on its nocturnal activities as it emerged from the gutter. A large portion of the Wizarding World was probably still enjoying the festivities taking place at Hogwarts.

Her thoughts slowed and meandered lazily about her brain. She was having a hard time remembering the name of the street she was looking for.

"Spencer Lane," she murmured as she took a sharp left off Knockturn Alley.

The Anvil Tavern was the lone establishment with its lights on. She had no difficulties finding it. Hermione wiped her eyes with the back of her hand before entering the premises and took a deep, cleansing breath. She tugged several times on the heavy door before casting an "Alohomora!" The door opened with a loud squeak. She headed straight to the bathroom facilities without glancing up. She didn't want anyone to see her in such a sorry state.

The copious amount of champagne and rose she had consumed muffled her senses, but the seediness of the tavern penetrated the dense wall. It smelled like a Muggle ashtray, and the wooden floor looked like it had never felt the strong caress of mop and bucket. Her sandals stuck to the wood planks, making a squishy sound. The state of the bathroom was no better, but at least it was empty, giving her the privacy she needed to pull herself together.

Hands on either side of the grimy sink, she looked at her reflection in the cracked mirror.

The events of the day came rushing back full force now that she was alone to lick her wounds. She had wanted to surprise Ron at Grimmauld Place, so she had carefully Disillusioned herself and cast Muffliato to make sure she would not be heard. However, it was Ron who had surprised her, for he was not alone as expected, and he hadn't bothered with any charms to conceal his presence or voice.

She had not been upset to find him chatting with Cho Chang. The two had become friends during Auror training and were now paired to patrol together. They seemed to be having what was obviously a work-related conversation.

"Cho, I really don't know what to do!" lamented Ron, "Hermione is one of my best friends, and I really do care for her."

"Maybe not work related, " thought an (at the time) only slightly tipsy Hermione.

Cho was sitting on the sofa chair across from him. Her large, brown eyes were fixed on him with warm empathy.

"Ron, you can't stay in this relationship forever if you are not happy," said Cho softly.

"I would sacrifice my happiness not to lose her friendship!"

"Oh, Ron!" exclaimed Cho, now teary-eyed, "It's so rare for me to be in the company of someone with such intense feelings!"

"Is she still talking about Ron???" thought Hermione, looking around the room for another person.

Biting his lip, Ron leaned forward slightly and looked at Cho with such longing that Hermione realized that there was something developing between them. Something tangible and real.

Her stomach had immediately plummeted upon digesting that bit of information, and before she could do or say something she would later regret, she silently left the room, unnoticed, leaving Ron and Cho to their burgeoning feelings for one another.

When she had been reunited with Ron later at the ceremony, she had been the one to end their relationship, claiming that they had different goals and interests. They had both cried but Hermione had noticed how easily he had accepted her decision. His grateful expression had hurt her more than she could've imagined.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looked a fright. Her eyes were bloodshot. They were so red, in fact, that it seemed that if she were to cry, blood would run down her cheeks instead of tears. She splashed cold water over her face and reached for her wand that was tucked away on the side of her skirt at the waist. She cast an efficient "*Rougesorta!*" and her face and eyes returned to their natural colour.

Face cleaned, shoulders high, fake smile on, it was time to leave the bathroom to see if she could find Viktor and his teammates.

Still feeling the effects of the Rose and the other numerous drinks, Hermione tripped over the small step leading to the bar area. She grabbed the wall and slumped against it, just in time before falling on the disgusting tavern floor. Another memo to the Ministry composed itself in her head about standardizing the height and width of steps in the Wizarding Community.

As gracefully as she could, Hermione made her way over to the bar and sat on tall stool after wandlessly casting a cleaning spell on the stained gray material that had perhaps been blue at one time. She quickly glanced around the tavern to see if Viktor and friends were around, but she already knew they were not here, as she would have surely heard the boisterous sound of fifteen Quidditch players drinking.

Hermione wondered how in the world Viktor had chosen this disgusting place. She ordered some red elf made wine while she waited. Surely, one more glass of wine couldn't hurt, and besides, she was in dire need. She had just lost the only boyfriend she had ever had.

Entropy

Chapter 3 of 4

Madam Pince's feeble attempts to lure Professor Snape back into her library have unforeseen consequences.

A/N: Huge thanks are due to my wonderful betas, Lariope and lulabelle72. Their help and insights have been invaluable. Thanks so much my dear friends!

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Snape had been sitting at the small table furthest to the back of the room in the Anvil Tavern since late afternoon. He was cradling his empty glass when Verla, the owner, reappeared to pour him another Firewhisky, purposely brushing her large bosom against his right forearm. "This one is on the house," she whispered seductively into his ear, "but it's the last one. Wouldn't want you to lose your capacity to... get home." The invitation was unmistakable.

Severus ignored the slight stirring in his groin. He was drunk, that was all. Certainly, it would be nice to have Verla relieve him instead of his left fist for a change, but now that he knew she had a husband, he had no desire to get involved in any kind of confrontation. He was trying to keep a low profile, and frankly, if someone could not afford to have his nose broken, it was he.

Perhaps now would be a good time to retire for the evening. More wizards were starting to enter the Tavern, indicating that the Remembrance Day reception at Hogwarts was probably drawing to a close. Severus got up from his chair, his graceful swiftness not betraying the amount of liquor he had consumed. This was another thing he had inherited from his bastard of a father, the ability to be pissed drunk without appearing to be so physically.

But perhaps this was no longer true, for it seemed his eyes had been affected by the alcohol after all. With great dismay, Snape observed his former student, Miss Granger, enter the Anvil Tavern and quickly make her way to the loo. He pulled his scrawny chair out and sat down again, this time more slowly, and waited to see if it was indeed Granger he had seen.

Was it possible that she had followed him here on Minerva's order? His instinct told him no. Her eyes would have scanned the interior of the pub instead of keeping her head low. And why would she have waited so long to follow him and nag him about the ceremony?

Could this really be a coincidence?

Finally, even though he was sitting quite far away, he was able to correctly identify the young witch as Hermione Granger, when he saw her emerge from the ladies' facilities and trip over a small step on the way to the bar.

The irony of the situation was not lost on Severus. He had avoided going to the ceremony to escape from the likes of Potter and company, and typical of his luck, there was Potter's best friend. Which probably meant the other members of the Holy Trinity were sure to follow shortly.

From his seat in the far corner, Snape continued to observe Miss Granger, *Mercury*, carefully. She had obviously been crying, though her face was back to its usual pink. She appeared to be struggling with her emotions as she ordered a drink and tried to smile tightly, and her body language indicated that she was, without a doubt, intoxicated.

Almost against his will, he wondered what had her so upset and why she was by herself. He weighed the pros and cons of making his presence known to her.

Perhaps he should just Disapparate back to Treacle cottage and call it a night. He had no desire to have to explain his absence from the ceremony to *her*.

But wizards were already ogling her as if she were a solitary mouse in a roomful of cats.

She is not my problem.

But a nagging sense of duty overruled.

He would just get rid of her. Tell her to go somewhere safer while he continued his drinking in peace.

With a single determined motion, he left his chair and made his way around the corner to where the young witch sat, oblivious to the stares directed her way.

Snape approached the bar and stood still behind her for a moment. He was once again tempted to just disappear, but he decided that Miss Granger was in fact quite drunk when he overheard her tell an incredulous Verla, "You're much too good to be hanging around this dump."

Hermione had already decided that after this glass of elf-made wine, she would go back to her parents' place. They weren't expecting her, but she had no desire to go back to Grimmauld Place after what had happened earlier in the day. She reached inside her dress robes to find the velvety black pouch that contained her Galleons. Her fingers grabbed a few blindly, and she pulled them out to give them to Verla, who was still looking bewildered at the career suggestions Hermione had tried to propose to her. It was then that she felt the presence of someone with potent magic behind her, tickling the back of her neck.

"Miss Granger," breathed the someone, close to her ear, "how much have you had to drink?"

She jumped slightly off the barstool. She knew that voice very well, but in that moment, could not comprehend why it made a shiver crawl up her back and settle in the roots of her hair.

"Professor Shnape!" she exclaimed, trying hard not to slur. "What are you doing here?"

But before waiting for a reply, her mouth ran away with her, spewing all the questions that darted drunkenly through her mind.

"Are you alright, sir? You missed the Ceremony this afternoon, and we waited for you, you know! Professor McGonagall said you would be back for it, and she was worried about you. Where did you go? Oh, Professor, it was awfully selfish of you to skip out on the ceremonies. You should be grateful to be alive after so many have died, and I think..."

"Must you always be so long winded?" interrupted Snape, clearly annoyed.

He wondered why her nagging had not figured more prominently in his list of cons.

"Miss Granger, despite the fact that you are obviously intoxicated, I hope your synapses are still able to connect for you to receive this message." He paused, as if in fact allowing enough time for said connections to occur, and then added rudely, "I want to be left alone. Now kindly choose a more appropriate venue for your theatrics."

Hermione stared at her former professor as if somehow the red wine had given her eyes the permission to do so openly, if blurrily.

She was conscious of his narrow black eyes, his high... or make that gaunt... cheekbones, and his prominent nose. His black hair was curtaining his face out of sheer habit, and the glare he was giving her couldn't be called friendly. *Is there such a thing as a friendly glare?* she thought drunkenly.

"Must you always be so antagonistic?" she finally replied.

Snape ignored her tit for tat. He was not about to justify his lack of manners when it was partly Wonder Witch's fault that he was still around to blurt out insults at her. Did she believe that changed anything?

"Even though Voldemort is no longer a threat, Miss Granger, it is still not prudent for someone like yourself to be in such an establishment, especially as inebriated as you are."

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"You're worried about my welfare!" concluded Hermione happily. Perhaps Professor Snape was starting to erupt from his cocoon of apathy.

I am more worried about your sanity, "Mercury" Granger.

Should he bring up the whole embarrassing Mercury correspondence? Is that what she was getting at? No, better leave this unsaid. Hadn't he been purposely avoiding discussing her research? He could not risk having her recite her entire damn premise behind her thesis, a positively sure-fire way to kill any peace he might have this evening, not to mention that it would be like throwing a bucket of ice water on any lusty thoughts he might have later while safely in bed.

He switched to a new tack to evict her.

"Should you not be at the ceremony, too?" replied Snape.

"At least I made an appearance despite not wanting to be there either! And my reasons were not selfish for skipping out... they were personal!"

"Isn't 'personal' just a prettier word for 'selfish,' Miss Granger?" remarked Snape and then added, "Why are you not with your beau?"

"What is this? The High Inquisition?" replied Hermione, suddenly defensive, the red wine sending her on an emotional roller coaster. "He's with Cho Chag... er... I mean Chang."

"Ah! The personal reason for skipping out!" declared Snape pointedly. "I would have pegged Mr. Weasley too wimpy to cheat on you."

"He did not cheat on me! He was just *talking* to her... about me, mind you..." explained Hermione as her voice croaked slightly.

She felt the lump in her heart make its way back to her throat. She swallowed twice, but to no avail. The lump was determined to express itself as a pool of tears. Before her eyes had a chance to completely fill up and spill, Hermione hid her face with her hands and noticed her nose was runny as well.

"Miss Granger, what exactly are you doing here?" asked Snape impatiently.

He was not about to play relationship counselor with Granger. What advice could someone such as he possibly offer? *'If the love of your life does not want you, have them murdered?'*

Of course, only when under the influence of alcohol could he let himself even think about his part in Lily's death so bluntly and crudely. Yes, he was in fact as intoxicated as the little war hero, who was failing to discreetly wipe her red nose with her sleeve. He was just better at hiding it.

Miss Granger was talking again. Something about Viktor Krum and Quidditch and plans to meet up here. After the War, Snape had become adept at only listening to half of what anyone said as a prophylaxis to severe migraine. Perhaps he should make that a third with this particular witch. He had no desire to handle her little crisis.

He was not surprised, no, not at all surprised, when he saw through the side window Potter's posse in the alley at a distance, undoubtedly searching for this Tavern.

He looked down at the young witch whose head was now buried between her folded arms, resting on the peeling bar counter. This was the perfect way to finally get rid of her. He bent down low to advise her that she could go meet her friends outside, "Miss Granger, your friends..."

Her head jerked up brusquely as she took a quarter glance towards the entrance. Oh shit! Ron and company were about to enter the Anvil and find her pitifully crying in her drink. Hadn't she been the one to break up with him? What if Cho was with them?

Without thinking about her actions, she yanked Snape by the front of his robes, forcing him down to her level. Her right arm wrapped itself around his neck as she slurred, too loudly considering their proximity, "Let's see if you've kept your acting skills, Professor Snape." She then reached up to kiss him, her left arm linking with the right behind his neck

His lips were thin and cool and tasted like a strong, odorous liquor, sweet but with a distinct, lingering ethanol after taste. The unexpected contact lasted a few seconds before she tried to nudge his lips apart with her tongue.

Professor Snape made absolutely no effort to respond to her kiss, with his lips sealed tightly for the duration. She tried again to probe his mouth open as she stood up awkwardly and pressed the entire length of her body against his. She had a chance to breathe the scent of something alkaline, like harsh cleaning fluid, and it did not surprise her that Professor Snape smelled a little bitter.

Then she felt his hands grabbing her shoulders, trying to force her away. But she clung to him, fervent and desperate, knowing she would die of humiliation if he remained impassive in front of her friends. Why couldn't he just pretend? Surely kissing her was easier than trying to fool Voldemort?

In that split second that she took him by surprise, Snape did use all of his acting skills to remain indifferent. Bloody melted cauldron! Yes, his senses had been affected by the tipsy Miss Granger. But, no, he did not want to kiss the little twit. Truth be told, he did not like kissing very much. He had never learned to appreciate the intimate coupling of the tongues, and he certainly would never do so in public like some show off teenage Quidditch player.

However, his body had risen to the challenge, so to speak. To have her young, strong body applying such fervent pressure on the fabric of his robes had made him feel alive and yearn for more, much more. *Pathetic*. Was he so desperate for physical contact that even the slightest friction of his *own* robes against his *own* skin felt heavenly?

He peered down into her eyes and recognized a mixture of determination, confusion, hurt and apology, all expressing a solo dance on her features one by one.

He finally pushed her away with both hands on her shoulders, thumbs anchored on her collarbones as he whispered soft as iron, "I will not be involved in your childish games."

"Professor, *please*, don't go!"

Luna was the first to speak when her small group of friends reached the unlikely pair.

"Hello, Professor Snape," said the blond haired witch respectfully before turning towards her friend and adding, "Hermione, we were looking for you... Did you just try to kiss Professor Snape to make Ron jealous?"

Hermione blushed furiously, ignoring Luna's statement. She was tempted to either laugh hysterically or to Apparate back into her mother's womb to have a go at another forty weeks of gestation just to get away from everyone for nine months.

Snape was standing next to her, arms folded and scowling darkly at the search party wondering why in Merlin's name he had not immediately left the premises when he had seen Granger.

And now Potter was staring at him as if he was about to go to confession.

Harry's gaze was fixed on Snape intently, and everyone in the vicinity had grown quiet.

"Sir. You missed the Ceremony."

Hermione knew by the sudden silence that everyone was waiting for Snape to comment viciously on Harry's understatement.

It spoke volumes of the shift in their relationship when Snape simply answered:

"Yes, Potter, I missed the Ceremony."

Hermione expected to see a pig come flying by any second. She had kissed Professor Snape, and he was being cordial to Harry.

All eyes veered back to Hermione when she let a tiny laugh escape. Her dear friends were now staring at her with puzzlement written all over their faces. She suddenly felt

very lightheaded and had a strong urge to just bow out of the entire situation.

If this was Victorian England, I could just gracefully faint at this point.

Ron finally unfroze and walked over to her. "Hermione, you're really weirding me out. Let me take you home, okay?"

"No, Ron, I'm fine, really!" said Hermione, probably too cheerfully. "Professor Snape and I were just about to discuss my research on Mercury. Remember? I told you he might have some stuff to share with me."

Her friends still looked skeptical. "Listen you guys, thanks so much for coming to look for me and making sure I was alright, but really, I'm fine here with him." Hermione said, conscious of the fact that Snape was looking at her as if she was the wrong ingredient in one of his potions.

"But is he fine with her?" she heard Luna whisper to Ginny with a Mona Lisa smile on her face.

Hermione grabbed Ron's hand and said softly, "It's okay, just go! We're going to stay friends, don't worry."

And as soon as she said it, she knew it to be absolutely true. Ron might have never been right for her, and she had never been right for him, but their friendship would stand.

Finally, Ginny made the decision for all of them and gave Hermione a quick hug and said, "See you tomorrow for brunch at the Burrow."

She watched as her friends left the tavern and Disapparated back to Grimmauld Place. She finally faced Snape, who wore a look she couldn't quite read.

"Well, Miss Granger, you are as subtle as an Unforgivable," he said, shaking his head slightly.

"I'm so, so sorry Professor Snape," mumbled a beet-red Hermione. "I guess I didn't want Ron to know--." She couldn't finish her sentence, and once more, her eyes filled with humiliated tears.

"Miss Granger, you have not failed an exam. Please, get a hold of yourself," said Snape, apprehensive of a complete teenage girl meltdown. He had always somehow managed to avoid any of those as head of Slytherin.

She reached inside her dress cloak to look for some Galleons, forgetting she had already paid for her carafe of wine.

"I'll...I'll be going now. I know that's what you wanted," Hermione said as she pulled herself together, and then added as an after thought, "I should not have used you like that; I'm very sorry, sir."

He watched her carefully make her way back to the facilities. With every step she took, strands of her shoulder length brown hair slipped out of her loose chignon. The last thing he saw before she disappeared was her hand reaching back impatiently to yank the hairclip off, freeing the disobedient curls.

The Firewhisky in him gave him a strong urge to pull her back to him, sink both hands in those curls, and give her permission to use him.

He recalled her silky pink tongue as it tried to pry his lips apart, and how she had felt when ... Merlin, it wasn't *her*. It could have been any other witch and his reaction would have been the same. It had been too damn long, and really all he wanted was to--

NOW would be a good time to leave--

Perhaps at some point he would eventually listen to himself.

Feeling even more horrible than when she had entered the Anvil, Hermione made a beeline to the witches' facilities for the second time that evening. Wasn't it where she always ended up when she was upset? She half expected Moaning Myrtle to stick her head out of the toilet bowl and ask her what was wrong this time.

Good God! Had she really, truly kissed Professor Snape...open mouth, tongue and all...?

And it's not as if she had even succeeded in making Ron jealous. He almost looked relieved to see her with someone else. For sure, it was Harry whom she had managed to make jealous. He had been trying to meet with Snape for a year to find out more details about his mom, but his requests were always denied. His list of questions to ask him was longer than her last Transfiguration essay.

She cast a cleaning spell on the toilet seat and sat there for a while, staring at the strange orange paisley wallpaper on the ceiling.

But honestly, what had she been thinking of kissing Snape?

Shite!

She had not even been able to get a reaction out of him and had had to beg him not to make her look like a complete idiot.

Would he still be there when she came out? Did he really think she wanted him to share his research? Gosh, she hoped not! She had read his essay on mercury toxicity and it was the complete opposite of her own hypothesis. She really didn't want to antagonize him further by pointing out to him how outdated his line of thinking was.

So, what next?

Had she ever found out what he was doing in this Tavern? Was he meeting someone as well? Professor Snape with friends was hard to imagine, and that thought made her feel very sorry for him. How much had he had to drink? Was he feeling suicidal just as Minerva McGonagall had feared this afternoon? She had been so worried when he had missed the Ceremony.

She had made such a fool of herself, and she didn't really feel like going back out there to face him again.

But a nagging sense of duty overruled.

When Hermione exited the bathroom, she found Professor Snape sitting on her stool, waiting for her.

She remembered the small step this time as she reluctantly made her way towards him. She felt her face burning red again; maybe he had already forgotten the kiss?

"I believe you wanted to talk... 'Mercury?'" he said as he stood up and put a hand on her back to guide her in the direction of his abandoned table.

Hermione would have preferred that the invitation not sound quite so much like an order but she followed him regardless.

The small, rectangular wooden table was tucked away into a corner beside an oval window where the nighttime sky had taken over the bright blue of the afternoon.

She let herself fall into a chair at a right angle to Snape's, so that their elbows almost touched on the surface of the table. She counted twenty-four shiny black buttons on his sleeve, starting from his wrist to his elbow. *'Two dozen buttons,'* thought Hermione distractedly, confirming that she was, in fact, not sobering up at all.

"You will be ordering water now, I imagine?" asked Snape as if reading her thoughts. Verla was standing next to him, waiting to take their order.

"Actually, I would like a Veela Vodka," said Hermione, her nose feeling hot. She was always a bit contrary when drunk.

"How... trendy," muttered Snape.

While they waited for their drinks, Snape decided they might as well get the Mercury business out of the way immediately.

"Did you really believe I would not figure out what this whole 'Mercury' identification mystery was all about?"

Hermione looked puzzled. That was a strange way to summarize her research.

"Professor, I'm not worried about *identifying* mercury," she answered, slightly confused. "I know you can easily identify mercury, I'm just interested in your thoughts on whether it's possible to transfigure it into something better, less toxic."

"Less annoying, you mean. What kind of riddle game are you playing, Miss Granger?"

"Why is it so difficult for you to admit that it's a good idea? Surely you've read my reasoning?"

"You have very naïve expectations. Everything about your research and your notes is quite childish. Did McGonagall put you up to this?"

"No...she had suggested transfiguring heavy metals after they were in their toxic form. It was my very own idea to transfigure them *before* they did any damage. You know, make mercury less volatile!"

"Perhaps you should try for less impulsive next time!"

"Sir... it's late, and you've lost me. Do you think it would be possible to meet with me and discuss it at a later point?"

"I suppose tomorrow at 13h00 in the library is a convenient time for you?"

"Yes... Actually, that could work! I don't go back to Paris until Sunday afternoon."

"What a surprise."

There was an uncomfortable moment when their eyes briefly locked before returning to gaze at their respective laps, and before Hermione could decide exactly what to do next, Verla returned with their drinks.

Irma laid back on her bed, arms crossed behind her head while her legs dangled to the floor. She had watched the colour of the sky change from blue, to pink, to a fiery orange through her window. The reception was over, and she could hear attendees departing from far, their voices echoing softly.

Where was Severus Snape? What was he doing? Was he safe?

In hindsight, it should not have been a surprise that her darling hero had not attended the ceremony. He was so modest that he wouldn't appreciate all the attention centered on him. But that didn't help her situation! When would she see him next?

How could she salvage things at this point?

Irma got up from her bed, flattening the covers with a firm hand, and walked to her large desk with a determined step. There, she perused the reading material at her disposal: all dealing with romantic matchmaking.

What did she have to lose really?

What is the worst that can happen? she thought.

Short of going back to school herself to become a Potions Apprentice (and don't think she had not contemplated that option fourteen years ago) there was not much that she could do to see him more often.

Romantic matchmaking?!

Hadn't Professor Dumbledore once said all the world's problems could be solved with love?

She grabbed the first book, an outdated edition of *Matchmaking for Dunderheads*, and began reading through the first few pages while still standing up. When her eyes reached the checklist for compatibility, she sat down briskly at her desk.

Why not complete it and see how farfetched this idea was?

Irma read the instructions carefully three times: *Complete this checklist keeping in mind the two individuals you would like to see together. Use a checkmark to indicate an affirmation and an x to negate.*

Irma raised her wand and copied the checklist onto a blank piece of parchment (it annoyed her when people saw checklists as an opportunity to write in a book).

She chose emerald green ink (the colour of hope) and began inscribing her answers on the parchment.

Is the male candidate:

Personable

Somewhat Attractive

Happy at his place of employment

Follows proper dating etiquettes

Looking for a commitment or vow

Her quill hung mid-air as her eyes scanned the checklist.*Oh! This is ridiculous!*

She put her hand over her mouth, fighting the urge to laugh. According to this checklist, Severus Snape was the least likely male candidate to ever find a successful match.

What was I thinking?

Of course her beloved could never be set up romantically!

She closed her eyes briefly and tried to imagine Severus Snape in a romantic situation with Hermione Granger. Perhaps holding hands? Her giggles grew. This was as unlikely as Snape ever holding *her* hand again.

She threw the parchment in the rubbish bin with surprisingly good aim and went back to her desk. She picked up his note from this afternoon's correspondence and reread the words.

No, you shall not.

Three fat tear drops splattered on the parchment, and she hurried to wipe them off before they smudged his handwriting.

She should probably compose another missive in case he changed his mind and showed up. She couldn't take the risk (even though it was minuscule) of him wanting to meet Granger and her not showing up. She needed to fabricate a better plan before she saw him next.

The new plan would have to wait until tomorrow. The note she could write now and send with her owl in the morning. She wrote quickly so she would not waste the green ink from her quill that had not been used on the checklist.

Dear Professor Snape,

I regret to inform you that I am unable to keep our appointment today.

Yours truly,

Mercury

When Irma finished putting on her long lilac nightgown and matching hairnet, she went back to her small single bed and blew out the candle on her bedside table. Overall, it had been a very disappointing day. She had not seen Severus, and romantic matchmaking had been a waste of her time. Goodness, she couldn't even imagine them ever developing any kind of chemistry that would even lead to hand holding. But as she drifted off to sleep, soft images of Severus's hands danced in her head.

There was a lengthy silence while they sipped their drinks uncomfortably. The byproducts of fermentation...a rather different sort of magic than either one was used to...coursed through their bloodstream, rendering them able to do things they would have been unable to do otherwise.

She stared openly again at the man who had protected them, all the while belittling them, throughout their formative years at Hogwarts. He was not an attractive man, but Hermione was well aware of the fascination that the post-war Severus Snape held for the witches of the Wizarding World. She had heard countless times of how "oh, so romantic" he was, and how brilliant he had been to have duped You-Know-Who for so long. Even her thesis advisor, Monique LaRochelle, who lived in France, was fascinated with him.

With each sip of her drink, Hermione could in fact acknowledge that the man she had always known as her professor emitted a certain magnetism. His incredibly soft voice, narrow black eyes, and the constant cynicism behind them certainly gave him a mysterious air that made one wonder what it was he was so determined to keep hidden. She had the distinct impression that there were two men in that body, two distinct personalities and not just because she was seeing double.

Severus was doing some examining of his own. For some unknown reason, his mind was completely focused on Miss Granger's hands. He had never noticed them before, even in his Potions class, he was sure. They were small and pink and both her hands bore small permanent white scars, reminding him of her diligent efforts during the war. Her nails were also pink, free of polish, with a translucent white quarter moon at the base. Her left hand was resting casually on the top of the table while her right one was holding the Veela Vodka bottle loosely. He unconsciously found himself wishing that her grasp on the bottle was firmer; that all of her fingers were wrapped around the circumference of the bottle and that her thumb

Pathetic pervert.

His breath left his lungs and a pervasive tingly pressure exerted a pleasant force over his groin area when she lifted the bottle up to her lips to take a long sip.

That hand would feel so good, so damn good.

It seemed to him that the wooden chair he was sitting on was throbbing between his legs.

Could that hand detect which stroke speed he liked best? Would the fingers and thumb massage his balls in the soft, rolling manner he preferred?

He brusquely made himself put a stop to these thoughts and reminded himself that, unfortunately, that hand was firmly attached to the wrist, arm and body of Miss Granger.

Desperate fool!

He tried to think of other, more appropriate contexts for her hand. She had certainly done some powerful magic with it the previous year. Wasn't it that same hand that had conjured a flask to contain his memories last year?

That thought should do the trick to cool his libido.

Hermione noticed that Professor Snape was rudely staring at the small greyish metal stain on the index finger of her right hand. She hadn't been able to find a solvent strong enough to remove it and had concluded that no one would even notice. *Go figure!*

Should they talk about something else now? She took a long sip from her drink, unsure of what to say to him. She felt his gaze follow her movement, and when their eyes met, her breath ricocheted inside her lungs.

Why is he looking at me that way?

His face displayed such an intense expression that it reminded her of how passionately he had looked at Lily in the Pensieve. It was sensual and scary at the same time. No one had ever looked at her this way before--no one! She was suddenly very much aware of her own body and its movements. But then his expression changed, and once more she was sitting next to her surly and morose professor. Hermione made herself believe she had imagined the whole thing.

But still... What would it be like to witness Professor Snape completely losing his inhibitions?

Hermione, don't be stupid!

But Snape hadn't been staring at her stain at all, had he?

Again their eyes caught, and her senses became very aware of his presence.

His silence was making her nervous. She wasn't used to being this quiet for so long, and she was getting quite fidgety with the whole awkwardness of the situation. The truth was, she just didn't feel like *herself* tonight.

Perhaps I should just go.

She reached for her bottle, deciding to chug the rest of her drink in one shot before leaving.

Oooops!

She had underestimated the amount of vodka left in the bottle and had to let the liquid fill her cheeks to prevent it from leaking out the corners of her mouth. She'd feel terrible if poor Verla had to clean up her mess, and this Tavern was filthy enough without her adding to the mess. She swallowed the content swirling in her cheeks in two big gulps, making a very unladylike sound.

Looking like he was challenging the speed of light to a race, Snape got up from his chair and pivoted towards the back exit of the Tavern. She thought she heard him mumble something like: "Do not follow me."

Hermione started from her seat, banging her knee on the table and making the empty bottle of Veela Vodka rattle precariously on the surface. She found herself heading toward the same exit as Snape without having consciously made the decision to follow him. She saw the heavy back door swing open as he neared it, and she was impressed he had managed to do so wandlessly in such a noisy and distracting environment. She had just enough time to squeeze through the opening behind him before the door slowly closed behind them.

Synergy

Chapter 4 of 4

Madam Pince's feeble attempts to lure Professor Snape into her library have unforeseen consequences.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful betas, Lariope and Lulabelle72, for their patience and tremendous help with this chapter. I'm sorry about the long delay in posting this chapter. Real life got in the way, as it so often tends to do. The next one should not take this long!

My gratitude also to the TPP staff for all their hard work, ensuring that this site runs so smoothly and efficiently.

Outside the tavern door, Hermione was surprised to find the spring air was much cooler than it had been this afternoon at the ceremony. A chill ran across her upper arms as the evening breeze wafted past, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its path. The moon was full and bright, casting a soft blue glow on the unfamiliar surroundings. She figured they must have used the back exit of the Anvil, since there was nothing she recognized, and they were now standing in a small yard with a scrawny birch tree and a large wooden crate marked "Meyer's Butterbeer" propped against the stone wall of the tavern.

Ahead of her, Snape had stopped all motion once he had heard her footsteps crushing the yellow spring grass behind him. He stood frozen in place as if he'd been Petrified by an errant spell. Stillness and silence surrounded the yard; it was too early yet for the crickets, and people were still trailing in from the ceremony at Hogwarts.

In the absolute silence, Hermione was suddenly afraid Snape would Disapparate if she even blinked an eye.

Why had she followed him? To be contrary? Or to apologize?

All she knew was that she wasn't quite herself, and that somehow it was very important to tell that to Professor Snape. Warm embarrassment washed over her face when she thought about her immature behaviour in the tavern. It wasn't just the kiss but also the childish way in which she had conversed with him. She wished she had thanked him for staying and for being cordial to Harry. She wished she would've been more focused when they had talked about her research.

But could that not wait until tomorrow? Had they not agreed to meet?

If she were honest with herself, she would also have to admit to following Snape because she was curious. Curious as to why he had initiated a conversation (albeit bizarre) with her after her impulsive kiss, curious as to why he would talk with her when so many were seeking discourse with him, but he would not allow *them* to penetrate his reclusions. She was also curious about the way in which a grown man...no, not just any grown man, Snape...had stared at her with naked need in his eyes.

She could sense his hunger, like a man preparing to eat after a long fast. That Hermione would be the feast was too bizarre for her to comprehend. She couldn't even compete with a chocolate frog when she was with Ron, and now this man, her snarky professor, had looked at her like he wanted to devour her as if she were the Welcoming Feast.

Hermione felt her heart speed up as he looked at her. It was not necessarily a sexual feeling, but a deep reaching of her soul toward a man who looked in dire need of something.

So underneath all of her excuses for apology and gratitude, stood an opportunity for Hermione Granger to obtain the elusive appreciation of the one professor she had never been able to impress.

"Professor Snape," she called to him across the still air.

He turned around with disciplined slowness, allowing the moon to light half of his features. His penetrating gaze could be felt even if it could not be completely seen. Hermione approached him across the yard, passed the leafless birch tree, and stood awkwardly in front of him, head slightly raised towards his face.

"Sir, I felt the need to apo..."

Suddenly, both of his hands were wrapped around her upper arms, pushing her against the Anvil's stone wall, and his mouth came down fiercely on hers, cutting her off mid sentence.

He was already breathing fast, his warm Firewhisky breath blowing balmy currents across her face while his feathery eyelashes were sweeping across the round curve of her cheek. The thought briefly anchored itself in her mind in wonderment, *Professor Snape has soft eyelashes.* The entire situation felt surreal. Around them only the silence prevailed, and it was now mingling with her disbelief that she was here with this man, doing this, feeling him.

Without warning, his pursuit became more frantic as his mouth traveled all over her face, neck and below her ears to the tender spot where her jaw line met her neck. Her heart accelerated as a thrill of the forbidden shot through her. He ran his tongue around the entire rim of her lips until they were sleek and wet. His mouth felt warm and firm, and surprisingly soft. *How can such soft lips utter such harsh words?* He wasn't kissing her so much as he was consuming her.

She could feel his teeth pinching her earlobe and nipping the base of her neck. What was he doing? *Oh mercy me, he's biting my neck.* The frantic pace combined with the unexpected bites sent a ripple of warning down to her toes.

As Hermione was overcome by wave after wave of sensation, she began to panic. She was in over her head. She had no idea how to respond to something of this intensity... It was too much, too soon. The first few moments of their encounter had been electrifying, but now it felt as if things were quickly careening out of control. If only he would just *slow down!* She had the feeling that she was being engulfed, drawn under... She should push him away now.

As if reading her thoughts, or perhaps suddenly becoming aware of his own loss of control, Snape pushed away from her unceremoniously. She took one step toward him reflexively before she noticed his hands forming tight fists at his sides, as if restraining himself from reaching out for her again.

"Tell me to stop," he whispered huskily and flinched as though he wanted to spring at her again.

This cold, hostile, solitary powerful wizard *needed* her. She could feel the desire and desperation radiating from him. His words, and the look in his eyes plainly displaying his need and loneliness, sent a wave of something fierce sweeping through her like a tsunami, wiping away her urge to fight and replacing it with the urge to soothe, to relieve his burden.

He was becoming utterly undone. For Hermione, there was no aphrodisiac more powerful.

Without a hint of hesitation, she pulled him into her embrace, pressing herself to him firmly as if trying to extinguish his solitude with the visceral soothing of her presence.

What the hell was she doing? Surely she was sober enough to have heard him? Why did she continue to do exactly the opposite of what he asked? Was this why she had followed him?

How far would she take this?

At last, he looked down at the young witch who, for some unknown reason, was offering herself so openly. In the moonlight, he could see her profile as she laid her head against his chest, her hair in complete disarray under his chin. Looking up at him, eyes shining and sure, she reached a hand around his neck and tried to force his head down to hers.

This is a mistake.

She reached another hand up, both hands in his hair, fingers scraping along his scalp and sending a shiver down his spine. He had not been touched in so long; he found himself rolling his head, desperate for more contact. She was so warm, her breasts so damned soft against him.

What was one more mistake in a life that had so many already?

Finally, he took what she offered, wildly, urgently, pushing his body hard to hers, keeping her pinned to the wall. One hand grabbed a fistful of curls and pulled down on it to expose the arc of her neck. He bent down and licked a first hasty taste. *Almond.* She tasted like almond, and suddenly, he couldn't get enough of that taste. He pressed his teeth to the tender skin as his tongue licked between, soothing the area, his lips suckling her from collarbone to the soft flesh behind her ear. His left hand sneaked underneath her white blouse, fishing for contact of any kind. His hand landed on the soft skin just below her armpit, his thumb touching the thin material of her bra. She bent her knees slightly, his thumb sliding under the silky material covering her breast. He let his thumb rub back and forth rapidly over the hardened peak a few times. She breathed out a deep, low moan of pleasure directly in his ear and whispered in a soft familiar voice, "Feels good."

He stopped dead in his tracks. *Miss Granger.*

He forced himself to look into her sensuous brown eyes, filled with desire.

For a second, everything stopped, and in his one lucid moment, Snape wondered how it was that he was feeling up the darling of the wizarding world against the exterior wall of a seedy tavern, and that she was apparently enjoying it.

After years of using and being used, Snape could not help but wonder what her agenda could possibly be.

Forget her agenda. Whatever she wanted, there was clearly something in it for him.

But suddenly, his shoulders slumped, and he relaxed his grip on her. There was no way he could do this. Something deep in his mind insisted that he would ~~not~~ *betray*... He could not take someone like Hermione Granger against a tavern wall.

When he spoke, the words were wrenched out from between clenched teeth.

"Miss Granger, do not..."

Do not what? He could not say. Do not play with fire. Do not pretend. Do not pity me. Do not underestimate me. Do not overestimate.

He could not choose one and, consequently, never finished his sentence.

He took three slow steps back from her, turned around abruptly and disappeared, her look of confusion and arousal branded into his mind.

Hermione Apparated as softly as she could into the newly remodeled kitchen of her childhood home. She hung up her cloak, kicked off her sandals and sent them tiptoeing into the front hall closet while she rubbed her sore feet. She heard her mother's voice from upstairs, "Hermione, is that you?"

"Yes, sorry to have woken you, Mum," replied Hermione in a hushed tone. "We'll talk tomorrow, okay?" she added for fear her mother would come downstairs and greet her. She needed to be alone to try to decipher everything that had happened since she had left her home earlier in the day.

She walked up the stairs like a burglar and stopped on the landing when she caught her reflection in the mirror. She stared at herself for a few seconds and wondered how

she could still look the same when inside she felt like a completely different person.

She made her way to her bedroom, still decorated in hues of blue and white, and quickly prepared for bed methodically, while trying to keep the myriad of odd feelings at bay until she was ready to greet them one by one.

After she had braided her hair (a necessity if she didn't want to look like she had been struck by lightning the next day) and brushed her teeth, she sat down at her old work desk and took out some paper and a yellow pencil and wrote the date at the top right hand corner and stopped.

How sad that she needed to sort out her feelings on paper instead of simply just talking it over with someone. Isn't that what her friends did? The problem was that everyone looked to *her* when difficulties arose, but no one ever paused to inquire if she had any of her own. After pondering that little injustice for a full minute, she had to admit that it was partly (or fully) her fault. She had always enjoyed being the problem solver, and perhaps her competence was what made it seem like she could not possibly have any difficulties herself.

She wrote down the issues she had to work through in chronological order as they had happened: Ron with Cho, the ceremony, the breakup with Ron, and finally, Professor Snape.

Hermione liked to do things linearly, but tonight, her thoughts kept circling back to one item in particular. The feelings her encounter with Professor Snape had evoked were so dominant that it overrode everything else on her list. She felt a stab of guilt. She had attended a heart wrenching ceremony and broken up with her boyfriend of a year, and all she could think about was Snape? Shouldn't she be ashamed by her behaviour?

No...she had done nothing wrong. She and Ron had already ended their relationship, and she and Professor Snape had kept each other company on a difficult day. Things had taken an unexpected turn; that was all. But now there was something growing within her, a newly awakened feeling that she had no idea how to label or what to do with. All she knew was that feeling was pervasive. She could still feel where his lips had roamed over her skin, but it went deeper than that.

She cast a spell to turn off the lights and crawled into bed to consider it further. Flat on her back, she tucked the blankets tight over herself, as if to keep the feel of his presence from escaping.

In the dark, she reflected that he was no longer her professor in distress. What had been pressed against her earlier had been purely male. Now, he was a man, and for the first time she understood why so many witches were infatuated with him.

She sighed and wondered what he was doing right now. Was he laying in his bed somewhere thinking about her?

A sudden image of Snape lying in a bed identical to hers, flat on his back with the covers tucked in... No, the covers were not tucked in. They were pushed aside by his legs, and his nightshirt was rucked to his waist, while he... he...

Hermione shivered, and that shiver was not altogether unwelcome, in fact it was also delicious. She remembered the way he had pressed against her; she was certain she had felt his erection, his hardness, through all those layers.

She rolled to her side and spooned her pillow, enjoying the heat and tingling that her recollections of Snape's arousal brought to her lower body. She wondered if she would ever get the chance to feel him again that way... There had been so much heat.

Hermione gradually fell asleep, while real images of Snape and the wishful ones intermingled, cocooning her in sensuous dreams all night.

Snape Apparated into the master bedroom of Treacle Cottage and sat down on the large bed, concluding that he should never have left this place while inebriated. Look at him now, as horny as when he was a teenage wizard... and just as frustrated too.

He shed his long coat on the chair and cast a Muffliato at the sheep cushion that began protesting loudly over the weight of his cloak. He didn't bother to remove anything else as he went face down unto the bed, trying to avoid looking at the décor. He then rolled onto his back and let out a long, deep breath of dissatisfaction. His state of arousal could no longer be denied; his erection pressed both pleasantly and uncomfortably against the fabric of his trousers. It was dark in the room except for the sheep glowing on the ceiling, fat and fluffy constellations that drifted and baa'd mutely. He closed his eyes to avoid them, and vivid images of Granger's tilted face, soft skin and tiny moans, made him nearly desperate to seek release. He took himself in hand and tried to latch on to the feelings instead of the images, but in the end, the thought of *her* being so wildly and openly responsive to him, one last image of her eyes gleaming with lust for him, wet lips parted, sent him over the edge.

After, he lay awake for hours, trying hard to Occlude thoughts of Miss Granger, but as in real life, the damn girl was persistent and kept floating to the surface of his mind. Severus tried to recall the last time anyone had touched him like she had--on purpose and so gently, that it had dissolved his common sense. He supposed the fact that he had been drinking all afternoon and that he had been living like a monk for Merlin knew how long didn't help matters either. But still... he had no business being with the likes of Granger.

What about her common sense? Had consuming alcohol altered her eyesight and her memory?

It was all her fault, he decided. Her and her juvenile little notes and her soft hands in his hair. He hoped he had scared her for good and that she would let McGonagall know that she would no longer whore herself out to make him stay at Hogwarts.

Truth be told, Severus did not actually believe that Minerva had had anything to do with tonight's encounter. He had known the old witch for far too long, and it was impossible that her strict code of ethics would suddenly evaporate just solely out of the desire to keep him on staff. But it was actually easier to think of Granger as offering herself for the cause than to think of her as being responsive to him because she was trying to *comfort* him, the only reasonable alternative explanation for her behavior.

Had he become one of the hopeless cases she was known for taking on? He had no right to that comfort. It was undeserved, and it was entirely unwanted.

The incident only served to increase his resolve to resign from teaching for good and move this God-awful cottage somewhere else and start anew. There were only five weeks of school left, and chances were that he would never see Ms. Granger again after what had happened last night. He was trying to piece his life back together; he should not be taking a sledgehammer to what little he had.

Once she was nicely sobered up and reconciled with the Weasley boy, she would feel disgust at ever having touched him at all.

Heartburn. It had to be heartburn and not angina, thought Irma worriedly, poking her chest with her fingers a few times. She should not have eaten the small (tiny, really) cucumber sandwiches that Pomona had brought back for her. That's what was making her sick... *Please let it be the sandwiches!*

She sat up in bed, both feet resting flat against the small green carpet on the floor. She glanced at the clock, but could not see the numbers properly without her glasses on. Moving very slowly, as if brusque movement would set off a heart attack, she reached for her glasses on the bedside table and put them on carefully. The hands of the clock, now in focus, showed that it was 1:19 AM. The pain had not subsided, and to make matters worse, she was starting to have difficulties breathing as she felt her chest tightening.

Am I having a heart attack?

It suddenly came to Irma's mind that if she were to die, not too many people would care. Irma wondered how long it would take before anyone even noticed that the library

had not been opened.

Would *he* care?

No. It was not likely that Severus Snape would give a hoot if she died.

In fact, he would probably be disgusted if he ever found out that someone such as herself had been in love with him for so long. That thought made her reach over to her bedside table (less carefully than minutes before) and fumble inside the bottom drawer to extract the small wooden box that held the notes that Severus Snape had written to her over the years. She opened the box holding the cover between her thumb and index finger and stared at the last note they had exchanged. *No, you shall not.* She replaced the lid on the box and gently placed it at the bottom of the rubbish bin. She caught a glimpse of the matchmaking checklist she had thrown out earlier that day... as if there were *any* possibility that these two would ever have any chemistry. What a pathetic plan anyway... What did she think would happen? That they would fall in love, and Professor Snape would start coming to the library every day in order to help young Granger with her research while she was in France, and that she, Irma, would continue to be satisfied in just seeing him? In the lonely, dark hours of very early morning, it all suddenly seemed so very sad.

Irma grabbed her wand and cast a quick "Incendio" before she could change her mind. She watched the box and notes go up in flames rapidly. They burned for a few minutes, the wood of the cedar box making a fragrant twirl of smoke on top of the rubbish bin.

At least now she had saved him the embarrassment of finding out. And finding out from a third party. She was still very worried as to his whereabouts today. Perhaps that was why she wasn't feeling well?

Another pain came and squeezed her chest, reminding her of why she was up in the middle of the night.

What should I do?

She sent her Patronus, a rather large silver dragonfly, to Madam Pomfrey to ask her what the difference was between heartburn, angina and a heart attack. (She didn't add broken heart to the list.)

A medi-owl returned promptly with detailed instructions from Madam Pomfrey:

Hi, dear. First, do not worry. Drink three large goblets of distilled water and wait three minutes. If there is no change, we will come and get you. If the pressure in your chest is released, then it was just heartburn.

Irma did as she was told. She conjured up the goblet with the correct amount of water and drank it quickly, and finally the pain subsided with an enormously satisfying burp.

She sent a note back to her colleague to inform her that she feeling better. She thought about how nice it was to be in an environment where immediate care was accessible. Yes, Hogwarts always took care of everything.

Everything but the loneliness.

Snape woke up to the smell of something heavenly beneath his nose. He opened both eyes to find Remy beaming proudly at him and holding a silver tray filled with fragrant breakfast items. Usually, he could not even eat breakfast, especially if he had been drinking the night before, but today his stomach growled at the sight of the food presented to him. Oddly, the morning light did not slice into his brain like a sword either.

He must have slept like something hibernating, because he could not remember hearing Remy preparing any food for him. Perhaps he would keep this place after all and just figure out a charm to move it to a different location when the school year was over. He was ready to move on.

After he had eaten breakfast, in bed no less, with the sheep for company, Remy returned with mail he had just received from a delivery owl.

He was not surprised at all when he read:

Dear Professor Snape,

I regret to inform you that I am unable to keep our appointment today.

Yours truly,

Mercury

Miss Granger had found her footing again and come to her senses. Well, at least, he had put a permanent stop to her ridiculous Mercury notes.

By midmorning the next day, Hermione had already had her breakfast with her parents, explained her breakup with Ron (Inevitable! Her mom had interrupted quite a few times... even at the part where she described her excessive drinking and kissing an old acquaintance); she had cancelled brunch at the Weasleys' and forced herself to at least write a thousand words for her research project despite being quite hung over.

Her parents were now safely out of the house, shopping for perennials that Hermione would eventually have to charm back to life at some point during the summer. She grabbed a left over slice of whole wheat pesto pizza from the fridge on her way back to her bedroom upstairs. After two bites, she realized that she had butterflies in her stomach from her upcoming trip to the Hogwarts library, and she heaved the slice into the rubbish bin.

Back in her room, she took out her clothes from the green canvas bag she had brought over from France for the weekend and laid them out on the bed for her perusal. She fretted for a few minutes about what to wear. Were her jeans too Muggle? Too young looking? What about the long khaki skirt that she had considered wearing to the ceremony yesterday?

She sat moments longer staring despondently at her clothes on the bed. After handling a few more shirts, Hermione came to the conclusion that she was just trying to distract herself with false problems. If Professor Snape showed up at all, it would not be how she was dressed that would dictate how their meeting would go.

She felt a tremor tumble through her lower belly. Was she thinking about clothing to avoid thinking about the fact that perhaps he wanted nothing to do with her? What if he had simply been drunk, and he would've done... all that, with any female that had come out that door? She had smelled the Firewhisky on his breath, and rather strongly...

Well, she was going to go to the library regardless. She had to keep working on her research, and she couldn't afford to be so distracted so early on in her Master's thesis. But it wasn't fair that being held by the grouchiest man she knew would excite her more than anything she had experienced before, and now she would need to cast those feelings aside. Truthfully, she really didn't have time to delve into her reactions to Snape's closeness, to understand why his behavior had inflamed her so quickly and brought her to the height of arousal with only a few frantic kisses (if they could even be called that). Ah, and his hand under her jumper, touching her, making that part of her as hard as he undeniably had been...

Stop! Stop thinking of what happened! She put a hand to her throat, feeling the rapid pulse under her fingertips, and her chest was heaving with quickened breath. Men were trouble. They were a distraction. And she hadn't gotten this far in her life by allowing herself to pine after men who, under ordinary circumstances, didn't care one whit

about her, nor had she gotten this far by melting every time one of them so much as touched her breast.

Madam Pince came bustling down the hallway, dabbing her mouth with a flowered handkerchief. She came to an abrupt stop when she saw Hermione Granger sitting cross-legged on the floor, reading a book by the doors, apparently waiting for her to open the library. The young witch looked up from her book, smiling at her as she bookmarked her page with a pretty purple string and got up swiftly.

"Madam Pince," she whispered, out of habit even though they were still in the hallway. "I wasn't sure if the library would be opened the day after the ceremony."

Irma could only stare. It was almost 13h00 and Ms Granger was here. Coincidence? She had to find out.

"What brings you here, Ms Granger? I thought a young woman of your age would be sleeping in after last night's festivities?"

Trying to sound casual, Hermione replied evenly, "Oh, I'm meeting Professor Snape to discuss my research."

"Professor Snape," repeated Irma, her hand flying to her mouth.

Hermione felt herself blushing at the evident surprise in the older witch's voice. "Yes... Remember, you were the one who suggested that he might be able to offer some insights into my research project."

"When?" asked Irma, a slight tremor making the word seem drawn out a bit. "When did you see him?" she elaborated with a slight edge of panic in her voice.

"Yesterday evening," Hermione said above the heat burning her face. "He's okay." She added, hearing Madam Pince's worry in her tone.

"Thank God!" the librarian exclaimed, grabbing both of Hermione's hands and squeezing her fingers tightly.

And just as suddenly, Irma let go of the young girl's hands as if she had grown thorns on them. What happened to her face could not really be called a blush; it was too instantaneous; Irma turned poppy red in one shot. Both women stared at each other, eyes wide.

The embarrassed librarian turned abruptly from the young witch and took out her wand from the side pocket of her bile colored dress. She released the wards quickly and entered the library without holding the door open for Hermione, who followed her on her heel. Irma went straight to her desk and looked for something to busy herself with. She drew her chin in when she looked down at the surface of her pristine desk. Not one paper at her disposal to hide behind in order to tamper the feelings of mortification and elation trampling in her mind.

Hermione hovered at the edge of the desk, and Irma felt transparent beneath Ms. Granger's scrutiny. "I happen to care about my colleagues," she announced somewhat defensively to the confused young woman.

"Right," said Hermione, still puzzled by the librarian's bizarre behaviour. "You don't happen to have Professor Snape's research articles handy by any chance?" she asked to ease the tension.

By any chance...

Irma went behind the glass window to her filing cabinet and pulled out a rather large yellow envelope. She took out the contents and made a quick copy using her wand. The originals could not be trusted with anybody, even the very organized young witch waiting for her. She set the documentation on the circulation desk, facing away from her, and realized she had left her wand behind, so she pivoted back towards the glass window partition to retrieve it. She caught the young witch perched over the articles, trying to read the titles upside down. She had always been curious, that one.

She bound the loose parchment sheets together with a stapling spell and finally handed them over to the girl.

"Thank you, Madam Pince."

"That's my job," said Irma stiffly.

Hermione nodded once and grabbed the stack of papers with her free hand. "I will be sitting at my favorite table if Professor Snape is looking for me," she said, pointing in the general direction of her usual study spot. "But to tell you the truth, I doubt that he will even show up," she added before going towards her table.

Oh, trust me, he won't come... because you, Mercury, have already cancelled your meeting with him.

Irma looked at Miss Granger's smooth face and pretty curly hair before her eyes were drawn to the small red line on her neck. This time, they both blushed.

Oh, sod it! thought Irma and asked, "So, he's well?" No need to specify whom she was inquiring about.

"Yes, he's fine," replied Hermione, comprehension slowly permeating her perplexed neurons.

"Fine is good... isn't it?" Irma asked pathetically, wanting more details but unable to ask.

Hermione felt her heart melting like wax under a heating spell as she realized the depth of Madam Pince's feelings for her colleague *She fancies Snape!* And from the desperate look in the librarian's eyes, she had for a long time.

Hermione thought best to pretend she hadn't caught on, but decided then and there to give as much information as she could about Professor Snape.

"Well, yes, we were all worried about his whereabouts, and it was a complete coincidence that I ran into him at a secluded pub downtown," said Hermione chirpily, and somewhat too fast. "I think he might have been drinking a bit, but seemed okay otherwise." She watched the tension ease from the librarian's shoulders.

Irma gave her a small smile, and Hermione continued, screening what would make the librarian feel better and what wouldn't. She couldn't tell her about the part where she had tried to kiss Snape or the part where he had tried to consume her. The stuff in between seemed safe enough.

"One wouldn't think of Professor Snape as a confidant, but I told him about my break up from Ron Weasley regardless. I was a little bit tipsy myself."

Irma smiled, trying to picture Severus listening to Miss Granger's difficulties.

"We also talked about my Mercury research. He hinted that he doesn't agree with my premise. *Hinted?* "We agreed to meet here today, but I think he got a little annoyed at me at the end, and perhaps that's why he didn't come. He left to go home afterwards."

There. That's all I can give you.

"All right then, Miss Granger, it was nice catching up with you, but you need to let me get back to work now," said Irma evenly, trying not to let too much gratitude tint her words.

Hermione gave a short laugh and said, "Sorry, I know sometimes I talk too much."

Hermione walked to her table very slowly as if her discovery had affected her muscle tone. She had just come to terms with the fact that she herself was somewhat attracted to Professor Snape, and to have to contemplate that Madam Pince felt the same way felt very bizarre.

She pulled her chair out with one hand and sat down distractedly while watching Madam Pince water the large ferns with an extra bounce in her step she hadn't had before entering.

Hermione suddenly felt extremely sad for the librarian. How long had Madam Pince had feelings for Professor Snape? Was there something she could do?

She thought of Irma Pince as a young woman, perhaps dreaming of starting a family with a wizard of her own. Had she been hoping it would be Snape? Poor Madam Pince; she looked so distraught and lonely. Hermione wondered what it would be like to have no one to even share your breakfast table with year after year.

But there wasn't much she could do to help the poor woman, was there? Perhaps it was time she stayed out of other people's business anyway. Hadn't she been feeling sorry for herself because everyone perceived her to be a problem solver?

Hermione leaned into the table, rested her head on her folded arms and peeked at the large painting of an old mill beside a stream, surrounded by tall grass dancing softly into the breeze while a young wizard read a book under an apple tree. She'd studied it often and knew it as well as the rest of the library. Most times the soothing scene filled her with contentment and peace and helped her to focus before starting her work. It lent no such satisfaction today as she tried to ignore the lingering disappointment that rang within her at the absence of Snape and the feelings of sadness brought on by Madam Pince's solitary life.

Slowly, Hermione lifted her head, deciding that it was time to get back to work. She Accio'd her quill and fresh parchment from her schoolbag and began to itemize her list of things to do for the afternoon. She had Snape's research papers in front of her plus she had two references that she needed to look up here. The Martine Dumoulin Library in Paris only had the first edition of *The Dangers of Methyl Mercury*; and that was just not recent enough.

As she got up to look for the third edition of the book, an idea slowly started germinating in her mind. Perhaps there was a way she could help Madam Pince after all.