

# The Long Drive Home

*by Olethros*

SSHG Exchange 2008 submission. A Portkey blunder leaves Severus and Hermione stranded in America, doomed to a cross-country road trip with only each other for company. They're obviously perfect for each other, but can they refrain from killing each other first?

## Stranded

*Chapter 1 of 4*

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Warnings: some naughty language

Summary: Finally putting up my SSHG Exchange 2008 submission! A Portkey blunder leaves Severus and Hermione stranded in America, doomed to a cross-country road trip with only each other for company. They're obviously perfect for each other, but can they refrain from killing each other first?

Original Prompt: I kind of melded two together, though I have relied more much more heavily upon prompt #2.

1) A detailed Romance explaining the evolution of a relationship between SS and HG, starting as friendship and becoming something more. Happy ending please.

2) Anything involving Hermione and Severus being stuck together in a small space for an extended amount of time, forcing them to get to know each other. Any rating.

Disclaimer: Don't own them and never will. So many thanks go to my lovely beta sshg316. \*blows kisses\*

### Chapter One

#### Stranded

*In which Professor Snape and Hermione Granger are stranded in a frightening place, or why Manchester United fans are evil.*

Standing at the mouth of a dark alley in the middle of Muggle London, Severus Snape ardently wished that he was someplace else.

Normally, being a wizard and a rather powerful one at that, he would fulfill his wish at once. However, on this irritatingly sunny afternoon, a more formidable force overcame Snape's ability to Apparate, and his name was Albus Dumbledore.

One week ago, he had sat stiffly in an armchair as the headmaster thrust a bowl filled to the brim with lurid yellow lemon drops under his nose.

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"Ah, thank you so much for dropping by, Severus! You're just the man I was looking for."

The old sot had obviously forgotten that Snape had little choice in the matter. The headmaster's summons had interrupted a promising start to a night of fabulous drunkenness celebrating now that the dunderheads had finally completed their Leaving Feast.

"I am organizing a trip for our most recent class to leave us, and I need you and Minerva to be chaperones."

At least he wasn't speaking in riddles. Not that that made Snape any happier.

"Surely another professor, Albus. Someone with a greater *flair* for dealing with children... with these particular children."

His protests did him no good. Dumbledore proceeded to tell him how every professor was unfortunately out of the country or in the midst of a crucial project or undergoing a week-long surgery in St Mungo's. Except for Minerva, of course, who would have followed Dumbledore on any hair-brained scheme he cooked up. Snape felt irked that the other professors had known about the trip for far longer than he and had clearly failed to warn him to make himself scarce.

After all, who else wanted to be the fool saddled with a gaggle of hormone-crazy teenagers who no longer had to worry about losing points for misbehavior?

It was Snape's worst nightmare. He had thought himself rid of his most annoying students a year ago. But in true dramatic fashion, the Dark Lord had invaded Hogsmeade on Halloween and kicked off eight months of hostilities ending with the death of nearly all those Snape had once called friends. Yet even after the second Great War of their generation, the gears of education kept grinding on. That meant bringing Potter and his surviving classmates back to repeat their seventh year. Fortunately, almost all the children had survived.

And now he found out he was still not free of them. All Snape needed was the Dark Lord to rise from the depths of the North Sea, where the Boy Who Continued to Live had blasted him into a million pieces, and his horror would be complete.

At least the bespectacled pestilence would not be as unbearable as usual. He was so wrapped up in Miss Weasley that Snape doubted either of them would even venture from their lodgings for the entirety of the trip.

And as for the other duo, Weasley and Granger... Well, it was hardly any of his business to keep up with his students' ~~his~~ *former* students' romantic lives. But if there was ever a simmering cauldron guaranteed to explode in the nastiest way possible, those two were it. Almost of its own volition, his right hand came up to touch the mass of ragged scars that criss-crossed his right cheek.

No matter. If any student became truly unbearable, there was always Stupefy.

"Unfortunately, no one will be allowed their wands for the entirety of the trip," Dumbledore stated as if he had read his mind which, Snape decided, he probably had. Then the meaning behind Dumbledore's words sank in.

"What!"

"Our trip destination is in America, California to be exact. I've always wanted to go to a proper Pacific beach."

Filing away the utter dread that the beach inspired for later, Snape focused on the more important issue at hand. "I happen to know there are a great many witches and wizards in America. I know several colleagues at The Salem Institute..."

"Ah, but we're British, Severus. And according to the International Wizarding Code, Section 4 Paragraph 53, magical folk who travel to regions under different ministry jurisdictions are not permitted to use magic while outside their own region."

"They can't have my wand."

"Nor do they need it. There are wards across the entire country that will prevent a wand with a foreign magical signature from functioning while you are within their territory."

"You're making this up."

"I have the code right here, if you would like to see for yourself." Dumbledore's hand emerged from behind his desk, holding a book the size and shape of Hagrid's head. "Apparently each continent's Ministry of Magic forbids magical signatures they do not recognize within their own jurisdiction. The law was passed as a method to ensure peace following the Second Voldemort War. The only way around the provision is to undergo a month-long approval process for a magical visa."

Good grief, they had survived the Dark Lord only to be squashed under bureaucratic thumbs. And Dumbledore had the nerve to call this a holiday?

"Are people so quick to believe that all dangers in the world died with the Dark Lord?" Snape said soberly. "You know as well as I that not all of the Death Eaters were killed in the war."

"And you think they would flee to America? No, Death Eaters would have more pride than that. Not to mention that such activity would have been caught by the Ministry, my boy."

Snape hated being called that.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, using the International Wizarding Code as a headrest. "Stop fretting, Severus. The war is over, and I think it's high time that you had some fun."

Snape groaned and ate a lemon drop.

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Half an hour later, Severus Snape was still standing at the mouth of the dark alley and cursing Hermione Granger under his breath. Everyone else had long since left via Portkeys. Granger was undoubtedly buried in the shelves of Flourish and Blotts and had lost track of time.

For want of something to do, he felt carefully within the many pockets of his Muggle trench coat (he refused to wear clothes that required abandoning his dramatic flair) to ensure that he had not left anything behind. There was nearly \$1,000 of American Muggle money, two pounds of proper English breakfast tea, a small sewing kit and extra buttons, one bottle of what the Muggle chemist swore were the strongest headache pills available, and a crowbar. He had prepared for every possible eventuality.

In other words, Severus Snape was scared shitless.

An entire week in a strange country babysitting former students without magic. His wand hand began to shake.

Snape nearly jumped out of his skin when a group of Muggle teenagers almost plowed into him, whooping and shouting loudly. He snarled after them and glared at the Muggle wristwatch he had just purchased.

*Where is that infernal girl?*

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"I'm... here... Sorry!" Hermione gasped as she ran across the cobblestones, her shopping bag banging against her shins and her rucksack slamming into her back.

Professor Severus Snape was waiting for her at the mouth of a dark alley and barely turned to acknowledge her existence as she huffed and puffed her way like an accordion to his side.

"Sorry, sir," she blabbered. "The line at Flourish and Blotts took longer than I thought, and then a horde of Man U fans nearly ran me over outside the Leaky Cauldron. I barely saved my books and..."

"And we have only thirty seconds before the last Portkey activates. The others have already left for our final destination, so I suggest you cease your infernal chatter before we are left behind."

Hermione gasped once more for air and then clamped her jaw shut. "Yes, sir," she managed to say with minimal lip movement.

Teacher and student walked quickly into the dark alley. At the end was an empty dumpster. An unshaven man in ragged clothes leaned against the dumpster's side, perusing a grimy newspaper.

Snape's eyes went wide. Hermione noticed and opened her mouth. "Sir, is that...?"

Snape pointed his hand at the incredulous beggar, a gesture that was less commanding than he hoped without the threat of a wand. "You! Old man, I demand that you surrender the paper to me at once."

"Here now, chap, I hadn't finished the story on the European Cup..."

"Now!" Snape abandoned gesturing and simply wrenched the paper out of the man's startled hands.

"Wanker," the beggar muttered. Hermione shot him an apologetic look. She thought she saw him slip something underneath his wrinkled jumper.

"Five seconds, Miss Granger!"

She jumped at his harsh voice and turned around so she could lay a hand on the newspaper Snape proffered to her. It was an edition of *The Guardian*, and the headlines proclaimed Manchester United's latest European Cup victory in bold, black letters. The newspaper felt oddly light.

Hermione remembered the beggar tucking something under his clothes. Her eyes went wide. "Fuck," she said.

Snape's eyes went even wider than hers. "Ten points from Gryffindor for cursing in front of a teacher, Miss..."

The rest of his sentence was lost as she felt a jerk behind her navel and the world spun into a jumbled haze of Technicolor.

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"Fuck me," Snape said.

Hermione could think of no response that would not get her into trouble, so she bit her lip and waited.

Snape tore his wand from his sleeve and waved it around wildly, concentrating so hard that his cheeks flushed red. As he had dreaded, not so much as a spark. His wand was useless for anything except poking someone in the eye.

"You're making this up. Fuck!" Snape kicked wildly at a pinecone, which splintered against a nearby tree trunk.

"I would have no reason to lie, sir," Hermione responded, personally impressed at how steady her voice was. She held up their copy of *The Guardian*, now a useless piece of trash. "The sports section is gone; the beggar must have stolen it. So the Portkey was not complete, which explains why we're... not where we're supposed to be."

"*Not where we're supposed to be?* According to you, we are in the middle of a forest in Tennessee, about two thousand miles away from the western coast. Aren't Portkeys transformed from pieces of junk under the assumption that Muggles *won't pick them up*? Especially not beggars who are rabid and... and *literate* Man U fans!"

Snape's voice had gotten higher and higher with every word, and Hermione was growing frightened.

"Sir, it's not as bad as it may seem. We seem to be near the entrance to some park. I'm sure we could find someone and..."

"And tell them what, Miss Granger? That we're foreigners who were accidentally dropped off two thousand miles before our destination and could we please get a ride to California? And, yes, we realize that we have no idea *where* in California we are supposed to be, but doubtless we'll figure it out as we go."

Hermione zeroed in on one word amidst Snape's complaining. "A ride..."

"Bugger the Ministry's laws. We can't Apparate, can't send messages... And I'll be damned if I'm asking everyone I meet whether they know what Floo Powder is. Cornelius Fudge can take his head and stick it up his..."

"Both of us have experience in the Muggle world, Professor. I'm sure we can arrange transportation somehow. I've brought enough money that we could get plane tickets..."

"Absolutely not."

"We would get there in four hou..."

"Have you failed to learn the meaning of the word *ho'* after seven years and eight interminable months in my presence, Miss Granger?"

"Well, I'll be damned if we're walking, so that leaves driving. If we start on our roadtrip now, you'll be free of my presence in just under forty hours."

"And just how do you propose we commence this 'roadtrip,' Miss Granger? Did you happen to pack a spare automobile in that gargantuan rucksack of yours?"

Snape's uncharacteristic display of panicked vulnerability had woken a previously dormant devil in her. And he technically no longer had any power over her. Those were the only reasons Hermione could find to justify what she said next.

"No," she replied. "But is that a crowbar in your pocket, sir, or are you just happy to see me?"

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About two thousand miles east of London, a man dressed in ragged clothes appeared on a beach in Cyprus clutching a wrinkled section of newspaper. Several topless sunbathers screamed as he materialized out of thin air.

"Well," the beggar said to himself, perusing the white sand beaches and sparkling blue water. "This is certainly an improvement."

# Are we there yet?

## Chapter 2 of 4

In which Snape reminisces about his criminal childhood and Hermione makes him several wagers he can't refuse.

### Chapter Two

Are we there yet?

*In which Snape reminisces about his criminal childhood and Hermione makes him several wagers he can't refuse.*

Severus Snape was feeling smug for a few reasons. First, he was sitting in a sinfully comfortable leather seat behind the wheel of a Jaguar XJ8. Second, as a result, he was feeling remarkably more cheerful about the thought of a holiday in America. And finally, he had stunned Hermione Granger the insufferable know-it-all into silence.

It had taken him exactly 59 seconds to select the best car from the nearby lot, trip the lock with his crowbar and cross the necessary wires to start the V8 engine with a massive roar.

Miss Granger's mouth had dropped open. He had smirked and opened the passenger door for her with a gentlemanly bow. Tobias Snape had been a mediocre mill worker at best, but he had excelled at stealing cars when honest wages failed to support his family. That had been one skill that Tobias seemed to have no reservations passing on to his son.

Childhood years of skulking trepidation before the law had all been worth it for the look of shock on Miss Granger's face and the forty minutes of blessed silence that followed.

"Professor?"

He should have known the moment was too perfect to last.

"Professor... where did you learn to hotwire, *drive* a car?"

His comfortable smugness was vanishing as fast as a Hufflepuff at the end of Friday Double Potions. He thought he was driving quite well, considering that he had not touched a car since he was eleven years old. The parking lot would never miss that small section of its wooden fence or that single mailbox.

Snape ignored her for a moment by adjusting the rearview mirror. "Why?" he replied.

"Why... what?"

"Why do you want to *know*, Miss Granger? To know everything, even if it means forcing your incessant questions on everyone you meet until you at last exhaust them?"

"Well, I... I suppose..." The girl seemed extremely discomfited by the thought that he might be asking her an honest question.

"Think carefully, Miss Granger. I want an honest, satisfactory answer to my question. Only then will I consider answering any of yours, which are thrown out with much less care."

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Then she leaned back in her chair and lapsed into silence, just as he had intended.

*Yes, indeed. Much more rewarding to puzzle her than to degrade her.*

It bought him another hour of blessed silence before Miss Granger said, "I'm hungry."

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They found themselves in a Waffle House. According to the map Hermione had found in the Jag's glove compartment, they were on the eastern border of Arkansas.

Hermione had raised an eyebrow when Snape conjured a tea bag from the depths of his coat and made his own cup of tea. At his look, she kept silent and smiled to herself over her cup of black coffee.

She listened to the ambient sounds of laughing diners and the scratching jukebox, watching the steam from her coffee rise in the air.

"Thank you," she said abruptly.

His head lifted from his cup of tea like a swimmer coming up for air. "Whatever for?"

"I can imagine that this isn't your idea of a holiday, being stuck with me," she said wryly. "Thanks for not making things miserable for the both of us."

Snape raised one eyebrow. "I have effectively forbidden you from asking questions, Miss Granger. I would think that to be nothing short of torture."

"Oh, no." Hermione finished her last sip of coffee with a grin. "I think of it rather as just something else I can learn from you."

Snape stared suspiciously.

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It was sweltering inside the Jaguar, and the portions of Hermione's thighs not covered by her skirt were sticking uncomfortably to the expensive leather seats.

"Professor, could you please turn on the air?"

No response. Her question might as well have been a breath of air for all that Snape's expression changed. Fine, if he wanted to ignore her question, she could just deal...

Oh. *No questions.*

"Professor. Turn on the air," she commanded.

The expected retort never came. Instead, Snape blinked slowly, twice. Then he reached between their seats and adjusted the climate control by a few degrees.

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Snape liked consistency and order in his life.

This meant that nearly two hours spent in silence with Hermione Granger was becoming unbearable. Granger was a consistent, known quantity in his life. She talked. She bit her lip. She interrogated people. Incessantly. She was unfailingly brilliant underneath her irritating façade.

"What are you planning to do after Hogwarts, Miss Granger?"

She jerked in her seat and turned to look at him. Her eyes darted around the enclosed interior of the car, apparently confirming that the question had been directed at her.

Snape gave a mental sigh and scratched his scarred cheek with his right hand. "I have invested nearly eight years in your education, not to mention your continued survival, Miss Granger. Yes, I am honestly interested in what you plan to do with your life."

"Oh. Well... I've submitted applications to three different institutions. But I really hope to get the mediwitch apprenticeship at St Mungo's."

"Understandable perhaps, given the amount of training you have already received on the battlefield as a Healer. But it would be a complete waste of your time."

He was half-amused, half-impressed to see her bushy hair literally crackle with her ire. "I beg your pardon, Professor. Some would say there is no greater cause than to commit your career to healing others."

"Some, yes. But what about yourself, Miss Granger?"

"I... of course I would!"

"Was one of the other institutions to receive your attentions the Aurory, perhaps?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you asking questions to which you already know the answer?"

"Merely making an educated guess. After all, you always did like to follow the paths that others laid out for you, Miss Granger. And with Messieurs Potter and Weasley joining Auror training, it seemed unlikely that you would not also apply by default."

"I'll have you know that I considered my options very carefully..."

"Listen carefully to what I'm saying, Miss Granger, because none of your other professors could bear to tell you such unpleasant things. You would perform above average as either a mediwitch or an Auror, but that is as far as you will go. You will be joining well-established institutions, and they do not make a habit of encouraging greatness. You would have no chance at experimentation such as we conducted during the war. You would become a well-trained pair of hands. Nothing more."

There was a significant pause from the girl in the passenger seat.

"It's true," she remarked. "You out of all my professors certainly have no trouble being *unpleasant*."

Snape sighed to himself. If she didn't want to listen, at least he had tried. That was far more than he owed the girl anyway, despite the fact that she had saved his life multiple times during the war. He figured that over seven years of protecting her rather made up for that in full.

"Do you want to hear what my third choice was?" Hermione asked.

He stared levelly at her until she rolled her eyes. "No questions, fine. I'll deduce your answer to be 'yes.' My third application was sent to the Ministry. I proposed the creation of a new office that would act as liaison between the wizarding world and the families of Muggle-borns. Representatives would be dispatched to families when their children receive their Hogwarts letters, to introduce them to the world their children will be entering and answer any questions they may have."

"That is the most ludicrous of all your options so far, Miss Granger. The Ministry will never let this see the light of day. And even if you were able to wheedle your way into getting workers and funding, I guarantee that you will be consigned to the basements ten floors below Arthur Weasley's misguided Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department."

"I would very much like to place a wager on that, Professor."

*That* was certainly unexpected. "You are serious."

"Very much so. I should warn you that I have ample experience bringing people around to my point of view, including two of most stubborn boys that I know."

"Somehow I believe that the Ministry will be more immune to your charms than Potter and Weasley."

At that, she smirked. "I wouldn't count on it. I've received three rejection letters so far, and each one of them has arrived a little more promptly than the one before. If they were truly immune, they wouldn't even bother returning my inquiries, would they?"

Once again, Hermione Granger had managed to surprise him. "What is the wager?" Snape asked. "And think carefully, Miss Granger. I will show no mercy if you lose."

"If, after a year's time, my department is not on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, I will treat you to an obscenely expensive dinner. If I meet the conditions of the wager, you will be the one treating me."

"That's all, a dinner? Surely your career is worth risking more than that."

"I did say an *obscenely* expensive dinner."

"You think that I would demand that of a penniless graduate after the Ministry rejects you?"

"Apparently your age has let you forget the substantial stipend that we both received with our Order of Merlins."

Snape gave her a sidelong glance before making a show of returning his gaze to the road. He might have allowed the corner of his mouth to quirk upwards ever so slightly.

"When you put it like that, Miss Granger, how could I possibly refuse?"

She rewarded him with a dazzling grin, and this time he truly did smile. He was careful, however, to turn his head to one side so that she wouldn't see.

"We'll need to stop somewhere for the evening."

"It's barely after noon."

"I know. I'm just saying that I know exactly where we should go, since you'll be needing quite a bit of money a year from now."

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"This is preposterous, Miss Granger."

"Don't you believe that we should at least get some fun out of all of our troubles?"

"This city looks like Peeves was given free reign with Christmas decorations and a hammer."

"If you could have gone anywhere for this holiday other than where Professor Dumbledore is sending us, where would it be?"

"I fail to see the purpose of..."

"I'm justifying my decision to bring you here."

"We are wasting precious time that we could be spending driving to our destination."

"And we don't even know where that destination is, right? Look, we also need to stop for the night somewhere, and it's either here or some motel in the desert."

"If I could have gone anywhere, I would be in some Italian villa far away from these pesky tourists."

"Well, lack of tourists I can't do, but Italy is easy. Turn right at that fake pirate ship."

The doorman gave an overly formal bow as he opened the massive golden doors of the The Venetian, one of the grandest casinos in Las Vegas.

Hermione was pleased to see Snape pause to behold the soaring arched ceilings and frescos of the lobby. They might not have Charms to help them, but Muggles could still make an impressive Great Hall.

Almost jogging next to Snape to keep up with his long strides, Hermione noticed that they were drawing more than a few curious looks from passersby. She was more annoyed than embarrassed at first, unable to figure out the fascination. It was only after she examined Snape out of the corner of her eye that she realized. Dressed from head to toe in black, as usual, Snape cut an extremely elegant figure. And while there were plenty of unattractive men like him (she had to be honest) in suits and pressed pants accompanied by women less half their age, these women were all dressed to the nines with flawlessly powdered faces.

Wearing a denim skirt and a faded top that had seen better days, Hermione experienced an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. She'd been expecting a casual holiday, after all. There hadn't been anyone she needed to impress.

Her mortification was eased only by the happiness she felt that it was no longer Snape who was the object of cruel curiosity. There were no wizards around to stare unabashedly at the livid scars on his cheek. No one to snicker behind his back about how magically inadequate he must be not to be able to fix his face.

She would gladly take the world's scorn in his stead. Hermione squared her jaw and looked resolutely forward.

"Where precisely are we going, Miss Granger?"

She looked up to meet his eyes. They were humorless and slightly annoyed. At least Snape would never regard her with any prejudices. He would treat her as he always had, from the first day her annoying hand had shot up in his classroom.

"I presume you have some brilliant plan to have me enjoy myself."

Not true, she realized. Though sarcastic as ever, at least he no longer doubted her intelligence. Hermione smiled.

"A chance for you to practice your greatest strength with no consequence more dire than losing all of your money. I hope your subterfuge has not become rusty, Professor."

The Venetian poker room looked like the Gryffindor common room right before exam time. A small horde of people were seated around each table, their concentration and anxiety thick enough to cut with a knife.

There was room for two people only at the \$50-\$100 table. Hermione paled slightly. That was rather more money than she was prepared to risk. She'd always been pants at poker. But Snape was looking at her with a smirk, as if sensing her discomfort. With a curt nod at the hostess, Hermione sat resolutely to the left of the dealer. Snape squeezed in next to her, his black clad legs uncomfortably close to her bare knee.

Hermione rifled through her rucksack, confirming that she had exactly \$1,000 in her possession. Ten rounds at most, if her usual luck held out. She didn't know what possessed her to lay down the entirety of her funds, but the dealer swept it out of sight before she could reconsider.

There, the slight raise of Snape eyebrows, the unthinkable gleam of admiration in his eyes. That was why she'd done it.

Even now, after seven years as his student, eight months working together in Grimmauld Place's basement, and six times directly saving his life, Hermione was still a beggar for his approval. She knew one reason why, and it was etched into his cheek in red, angry scars. The more important reason, however, was that he was the only person in her life who had never expressed any approval. For her, there was no siren song more alluring than an impossible task.

Snape dropped \$1,000 on the table as well. Five cards landed in front of her.

Hermione lifted the corners of her cards carefully. One card away from a flush. She should fold if she was being smart. When Severus Snape and poker were placed side by side in her life, Snape easily had caused much less misery.

She slid the single card forward and tapped for another one. Hermione glanced at the corner of her new card and nearly choked. A few seconds later, every other person at the table had folded.

Snape leaned over to her ear, his breath on her skin making her squirm. "You would do well to demonstrate some subterfuge of your own, Miss Granger."

She rolled her eyes. A brief spell of luck, that was all. Surely it had passed.

The next round, she was small blind and slid the heavy blue chip forward with some resignation. She needn't have worried. Her hand was three of a kind without even needing to change cards. She didn't react this time, merely blinked slowly at her hand. A niggling suspicion was beginning to brew in her mind.

Snape slid a sidelong glance at her face. She looked back serenely. He called her bid. So did the others around the table. A few seconds later, she was gathering a pile of blue chips into her possession. Snape was outright glaring at her.

She won the next two rounds before folding the next four. She was careful then, to play more prudently even as she confirmed her suspicion with each ensuing round. Before she knew it two hours had passed, and she and Snape were the only ones alive at the table. She was up by \$10,000 and Snape by a little more with \$15,000.

The last competitor, a middle-aged man wearing wraparound sunglasses, passed his last chips to Snape with a resigned sigh. "Never seen anything like this. Good luck, you two." He stayed to watch, and he wasn't the only one. No one from the original table had left their seats. If anything, they pressed in even closer, hungry for the next hand. Snape's cloth-clad legs were pressed up fully against hers.

Hermione felt small beads of sweat break out across her forehead as cards landed in front of them like brightly-colored leaves. She glanced at her hand, frowning slightly. She looked up. Snape was studying his cards intently, apparently ignoring her. She knew better. Hermione slowly, obviously, showed her ace and then slid forward the other four cards to be changed. Snape slid forward just one.

He got his card first, and as Hermione was waiting for the dealer to give her four, she nearly jumped out of her seat as Snape's leg twitched against hers. It was discomfiting, this closeness, but even more awkward was how she honestly didn't mind that much. This scene would never have occurred to her in her wildest imaginations. Snape and herself, sitting down at a table as equals, each of them as nervous as the other.

That twitch in his leg, was it a tell?

"All in."

An enormous gasp rose from their observers as Snape pushed the entirety of his small mountain of chips to the center of the table. An audible hush fell across the entire room. Activity at the other tables slowed or stopped altogether as all eyes riveted upon Hermione, waiting for her next move.

She hadn't even had a chance to look at her cards yet. She took a deep breath and lifted the corners slightly. The plastic edges rasped against her thumb as she let them fall again. She looked up, and Snape looked steadily back. What could he possibly have? She had exchanged four cards; he only one.

The corner of his mouth curved upwards in an unmistakable smirk.

"All in," she said loudly.

An all-out roar erupted from the poker room, and suddenly the audience crowding around their table had grown tenfold. Snape shifted in his seat as she pushed her chips into the center. The onlookers starting whooping excitedly, clapping, pointing to the multi-colored mountain of chips, some taking photos with bright flashes.

"Quiet! Quiet!" shouted the dealer. The roar dulled into a low murmur as the audience pressed even closer.

"The gentleman shall show his cards first."

Snape never took his eyes off her as he slid his fingers underneath his cards and turned them over with a flick of his wrist. A synchronized gasp arose from the room. A full house. Only two types of hands could possibly beat it.

"And now the lady shall show hers."

Hermione looked coolly back at Snape. When she felt the insistent pressure on her mind, she was not surprised and chose not to be offended.

*Don't even think about it, Snape, she thought. You had your chance this entire game, and you haven't cheated once yet.*

The pressure withdrew instantly, and Snape dropped his gaze. She couldn't tell if he was surprised, but she definitely caught a shred of grudging admiration before their minds broke the connection. At that point, she no longer cared about the outcome of the game. Monetary consequences could hold no place in her mind with the joy that filled her like a cathedral, knowing that he respected and admired her. Maybe he had even forgiven her.

Hermione flipped over her cards. There was a brief moment of utter silence before the room was consumed with shouting, whooping and cheers.

A four of a kind. In her mind, the cathedral bells began to chime. Just because the money no longer mattered didn't mean that she wouldn't gloat her heart out.

She was being slapped on the back, the dealer was pumping her hand up and down and a loud bell began ringing, reverberating throughout the entire casino, announcing her jackpot. Amidst the chaos, she felt Snape take her hand and enfold it in his.

"Well played, Miss Granger," he said. Their eyes met, and she imagined that he held her hand for a bit longer than was necessary for their firm handshake.

She stood up a little unsteadily, handing a \$1,000 chip to the dealer with a murmur of thanks. He in turn pressed a keycard into her hands. "A complimentary night's stay in one of our Prima suites, madam."

Hermione was jostled from all sides as she attempted to move away from the table. The congratulations and handshakes did not cease. Nor did the catcalls and murmurs of sympathy for Snape. She jumped when she felt a warm hand on the small of her back and Snape said to her, "Come, Miss Granger."

And like a consummate Slytherin, he twisted within the crowd and had freed both of them in seconds. Weaving in and out among the brightly-painted slot machines, Hermione was once again stumbling to keep up with his long strides. This time, however, he slowed their pace when it became clear that they had left the crowd behind.

Hermione cautiously lifted the keycard in her hand. "Um, Professor. We were given a... free night's stay."

His eyebrows raised, and she kicked herself mentally as she felt an inexplicable blush creep into her cheeks. "Well, Miss Granger, I'd say that's the least you could do for a now-penniless gentleman."

The lift was trimmed with gold and mirrors and absurdly small. It was only after the ornate doors closed to the sounds of the still-clanging jackpot bell that Hermione became acutely aware of her situation. She and her former professor were heading up to their hotel room singular in Las Vegas while she grasped their keycard in an increasingly sweaty hand.

*Oh... bloody hell.* Why was the lift so damned small? Her elbow was mere inches from his waist, and she was hyper-conscious of each breath they took in the increasingly warm space. She had been too high-strung to focus on his closeness at the poker table, but here in the golden lift, there was little to occupy her mind other than claustrophobia and Snape.

It reminded of her of when they had worked together for so long in Grimmauld Place that year before the Final Battle. She'd imagined they developed quite a camaraderie... well, before she had torn it all that one day. Her eyes slid once more to Snape's mangled cheek.

To distract herself, she studied him, hunting for signals that he was more uncomfortable than herself. He did look mildly nervous, but Hermione noticed after a few seconds that his anxiety seemed timed to the squeaks and groans of the moving lift. Of course... how often would he have cause to use a Muggle lift? Probably as often as he had to board an airplane.

*How long could a single ride in a lift last?*

She heard Snape clear a dry throat. "So what will it be? Your own library?"

Hermione blinked. "What?"

"You. Spending your newfound riches on enough books to rival the Hogwarts library. Or perhaps on a nice gift for young Mr. Weasley if his pride doesn't get in the way."

"Books aren't the only things I care about," Hermione replied indignantly. "I mean, my Muggle-born initiative could certainly use the funds. And Ron is doing quite nicely now that he has abandoned the Aurory for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. In any case, he's not my concern any longer."

"He isn't, is he?" Snape didn't manage to sound as disinterested as she knew he was trying to be. "Well, there is the obscenely expensive dinner that you will be treating me to in a year's time."

"I wouldn't be too confident, Professor. Besides, considering that I've just robbed you blind, I can make sure it's *al*your money that pays for it no matter the outcome of our deal."

Snape's scathing retort was cut off by the lift doors sliding open with *ading*. The anxiety that had eased during their banter rushed back full force as Hermione beheld the long hallway of rooms.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, there was no long walk. Their room was three doors down from the lift. The lock beeped loudly in the silent hallway as she opened the door to their suite.

The warm light from the hallway revealed a sumptuous room with a sunken living room and dining area, a wall-to-wall window with a view of the Strip, and thank goodness two beds.

Snape paused next to her. Too close. She began breaking out into a sweat again.

"Well," Snape said suddenly. "This has certainly turned out better than any holiday Albus could have planned."

There was a beat of silence. Hermione could almost hear the thoughts in Snape's head come to a screeching halt as he processed what he had just said given the context of the two of them standing in a bedroom together.

His head whipped around to face her. Hermione knew that Harry and Ron would have given their last Knut to see the look of utter embarrassment on Snape's face at that instant. "...that is, Miss Granger, I certainly did not mean to imply anything about you... that would make you uncomfortable, that is..."

"No offense taken, sir," she said very quickly. Hermione wasn't ready to deal with the situation in the first place, and she ~~wasn't~~*certainly* wasn't ready to deal with an apologetic Snape. "I'm going to use the loo." She ducked into the room to their side and almost slammed the door.

Inside, she spent far more time than necessary brushing her teeth, combing her hair and sorting the complimentary bottles of toiletries into alphabetical order. Beyond the door, she could hear muffled sounds of Snape walking around the suite, the gentle creak of a stair as he descended into the living area, the smooth buzz of the television turning on and Snape's murmur of appreciation.

She wasn't ready to go out again yet. So she deliberately unpacked everything in her rucksack and carefully packed them again. She ended up with much more room in her bag. She paused when she was holding the thick wad of her cash winnings. Nearly \$25,000 in all. Enough for full tuition at the university of her choice, or for an admirable library, or several years of rent. Or, she scoffed, for *multiple* obscenely expensive dinners.

The sounds from the other side of the door had ceased, except for muffled noises from the television. The ticking of an ornate clock on the wall over the sink sounded incredibly loud.

Hermione stood, having made her decision. She removed several bills from her stack of cash and opened the door quietly. He should be engrossed in the television and therefore pay little notice to her.

When she had fully stepped back into the suite, she could see that she had been mistaken. Snape was stretched out upon the sofa in the living room, sound asleep and engrossed in nothing at all. The television played on in the background, the flickering images of some evening cooking show dancing across the screen.

She paused for a moment to take in the never-before-seen sight of a sleeping Snape. The lines in his forehead were completely relaxed, and his hands were folded loosely across his fully-clothed chest. It was barely ten o'clock at night, but of course he was exhausted after driving for so many hours. Just about twelve hours, she calculated.

In sleep, he looked well, she would never use the word *gentle* to describe Snape, but he looked... peaceful. The angry mass of scars on his right cheek was the only thing to mar the peaceful image, reminding her of just how much she owed to this man. Hermione swallowed hard and picked up the keycard. Her task would be easier now since he wouldn't even notice she was gone. She opened the door quietly and stepped out into the warm desert night.

## Freak Accidents

### *Chapter 3 of 4*

In which unbelievably coincidental things occur, and Hermione more than repays Snape for taking all his money.

### Chapter 3

#### Freak Accidents

*In which unbelievably coincidental things occur, and Hermione more than repays Snape for taking all his money.*

"Ta-da!"

Snape was annoyed. This state of being was nothing new, but for once it wasn't due to lack of sleep. Indeed, he couldn't remember having a better night's sleep in his life. And he hadn't even made it to the actual bed.

No, he had known it was going to be a bad day the instant he had roused himself from the couch, feeling refreshed and well-rested. His eyes had beheld a beautiful young woman deeply asleep in a nearby bed, a riot of curls covering nearly the entire pillow. His first instinct had been to walk over and tuck the blanket more snugly around her body. He was actually standing over her, his arm outstretched, when his brain caught up to his actions. Feeling as if he'd been hit with a Bludger, he stumbled back and nearly fell against the armoire.

Of course, the noise had woken her. His eyes fixed upon her for a few eternal seconds at the sight of her slow awakening. Her limbs stirred as her cheeks flushed with life.



And then she had opened her eyes and seen him.

The look on her face!

It didn't bear thinking about. He had snapped sharply, perhaps cruelly, at her to get dressed and ready for their drive.

It was better that way, to have her frightened and out of her sight. Better not to look at her for too long and be forced to justify the thoughts prancing merrily through his head.

But Granger being Granger, she didn't stay anxious for long. His plans to duck quickly into the driver's seat of the Jaguar and not look at Granger for the rest of the journey were interrupted as she thrust something large and black right underneath his nose.

"Ta-da! This is for you, Professor."

It was a large and black article of clothing. She held it by the shoulders and the bottom half dropped far past her feet. He picked it up, telling himself he was preventing the cloth from getting dirty.

His fingers nearly let go in surprise as they touched the fabric. It had the texture of cashmere and silk, although it felt sturdier than both. He could tell the garment was a set of robes. More precisely, a set of ridiculously expensive robes.

He forced his voice to remain impassive. "To what do I owe this honor? Surely you have better things to be doing with your winnings than buying me clothes."

She rolled her eyes. "Fear not, Professor, this is more out of penance than generosity. You see, there was this incident in my first year involving your robes..."

"Merlin's balls, that was *you*?"

The chit had the nerve to *laugh* at him. The corners of her pert, serious mouth crinkled in mirth. *Ridiculous, you do not think she looks beautiful* he told himself. *She looks...* Now he really had to force his eyes away. He focused on the fine robes. This was certainly several pay grades above the garment she had scorched many years ago.

He ran his hand over the smooth fabric, admiring the look and feel of the garment. The girl had good taste. He looked up at her. Her eyes were riveted upon him, anxious for his verdict. He cursed silently and lowered his gaze.

There had never been any other choice. He removed his trench coat and settled the robes around his shoulders, hooking the fastenings together. It was even more comfortable than it looked. Unexpectedly, Snape also felt his confidence increase. It had been more taxing than he had expected to dress and live as a Muggle even for a short time. The trench coat had felt like he was donning an ill-fitted costume.

"I thank you, Miss Granger."

The sun was surely less dazzling than her smile.

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It was Hermione's turn to be annoyed. Snape had honestly seemed to like her gift. Why then had he been as silent and aloof as a statue in the hours since they had left Las Vegas? Her few attempts at conversation had been met with a blank stare.

She knew he couldn't be unhappy with the gift. She had seen him mindlessly stroking his collar when he thought she wasn't looking.

It shouldn't have bothered her. A silent, impassive Snape had been normal for all the years she had known him. However, she remembered how he had come alive at the poker table; she remembered him conversing ardently with her and even making jokes. There were hours left in their drive, and she wanted that Snape back.

Besides, she was dying to discuss with him the theories that had been burning in her mind ever since drawing hand after amazing hand at the poker table. She waited until they were driving on a wide two-lane highway that stretched straight for as far as the eye could see.

"Professor, I would like to ask a question."

"Such a surprise," he responded, unmoving.

"I'm asking your permission, sir."

He turned to look at her then, eyebrows raised. Obviously he had not expected her to remember his question ban from yesterday. "Speak," he grunted.

"I was wondering if you knew why all of these coincidences have happened to us over the past twenty-four hours? Last night at the card table..."

He scoffed, still making an admirable effort to concentrate only on the road. "Beginner's luck, Miss Granger."

"I'm not a beginner, not really. I played with friends during my summers, and I even taught Harry and Ron. I can't imagine why I did; I always lost ~~the~~ ways."

"Then your time had come."

"Professor, remember my last hand. I exchanged four cards and came away with a four of a kind. Do you know what those four cards were that I threw away? They were *already* a four of a kind. The dealer handed me another four identical cards, all in a row. What do you think that means?"

"I think it means you are the most foolish player in the history of gambling."

"We started driving from Tennessee in the morning, and we were in Nevada by the evening. Twelve hours of driving. Do you know how far away those states are? It should have taken us more than a day."

"I'm a fast driver."

"The costume shop tailor guessed exactly how tall you were and the correct cut for the robes without me giving any specifications. And you can't say I was requesting a normal order."

"These robes came from a *Muggle costume shop*?"

"Your outrage would be more effective if you weren't so obviously pleased."

"Foolish and impertinent, too. Are you asking if we are performing magic unconsciously?" At her nod, he gave up any pretense of concentrating on the road with a great sigh. "That could be the case. Magic requires intent, and there is certainly enough desire between both of us to reach our destination to magically shorten our journey. And at the *costume shop*, you must have desired to get your money's worth."

"And the poker game, Professor? You must have wanted to win as much as I did."

"I was the better player. Don't take this the wrong way, Miss Granger, but..."

"I suck at poker."

He was definitely stifling a smile. "Your skills leave much to be desired. The outcome that resulted was the one requiring the greatest amount of magic. I believe that the wards in this country preventing our ability to perform spells have resulted in an enormous buildup of magical energy. And it has to release in order to prevent itself from becoming unstable, much like air leaking from an overinflated balloon. There seems to be no pattern to how it releases. I have been wishing that we would happen upon a wizarding community for hours, but it has not happened. I wouldn't be surprised if some freak accident were to occur in the near future."

Hermione looked out the window and went white. "You really have unfortunate timing, sir."

They were driving along the Continental Divide Highway, on a fault line in the earth, and on either side of the two-lane road was a 500-foot drop into nothingness.

Hermione covered her eyes. It was going to be a long drive.

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He needn't have spoken so soon; their freak accident waited until that evening to happen. The sun had set upon a landscape of rain-slicked concrete and sagebrush. They were at a filling station, replenishing the hungry Jaguar's tank, when he heard the sound.

A low, quivering whistle floated through the darkness beyond the brightly lit filling station. Snape stayed perfectly still, betraying no reaction as his heart began to race. He had heard that sound many times before.

Death Eaters used it to locate others at unfamiliar meeting points.

The whistle sounded again. The pump recoiled in his hand as the tank reached capacity. He replaced the pump carefully, checking that Hermione was still in the passenger seat, engrossed in one of her books. All he had to do was get in, lock the doors and then...

A hand landed heavily on the side of the car, blocking his path.

"It's not nice to ignore a person, Snape."

Slowly, maintaining an air of nonchalance, he turned to look into a truly wretched face. The man was dressed in rags, and his face was pockmarked and ravaged with spell damage. Snape drew his brows together in an expression of confusion. "I'm afraid you have the wrong person," he said.

Scar-face laughed with a throat that sounded full of sand. "I don't think so. 'Course, I don't expect you to know me. The Dark Lord never did reveal the full number of his supporters. Quite clever of him. But all of us knew you, the right-hand man, the *traitor*. Isn't this an amazing coincidence, Jim?"

A hand seized his arm and a new voice growled out, "Just look at him flapping around in those robes of his. Still the great black bat, even in the Muggle world. *Thæ*erve of him."

He remained very still, calculating his options. He had fought greater odds than this, against more formidable foes. But never without magic, never with his wand feeling like an impotent deadweight in his robes.

*Bloody hell, why did I wish so hard to encounter other wizards?*

"Let's take a walk, Snape," Jim said. "Very quietly, and maybe the girl won't notice."

His plans for escape ground to a halt. *Hermione*. Still engrossed in that wretched book. Still unaware. Still safe. Snape took a walk.

They walked him out beyond the lights of the filling station, towards the mouth of a dark alley. There a third man waited; he was extremely large and heavyset. *This wasn't going to end well at all*. They stepped into the darkness of the alley.

They pulled his robes half-off his body as they rooted around in the pockets. The packets of tea and headache pills went on the ground. Scar-face sneered at the sewing kit, but tucked it into one of his pockets.

"Not a single penny," Jim hissed in frustration. "Where is all your money?"

*Wouldn't you like to know*. He smirked. "This place doesn't seem the most desirable hideout for the Dark Lord's chosen ones," Snape remarked. "What did you do to get exiled to this shithole?"

"Emergency Portkeys don't leave you with much choice, Snape," said Jim. "But I've got to admit, things were pretty boring before we stumbled across you."

"Shut up," said Scar-face. He had found the crowbar and was turning it over in his hands, testing its weight.

"He's driving an awfully nice car," the hulking third man said.

"Well, bring it here then." Scar-face tossed him the keys he had taken from Snape's pockets.

"I'm surprised you can tell a luxury Muggle vehicle from your own arse," Snape sneered.

Scar-face swung the crowbar. Snape fell to his knees, wheezing through a broken rib.

"I wasn't referring to you," he said when he could speak again, spitting blood from between his teeth.

He heard the third man turn away from the mouth of the alley. Away from Hermione in the vehicle. *Thank Merlin*.

"Still so clever, Snape," said the third man. "No wonder the Dark Lord didn't kill you years ago, when you deserved it." He smashed his fist into Snape's face. He was still holding the keys.

*Well*, Snape thought as he curled into a fetal position and choked back his scream, *I'll have a scar to match my other cheek now. The asymmetry was really becoming bothersome*.

He heard a car door slam from far away. *No, Hermione. Just this once, don't be a Gryffindor*. He heard racing footsteps coming closer. *Stay in the car, please. Please*. He heard a horrified gasp that quickly turned into the sounds of a struggle.

Several pairs of booted feet slammed into his body. Severus felt more of his ribs crack.

"Stop it!"

He looked up and saw Hermione wrapped in a bear hug from behind by the gigantic man. He thought he saw tears winking on her cheeks, but his vision was hazy.

"Not my husband, you bastards!"

Severus froze. So did the other men. His befuddled mind was still processing her last statement when Hermione wrapped her left hand around her right fist and drove her elbow like a sledgehammer into her distracted captor's solar plexus. The man went down, wheezing.

Determined not to be outdone, Severus tried to twist his way out of kicking range, but something seemed to be wrong with his left arm. He barely managed to move an inch. However, Scar-face and Jim chose that moment to abandon him and go after Hermione, who was suddenly the more threatening foe.

Granger was faster, however, and sidestepped them, leaving the two men grasping at thin air. She seized Snape underneath his shoulders and attempted to drag him to his feet. He groaned and lifted by about two inches. Granger made a sound of frustration and tried to lift him again. It felt like an ant attempting to move a mountain.

Severus heard a shout and saw two pairs of arms reaching for Granger. Just as he resigned himself to a certain poor ending, Hermione flung her arms around his neck and drew him close. Her bushy hair filled his mouth, and he nearly choked before an unbelievable pressure suddenly squeezed him from all sides.

Before he could chastise her properly for attempting to Apparate without a wand, the pressure immediately flattened him again. The squeezing sensation hiccupped three more times, like a flagging motor, as they spun through nothingness again and again. Severus felt his ears pop and was certain that his head would split down the middle.

Then they spun fully into existence in a brightly lit area. He felt as if he were flying upwards and was mildly surprised when his body instead slammed down onto hard concrete.

"Let's see them follow us now. That... that was a lot harder than I thought it was... oooh, my head. Did you know you have really nice cheekbones, Professor?"

Hermione Granger slurred her words and suddenly broke into a fit of giggles. She still had her arms around him, and he could feel her shuddering from little waves of energy arcing off her body. Some of them leapt into him, others skittered into the concrete beneath them. One of the energy bolts zapped him in the chest, and he felt his ribs shift as they knit themselves together.

He put her down gently and shed the new robes from his body. Wrapping Hermione in her gift to him, he lifted her in his arms, careful not to touch her skin.

Severus recognized magic "leakage" when he saw it. It was a common side effect when one attempted to perform wandless magic beyond their abilities, but he had never seen it happening so quickly and unchecked. Then again, no one had ever successfully performed multiple Side-Along Apparations without a wand.

Spitting out a few of her curls that had again found their way into his mouth, he got to his feet so fast that his vision swam. Something made a grinding sound in his left forearm, and Severus nearly went to his knees from the pain. He looked around them. The sky was still dark, but there was an enormous source of bright light right in front of him. He saw the neon cross atop a building. The color was wrong, a bright blood red rather than the familiar green, but he stumbled towards it. Hermione moaned in his arms, this time in pain.

He felt a small breeze as the automatic doors whooshed open before him. He staggered into a noisy scene that fell silent as all eyes turned to them.

"Help."

Maybe he unconsciously put a bit of magic into his command. Five figures dressed in pale blue immediately surrounded them. Two pairs of arms relieved him of Granger, and he nearly fell forward as her weight was gone. An arm encased in a blue sleeve was pulling at him, encouraging him to remove his shirt so they could look at his forearm. They said it was broken.

"Her. Take care of her. Her name is Hermione, and she needs a Calming Dr... a sedative immediately or she will die." She would lose her magic, but it was the same thing.

He stumbled towards the figures in blue holding Hermione. It was more essential than life that they take care of her properly. He repeated himself again, dimly aware from the pain in his throat that he was shouting. He felt a faint pinch in his neck, and a wave of lethargy swept through him. As he fell into a pair of waiting arms, he tried to explain that they had the wrong person. She was the one that needed the sedative, not him. Black spots invaded his vision, and a hand placed a clear mask over his face.

"Don't worry, sir," he heard a voice say from far away. "She's in good hands."

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It was white, pure white everywhere. Opening her eyes felt like forcing a rusty gate open. Bits of grime had collected at the corners of her eyes, marring her vision of stark cleanliness. It seemed unnaturally bright in the room.

Despite her lethargy, Hermione remembered everything. And she remembered with acute embarrassment that she had called Snape her husband. Somehow that fact was the most horrifying part of the whole ordeal. As a spy, Snape certainly would have recognized a distraction when he heard one. But she had no explanation for why she had chosen that option rather than faking a seizure or suddenly bursting into song both of which now seemed like much more sane options. She was also certain that she had said something even more embarrassing to him before she had passed out after the multiple Apparations.

Hermione lifted her hands to her face to rub the remnants of sleep from her eyes. She wondered why the room seemed to get brighter as she brought her hands closer to her face. She let her hands fall to her lap and looked at them.

She screamed.

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Severus Snape awoke feeling more relaxed than someone recently beaten and broken had any right to feel. In fact, he couldn't remember feeling this good since he was in his teens, before the whole joining-the-Dark-Lord fiasco. He looked down at his left arm to find it splinted and swathed in bandages.

Right, they had broken his arm. And they'd broken his face, too, which had hardly been necessary. He looked down and was surprised to find his chest free of wrappings. Hadn't they swung a crowbar into his chest?

He took a few breaths, steeling himself for the pain from his broken ribs. He felt nothing.

Snape took a few more breaths and was stunned to realize that not only was he uninjured; the old aches in his chest from ribs that had broken and healed improperly in years past were also gone. He ran his fingers across his thin chest and found not a single familiar dip or imperfection. He realized a split second later that groping himself had required the use of both hands, including the one attached to his broken arm.

Staring at his splinted arm, he tried to move his fingers. They wiggled merrily. A few seconds later, he had removed the splint and bandages. His left forearm was straight and unbroken, without a hint of blood or bruising. Hardly daring to breath, Snape turned his forearm over. The Dark Mark was there, black and undisturbed. He released his breath in a great whoosh. Apparently there were limits to the magic that Granger had unwittingly transferred to him.

He swung his legs across the bed and onto the ground, a fluid, flawless motion without any familiar tightness and soreness in his joints that had plagued him every morning for as long as he could remember. He stripped away the plastic tubes and pads taped to his person before pulling on his clothes and somewhat battered robes that were lying neatly folded on a nearby chair.

Then he walked - no, *glided* - over to the sink built into the right wall. There was a mirror affixed above the counter. It was so small he could only see his head and shoulders.

A face from his dreams looked back at him.

Snape had never been vain. After many years in his body, he recognized a lost cause when he saw one. His hair would always be greasy, his build slight, his teeth discolored and crooked, his nose a cumbersome protrusion. However, in his dreams, he imagined that he didn't look so used, like a pair of shoes broken in too well: scuffed, stained and cracked around the edges.

The face that looked back at him was smooth, with only the faintest of wrinkles around his eyes. His skin was no longer pale as a corpse's. He seemed to glow with a healthy tan that a lifetime in the tropics could not have perfected. His new complexion made his black clothing appear dignified rather than forbidding. His nose, while still as large as ever, was straight and centered upon his face. He ran a finger along the bridge, feeling for breaks that no longer existed. Snape stared at himself for several long moments. Then he took a deep, shaky breath, feeling the cold air shooting straight to his brain.

The world spun. He keeled over, vomiting into a nearby rubbish bin. He remained upon his knees for some time, his hair falling in a cool curtain around his face, waiting for the nausea to return. Nothing happened.

He felt *clean* inside. It was as if something had been festering in his gut for a lifetime, and now it was gone.

Snape accepted all of these miracles with remarkable calm. His mind was otherwise occupied with the mystery of how Granger had performed this marvel upon his person. A chill rose within him as he imagined what her involuntary outpouring of magic had done to her. She had erased nearly twenty years of harsh living from his body. What had she sacrificed to make this possible? What if she looked down at her hands, her young tender hands and saw...

From the room next door, Hermione Granger let out a blood-curdling scream.

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He was out the door and in her room so quickly he might have Apparated. Hermione Granger was in the process of drawing breath for a second scream when her eyes landed upon him. She made an odd choking sound, and her scream died in her throat.

Severus Snape stared at her body. Every bit of her exposed skin - her hands, forearms, face, neck... was *glowing*. Her skin shone like thousands of diamond facets turning and winking in the sunlight. The brightest points of light concentrated in her fingertips and the base of her throat. Unconsciously, Snape felt himself reaching for the heavenly creature, his hand drawn to the brilliant light.

The door slammed open, and a pair of doctors in blue hurried into the room. "Miss! What happened, are you alright?"

Severus drew his hand back as if it had been burnt. Granger stared at him as the men in blue poked and prodded her, checking her readings.

"No sign of trauma and her temperature is normal, but her pulse is still off the charts," one doctor said to his partner. The other nodded back. Both of them seemed unaware that their patient was shimmering like a gigantic Christmas light.

"Miss... Hermione?" asked one of them. "That's what the man who brought you in called you. Do you know your full name, miss?"

Snape learned two things. First, they were unmistakably Muggles, since every wizard in the world recognized Hermione Granger's face. Second, his own appearance had changed so much that the same doctors no longer recognized him.

"Hermione..." Snape said. Her first name sounded awkward on his tongue, but he was not about to enlighten anyone of who she was. They were in enough danger already. If possible, her eyes went ever wider. "Your magic, energy has dislodged from your core and is flowing unchecked from your body. There is no cure for this except bed rest, so you *must* calm down." He affixed her with his best classroom glare.

He realized after a beat that he was attempting to intimidate someone into calming down, and there was something counter-intuitive about that. But Hermione had never been a normal person. He watched her take a deep breath, saw as she flexed and unflexed her fingers. Both of them watched the points of magic in her fingertips slowly fade from bright white to cool blue and then finally to the pale red of healthy, unblemished skin.

The glittering light faded from her face leaving her flushed and shaking. She brought her trembling fingers up to her rosy cheeks, and Snape's breath caught in his throat at her beauty.

Thrusting that thought into the deepest recess of his unconscious mind, Snape cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I trust that she is well enough to leave your care? Our presence is required elsewhere most urgently."

One of the doctors frowned at the man in black. "And just who are you, mister? Only family..."

"Her husband," he replied.

To her credit, Hermione allowed not a flicker of surprise to cross her features, schooling her expression instead into one of gratitude.

"As you can see, she appears none the worse for the wear."

The man scowled. "You'll need to sign in. We couldn't find any records on her."

"I understand," Snape replied smoothly. "We are happy to compensate the hospital for her stay."

"Sir, it's not a question of money. We need to be sure that..." Hermione cleared her throat quietly. Five one hundred dollar bills appeared in her hand. Snape's mouth twitched in a smile. The two doctors exchanged a glance. After a moment, the older one shrugged and cleared his throat. "I'm certain we could work something out."

"Excellent. Now if you would step out of the room with me, gentlemen, I believe that the lady needs her privacy to dress."

Outside in the sterile white hallway, the doctors pocketed the money and shook Snape's hand. They slapped him on the shoulder and congratulated him on landing such a young, misguided bride. Snape watched their retreating backs, his fingers twitching towards his useless wand.

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A/N: Thanks for the reviews and encouragement, everyone! Just one more chapter after this.

# Home

## Chapter 4 of 4

In which they return home.

A/N: In preparation for objections that some of you may have, I wanted to let my readers know that this story operates under the assumption that wandless Apparition is generally considered not possible.

And since it's my last opportunity to do so, I wanted to thank sshg316, my beta extraordinaire for once again making my work much much better.

### Chapter 4

#### Home

*In which they return home.*

Snape was stunned at the steadiness of Hermione's gait. Her fingers barely touched the elbow he held out for her as she walked at his side. She had managed to dress herself, although the buttons of her blouse were off by one. He held her close to him nonetheless, both of them walking straight and tall past many curious glances.

It was a good thing he was so close, for once they passed beyond the hospital parking lot and out of sight, her legs buckled immediately.

He scooped her fully into his arms before she could fall, barely noticing the weight. He was careful not to look at her. The warmth of her in his arms and her pounding heart were distracting enough.

Since his face was turned away, she asked her question to his Adam's apple. "Wow. Did I make you stronger as well?"

"No questions from you, Miss Granger. Remember," he said. *No, you have made me weaker. You have broken me down completely.*

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She had Apparated them to a hospital in the middle of Los Angeles. Therefore, it was a simple matter to check into a nondescript hotel where Snape insisted she would spend many hours resting. She tried to forget her embarrassment at the look on the receptionist's face when Snape had laid her prone form across the front desk and demanded a suite for two.

Her body started shimmering again when he carried her across the threshold and laid her on the bed. He released her as if she was an open flame and was backing out of the bedroom almost before she could speak.

"Wait... please?" she blurted out.

Snape looked downright miserable, but he stopped. Hermione talked fast, ever-conscious of her literally glowing cheeks. "Can you stay with me? You don't have to be right next to me or anything. I just need to hear your voice. With this... this *thing* that's happening to me... I don't want to be alone.

Snape's hands clenched and unclenched. Hermione could see his body fairly leaning towards the door, desperate to escape.

"You are in no further danger, Miss Granger," he said slowly. "In fact, it would be best if you were free from distractions or stimuli of any kind."

"I don't think so," she said, trying her best not to let her distress show. "Oh, how can I explain... Do you remember the time we worked together in Grimmauld Place?"

"The eight longest months of my life? Certainly I remember."

She frowned, and he noticed. Snape rolled his eyes. "I was not referring to yourself, Miss Granger. You were a more than able assistant."

"What about the time when I mixed the Ashwinder eggs, Runespoor scales and loveage together?"

"And blasted not only my best cauldron but also the stone table underneath into dust? Believe me, I have done my best to blot it from my memory."

Hermione grimaced. He had not been able to protect himself from the glittering shrapnel that had flown at his head. She had barely managed to stop him from bleeding to death.

"It was my incompetence that ruined your face."

"As if there was anything to ruin in the first place."

"Don't say that!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't stand how those witches and wizards stared at you over the past year. There were times that I probably could have managed an Unforgivable, watching them sneering and laughing behind your back when all along the fault was mine."

There. That was it. A year's worth of guilt finally laid bare at his unforgiving feet. Somehow, actually saying it out loud made her feel ridiculous. What Snape said next didn't help.

"Miss Granger, I would have gone mad years ago if I hadn't learned to ignore what anyone thought of me. And as I recall, it was your explosive concoction that was the key to destroying Voldemort. You are the reason he is currently in several hundred pieces on the floor of the North Sea. A slightly uglier face is a pittance for me to pay."

He sounded bemused, and that just made her even more upset. "I don't understand you. You should be furious at me and holding a grudge for years. Merlin knows you're good at that. You shouldn't be listening to me going into hysterics over being alone because it feels like that day I blew up Grimmauld Place. Except now it's all in my head all jagged edges and loud noises. Whatever this is that's tearing me apart from inside, I'm scared. And I know it's probably no use telling *you* because you'll just tell me to deal with it. But I could really use some pointless reassurance right now. And and I'm sorry. You didn't sign up to deal with hysterical females, so I'm going to shut up now." With that, she wrapped her arms around her knees and buried her forehead in her hands. She scrunched her eyes tightly closed against the brightness of her glowing skin.

She held her breath, fighting back sobs and dreading his reply. Then she heard a creak as he sat down in the chair about a meter away from the bed.

"Everything will be alright," he reassured pointlessly.

Her sob changed into a laugh as she lifted her head. "Liar," she said. "But thank you. Nothing will ever be the same again. For either you or me. I've seen to that. And even though I'm scared shitless, I'm still glad this happened to me. I was getting tired of feeling guilty every time I looked at you, knowing that of all the people in your life, the

scars that I left were the ones visible. Really, healing you was the very least I could do."

"It is I who am indebted to you, Miss Granger," Snape said somberly. The chair creaked as he shifted into a more comfortable position. "I will stay until you have fallen asleep, but there is no doubt in my mind that you will get through this. Now, have you read Agassiz's most recent theories on moonstones in *Ars Alchemica*?"

She responded enthusiastically, welcoming his attempt at distraction. She wondered how long he could keep up a discussion that was surely elementary to him, all in the name of keeping her mind occupied. But in fact, she fell asleep only thirty minutes later, still exhausted from magic depletion.

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The world was dark outside when she opened her eyes again. She didn't remember what had awoken her. The floor creaked as something shifted its weight near the door.

"Miss Granger."

He was a black shape in the dim doorway.

Hermione lifted herself on her elbows. "Professor, wh-what time is it?"

"I wished to inform you that I am going out and will be back shortly."

Hermione had found her digital watch and peered at its glowing hands. "At two in the morning? Where could you possibly be going?"

"Out," Snape replied curtly. The door whispered closed behind him.

-----  
Los Angeles was nearly as decadent as Vegas, and he had only wandered ten minutes when he saw an appropriate establishment. The red light bathed him in an eerie glow as he pushed his way through the door.

Inside, the room was overly warm and hazy with smoke. Snape made his way through the tables and raucous laughter to the front of the room. The woman behind the bar counter smiled broadly at him. Her lips were the color of a ripe pomegranate. "Good evening, sir. And what brings you here?"

He sat down at the bar with a great sigh. "A woman."

She laughed as she poured him a generous measure of whiskey. "That is rather the point, sir. But somehow I feel you are speaking of the woman that drove you to come here."

He downed the drink in a single gulp and blinked his red eyes. "I don't deserve her."

The woman's red lips smiled as she poured him another. "That's certainly never stopped men before. But are you sure that she thinks the same way as you?"

The second shot went down even more smoothly than the first. He set the empty glass down with a soft laugh. "I was her teacher. Her old, cranky, and despised teacher. And she is... she is going to be the light of the world. The day she knows what she wants, nothing on heaven or earth will be able to stand in her way."

The woman was staring at him when he looked up. Just before the silence became awkward, she smiled thinly. "How different my life might have been if someone had ever said those things to me."

Snape dropped his gaze. He kept his eyes fixated on his glass as she filled it for the third time.

"So how can we serve you tonight?" she asked in a different voice, an edgy and purely professional voice. She had already played her role of putting a new customer at ease, so niceties were no longer necessary.

Snape looked carefully around the room. Many of the women seemed to be occupied at this hour, but there were a few leaning against the walls, ready, winking at him. Blonde, brunette, redhead...

His eyes slid back to the bartender. She looked back, and her smile became a playful smirk. "I can't fault your taste, sir, but I'll cost you a pretty penny," she said.

Snape removed two \$100 bills from his robes. It had been easy enough to take a few from Hermione's rucksack. The woman's eyes widened appreciatively as she reached for the money. She had warm golden-brown eyes. Hermione's eyes.

He held onto the money for a moment longer after she had reached out to take it.

"Just a pint of Guinness for an old, lost wretch," Snape said at last. "Keep the change."

He watched the money disappear into her ample bosom and her lips form a pout. "You're hardly old, sir. That is a very pleasant face you have." He imagined that he saw disappointment in her eyes before she turned away to get his drink.

Snape stumbled back into the hotel less than ten minutes later. He had forgotten how horrific Guinness tasted in America.

He cracked open Hermione's door, telling himself that he was merely checking to see that she was recovering. She had not moved from the position she had fallen asleep in, and her face was invisible beneath the mass of bushy hair spread out over the pillow.

Her skin tone had nearly returned to normal. She would be fine by morning.

He closed the door and went to the sofa in the other room. He stretched out atop the cushions, leaving his clothes on.

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Snape was especially irritable in the morning. As she dug into a croissant he had purchased for her breakfast, he snapped at her for eating too quickly. Then he sat and glared at her until she finally ordered him out.

Hermione wiped her mouth after completing her meal and lounged back against the bed pillows. She felt undeniably better. Her fingertips no longer tingled as if they would catch fire, and her insides had settled enough that she could stand without trembling.

But now she was anxious for a wholly new reason. Snape had fidgeted like a schoolboy over breakfast and had shown neither offence nor protest when she had demanded that he leave.

It was as if he had been trying but unable to say something to her. But she didn't quite believe her own theory. Never in all the years she'd known him did Snape have trouble saying exactly what was on his mind.

His odd behavior, coupled with the fact that only once in a best-forgotten dream had she seen Snape look so healthy and alive, made her extra jumpy.

The phone rang loudly. When her pounding heart had calmed somewhat, she picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hi. Am I speaking to a Miss Her-mee-own Granger?"

She would have been frightened if the mispronunciation was not so great. A telemarketer, perhaps? Was this the newest freak accident to befall them?

"I can take a message for her," she replied.

"Okay, well, tell her that a Mr. Bumbledore or something is here to see her and hey, wait, old man! You can't go up there !" There was a loud thump from the other end as the phone was dropped and the line went dead.

A few seconds passed before she thought to move the phone away from her ear and return it to its cradle. Snape's head swiveled to face her as she walked into his part of the suite. He had been pacing.

"Yes?" he asked testily.

Hermione hesitated. Saying the words out loud would mean that their time was over. They would rejoin their friends and colleagues; they would go back to their roles of former student and hated teacher. Road-trip-Snape: this funny, witty, noble and alright, she would admit it *damn* attractive Snape would no longer be hers alone. She had been the sole witness to a profound change in him, and she was selfish enough to not want to share.

"Professor Dumbledore is here for us, sir."

To a casual observer, Snape had no reaction. But Hermione had watched his face intently for hours over a poker table and thought she knew his tell. His jaw clenched a fraction of an inch, and his knee twitched. He was anxious.

"Hermione," he said, his voice barely audible, "before we go, I wish for you to know that..."

"Good morning, children," said a familiar, kindly voice.

Hermione felt like cursing its owner to deepest pits of hell. She whirled around, and Snape stiffened. Albus Dumbledore looked back, twinkling and looking supremely happy to see them. The silver sequined shirt he was wearing over corduroys certainly added to the twinkle.

Hermione couldn't stop staring. This brought wizards-attempting-to-dress-as-Muggles to a new level of disaster. She had to tamp down her urge to set a lighted match to his shirt and make the flaming image complete.

"Hello, Professor," Hermione replied in a quavering voice that was holding back a hysterical laugh.

Snape scowled. "Damn it, Albus. Could you have knocked first?" He stalked away into the bedroom.

Left alone with the Headmaster, Hermione tried her level best not to look directly at him. "So, er..." she said, "how did you finally find us?"

Dumbledore made himself comfortable on the sofa. "A few minutes ago, the American Ministry informed me that an abnormally large amount of wandless magic had been performed last night. They found it curious since the magic trail clearly indicated multiple Side-Along Apparitions stretching across several of their states. They informed me that such a thing was not possible, so I immediately assumed you and Severus must have been responsible."

Hermione blushed. "Yes, the two of us ran into an...*incident*."

"My apologies for not arriving sooner. We honestly had no idea how to track the two of you when you didn't show up with your Portkey. Yet you look no worse for the wear." Dumbledore chuckled, "And as for Severus, oh my, whatever did you do to him, Miss Granger?"

If possible, she flushed even deeper, relieved that her glowing skin did not return. "Professor, nothing..."

A great crash sounded from the bedroom followed by a muffled curse.

Snape stalked out of the other room, holding Hermione's rucksack by one strap. He tossed it to her, and she barely caught it before it fell to the floor.

"As you can see, old man," said Snape, "she is alive and unspoilt. Now, I believe we are going to rejoin the others? Merlin knows how you've managed without your other chaperone for so long."

If possible, Dumbledore's eyes twinkled more brightly than the sequins on his shirt. "On the contrary. You might be surprised how well-behaved children can be when given full freedom on holiday. Although I suspect they will be even more cheery now that they know the two of you are safe."

Snape scoffed. "That Miss Granger is safe perhaps. As for myself, don't fool yourself, Albus."

"Now," Dumbledore continued, ignoring Snape, "I have two Portkeys waiting downstairs in the form of equestrian magazines. I can assure you that these are in absolutely no danger of discovery. Miss Granger, you may go first. I would like a quick word with Severus."

"Yes sir," she muttered. Hermione paused at the door. "Um, Professor Snape? I just wanted to say, er ..." She looked over at Dumbledore. He seemed fascinated by the ugly hotel wallpaper and was pointedly ignoring her. She shifted her gaze to Snape's dark, unreadable eyes. She continued quietly, "I just wanted to thank you, sir. There's no one else I would have rather gotten lost with."

His jaw clenched and unclenched. Dumbledore nearly had his nose pressed against a spot on the wallpaper, examining it closely.

What could he say? *I'm still lost with you. And I'll never tell, but there is nowhere else I would rather be*No, that would not do at all.

"I did my duty, Miss Granger. Now leave. Join your friends," Snape said.

Her face fell.

"I see. *Sir*," she replied. Hermione fled down the stairs.

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"You handled that rather abysmally."

"Shut it, old man." Snape was still staring at the empty doorway where Hermione had disappeared.

Then he turned to face the Headmaster. "I hijacked a Muggle vehicle, she stole all of my money, I was beaten half to death by former Death Eaters, and then she nearly killed herself by using too much wandless magic. *This* " he gestured to himself, " happened to be a side effect of her foolishness. Absolutely nothing untoward happened between the two of us. Does that satisfy you?"

Dumbledore sighed and stood from the sofa. "I'm afraid the quality of your reports has gone down since the war ended. My only interest was in ensuring that both of you are now safe."

"What about ensuring that Hogwarts' most brilliant pupil wasn't taken advantage of by the greasy black bat of her teacher?"

"Her *former* teacher, Severus."

"You can't be serious. Yet it is irrelevant, as there is nothing between us, nothing at all."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," Dumbledore replied with another twinkle.

*Hamlet. How cheerful.* "There's nothing," Snape said, more quietly. "There can be nothing. She has her whole life ahead of her: a life for the first time free of war or fear. I've proven that I can't escape my past even two thousand miles away. A new face and body are meaningless to offer her in comparison to the danger. I won't hold her back, Albus."

The Headmaster walked toward him slowly. "It is what I would have expected from you, Severus. You always were a martyr. But despite your attempts to repel her, I've noticed that nothing in the world can hold Miss Granger back once she knows what she wants. And when she does," he chuckled, causing Snape to grit his teeth, "it is your honor that I would worry for."

Snape grunted in disbelief.

"However," Albus continued, peering over his spectacles, "if you toy with her in any way, I will have no qualms about feeding you to the Acromantulas in the Forbidden Forest."

That caused him to nearly smile. That was more like the Dumbledore he knew. "I can assure you there is no danger of that, Headmaster. There wouldn't be enough left of me after Hermione had her way."

Albus patted his shoulder a bit too forcefully. "That's my boy."

Snape nearly stumbled forward. "You know I hate it when you call me that. And for Merlin's sake, change your shirt. You look like a constipated pixie."

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*Six months later...*

The knock came upon his door at precisely six o'clock. Severus put down his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. He had never opened it. The front page was all he'd needed to see.

Only six months had passed rather than the year that she had wagered. Ahead of schedule, as expected.

Severus straightened his Muggle tie and opened his front door. A vision from heaven stood before him, framed by the rolling hills of the Tuscan countryside outside.

"Come in, Miss Granger," he said, a few seconds later, when he could breathe again.

She smiled demurely and floated inside, a siren in red silk and white pearls. "Call me Hermione, please," she said as she laid her purse on the hall table. "I won't enjoy this evening at all if you keep reminding me of school robes and Potions dungeons."

"Hermione," he said, savoring every syllable. She began fidgeting with the plunging neckline of her dress. He smiled. "Our obscenely expensive dinner does not begin for several hours. Since you have over-achieved as always and are six months ahead of schedule, I added a pair of tickets to a very grandiose show."

Her eyes widened for a moment. "Wow," she said, sounding for a moment as young as her years. Then she blinked, and the haunting, beautiful siren was back. "I would expect no less. You were always too noble for your own good. Which reminds me that I'm also here to collect something else that is due." She walked resolutely in his direction.

"How is your Muggle-born initiative faring?" His tongue seemed to trip in his mouth as the siren encircled her silk-enclosed arms around his neck.

"Marvelously," she said. "I have a staff of sixteen already, and the Ministry is having an apoplexy. You were remarkably rude to send me off like that during our holiday six months ago."

"I have never claimed to be anything but rude."

"Because of you, I spent a week in mental agony when I should have been tanning on the beach. I notice that you still haven't lost your tan."

"That remains all your handiwork, Hermione. I haven't seen the beach since our holiday."

"You're a fool, Severus. And a damnable tease to make me wait these six months."

"I would have been in the way, Hermione."

"And are things so different now?"

"Well, you have won our wager for one." He took a breath, and the scent of her skin mixed with light floral perfume made his head spin. "And the Hermione Granger of six months ago would never have attacked me in my own home."

Her arms drew him closer until he could feel her heart fluttering like a bird's wing in her chest. The feel of silk against his skin was heavenly. He had no doubt that her skin against his would feel even better.

"Let's just say that at last I know exactly what I want," she said.

"We will be late for the show," he whispered as she placed a light kiss upon the base of his throat. *Ah... definitely better in every way.*

"Bizet can wait. After six months and a long, long drive through a strange country, I've finally arrived home."

As their lips met, tenderly at first, and then hungrily, Snape proceeded to assure her that the feeling was completely mutual.

**The End**

A/N: If you have enjoyed this long drive home as much as Severus and Hermione, please leave a review on your way out. Thank you for reading.