

Chiaroscuro

by julymorning

Owain, the head of the Order of Bards, sends Hermione to Wales to gain experience at the feet of a master. There, she discovers that contrasts can be powerful inspiration. Written for tsukisei in the Winter 2008 SS/HG Gift Exchange.

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Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Note: Muchas gracias to my lovely beta, lulabelle72. Hermione's poem courtesy of Edgar Allen Poe; the story of Caedmon courtesy of Bede. Snape's quotation is from Plato's Ion. Original Prompt: Hermione's been studying the effects of music (instrumental, vocal, etc.) when used with magic with a group of magical beings (wizards, centaurs, sirens, etc.) called The Brotherhood of Bards for eight years following Voldemort's fall. In order to become a master she must find her partner. For every evil there is good, for every light there is a darkness, and for every soprano there is a baritone.

I.

Hermione glanced to her left. If the darkening sky had not been covered thickly with clouds, she would have seen a beautiful view of the sun setting over the sea. Perhaps she might also have been able to see the failing light glinting off the rocky islands that dotted the bay. Instead, she could see nothing of the sea; muddy cow pastures seemed to stretch to the snapped-off edge of the world. She was tired, hungry, and irritable that she was not permitted to reach her destination by Apparition. Vague explanations had been given about the exposed and broken fields of basalt interfering with the internal magical compass. She snorted at this as she trudged along the narrow road. She had not studied epic journeys for eight years not to recognise when she had been sent on one herself. Denied her preferred method of travel, she had ridden for eight hours on the train from London to Haverfordwest, caught a bus going to St Davids, and was now making good use of the shoe-leather express between St Davids and... where? The directions were on a scrap of paper in her pocket, but she didn't need to look to remember what it said: North road from St Davids. Turn right past Hendre Eynon. Ty Gwennol. Well, she was moving north. She just hoped everything else would make itself clear as she walked on.

It really wasn't fair, she reflected, indulging in a small helping of self-pity. No one else had been asked to do this. No one else had been summoned into Owain's study. No one else had had to listen to him say, 'Hermione, you've been here for eight years. What you've studied and what you've taught has been invaluable, but it's been too selfless. You've ignored your own needs for too long.'

'Do you want me to go forth? Is that what this is about?' she had asked.

'Not precisely.' Owain's study was stark and Spartan, bare wood and bare stone. The only ornamentation was functional: musical instruments hung from hooks driven into the wall or rested on homemade stands. Her eyes were drawn to these, even as she focussed her ears on Owain's words. 'You have more to learn, Hermione, mostly about yourself. A bard who entertains with tales of things he's never done and emotions he's never experienced is a pathetic excuse for a bard.' His voice became kinder. 'I don't want you to go through life avoiding the world and everything in it. To access the words and the music, to understand them fully and not just mechanically, you need to feel and to grow. So I'm sending you away, but not to go forth.'

'Where, then? Why?' Hermione had said dully. She had not wanted to leave the conclave. The tingling, magical warmth of the old manor house had reminded her of Hogwarts: in both places, she had felt safe and cocooned, enfolded by familiar forces that she knew how to control. The rest of the world was cold, hectic, and unexpected,

and she hated the way these qualities made her feel exposed and helpless, like a baby born too early.

'To Wales,' Owain had replied, suddenly businesslike. 'Our traditions began there; we still consider it our spiritual home. There's no better place to learn how to feel the poetry of sound and word. I'm sending you to a member we have there. He's been one of our order for thirty years. I think you'll find his help... instructive.'

Hermione broke off her recollection to climb halfway up the verge to her right as a car swept by from behind. Its headlamps illuminated a brown sign on the other side of the road that announced the presence of the farm of Hendre Eynon. It was about time, she thought, brushing mud and grass from her jeans and plucking an enormous black slug from the laces of her left shoe. She estimated that she had walked two miles already.

After another five hundred yards, she came upon a right-hand turning and followed it, dodging the puddles and potholes as best she could. The light really was almost gone now; how would she know when she had arrived at the house if she couldn't see it in the rural pitch-black that was settling on the land? But there was still just enough faded daylight to make out a long, low building up ahead, though its colours were all turned to grey in the gathering gloom. Hermione hurried toward it. If it wasn't the place she was looking for, she could at least ask its inhabitants for better directions.

A moment later, she rounded a curve in the road, and there was the building, which she now saw was a cottage, right in front of her. She stepped forward into the yard and leapt backward at the same time: a dense flight of swallows, disturbed by the sound of her feet crunching on the gravel, had taken wing from beneath the eaves of the cottage. Their dart-like bodies and rustling, flapping feathers barely missed Hermione, who cringed away in surprise. They disappeared over the fields just as full night fell.

Hermione tensed to step forward and was stopped, rather abruptly, by the sudden discomfort of something like a stick jabbing into her lower back.

'Do not move another step,' a voice whispered directly in her ear. 'Drop your bag.'

Hermione complied instantly, frozen in place by alarm and shivering from exhilaration. 'What do you want?' she whispered back.

'Prove yourself,' said the voice. 'Sing.'

She took a deep breath and recited, "'Listen! We the spear-Danes in days of yore..."

'Wrong answer,' the voice growled. 'You aren't still some novice learning *Beowulf* and the circle of fifths.'

Hermione knew what he meant; the sentiment was somehow oddly familiar. He didn't want something learned by rote from the syllabus. He wanted something that was her choice alone... She tried again: "'And there she weaves by night and day, a magic web..."

'Wrong answer!' There was a little more menace in the tone this time, a kind of savage glee. 'One more chance.'

She ground her teeth in frustration, searching her mind desperately for something she had learned on her own, something she had connected with. She was fully aware that the longer she took to come up with something, the more her mysterious host would suspect that she had chosen it by reason instead of impulse. With difficulty, she closed her mind and opened her mouth:

And !I my spells are broken.

The pen falls powerless from my shivering hand.

With thy dear name as text, though bidden by thee,

I cannot write...I cannot speak or think...

Alas! I cannot feel; for 'tis not feeling,

This standing motionless upon the golden

Threshold of the wide-open gate of dreams,

Gazing, entranced, adown the gorgeous vista,

And thrilling as I see, upon the right,

Upon the left, and all the way along,

Amid unpurpled vapors, far away

To where the prospect terminates...thee only.

Hermione realized triumphantly that she had silenced the whispering voice, though her host's wand continued to gouge a hole in the small of her back.

Finally: 'An interesting selection. Why did you choose it?'

She answered honestly, 'You remind me of someone I used to know. So does that poem.'

'Hmm.' The pressure of the wand against her skin gave way. She turned round, hoping to greet her new tutor, but though she could feel the heat of his body in front of her, the depth of the darkness in this Welsh desolation was such that she could see nothing of him, not even the outline of his form. He seemed comfortable in his blindness, however; he bent down to collect her bag and rested his other hand gently behind her elbow, guiding her toward the now-invisible cottage.

Then he opened the front door, and an explosion of lamplight and warmth surrounded her. She preceded him into the house, marveling at the beauty of the rough stone walls, the terracotta tiles on the floor, the hand-woven rugs and blankets, the rustic wooden furniture. It was like a cottage out of a fairy tale, and she whirled around to tell him how adorable his home was, only to come face-to-face across the kitchen with the last person she had ever expected to see.

From the expression on his face, it was clear she wasn't the only one surprised; her startled squeak of 'Professor Snape!', however, was entirely drowned out by his outraged, disbelieving snarl of 'You!'

Dinner was a subdued affair. Hermione thought of innumerable questions to ask, none of which, she knew, he wanted to hear, so she kept silent while Snape grilled steaks and roasted vegetables. His appearance had not changed since she had last seen him at Hogwarts, eight years ago: black clothing, greasy hair, severe expression. She allowed herself a tiny smile; she knew she hadn't changed much either. Time moved slowly for wizards and witches.

They drank red wine with the steak, and the alcohol seemed to loosen Snape's nerves. When they sat back at last, plates empty of food, he spoke. 'You have innumerable questions, of course,' he began, regarding her coldly. 'This is all I intend to say: I joined the order in nineteen-seventy-five,' he went on, 'though, as you might imagine, I was never a very active member. You will have had no idea, of course,' he added, pre-empting another of her questions. 'I liked to keep my private life private, especially from students.' He laughed softly, though it seemed the humour was pained. 'And here you are, my student again.'

'How did you end up here, in Wales?' Hermione asked.

'After the war, Owain requested that I come here so that I could teach people like you. I've been through a lot in my life,' he explained reflectively, 'joy and sorrow, mastery and slavery, travel and solitude. There is very little in poetry or song that I haven't experienced. I'm prepared to teach you how to find those emotions in your own, I must say rather limited, experience, although I don't expect you to absorb much.' His expression was baleful. 'Your talents have never lain in the *ex tempore* realm.'

'How many people have you taught?' She took brief pride in her lack of reaction to his taunt.

A mild flush coloured Snape's pale face. 'You're the first,' he admitted. 'But I haven't let my time go to waste. You won't find yourself ill-served.' He frowned, as if regretting what he had just said, and stood abruptly. 'We start early tomorrow. You should get some sleep.'

Hermione nodded, aware of the deep fatigue that had been creeping over her while they ate. With a flick of his wand, Snape set the dishes to washing themselves in the sink, then gestured for her to follow him down the narrow, low-ceilinged corridor. He led her into a small, cosy bedroom with brown furnishings. Another wave of his wand lit a fire in the tiny grate. Pointing to a door beyond the bed, he said, 'Your bathroom is through there. Sleep well.'

When he had gone, Hermione undressed and brushed her teeth sleepily before crawling, naked and warm from the fire, beneath the pure white bedclothes. Soft feather-pillows enclosed her weary head; the sheets smelled of cedar chips. Wearing a satisfied smile at odds with the ill temper she had felt all day, Hermione drifted to sleep.

II.

The next morning saw a weak sun pushing its way feebly through the cover of cloud. After a breakfast of tea and Welsh cakes, Snape instructed Hermione to put on a pair of sturdy shoes and her waterproof and led her back out to the road.

'Where are we going?' she asked, looking round at the endless pastures.

'St David's Head,' Snape answered. She followed him up a dirt road that led, she noticed, to a massive rock outcropping. She hadn't seen it the night before, but she felt now that she must have known it was there: hundreds of feet high, it towered over the surrounding fields like a sentinel. She imagined that it guarded Ty Gwennol, standing as protector against the starkness of the sea and the unknown beyond. Snape seemed to sense her pensive mood; 'This hill is called Carn Penberri,' he told her. 'It's not the biggest on the peninsula, but it's one of the most imposing.'

Climbing it was unexpectedly easy, and when they reached the summit, Hermione saw with astonishment that the far side of the hill sloped directly down to the sea. Momentarily vertiginous, she felt that if she were to tumble off her rocky perch, she would roll headlong like a boulder over the edge of the cliff and cannonball into the waves. She swayed a bit, and Snape's firm hand steadied her.

'Look there,' he instructed, pointing to the northeast. Her eyes traced the coastline out to its end, where the peninsula jutted in a point toward a misty land in the distance that she supposed must be Ireland. 'Do you see where the peninsula comes to a head? That's where we're going.'

'It must be miles away!' she exclaimed softly.

'Distances are deceptive in Wales,' Snape said. 'It's only one mile.'

They trotted down the hillside and into the open plains again, but the terrain here was rougher and rockier. Lines of stones stretched across the land, sometimes like the spokes of a wheel, other times like the squares of a grid. They looked like the remains of ancient settlements. Another outcrop loomed over them from the left. Soon, Hermione and Snape were climbing again across a cliff that was now more rock than earth. Huge blocks of granite protruded into the sky, their greyness set off by the purple heather that grew intermittently amongst the stones. The drop-off was sheer here; a wrongly placed foot near the edge of the cliff would result in disaster. Climbing ever higher, they passed a triangular arrangement of rocks that Snape said was a Neolithic burial chamber and finally reached the highest point on the headland.

'The stones and the earth have their own rhythms and sounds,' Snape explained quietly as they stood atop a boulder and looked out at the heaving sea. 'The land grows and cracks and shifts beneath us all the time. Each vibration is a pitch, low and melodious or high and dissonant. You can hear the modes of the earth, if you listen closely enough. Stand here,' he said, positioning her on a flat part of the rock, 'and feel the music. It swells inside of you and enlarges your soul. With your magic, you could channel it, if you wanted to.'

Hermione stood obediently, listening to the solid tones of the stone beneath her feet, but really she was thinking about Snape. She had always thought him cruel and hard, bound up in the minutiae of life and blind to its elegance. To hear such a speech issuing from him now should have been incongruous, but it was not. She finally understood what he had tried to say about Potions, about the Dark Arts: he did see the elegant economy of things. It was she who had been a bit blind. Eight years ago, this realisation would have humiliated her; today, it seemed perfectly sensible to own her past ignorance. After all, she was ignorant no longer, and that was what mattered. Was it the firm music of the earth that was grounding her thoughts so?

She glanced at Snape, who nodded as if he had read her mind.

The scream of a peregrine falcon echoed in the distance. The mood broken, Hermione climbed down from the rock and asked, 'What do we do now?'

'Now?' Snape said, the hint of a malicious grin twisting his lips. 'We go down.' He weaved a path through the rocks to the very tip of the cliff and pointed. Far below...a hundred feet down or more...a mound of black rock rose from the water. This, Hermione realised, was St David's Head itself, the last bit of land to break the water as it rushed around the end of the peninsula. There was no path to it that she could see, just the steepness of the cliff face and, at the bottom, a thin bridge of basalt leading out to the mound. Her courage began to drip away. Snape's smile grew broader, and he lowered himself onto the next shelf of rock without waiting for her to stiffen her resolve.

'Fine,' she said out loud. 'I'm not scared.'

Down they climbed, Snape with the sure-footed agility of a goat, Hermione staying on her feet when she felt able but mostly sliding from shelf to shelf on her bum, keeping her centre of gravity low so that if she slipped, she wouldn't have as far to fall. The descent seemed to take forever.

When they reached the bridge of basalt, Hermione turned and gazed back up the cliff. It didn't look quite so steep from this angle, and she knew, however counterintuitive it might be, that going up would be much easier than coming down had been. Then, at a prod from Snape, she focussed her attention on the narrow line of stones before her and saw they were slick with algae. Further out on the headland itself, waves of cold salt water crashed over the rocks. With a sinking feeling, she realised she was going to get very wet.

'Please, stare all day,' Snape called sarcastically. He had already made his way a little along the bridge. 'Waiting for you is an excellent use of my time.'

Throwing him a mutinous glare, Hermione surveyed the bridge again and decided the best way to approach it was at a crawl. Dropping to her hands and knees, she inched her way carefully over the slippery stones, moving slowly, but still crossing more quickly than Snape, whom she caught up at the halfway point. The bridge was too narrow for her to pass him, so she was forced to slacken her pace to match his movement on foot. She took pleasure in being able to say to him rudely, 'If you're so concerned about your time, Professor, perhaps you could disregard your dignity and do this my way. It's faster.'

'You look like an insect,' he snapped back, taking another careful step. 'The dignity you sneer at so casually is the dignity of mankind: that we no longer slither on our bellies like animals.'

'Mmm,' Hermione replied, uninterested in taking his bait.

Crawling along the bridge had made Hermione damp from the knee down, which was fortunate because, when they reached the top of the headland, the waves were cresting right at shin level. She thought Snape would have found this irksome, but he was oddly silent, his attention riveted on the open sea. She would have liked to do the

same, and adopt a mocking pensive air, but the positioning of the crashing water was irksome in another way: every time a wave hit her shins, it threatened to knock her off her feet, making Hermione stumble about in a humiliating sort of way.

'I suppose this lesson is about the music of the water?' she muttered irritably, trying to secure her feet.

'Water has two types of music,' Snape answered distantly. 'When you look out to sea, the waves look calm, even benign. It is the same music as the water that ripples over pebbles in a brook. But those same muted waves up close possess a harsh, powerful melody that demands respect and, perhaps, even fear.'

Just like you, Hermione thought, watching his stern profile. Her concentration diverted, she failed to recover from the next wall of water that broke over her legs, and she tumbled painfully onto the rocks. Before she could right herself, another wave hit her, soaking her completely and dragging her closer to the slope. Panicked, she hooked her fingers around an outcropping and held on desperately, searching at the same time for a toehold beneath the waves. Water slammed against her exposed back, pressing her unforgivingly against the rocks.

'Snape!' she shouted, unconcerned about formalities of title.

His sallow face appeared above her. 'Is your grip secure?' he asked.

'For the moment,' she replied breathlessly.

'Well done,' he said. 'Listen to the sound of the water as it buffets you.'

It took all of her remaining strength to keep from screaming at him, but her lips remained firmly closed. She shut her eyes as well, turning one half of her mind to steadying her hold on the rocks, and the other half to listening to the sound of the sea that seemed to be doing its best to smash her spine. The water roared over her, deafening in her ears, before flowing back down the rocks in a kind of *slurp* to rise again. The rhythm reminded her of respiration, the ragged inhalation and exhalation of someone exhausted by physical exertion. Eventually, she noticed that her breathing had altered to match the ebb and flow of the waves, as if all of the tiny water molecules in her body longed to join their brethren in the sea, and suddenly she felt like part of the water herself, at one and the same time separate yet inseparable from it.

'Are you ready to come up?' Snape called.

'Yes,' she answered hoarsely.

Long-fingered hands closed about her wrists and pulled her back to the top of the rocks. She lay on her belly, breath coming harshly, and wished there were some way to get home and dry without slouching back across the basalt bridge and trudging through the countryside. Before her mind caught up with her unconscious wishes, Snape twined his arm with hers and twisted on the spot, and Hermione was enveloped in the squeezing, blackened pressure of Apparition.

Ty Gwennol's cosiness struck her like a wall of hot air when they appeared with a faint *pop* in the sitting room. Intensely grateful for Snape's oddly merciful behaviour, Hermione entered her room and headed for the bath, shedding clothing onto the hardwood floor as she staggered along. The lukewarm water took the chill of the sea from her skin and bones, and she lay in the tub for some time and listened to how the bathwater rippled and gurgled in response to her movement.

When she emerged, refreshed, her face framed by ringlets of damp hair, Snape wordlessly passed her a mug of coffee and indicated that she should sit with him at the kitchen table. She drank silently, aware that, with Snape, it was better not to speak until spoken to. To her surprise, she tasted rum in the coffee.

At last, Snape said, 'This is how your lessons will be conducted. In the morning...experience. In the afternoon, you will turn your skills toward making something out of that experience. You have been trained at the conclave in all of the bardic arts, so I will allow you to compose in whatever medium you wish, provided that it can be performed.' He smiled thinly. 'After all, our function is to entertain.'

Hermione nodded. 'And will you be evaluating these fruits of my labours?' she asked dryly.

'Naturally.' He stood and took their empty mugs to the sink. 'In the evenings, we shall seek out entertainment ourselves, for... inspirational purposes.'

Puzzled and astonished by this last, Hermione almost didn't hear his instruction to help prepare lunch, and as she washed and chopped lettuce and tomatoes for sandwiches, she tried to imagine what Snape's idea of 'entertainment' might be.

After they ate, Snape showed her to the room in the back of the house where he kept his instruments. It was a small, low-ceilinged room, panelled in... egg-crate? 'For acoustic reasons,' he explained, seeing her bemused expression. His musical collection was much smaller than Owain's, she estimated, but no less beautiful. She lifted a guitar from its stand and ran her fingers over the smooth, polished wood of the body, noting the absence of dust. Snape obviously cared for his possessions well; she supposed it was a result of his innate attention to detail, without which he could never have become a Potions master. His attitude toward Potions, however, had always seemed rather mathematical, riveted on the satisfaction of solving a problem or completing a task well. This attention to the well being of his instruments was clearly something else: devotion, she thought, perhaps even love. She pictured him coming to this room, night after night, sliding the polishing cloth along the curves of the guitar with his precise hands, carefully oiling the valves of the trumpet, massaging the skins of the tablas...

So intent was Hermione on this interior vision that she never saw Snape leave the room; when she finally looked up and discovered he had gone, she noticed as well that she had been stroking the strings of the guitar herself, running her own fingers up and down the tightly twisted wires, rubbing the curved back of the neck in small circles with the pad of her thumb. Well, she loved these instruments too, didn't she? All the more because Snape so clearly valued them. The fingers of her left hand tilted up automatically to form a chord on the fret board; the palm of her right hand pressed gently against the strings near the bridge to dampen the sound as she strummed.

Then, after a long, motionless moment of contemplation, she rifled through a dish of plectra on a nearby table, found a nice springy one that suited the sound she was aiming for, and began to play in earnest. At first, she focussed on what Snape had said regarding the different sounds of water, but she realised soon that she would never be able to merge the two: if one could hear the gentle tumble of calm water, or water at a distance, one couldn't possibly hear or feel the inexorable crash and thunder of breaking waves. The two kinds of natural music did not touch at any point. As the afternoon wore away, Hermione turned her mind more and more toward the other sounds and ideas she had absorbed that day: the grinding, low metronome of the stones; the muted, velvet cushion of the earth around them. She discovered that, when she tried to approximate her impression into a bass line, it neatly underlay the tender glissandos representing water that she strummed out with her flexible plectrum.

Sometime after the windows in the room had grown dark with nightfall, Snape returned and asked to hear what she had worked on. Tentatively, but with growing confidence, Hermione played her rudimentary composition. It needed further development, she knew, but she had arranged what she thought were a pleasing chord progression and the skeleton of a melody. She was not, therefore, prepared for the frown that emerged on Snape's face as she played, nor for the expression of distaste he finally wore when she finished.

'You don't look pleased,' she said slowly, hiding her apprehension. She had always quailed inside at the prospect of criticism from her professor; none of the other teachers had affected her in such a way (and, honesty compelled her to admit, she had been quite impertinent to a few of them). But Snape's displeasure...well, that was another matter. He had a way of undermining confidence that attacked her greatest, and most carefully concealed, insecurity: that she wasn't really as clever or talented as she hoped. It had occurred to her once, while she was watching Harry and Ron slog through homework, that there seemed to be four kinds of students in the world: the lazy clever; the hard-working clever; the hard-working dim; and the lazy dim. Most of the teachers in the school had appreciated that Hermione was both hard-working and clever; Snape alone had seemed to prefer those students who performed well without seeming to have to do any work at all. Hermione had secretly longed to be such a student and had wondered whether it was possible for her to get excellent marks without revising so much, but to behave in this way was not in her nature. Her fear of failure was so great that she was never able to allow herself to choose a path that might lead thither; and besides, she enjoyed studying.

'I thought,' Snape said at length, after watching her ruminate, 'that you would utilise what you learned this morning.'

'I thought I did,' Hermione retorted. Briefly, she explained the ways in which she had tried to evoke what Snape had taught her to listen for during their ramble across the hills and cliffs.

He responded coldly, 'You haven't even begun to approach the majesty of natural music.' It was plain from his tone that he felt she was wasting his time.

Hurt, she said irritably, 'What sort of thing did you think I was going to produce? I'm a human being. There are more tunes than the grand and melancholy ones.' With a sigh, she replaced the plectrum in the bowl and the guitar on its stand. 'Should we make dinner?' she asked flatly.

Wordlessly, Snape stood and left the room. Hermione followed him sullenly through the cottage to the kitchen where they prepared salmon and asparagus in bitter silence. Snape poured two glasses of white wine and, as they ate, Hermione drank and worried over what she had said to her former professor. She hadn't been, she decided, perfectly respectful of his difference of opinion. Finally, she cleared her throat and said, 'Perhaps I should apologise for my attitude earlier.'

It was her bad fortune that Snape chose to state, at exactly the same moment, 'Your problem has always been that you refuse to admit you're anything less than perfect.'

All words of contrition died in her throat; she stared at Snape in open-mouthed outrage. He, in his turn, returned her look with one of startlement. Hermione snapped her jaw closed and stood, determined that no word of peace-making would ever cross her tongue around Snape again. He had been a bastard at Hogwarts, and he was still a bastard now; no silk purse, she thought angrily, was ever going to be made out of *this* sow's ear. Deliberately, she picked up their empty plates and took them to the sink. She turned back to the table to collect the glasses, only to find that Snape had recovered his equilibrium and was filling them with more wine. He was even, to her complete discomposure, laughing slightly to himself.

She lost all patience. 'What it is you want from me?' she snapped caustically. 'You went to a lot of trouble this morning to teach me some beautiful things...and I appreciate that enormously...but I wish you'd bothered to say you were going to be testing me on them. If there's a right answer and a wrong answer, why don't you go ahead and tell me the right one, so that we can cease the charade that either of us cares what the other one thinks?'

Snape appeared to consider this outburst for some time, almost as though he had heard it as a reasonable request rather than an attack. At last, he gathered the two wine glasses together and rose from his chair. 'All right,' he said calmly. 'I'll show you what I think the right answer is.'

Hermione trailed after him to the music room, puzzlement working its way through her anger. This was not Snape, or at least, not the Snape she knew. The Snape she knew didn't respond to rudeness with calm, to challenge with empathy. He humiliated the offender in scathing *ad hominem* fashion or executed a creatively vindictive punishment. Was this the new prelude to such treatment? Had he somehow learned to disguise the satisfaction he took in being nasty? She entered the music room apprehensively in his wake, fully prepared to absorb the impact of any emergent wrath.

No sign of anger appeared as he passed her a glass and settled himself onto the stool Hermione had occupied that afternoon. She perched gingerly on the edge of the table alongside where he sat and waited while he picked up the guitar, slid one hand lovingly over the hip-like curve of the body, and fiddled briefly with the tuning pegs. She wrenched her eyes away from his fingers when he raised his head and said, quite neutrally, 'The role of the bard is not to achieve perfection, as we are not professional musicians. We entertain; we evoke and respond to emotions in our listeners. This morning, I tried to show you the difference between earth and water: although they are both more substantial and profound than fire and air, water is tenor and melodious, while earth is a rhythmic baritone. The sound of water, whatever its form, is light and clear. The sound of the earth is heavy and opaque. Do you agree with me on those points?'

Hermione nodded.

Snape went on: 'In the visual arts, that contrast...between light and shade, surface and depth...is called *chiaroscuro*. What I was hoping you would produce was a tapestry of musical *chiaroscuro*, a mix of the delicate and the heavy. Something,' he added, 'perhaps like this.'

His nimble fingers picked out a melody...*her* melody, she realised...as they danced over the strings. The notes tripped and flowed over one another; he was tapping on and pulling off grace notes; the timbre of her tune became more full, yet at the same time more delicate, as he continued to play with it. Then, suddenly, his hands dropped an octave, and he began to pound the strings heavily, turning her dainty melody into something altogether deeper, harsher, and more forceful. The overtones of his graceful beginning echoed in a kind of sympathetic suggestion throughout the heavy bass attack; eventually, he was able to merge the two, so that a fragile, treble version of her song overhung, like a spider's web, the darker, more powerful tune beneath.

Emotion built inside Hermione as she listened, but what exactly it was, she could not immediately identify. Her chest seemed to swell; things waiting to be said and done hovered on the edge of her mind. She wanted to touch Snape, to speak to him, to become somehow part of and intimately connected to what he was doing. For a single, mad instant, she wanted to be Snape. It was only when he stopped playing and regarded her expectantly that she understood what she was feeling.

'I couldn't have done that,' she said in a low voice.

Snape's eyes moved over her slowly, as if this remark had sparked some new thought. 'Do not underestimate yourself,' he responded almost gently.

'I'm not,' she insisted, growing more heated. 'I could not have done that...I couldn't have composed it. Not because I'm underestimating myself,' she went on sharply, 'but for the same reason I couldn't, for example, have written Shakespeare's plays...because I'm not Shakespeare. *I'm not you.*' Angry at Snape and disappointed in herself, Hermione fought back the urge to cry.

Snape quoted, "'Each is able only to compose that to which the Muse has stirred him, this man dithyrambs, another laudatory odes, another dance-songs, another epic or else iambic verse; but each is at fault in any other kind. For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learnt by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all.'" He said it so quietly and sympathetically that Hermione again wanted to touch him. Instead, she let her fury blossom.

'I bet that delights you, doesn't it?' she said bitterly. Gathering herself with dignity, she reached for the doorknob, said 'Fuck you, Snape,' and left the room.

III.

Over the following two weeks, Hermione kept her resentment quiet as she followed Snape's ad-hoc curriculum. They spent their mornings traipsing over the North Pembrokeshire countryside, seeking out various natural features as sources of inspiration. The area abounded with isolated beaches, sheer cliffs, medieval ruins, and fascinating wildlife. Snape instructed Hermione to sit amongst the moss-covered stones of a sixth-century chapel; he covered her eyes while she listened to the calls of falcons and choughs; he directed her to squelch barefoot through chilly, wet sand and crawl into dripping hollows of overgrown foliage. After each lesson, Snape left her alone in his music room to recreate the new moods and sounds she had experienced.

This routine Hermione had expected; what she had not been prepared for was the evening 'entertainment' Snape had promised. They walked to Porth Gain, a tiny harbour town on the northern coast of the peninsula; they walked to Solva, a tiny harbour town in the south. And there, they went to pubs. The Welsh were a musical people; not a night went by when there was not, somewhere in the vicinity of Ty Gwennol, a live performance of some sort. Folk bands, string quartets, open mic nights...Snape took her to them all, and people wherever they went seemed to know Snape. In every pub, he was greeted by name, not just by the bar staff, but by the patrons, who enquired after his health and gossiped with him about the local community. Never gregarious, Snape utterly failed to meet their conversational expectations, but in spite of this, his neighbours appeared to respect him...and, to Hermione's eternal wonderment, even like him. They also evidently enjoyed their access to his musical talent: at every performance she attended with him, he was asked to sing or play, and although he acquiesced rarely, when he did agree, he was magical. The audience...including Hermione...listened rapt, moved, and erupted in thunderous applause when he finished. Appreciation for Snape's talent was so marked, in fact, that, one evening over dinner, Hermione emerged from her impersonal shell to ask him about it.

'Let's talk about modes,' he said in response, picking up his bottle of beer and going into the music room. He pulled out a chair for her at the small desk in the corner and sat down next to her. After a minute's rummage in a drawer, he extracted a piece of manuscript parchment and a quill. 'As you know, modes are diatonic scales. How

many modes would you traditionally find in a given key?"

'Seven,' Hermione answered promptly, having learned this in her second year as a novice.

Snape nodded and listed them: 'Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, and Aeolian. You also will have learned,' he added, sneering slightly, presumably at her regurgitation of knowledge, 'that ancient musicians associated each mode with certain emotions and used them in specific ways to evoke desired reactions in their listeners.'

'I did learn that, yes,' she sneered back.

'Draw the appropriate conclusion, then,' he fired at her.

'You're popular at pub music nights because... you make sure to play in modes that evoke appreciation?' she asked doubtfully.

Snape rolled his eyes and took a deep swallow of beer. 'Drink,' he said, pointing at Hermione's own bottle, 'and listen.' He pushed the blank manuscript parchment away and leaned back in his chair to lift the trumpet from its hook on the wall.

'First, the Ionian...that is to say, the major scale.' He put the trumpet's mouthpiece to his lips and played 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.'

Hermione grinned but shook her head. 'Nothing.'

'Good,' Snape said. 'You're supposed to feel nothing.' He fluttered the valves and raised the instrument again. 'Now...Dorian.'

What he played this time was something Hermione didn't recognise, a sweeping, expansive tune that resolved satisfactorily but without a sense of finality. 'Mmm,' she commented.

'Well, yes,' Snape said in response, looking as if he was trying not to smile. 'I expected "mmm."' Then he blew through the horn a tune of such melancholy sadness that Hermione, with two pints of beer inside of her, was moved beyond words. Snape paused for a moment to eye the expression on her face and changed his song mid-phrase to something Hermione found vastly more cheerful.

'Now tell me what you heard,' Snape demanded once he had finished and hung the trumpet back on the wall.

Her reliable brain did not fail her this time; Hermione answered, 'You played the same tune three times...well,' she amended, 'not the same tune, but the same intervals between notes. Each time, you started it on a different pitch, meaning you played three different modes: Dorian first, which made me feel calm; then Aeolian, the traditional minor key, which made me sad; finally, Phrygian, which was more upbeat and made me feel enthusiastic.'

'Well done,' Snape said, smiling thinly.

'I'm not a total fool,' Hermione retorted. 'That doesn't explain why people react so strongly in the pub.' She downed the rest of her beer in one.

The smile now turned into a smirk; Snape slid his wand deftly from his pocket and began to twirl it.

Hermione gasped. 'You...you use a spell on them!' Her eyes widened in appalled admiration.

'There are spells,' Snape said didactically, 'that enhance the effect music has on its audience. They work particularly well with modes, as listeners are already disposed to react emotionally to those combinations of pitches and intervals. The one I use is a simple, non-verbal charm...no wand movement, so very discreet...that more or less doubles the intensity of the mode in question. It only works on people; there are others, which I may one day teach you, that work on animals, and still others for inanimate objects.'

'I haven't seen these in books,' Hermione objected. 'Are they safe?'

'Perfectly. They're in books, just not in books you've seen. Surely you don't think you've absorbed, in eight short years, the entire corpus of musical literature?'

Hermione shrugged off Snape's magisterial tone and demanded, 'Teach me the one you've been using. You've used it *or me*, so it's only fair that I know it.'

'You have your wand on you?' he confirmed, and she knew that he had always intended to teach it to her...he had just been waiting for her to figure it out first. 'It's a non-verbal incantation, as I said, but you'll need some words to direct your intention.'

'Yes, yes, I get it,' said Hermione impatiently. 'What are they?'

'*Cedite arbitrium*,' Snape replied.

'*Cedite arbitrium*,' she repeated, working through the Latin in her head. 'Wait a moment,' she said slowly, looking up at him shrewdly. "'Yield your judgment'"?

He quirked one eyebrow. 'It only works while the music is playing,' he said casually.

'You see nothing wrong,' she said sardonically, 'with asking people to give up their faculty for reason so that you can get a bit of extra applause.' The two pints of beer gave her brain a nudge; fighting to hide her sudden smugness, she took the guitar from its stand and gave it a quick tune.

'You're going to try it on me now, I suppose?' Snape asked, his tone bored.

'Oh, yes,' she affirmed, nodding. Making deliberate eye contact, she cast the non-verbal incantation and placed her fingers on the strings. Then she said conversationally, 'I thought I would mention before I start playing that when you listed the modes earlier, you forgot one.'

His sallow face grew slightly apprehensive, but he said only, 'Did I?'

'You did,' she said. 'You left out the Locrian mode...according to convention, a theoretical mode only, never meant to be used. I presume you know why?'

He stared at her for a long moment before responding. 'The Locrian mode is dissonant and therefore creates a heightened sense of tension. Because its tonic note is diminished, it cannot achieve resolution on its own. It was never used in monophonic or polyphonic medieval music because...' He paused and looked away from her gloating countenance. 'Because it was believed to evoke sexual desire.'

Watching him from beneath lowered lashes, Hermione began to play. The song was one she had written during a particularly dull winter in the last year of her novitiate. She had learned about the properties of the Locrian mode, been fascinated by them, and decided to compose in it just to see what all the fuss was about. She loved the song; it was one of her favourite compositions. But she had never played it for anyone else, knowing that the other bards would recognise it for what it was, and so never had the opportunity to observe its effects on anyone.

Snape did not disappoint her curiosity; as she played, he fidgeted, unable to sit still, and after the first few bars, refused to meet her eyes. Hermione grew warm with excitement, thrilled by the power she appeared to be exerting over him and simultaneously filled with the guilty pleasure of it. When she stopped at last, she was flushed, her brown eyes glittering.

'Are you satisfied?' Snape asked harshly, favouring her with a malevolent glare.

'Mostly,' she said, smiling. 'Are you?'

His expression changed to match her smugness. 'Oh, indeed,' he replied. 'You see, what I failed to tell you was that the spell you used is designed to affect everyone within auditory range of the music...including the caster.' He stood and smoothed his robes. 'What you pay out, you always get back, Miss Granger. Sleep well,' he added with malicious glee.

Always the dramatic exit, she thought when he had gone, and replaced the guitar on its stand before waving her wand to extinguish the lamps. Then, there in the dark, she paused, arrested by an image that flashed unexpectedly behind her eyes: Snape, cradling the guitar, stroking the curve of the smooth, wooden body as if it were a woman's hip. She touched her own hip involuntarily, wondering what his hands would feel like on her skin, and was instantly and without warning flooded with a tide of hot, urgent need.

Due

Chapter 2 of 2

Owain, the head of the Order of Bards, sends Hermione to Wales to gain experience at the feet of a master. There, she discovers that contrasts can be powerful inspiration. Written for tsukisei in the Winter 2008 SS/HG Gift Exchange.

IV.

A veil of silence fell between them after Hermione's attempt to discompose Snape. She couldn't decide whether he was keeping quiet out of awkwardness or irritation; certainly on her part it was a bit of both. The lack of communication in the following days was comfortable at first; Hermione was glad Snape seemed to have no desire to comment on or analyse her actions. Eventually, however, she began to feel lonely, and it was this unwanted sense of solitude that finally drove her to ask a question at breakfast one morning.

'What's the plan for today?' she enquired as she buttered a piece of toast.

Snape looked up from his plate, mildly surprised at her attempt to start a conversation, but he answered readily enough. 'We're going to Ramsey Island,' he said. 'It's situated just off the end of the peninsula beyond St Justinian.'

'Oh... what's there?' she said, conscious of what a strain it was to keep talking after so many days of avoiding it.

Snape's eyes narrowed. 'You'll see. Finish your toast.'

After the meal, they walked to the harbour in St Justinian and boarded a boat at the dock of the Lifeboat Station there. Ramsey Island, Hermione read from a leaflet as they crossed St Brides Bay, was a bird sanctuary as well as the home of many other species of wildlife, including red deer and grey seals. She watched with anticipation as the boat approached the island and gasped with delight when she saw, as the boat docked in a small cove, the dog-like head of a grey seal emerge from the calm water to observe the passengers disembarking.

Snape's lips quirked when he heard her exclamation, but he said nothing, leading her in silence to the cliffs above the dock where the flat plain of the island stretched in front of them, punctuated by the looming bulk of two rocky carns. When Hermione turned round to look back at the mainland, she was surprised at how close it seemed: she could see the dark shape of Carn Penberri, the outcrop that guarded Snape's cottage, in the distance, and she was certain that when they climbed further up the island, they would be able to see the spires of St David's Cathedral reaching skyward from the vale of the river Alun.

Fancying she could also make out the vague grey shape of Ireland to the west, she followed Snape across the plain along a well-worn path that was dotted, most prosaically, with mounds of sheep manure. When they reached the opposite side of the island...a walk of no more than ten minutes...they trudged up the side of Carn Lundain, the smaller of the two outcrops. None of the other tourists wandering the island had ventured up the rocks, so Hermione and Snape were quite alone at the top of the hill.

Taking advantage of their isolation, Snape taught her a new incantation that, when applied to music, would call animals to her while she played. She knew the legend of Orpheus, of course, having studied it in her early days at the conclave, and she was delighted to discover that what she had thought pure myth was really possible. Not having brought an instrument with her, Hermione tested the spell by singing. Her pure alto sounded across the cliff, snatched from her lips by the wind and carried all the way down the rocks to the sea. After a minute or two, beetles started to crawl from beneath the heather, and butterflies arrived to rest delicately on the purple flowers. Glowing with her accomplishment, Hermione grinned at Snape while she sang, and he, to her complete astonishment, added his own voice to the song, a rough baritone that seemed to resonate in the stones beneath her feet. This extra depth appeared to strengthen the spell; not long after Snape joined in, birds began to land around them, puffins and falcons, choughs and swallows. They sat solemnly on the ground as if listening attentively, disinclined to eat the insects and tiny mice that clustered around them. Hermione marvelled that her music and her magic had the power to make these animals so disregard their nature and instincts.

When the song finished, the animals dispersed, like an audience filing from the stalls after a performance, and Hermione and Snape were left alone atop the carn once again.

'That was incredible,' breathed Hermione, dazed.

His face inscrutable, Snape nodded his agreement. Then he said, 'Would you like to see the seals now?'

'Oh, yes,' she affirmed, glancing involuntarily at the sea below. 'Where are they?'

'Further along the cliffs,' Snape answered.

They descended the outcrop to the plain and made their way along the western cliffs to an overhang where, Hermione finally noticed, most of the other visitors to the island had gathered. Snape seemed uncomfortable standing so near them, regarding the tourists with barely moderated suspicion, but he waited patiently as Hermione leaned out over the edge to gaze fixedly on the rocky beach far below where a number of grey seals and their tiny white pups lounged in the weak sunshine. She looked and looked, unable to get her fill of the fascinating creatures, and stood there so long that the other tourists began to drift away in groups of two or three.

'Can't we get any closer?' she asked, turning to Snape at last.

'It would only disturb them,' he said, joining her at the cliffs' edge. 'But there is a way to get their attention.'

Exhibiting a great deal of uncharacteristic patience, Snape showed Hermione how to throw her voice to the bottom of the cliff and speak to the seals, who turned their heads interestedly to and fro, searching for the source of the sounds. One or two even emerged from the water, flopping in ungainly undulations over the rocks to join their companions. With their perked heads and whiskered noses, they looked so like roly-poly dogs that Hermione began to fall in love and vowed to herself that she would immediately look into joining or supporting any organisations whose purpose was the protection of grey seals.

The sun had passed its zenith by the time Snape finally drew her away from the overhang and insisted they climb the other outcrop, Carn Ysgubor, before catching their boat back to the mainland. She went reluctantly, turning back often for a glimpse of the seals' beach until it was completely out of sight. This ascent was much steeper than what she had become used to, and she found herself growing breathless as they manoeuvred their way up the staircase of shale and boulders. Periodically, they reached good stopping places, small plateaux of heather and long grasses where Hermione could stand still and heave great gulps of air, and Snape could do the same whilst pretending to tap his feet impatiently.

One such plateau was a small area of spongy grass that looked out to the sea rather than over the plain of the island; Hermione leaned carefully over the drop-off and saw the water directly below, crashing against the cliff in a declivity that looked as if it had been gouged out of the earth eons ago by a giant hand. In the westerling sunlight, the rock of the cliff face seemed to shade from a deep purple-black slate at the top to a burnished copper colour closer to the water.

'Look at how lovely this view is,' urged Hermione, and she backed away from the edge, gesturing for Snape to take her place.

He stepped forward and crouched down, peering over the side of the precipice to regard the sun glinting off the rocks. 'Yes, it is very beautiful,' he agreed.

And, rising to a standing position, he stumbled against the gusting wind.

In less than the time it took her heart to stutter a horrified beat, Hermione's brain raced through the possible outcomes of Snape's stumble: he would fall to the water eighty feet below, he would break every bone in his body, he would freeze, he would drown... And so she was already reaching for her wand before he even attempted to catch himself; through the deafening screams inside her head, the intention of her unarticulated *Levicorpus* shot through the air with the force of divine fiat. The spell caught him before he plummeted out of sight, hoisting him back up to eye level by his ankle. He hung there for less than a second; then Hermione, mindful of his dignity even in her panic, whispered, '*Mobilicorpus*,' and his body drifted gently to solid earth at the direction of her wand.

She stood in helpless indecision for a moment as he lay there, shivering in relief. Should she go to him? Should she be worried that any of the Muggles on the island had seen what she'd done? Then Snape let out a shaky sigh and put his hands over his pale face, and she moved involuntarily to his side and knelt on the spongy turf.

'That was a very near miss,' she said quietly. Taking advantage of his momentarily obstructed vision, she placed her palm on his chest. She could feel the ribs beneath her hand vibrating against the rapid beating of his heart.

'I know,' he murmured. 'Thank you.' Firmly, but without offence, he pushed her hand away and sat up.

Surprised, she leaned back onto the balls of her feet, her pity and relief morphing into confused suspicion. Snape didn't thank people. He certainly didn't react so calmly to invasions of his personal space. She was not going to comment, though; at least, not at the moment.

When he felt steady enough, he got to his feet and gestured up the hillside. 'Shall we go on?' he asked. His voice was almost... friendly.

Hermione nodded, and they resumed their climb.

Nothing further ensued on Ramsey Island...at least, nothing unusual; and Hermione found herself extraordinarily tired as they rode the boat back to the mainland and walked along the narrow, winding roads into St Davids. She nearly groaned aloud when Snape made the turning onto the north road; it was two more miles to Ty Gwennol, and she wasn't certain she had the energy to walk. The obvious thing to do would be to Apparate, but the city centre was filled with people in the fading afternoon, gathered around the market cross or strolling down the pavements, and there was nowhere they could depart from without being seen.

Then Snape, whose slow step and hunched shoulders gave her cause to believe that he, too, was a bit weary, turned in to the Farmers' Arms and asked, rather curtly, what she wanted to drink. She waited with him at the bar until they had been supplied with two pints of Welsh ale, then led the way into the beer garden where she sank gratefully onto a bench and took a long swallow of the cool liquid.

Over the mossy wall of the garden, the spires of the cathedral could be seen, the ancient stones stabbing gracefully at the sky. A sparrow twittered nearby and flew over to sit on the strings of fairy lights that decorated the terrace. Hermione sighed. As much as she and Snape didn't get along, she could easily picture herself in this part of Wales forever, surrounded for all of her long life by the slow, deliberate pace of the sea, hills, and cliffs. A low, charming cottage like Snape's would suit her; if it had a big enough yard, she could host ceilidhs, she thought with a smile. She would make her living teaching music and poetry to children, and she would spend her evenings entertaining the locals in pubs until her reputation for lyricism rivalled Snape's...

'If you would kindly remove yourself from your fantasy,' Snape's voice interrupted acidly, 'we should speak about your assessment.'

'My assessment?' Hermione repeated vaguely, noticing with a start that half of her pint had disappeared.

Snape rolled his eyes. 'I told you many days ago that I would be judging the quality and relevance of the compositions you produced, did I not?'

'Er... yes,' she affirmed.

'For the next three days, then, you will occupy yourself with perfecting one such composition. You've started a number of different projects over the last few weeks. Choose one and be prepared to perform and defend it three days from now.'

'All right,' she agreed. In normal circumstances, being given so little notice of a test would have sent her straight into a panic, but with the better part of a pint inside her tired body, she couldn't manage to drum up even a bleat of anxiety. Instead, she leaned her elbows on the table and let the murmur of conversation wash over her.

'What, no complaint?' Snape mocked. 'How very...'

'Shut up,' Hermione interjected without hostility. 'Do you want another round?'

Smiling...actually full-on, teeth-revealing smiling...Snape nodded. Hermione levered herself up from the bench and weaved her way back inside, wondering what had got into the man and wishing she had had occasion to save his life years ago.

By nine o'clock, the darkness of the night was absolute, and Hermione was feeling no pain. White fairy lights swam before her eyes.

'I don't want to leave,' she complained when Snape jostled her, standing as if preparing to depart from the pub. 'I'm too tired to walk.'

'I'm not at all surprised,' he commented drily and gripped her arm at the elbow to lift her from the bench. She allowed him to move her, leaning heavily against him for support, and went without protest to the gate of the beer garden, through which they emerged into a deserted, pitch-black street.

'I can't walk,' she said again, trying to stand there without swaying. 'You talked to me all evening,' she blurted suddenly, apropos of nothing. 'What did you say?'

Unable to concentrate, she swayed again, and he put his arms round her waist to hold her upright. They had talked and talked, she knew, but now she could remember

none of it. What had torn the veil of silence they had constructed in the previous days? Oh, yes, she had saved him from tumbling over the cliff... She giggled, inordinately amused at the melodrama inherent in such a scene of daring rescue. Only it hadn't been daring, exactly...she had simply flourished her wand, and *voila*, he was safe.

'What's funny?' murmured his deep voice in her ear. In the thick darkness, she was reminded of the night she had arrived at Ty Gwennol, when he had stuck his wand in the small of her back and demanded that she sing. The memory sent her mind careening down a new path.

'Do you know the story of Caedmon?' she asked him.

'No, but please, tell me. The middle of a dirty alleyway is perfect for story-telling,' he said sarcastically.

Ignoring the tone, she narrated, 'Caedmon was a shepherd who worked for the monks at Whitby Abbey. He was thought of as a simpleton who could neither read nor write; his only talent was in herding sheep. One night, while the monks were singing their hymns to the Lord, Caedmon decided to sleep with the animals in the barn; he was sad because he knew no songs. But in his sleep, an angel appeared to him and commanded, "Sing me the story of creation." And without knowing how, and after much protesting, he began to sing a beautiful song. When he awoke in the morning, he remembered the song and went to see the abbot. When the abbot heard Caedmon's hymn of creation, he knelt and praised the Lord for His great gift. Thereafter, Caedmon became a monk, and he used his gift to turn the sacred stories and histories into the most perfect, God-given verse.'

Snape made no response. Hermione was shielded from the night's chill, wrapped up in his arms and grateful not to have to stand on her own feet. She relaxed further against him, almost snuggling, and turned her head to rest her cheek on his shoulder.

And then she felt warm lips against her skin where her neck met her shoulder. Tiny pecks inscribed a circle of heat there as a hand slid up her back and threaded its fingers into the hair at her scalp. Was this Snape still?

The hand tilted her head back and to the side until she was gazing into his face: Snape's face, indeed, slightly lined, serious, intense. He bent toward her until their lips were touching, then he began to kiss her.

Through her drunkenness, Hermione was dimly aware that this behaviour was bizarre, but she could not come up with a good reason why this should be so. After all, was she not talented? Was she not a wonderful story-teller? Was she not attractive? She knew that all of these things were true, and so it was not unheard-of for men to want to kiss her...aha! What was bizarre was *this* man's apparent desire, when hitherto he had given no indication that he was attracted to her, and she had certainly never given him reason to believe she was attracted to him. She *wasn't* attracted to him, in fact, but she let him kiss her, because his mouth was nice. It was more than nice, even...it was delicious and hot and sensitive all at once, and when she stroked his tongue with her own, she felt his anticipatory shudder and the reactive tingle in her own body.

The hand that wasn't directing her head into deeper and deeper incendiary kisses dropped from her waist to her hip and snaked a path under her shirt. When Snape's cold fingers touched her bare skin, Hermione's mind seemed to blaze toward clarity. Why on earth was she allowing this to happen? She should put a stop to it before life at Ty Gwennol became any more awkward than it already was. But the very idea of a Snape who wasn't sniping and backbiting and treating her with contempt was intriguing...

And suddenly Hermione discovered another emotion stronger than loathing and irritation and resentment: curiosity.

Without breaking the kiss, Snape tightened his grip on her and spun, popping them out of the cobbled street behind the Farmers' Arms and directly into her bedroom at the cottage. Then *she* was pushing *him* toward the bed, climbing into a straddling position on his lap when he sat down, opening her mouth against his as if to devour him, running her hands all over his face and head to set off further tingles and quivers of excitement.

His reactions did not disappoint; he was squeezing her, touching her everywhere, his breath coming in deep gasps, his hips jerking up to meet hers as she rocked on his lap; she revelled in the feel of his erection through his trousers. Impatient hands ripped at the zipper of her waterproof and pulled the garment off; she helped him yank her shirt over her head and gasped when his fingers deftly unfastened her bra and tore that from her body as well. He pushed her back into an arch and fastened his lips over her breast, tugging at the nipple and laving it with his tongue until she cried out. Then he moved to the other breast and did the same before shifting his body round so that she lay on the bed with him overtop of her.

There was a protracted moment during which he divested himself of his own jacket and shirt, and finally Hermione felt the warm skin of his chest on her breasts. His back became fertile ground for exploration; she massaged his ribs and slid her palms up the ridge of his spine, earning a low moan and an urgent nip on her jaw.

Somehow, amongst the tangle of limbs, Snape found his wand and got rid of their remaining clothing, at which point he nudged her thigh with his knee, and she opened her legs eagerly. He leaned to one side and dropped his head to her breast once again, sucking and kissing while his fingers sought out her core and found it slick and welcoming. She gasped, arching her hips forward when he twisted two fingers inside of her and skilfully stroked her inner walls. She was whimpering aloud, she knew, a sound that seemed to enflame his passion further; he slithered down her body until he was kneeling between her legs. Then, nestling his head between her thighs, he used his tongue to play a poignant counterpoint to the urgent movements of his fingers.

Hermione didn't want to speak, fearing that it would derail the progression of events, but she really didn't want to wait any longer, so she grasped his shoulders and pulled him up. He followed her direction readily and settled on top of her again, his weight pressing her deliciously into the white duvet. She wrapped her legs round his waist while he braced himself against the mattress, and finally...finally!...he angled his hips so that his cock, burning hot and impossibly hard, hovered at her entrance.

'Yes!' she hissed involuntarily, thrusting upward, and he sank inside her with a groan that managed to express, simultaneously, both satisfaction and further need.

Echoing the sentiment, she thrust again and was rewarded by his sudden and total loss of control. Crushing her mouth with his lips, he buried himself in her body over and over. He panted between kisses, spearing into her heat as she squeezed his thick hardness as tightly as her muscles would allow. Her eyes rolled back in her head as their bodies danced; she was reaching upward as though climbing the cliff at St David's Head, moving faster and pushing harder with every thrust. Wordless cries escaped her mouth to fill the tiny room.

And then she began to convulse in waves of pleasure; Snape's movements became more urgent as he drove like a piston through her orgasm. His cock grew ever more rigid and seemed to swell, spurring Hermione to new heights of ecstasy, until at last he came, shuddering and gasping, into her slow, diminishing spasms.

As Hermione drifted back into her right mind, she began to wonder whether Snape was a cuddle-during-afterglow sort of person. She rather imagined the idea of holding someone tenderly, insensible of the bodily mess that resulted from sex, would not appeal to him...so she was more than a little astonished and pleased that he immediately moved to one side and curled his body around hers, completely ignoring the messiness, and nuzzled into her neck. She stared at the ceiling for a while, her mind curiously empty; when she felt his muscles loosen and relax into slumber, she told herself he was unlikely to move again for a while, and allowed her own eyes to fall shut, exhaustion overtaking her at last.

V.

Hermione awoke early the next morning, aches in her head and liver testifying to her overindulgence the night before. Moving from the bed was agony; she stumbled into the toilet with her eyes half-closed against the intrusive sunlight and drank cupped handfuls of water directly from the tap over the sink. When she returned to the bedroom, she saw that Snape was still sleeping placidly, his pale face for once smooth and relaxed, his dark hair stark against the white pillows.

Tenderness infused her; he was not so dreadful, really.

The sound of tapping at the window drew her attention from Snape. She unfastened the catch to admit a grey barn owl, which offered her a note tied to its leg. Hermione let the bird nibble her fingers for a moment; when it had ruffled itself and flown off once again, she seated herself at the small desk and opened the parchment.

She recognised Owain's handwriting at once:

My dear Hermione, I hope all is well in Wales. You haven't written since you arrived there! But this is understandable, of course...I'm well aware of your thirst for knowledge and magnificent powers of concentration. Severus was a bit doubtful about teaching again, of course, but I think I convinced him it would be a good idea. You are learning a lot and having new experiences, I trust? Do let me know. Your room at the conclave is ready for you if you've found the past few weeks, well, less than suitable. Yours, Owain.

Ha! He had been unsure from the first whether it was a good idea to send her to Snape, and so he had not told her it was Snape she was going to see. Hermione snorted softly, amused by Owain's uncharacteristic cowardice. Perhaps he'd had personal experience of Snape's prickly demeanour.

She reached for a self-inking quill and turned the piece of parchment over.

It was very sneaky of you indeed, Owain, to send me off to my old teacher without giving me any warning! And yet Professor Snape is a good teacher, if perhaps unorthodox.

Pausing, she glanced over at Snape's sleeping form. 'Unorthodox,' indeed.

I think I'm having all of those 'life experiences' you said I needed, but you needn't rely on my word. Prof. Snape will be evaluating one of my compositions in three days' time. I'm sure he'll let you know if it turns out to be inadequate! 'Less than suitable' is a very diplomatic way of suggesting that he and I might not be getting along, and you're not far wrong! We've had a fair few arguments. On the other hand...

Hermione put the pen down again, wondering how to put exactly what she wanted to say. Snape sighed and rolled over in the bed. Her eyes were drawn again to the black hair fanned across the white pillow. Something about the conjunction of light and dark niggled the back of her mind, but she felt too shaky with hangover to examine it deeply at the moment. For now, she simply nodded, accepting the sight as a pleasing one, to which she would, perhaps, return when she figured out at last why it felt so fitting, so perfectly representative.

Turning, she bent over the parchment to finish her letter:

On the other hand, conflict is the spice of life...isn't that what they say? I'd take that over boredom any day. If that's what I have to suffer to learn the best from the best, I'll do it gladly. Thank you for keeping my room ready, but I shouldn't think I'll need it yet. I'm not ready to leave...not by a long shot.

Love,

Hermione.