

Some Places Speak Distinctly, or Have Snape, Will Travel

by WonderfulChild

Exiled from the wizarding world, Hermione finds a travel companion and discovers that home can be found in the most unexpected of places. DH compatible, but AU for the epilogue. Written for duniazade the Winter SS/HG Exchange.

Part the First: Hungary

Chapter 1 of 6

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Some Places Speak Distinctly, or Have Snape, Will Travel

Part the First: Hungary

She meets him in Budapest.

Well, not meets him so much as plows into him on the Danube Promenade while running from the Hungarian Aurors. She collides with him bodily, lets out an embarrassing "umph" kind of sound, then proceeds to roll around with him on the pavement, her limbs entangled with his.

Pedestrians out for a stroll stop to watch them. She sees them as a sort of blurry, multicolored background to their absurd attempt to disentangle their limbs; there is whispering and tittering, the click and beeps of mobile phones snapping pictures, and in the far distance, shouting.

"Merlin's bloody beard," he hisses in English, then adds something impatient and sharp in Hungarian. She doesn't understand what he says, but that voice it crawls up her spine and immediately transports her back into her childhood, to a damp dungeon, six years of condescending lectures on Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, shouted insults, threats of detention, and the unsettling realization that there was a teacher she would never be able to impress, no matter how hard she tried.

Hermione goes limp beneath him, shocked out of her panic.

"Professor Snape?" she gasps, even though her mind is rushing to tell her that it just couldn't be. She had seen him die, right there before her eyes, bleeding out on the floor of the Shrieking Shack he can't be here, this can't be happening.

He goes still, absolutely rigid above her at the sound of his name. Hands slap against the pavement on either side of her head, and he pushes himself up to stare down at her. Everything is the same the same limp, greasy hair, the same pale complexion, the same face he always made when he saw her, like he has just eaten a handful of earwax and vomit flavored Bernie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. "Hermione Granger," he says in disgust.

"But I saw you die." It's a pointless thing to say, but she hasn't quite recovered her wits yet, and really, of all the things she expected to happen to her as soon as she turned fugitive, bowling into Severus Snape on a busy promenade was never one of them.

Snape opens his mouth to say something sarcastic and scathing, but from somewhere beyond this purely surreal moment comes shouted commands and the sound of boots pounding on concrete. Snape's head whips around in that direction, but Hermione begins pushing at his chest.

"No. Move. Get off of me." The reasons why she was running so hard so as to plow into a dead man crash over her and stir up a wasp's nest of terror and panic in the pit of her stomach. "I have to go."

Snape doesn't move, only narrows his eyes at her. "What kind of trouble are you tangled up in now?"

"They want to break my wand." She's on the verge of tears, and he is impervious to her attempts to escape his weight. "Please ~~Move~~."

Snape obeys, rolling off of her, and Hermione climbs to her feet, scraping her bare hands on the concrete. She turns to run no time to say anything else, to examine this unexpected meeting, to find out why he's not bits of bone and dust, as much as she'd like to but there's a hand wrapped around her wrist, stopping her.

Not quite processing why she can't seem to run, she whirls on Snape, stares wildly at him as he stands there, gripping her wrist with his long, thin fingers, his expression shuttered.

"What are you doing?" She tries to yank her hand from his grip, but he won't let her go, and she realizes with a feeling like a kick to the chest that he is going to hand her over to the Aurors.

"I must be mad," he says. Suddenly his wand is in his hand, and he's raising it, and Hermione has a moment of sheer terror when she knows, just knows, that he is about to hex her, but then she's being pressed and compacted and folded by the magic of Apparition, and as she pops back into existence in some empty, cold field with Snape's hand still around her wrist, she understands.

He isn't handing her over. He's helping her escape.

Some days take you to places you never expect. Like the time just after she'd started working for the Ministry, when her cousin Elise invited her to tea at her flat in Cambridge, and Hermione somehow ended up standing in a wet and muddy field in Wales, watching Elise and her mates try to shave a sheep. She's had a series of such days since that morning in late September when the Aurors came to break her wand without explanation, and today is another she started this morning in the hostel in Budapest, having bitter coffee and trying to decide where to start looking for a job, and now she is standing in a field in the middle of nowhere with man who should be twelve years dead, trying to process the order he's just given her.

She has no idea why these sorts of days continually surprise her.

"I'm sorry," she says, pushing off the questions about how he was alive and why he is in Hungary for a more pertinent question. "Did you just tell me to break my wand?"

"Did I stutter, Granger?" Snape is eyeing her as if he'd like nothing more than to make her disembowel something nasty without protective gloves. He really does look the same. Perhaps his face is more deeply lined, but replace the long wool coat and red scarf with brewer's robes and a Slytherin-colored scarf, and he could have easily been on his way to teach his next class or to terrify first-year Hufflepuffs in the hallways.

"I am not breaking my wand." She glares at him, just standing there, hands in pockets, greasy hair flapping in the wind, all alive and smug and telling her to break her wand without so much as an explanation. "What kind of idiot do you take me for?"

"I don't think that is a question you want me to answer. Now, stop peppering me with idiotic questions and break your bloody wand."

"No. Why should I?" She has unconsciously sought out her wand in her pocket and clenches it tightly, savoring the pinch of the handle carvings in the palm of her hand. She had taken it from that murderous cow, Bellatrix Lestrange, during the war, and even though she knows there's something a bit twisted about keeping a dead woman's wand as a war trophy, she's not letting it go merely on Snape's say-so.

"Because, you ridiculous girl, it's how they've been tracking you."

"What? But how?"

"With magic, Granger." Snape sighs in exasperation. "For Merlin's sake. Just snap the bloody thing and have done with it. This isn't the time or the place to get into magical theory."

Hermione glances around. The field in which they are standing is bleak and empty; the foliage is yellowed and dead, as are the trees on the periphery. There isn't a sign of human civilization to be seen, and unless someone is hiding in a ditch somewhere, they are completely alone. "It's as good a time as any," she says. "It isn't as if we're holding up a queue."

He gives her his fiercest glare, the one she'd only ever seen directed at Harry and occasionally Neville when he had melted one of his cauldrons all over his worktable. "Only you would want to discuss magical theory in the middle of an empty field in the freezing cold, Granger."

Hermione just tilts her head to the side and gives him her best expectant stare, the one she learned to use on Ron to make him pick up after himself when they lived together. It also worked well on recalcitrant witnesses and the ever-growing generation of younger Weasleys who called her 'Aunt Hermione.'

Apparently, it also works on dead Potions masters.

Snape huffs and looks away. He pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment, mutters something incomprehensible, then dropping his hand, says, "Very well. The short version." He straightens considerably as if he's lecturing in class, somehow managing to loom even though he's several feet away from her. "The Americans have come up with a spell based off Native American tracking magic. The original spell has to be cast in the Cherokee without the even slightest mistake in ritual or pronunciation, but the Americans found a way to manipulate the magic behind the spell and develop it for their own uses, namely using magic cast from a registered wand to track the individual holding the wand."

Hermione stares at him, awed and horrified by that kind of magical technology. "So when I cast a spell, no matter how small, they are able to lock onto me."

"Yes, but it has limits, which is the only reason they haven't followed us here now. The tracking magic can only lead them to the place the spell is cast, but it can't lead them to caster once they've moved on. And of course, if someone else was using your wand, it would lead them to whomever had it in their possession."

"That's clever magic," Hermione admits, already thinking of the myriad of useful ways it could be used to track criminal activity, but also painfully aware of the other ways it could be used, should it find its way into the wrong hands. "It would be quite useful in law enforcement, but the ways it can be misused to violate personal rights..." She can only think about how different the war at home might have gone if the Ministry had been able to track Death Eaters by their wands, but even more so, how the Death Eater controlled Ministry could have tracked everybody by their wands. "There would have to be restrictions, and limited availability..."

"Indeed," Snape says, cutting her off. "And at the beginning of next year, legislation will be presented in several European countries to use the American's tracking magic in national and international magical law enforcement, including Britain. And, judging by what we just went through, it looks as though they aren't bothering to wait for the legalities."

"And that's why I was thrown out. They knew I'd protest it." She pauses, considering. "But I'm not the only one. The Order will, too. Not to mention most of the wizarding population."

Snape snorts. "You have a bit more confidence in the general populace than is entirely wise."

Ten years ago, Hermione might have argued with him on that point, but after her time in the Ministry, she finds she really can't. "I hope you're wrong."

"Surprisingly enough, so do I."

"But, how do you know about the legislation and the tracking magic?"

He looks at her as if he is wondering how exactly she manages to walk upright. "I read the papers. It was announced two days ago."

Two days ago. She's been without access to wizarding papers for a while now, so she isn't entirely surprised to know she had missed such an announcement. But it certainly makes sense, and clearly the authorities weren't interested in waiting for the legislation to be passed before trying out their new technology.

Still, her wand is her wand, and it's a reminder of what she survived. When Harry gets things sorted with the Ministry as he promised he would when he left her in Paris well over a month ago, she'll be able to use it again, but until then....

"Well, as the situation stands, I'm not going to break it," she tells him, squeezing the wand protectively in her pocket. "If it has to be used to be traced, then I just won't use it."

"It would be wiser to break it."

"I don't care. I got out of Britain by the skin of my teeth just so they wouldn't break my wand, and if I have to break it myself, then they win."

Snape rolls his eyes again. "Fine. Keep your wand. But don't use it, not unless you're ready to be caught. I, on the other hand, plan to be more prudent about my freedom."

He takes his own wand out, holds it in both hands, and before Hermione can process what he is doing, snaps it in half. She sucks in a stunned breath as if someone has just pulled plaster off of a sensitive bit of skin; his casual diffidence to his own wand seems so... brutal.

"I'm going to Krakow to buy a new wand," he says, tossing his broken wand negligently on the ground; Hermione feels a bit nauseous at the sight of the two halves just lying there, cast away. "You may join me if you'd like."

She looks up at him sharply and blinks in surprise, not sure she just heard when she thought she heard. "You're inviting me to travel with you?"

"No," he says as if he is speaking to a particularly stupid two-year-old. "I am inviting you to go to Krakow with me to purchase a new wand because clearly, you lack the survival skills necessary to live as a fugitive."

That rankles. "That's not true. I lived as a fugitive for nearly a year during the war."

"I would hardly go about raving about the superiority of your survival skills, Granger. If memory serves me correctly, you and your idiot friends wandered aimlessly through Britain in the dead of winter, nearly starved to death, and were found three times during that time. And please don't let me start on your infiltration of the Ministry and Gringotts."

Hermione gapes openly at him. She's so blindingly infuriated by his dismissal of everything they went through during the war that at the moment she has half a mind to pull out her wand and curse him well and proper, never mind that it would lead the authorities to her.

At least then she'd be a criminal for a reason.

"How dare you!" she hisses. "Harry, Ron and I were trying to figure out a way to kill Voldemort, risking our lives..."

Snape sighs loudly, cutting her off again. "Are you going to accept my offer to help, or are you going to stand there all day in the bitter cold, arguing with me about minutia?"

"Minutia! For your information..."

"No, for your information, by helping you I have given up a very quiet and comfortable life in Budapest, so don't waste any more of my time. Are you coming or not?"

Hermione's thoughts of violent cursing have given way to a very Muggle but appealing fantasy of strangling Snape with his own scarf. Unfortunately, she does need a new wand if they are tracking her by the old, and if he knows where to get one, then she probably shouldn't start thinking about where to hide the body.

Yet.

"Yes," she snarls at him.

"Good," he says, unimpressed by her anger. "Do try to keep up. If we are going to make it to the village to catch the four o'clock train, we have to move quickly." Then, pivoting on his heel, he starts off across the field, his long Muggle coat flapping in the brusque wind.

She watches him go, anger bubbling beneath her skin. She takes a moment to count backwards from twenty to calm down, then hurries after him, reminding herself that this is all out of necessity.

When they have finally settled on a train to Slovakia after walking for several hours through fields, over ditches, and along a road that was only one paving away from being a dirt track, Snape begins asking questions.

"How do your finances stand?" Snape asks, just as Hermione has settled back into her seat in hopes of a nap.

"Well enough." Actually, her finances are better than well enough. Harry has given her enough money to survive six months without working, though she was hoping to stretch it further by getting a job. She doesn't want to draw any more attention to him by contacting him too soon. "Why?"

"Because illegal wands are more expensive than legally procured wands."

"How much more expensive?"

"You can expect to pay triple."

Hermione does a quick bit of math in her head, tripling the price of a wand from Ollivander's, then converting it to Euros. Her finances can handle it, she decides, though

she might have to contact Harry before she wants to. "That's not a problem."

'And please tell me you haven't left all of your worldly belongings in a hotel room in Budapest."

"No. I carry everything with me in a handbag modified with an Undetectable Extension Charm."

Snape's eyes dart along her form, as if evaluating the suitability of her coat, jeans and trainers for purchasing black market items. "A handbag?"

"It's a small beaded handbag that fits in my coat pocket. I used it during the war."

"Ah, yes, when you were surviving. Well, that is something, at least."

Hermione only just contains the fury erupting within her. He's needling her, trying to upset her, and she's not falling into that trap, not unless she wants to miss getting a new wand because she's committed murder. "No, we're not doing this."

Snape raises an eyebrow at her. "Doing what?"

"Taking shots at each other about the war. You did things that were quite simply deplorable, and I'm not even talking about in the context of your role as a Death Eater, but I'm not taking cheap shots at you. We were kids with an incomplete education and only had the few things Dumbledore left us in his will as guidance, and maybe we didn't always make the best choices, but we got through it more or less in one piece. I'm not going to let you deride that every chance you get. The war is going to have to be off limits as a topic of conversation. And Harry, too, probably, if we're drawing lines in the sand."

Snape stares at her a moment, tracing his mouth with his index finger. "Very well," he says at last. "I can live with those terms. But I insist that you do as I say when I say it as long as you're traveling with me."

"I can't do that, not without a reasonable explanation. And I reserve the right to say no."

Snape rolls his eyes. "If you insist. You'll get your reasonable explanations and your right to say no, but I won't be held responsible to what happens to you if you don't listen to me."

"Then we are agreed. The war and Harry are off limits as topics of conversation. And I will do as you ask me as long as you provide a reasonable explanation, and still reserve the right to say no."

"Agreed," Snape says and settles back into his seat. He turns his attention to the bleak Hungarian countryside sliding past the window and acts as if she isn't even there, which is entirely acceptable to Hermione.

She settles back into her own seat and closes her eyes. The stress of the morning combined with the long walk to the train station not to mention the weeks of running and hiding, unsure of how the authorities kept finding her have left her exhausted. She needs a nap. A long one, say for a week or three. And even though she doesn't entirely trust Snape, she knows that she is in no danger from him, and so feels entirely justified in sleeping through their train ride. Especially since sleeping will prevent any more unpleasant conversations until she's more rested and ready to deal with his sarcasm and condescension.

She's just drifting off to sleep, lulled by the rocking of the train and the warmth of the car, when she hears, "Granger?"

"What?" she growls, refusing to so much as open her eyes.

"Disguising yourself as Bellatrix to get into Gringotts was almost... clever."

Hermione raises her head. Snape is still watching the barren winter countryside slide by the window with a scowl, and she fixes him with a scowl of her own.

"I know," she says uncharitably.

Snape turns his black eyes on her, his expression backed by some emotion she can't identify. "Once again, Gryffindor modesty reveals itself."

Hermione doesn't reply, just settles back and closes her eyes again, though her conscience is pricking her that just might have been Snape's way of apologizing for his comments about the war, and she had just blown it off.

"But thank you," she adds after a moment, and for the time being, there is peace between them.

Part the Second: Poland

Chapter 2 of 6

Poland, wands, and an old woman who sees more than they do.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Part the Second: Poland

"How long have you been on the run?" Snape asks her on their first morning in Krakow.

They are having breakfast in the hotel dining room, since anywhere is warmer than the double room they are sharing. Hermione looks up from the Muggle guidebook she picked up earlier that morning in the gift shop across the street. She has decided to kill the time they are waiting for an appointment to see the illegal wandmaker by doing a bit of Muggle sightseeing, something that she didn't indulge in a great deal of before for fear of being found.

"Since the end of September," she replies. "Why?"

Snape is hiding behind a German-language newspaper, and she thinks it is very rude that he won't put it aside while he is speaking to her. "And how many times did they catch up with you?"

Hermione hesitates; his condescending dismissal of everything she went through in the war still smarts, and she doesn't care to give him any other ammunition to use, now that the war is off limits. But if he has a practical reason for asking.... "Why do you want to know?"

Snape finally folds down the paper. "Because I want to know the difference between how many times you used your wand, and how many times they found you."

Hermione thinks on it a moment. "More than four."

"How very specific, Granger."

Hermione glares at him. "They caught up with me four times, so I would have had to use my wand at least four times, but I know it was more than that. Say, eight?"

"So the tracking magic has a margin of error," Snape murmurs, then disappears behind the paper again.

Hermione tries to go back to her Muggle guidebook, but Snape's question has her thinking about the tracking magic. She marks the pages she is reading with her finger and stares blankly at a terrible watercolor of some country landscape on the far wall, her mind working through the possibilities. "Maybe the spell requires proximity to a major wizarding area," she muses, "which Paris, Geneva, Salamanca, and Budapest have. Or maybe the wand requires proximity to the practitioner of the tracking spell. I wonder if..."

"No." Snape snaps the paper closed and glares at her. "You're staying out of it as long as you're with me. You may want to tempt fate by doing something as idiotically Gryffindor as trying to reverse international tracking spell legislation while on the run, but I'm happy being dead, and you will not to ruin it for me. Is that understood?"

"But they've taken my life from me..."

"And you can go casting at windmills as soon as I'm rid of you, but until then, read your Muggle travel guide and sightsee and keep your wand in your pocket. We had an agreement, remember?"

"Yes. Fine." She stares down at her picked-over breakfast plate, at the remnants of a slice of toast and the meat spread she didn't dare touch. They do have an agreement, and she will hold to it, but she feels so impotent, so helpless, adrift in Europe as she is. Her life and career have been stolen from her, and now she is dependent on Snape to buy a new wand so that at least she can retain some of what makes her a witch. She wants to fight, though, to fight and fix it and make it right, even though she knows she can't, but most of all, she wants to go home.

She so badly wants to go home.

"Besides, Granger," Snape says, the paper rattling as he opens it again. "If you take some time to enjoy being rid of responsibility and duty, you might find yourself appreciating it."

Hermione stares at the paper as if she can look through it and see him. "And do you enjoy it?"

"Every sodding moment," he replies with relish.

Snape comes storming into their hotel room a few nights later, snowflakes melting on his shoulders, in a snit that rivals those she remembers from her time as his student.

Hermione is bundled under her blanket, reading the travel guide and wearing two pairs of socks and a heavy jumper in an attempt to stay warm. She watches him cross to his side of the room and all but tear off his coat, wondering what has him all worked up.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

"Nothing. Mind your own business." He throws the coat over the back of the chair in the corner of the room, then throws himself down on his bed. He stares blankly at the television, which Hermione has turned on more for company than anything else. "What is this?" he asks, staring in consternation at the screen. "And why does that person have a raw turkey carcass on his head?"

"It's *Friends* dubbed over in Polish."

"*Friends*?"

"An American sitcom." She lifts the ancient remote control and turns the television off. "You'd probably loathe it."

"Ah." He leans his head back against the headboard and closes his eyes. His Adam's apple and the shiny scar tissue of what should have been a death-inducing snake bite interrupt the long line of his neck. It's the first time she's seen more than a brief glimpse of it; Snape usually has it covered with his scarf, and Hermione doesn't think that is a coincidence.

Snape cracks open one eye. "Getting an eyeful?"

Hermione looks away quickly, embarrassed that she's been caught staring. "Sorry," she says and quickly sticks her nose back in her travel book.

"Go ahead and ask. I know you've been dying to."

"Ask what?" she says, casually turning a page she didn't read.

"Ask me how I survived."

Hermione does want to ask, and badly. She doesn't see him often, usually only at nights and in the mornings, spending the time in between alone, but it's a question she has pondered quite a bit in her down time. He was dead when she and Harry left his body in the Shrieking Shack, she is sure of it. There was so much blood, and Mr. Weasley's experience with Nagini's bite wound made it clear that the snake was poisonous, so how exactly did he come back from the dead with only that scar as proof of his encounter?

"Okay," she says, marking her page with a finger and sitting up. Outside of the room there is a howl of wind and a rain of quick and tiny taps as snow dashes against the window. "Tell me, how did you survive?"

The corners of his lips curve upward; it's the same smile she used to see when he had trapped a student and was about to go for their jugular, metaphorically speaking.

"Magic, of course." Bedsprings creak as Snape gets up and crosses to the bathroom. "And you call yourself a witch," he says with an amused shake of his head and closes the door behind him.

"Oh, honestly!" she exclaims in exasperation and flops back onto the pillow, where she opens her book and glares at the page about Wawel Castle. That appointment for a second wand can't come fast enough.

"You know, you could have told me about this appointment earlier," Hermione says almost a week later as she is hurrying through the streets of Krakow in the middle of the night, trying to keep up with Snape's long-legged stride. It's literally freezing out, snow is still piled on the pavements and streets, and she is wearing only her pajamas

underneath her coat. Snape hadn't allowed her any time to put on more than that after he had come sweeping into their shared hotel room, snapping and snarling at her as if being asleep at three in the morning offended him on a deeply personal level.

"I didn't know until ten minutes ago," he replies as he turns down a street that leads into the Main Market Square in the old medieval section of Krakow. She's spent time there in the daytime, sightseeing, while Snape has been off doing whatever he does when he's not skulking about their hotel room, making insulting comments about her choice of Muggle travel guides as reading material.

"That's an odd way to run a business." Hermione says, then yawns widely, her breath a white cloud in the cold night.

"Not if it's an illegal business. We are hardly dealing with the law-abiding sector of Polish wizardry."

"Still," she says as Snape leads them out into the square. It is completely deserted; their footsteps echo off the buildings and leave tracks in the snow as they cross to the Sukiennice, the trading hall she visited the day before, and slip under the arches. It had been full of Muggle merchant stalls, and she had spent a couple of hours in the National Museum upstairs. Now, it is dark and silent, except for the wizard in black brewer's robes standing at the end of the corridor, a heavy brass ring of keys dangling from his hand.

"You are the British wizards?" he says in heavily accented English as they approach.

"We are," Snape replies. He stands with his back rigidly straight just as he used to when he lectured in Potions class, and Hermione half expects him to assign detention to the Polish wizard at any minute. "We have an appointment with Madam Golmolke."

"Yes. You have brought the payment?"

"Yes."

His eyes drift from Snape to Hermione and back again. "You may come, then."

He walks away from them, beckoning over his shoulder that they should follow. He leads them to a heavy wooden door at the end of the corridor, which Hermione is sure was not visible while she was here during the day, unlocks it with one of his huge, iron keys, and swings it open. They are at the top of a torch-lit spiral stairway that must lead into the basements below the square; the Polish wizard starts down immediately, but just before Snape follows him, Hermione catches him by the sleeve.

"Are you sure about this?" She doesn't know where they are going, and although she isn't precisely scared, she also isn't stupid. She can't use her wand, and Snape snapped his in half, and since they are about to walk into a criminal operation, she is a bit worried about what will actually happen down those stairs.

Snape gives her his best glare. "Yes, Granger. Perfectly. Come with me or don't, but make the decision now."

Snape jerks his arm out of her grasp and follows the other wizard; Hermione hesitates for a moment, decides that Snape probably wouldn't be risking his own life so easily, and plunges down the stairs after him.

The stairwell is short, and very soon, she finds herself in a cavernous, low-ceilinged market place lit by torches. The stalls are closed, protected by Muggle-style, pull-down metal gates, and even though she can't read their signs, she is fairly certain that during the day, this is a perfectly legitimate wizarding market. One stall, however, is open and lit with dozens of candles. Every inch of wall space is lined with wand boxes up to the ceiling, and she assumes that by day it is a legitimate business, conducting its illegal trade only at night.

An old woman wrapped in a threadbare shawl is just inside the entrance, dozing in a rocking chair, her wizened head resting on her chest. The Polish wizard approaches her, says something softly in Polish, and when she raises her milky white eyes to stare blindly through Hermione and Snape, a creepy smile breaks over her chapped lips. She raises one claw-like hand to point to Hermione and speaks rapidly in Polish.

The Polish wizard nods to the old woman as if she can see him, then turns to them. "Grandmother says the lady must show her palm."

Hermione looks to Snape, who gives a look that questions her intelligence and nods towards the old woman impatiently.

She approaches the old woman as closely as she can without actually touching her. "Er, hello," she says, not quite sure what to do next.

The old woman gazes up at her with her sightless eyes and touches the palm of one hand with the middle finger of the other. Hesitantly, Hermione offers her left hand; the woman grasps it greedily, spits right into Hermione's palm, and rubs it into the lines of her hand.

And immediately begins laughing.

"What?" Hermione says, confused. She thinks the old woman might be laughing at her.

The old woman rattles off something in Polish and gestures towards Snape. Huge tears of laughter are sliding down her cheeks, and when she runs her fingers over the lines in Hermione's hand a second time, her laughter takes on a new intensity.

"Grandmother?" The Polish wizard has materialized next to Hermione, looking concerned.

"Is this normal?" Hermione asks.

"No, but then nothing is for Grandmother."

The old woman gets control of herself long enough to ask for Snape's hand. Snape's expression is suspicious as he cautiously offers his hand to the old woman. She spits in his palm, rubs it in, and begins laughing all over again.

Snape snatches back his hand with an expression of disgust and wipes his palm on a handkerchief that he pulls from his pocket. "I thought we came for wands, not to be the entertainment for some old hag."

"Snape!" Hermione hisses at him like she would at Harry and Ron if they'd said such a thing, but she goes unheeded as the old woman's laughter ends with an abruptness that is terrifying. She barks something sharply at Snape, wagging her finger at him as she scolds him, her blind eyes fixed fiercely on him.

"Grandmother says hold your tongue, wizard," the grandson translates. "You may be powerful, but she stood with Dumbledore against Grindelwald, and as much as she respected him, she will not hesitate to curse his man for rudeness."

Snape's expression is one of the "if looks could kill" variety, but he says, "I apologize, madam."

The old woman nods sharply in approval and leans back in her rocker. She lifts one finger towards the boxes lining the far wall and speaks to her grandson. The grandson raises his wand and summons two slender boxes that were stacked together. The old woman takes both boxes, opens one, then the other, and runs her fingers over each wand with careful attention. She pauses, her head cocked to the side in consideration, then hands one to Hermione and the other to Snape and says something that sounds like an order.

"She says try your wands," the grandson says.

Hermione flicks hers. Power flows down her fingers and through the wand; sparks erupt from its tip in a brilliant shower of color and light. The wand in Snape's hand, she

notices, does the same.

The Polish wizard says something to the old woman, and she gives another nod of approval and begins speaking to Hermione and Snape in Polish.

"She says these are your wands," the grandson translates. "Oak for the lady because she is strong, sensible and unrelenting. Walnut for the gentleman because he is inflexible and full of contrasts, but also noble and always admired. However, your wands both have a core of dragon heartstring from the same dragon because your hearts are similar in their strength and devotion."

"The cores are twinned?" Hermione says, thinking of Harry and Voldemort's wands, but not entirely certain what that means for her and Snape.

"Yes. It often happens with people who are connected in some way."

Snape mutters something that sounds like "connected by misfortune," and the old woman begins laughing again, gasping out something in Polish between whoops of laughter.

Snape glares at her, the Polish wizard shakes his head, and Hermione asks, "What did she say?"

"She says, a long voyage lies ahead for both of you," the Polish wizard translates. The old woman pauses long enough to say something else, and a knowing, amused grin spreads across the grandson's face. "She says, enjoy your travels."

After the trip to the wandmaker, Snape disappears for a full twenty-four hours, only to reappear at half four the next morning to bully her out of bed.

"Why do you feel the need to keep waking me in the middle of the night?" she snaps at him and burrows deeper beneath the blanket, now pleasantly warmed by a charm cast with her new wand.

"Because there are things that must be done. Come, we're going to Bucharest."

"Bucharest? As in Romania?"

"Is there another?"

Hermione sighs and throws back the blanket to see Snape standing at the foot of her bed, arms crossed, looking irritated. "Do you have a good reason?"

"You need a second wand."

"I have a second wand."

"No, a second wand you can use."

Hermione sits up. "Is that necessary?"

Snape scowls. "Who has been in hiding for twelve years and who cocked it up four times in only six weeks?"

"No need to rub it in," Hermione says and slides out of bed. "Give me twenty minutes."

"You have ten."

"Fine," Hermione says, but takes twenty anyway.

When they are on the first train to Bucharest, Hermione, irritated that he hasn't allowed her the luxury of breakfast nor the necessity of caffeine, turns to Snape and says, "So why didn't we buy a second wand from the Polish wandmaker?"

"Because you are a fugitive, it would be unwise for you to buy two wands from the same maker, and since this is my second wand, I didn't need to buy another. Ergo, we are going to Bucharest."

"If you say so," Hermione says and stares out of the window, watching as the train station begins to disappear as the train pulls away. Her eyes begin to drift closed of their own volition, and just as she's about to slide back into sleep, she realizes what he said about his wand.

She sits up and turns to him, infuriated. "Wait. You've had a wand this whole time?"

Snape gives her the earwax and vomit Every Flavor Beans look again. "Of course. I always carry two wands." Then he smirks. "Surely you didn't think that I snapped my only wand and left it lying in a field in Hungary?"

"You had a second wand while I was shivering every night under that thin blanket in a hotel room that had a faulty radiator."

"Apparently."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why didn't you ask?"

"You're a miserable bastard, Snape," she mutters with uncharacteristic profanity and slumps back in her seat.

There is silence for a bit. Pieces of Krakow pass their window at ever increasing rates, and eventually, Snape says, "I inoculated myself."

Hermione looks away from the window. "What are you talking about?"

"You wanted to know how I survived," he says in that condescending way he has. "Like several other Death Eaters, I inoculated myself against Nagini's poison. She also missed the important arteries and veins, but other than that, I don't how I lived."

"And that's it? You got up and staggered out of the Shrieking Shack, and let everyone think you were dead?"

"Something like that," he says in a way that tells her that there's more to the story, but he isn't planning to share.

"Interesting," she says, beginning to suspect that this might be the way he always apologizes, though she would like it much more if he could just make a plain apology without wrapping it up in excessive words and hidden meanings. But there's probably about as much chance of that as Snape expressing his undying love for her on bended knee with an arm full of red roses.

And disturbed by that thought on more levels than she can adequately express, she turns her attention to the bits of Krakow and its outer suburbs passing by the window, and there is silence between them until they cross the border into Romania.

Part the Third: Greece and Rome

Chapter 3 of 6

Bickering, a distinct lack of money, and a new continent.

Disclaimer: Continues to be not mine.

Part the Third: Greece and Rome

Hermione does not find a wand that works in Bucharest.

She goes through an entire selection of black market wands while two large, unpleasant looking wizards loom over her, but she does not find a single wand that works properly. Snape does not allow her any time to enjoy Romania afterwards and herds her onto the next train to Athens, claiming there is another black market seller there.

Hermione doesn't find a second wand in Athens either, but before Snape can bully her into going anywhere else, she puts her foot down, literally, in the middle of a busy Athenian street during the early morning rush.

"No," she says, crossing her arms and ignoring the dirty looks the pedestrians are giving her for interrupting the flow of traffic.

Snape stops and turns around, giving her the earwax and vomit look. "No what, Granger?"

"I'm not going anywhere else until I can take some time to sightsee like I was able to do in Poland."

Snape rolls his eyes. "We don't have time for this."

"We don't have time? You're dead, and I'm a criminal. We have nothing but time. And, look!" She points towards the Acropolis rising over the city where the Parthenon sits in all of its noble and ancient splendor. "That's the Parthenon. It's a monument of both magical and Muggle importance, and you want to drag me off to some other back alley, illegal wand dealer without letting me take time to visit it."

Snape looks towards the Parthenon as if he hasn't noticed the huge bloody Greek temple looming over them for the past two days. "You want to visit the Parthenon."

"Yes. And the other temples on the Acropolis, the Agora, the museums, and possibly the Piraeus. And then I'd like to visit the towns in Peloponnesus, and then..."

Snape waves her off impatiently. "Yes, yes, I get it, Granger. You want to play tourist."

"As a matter of fact, I do. They've taken everything else from me, and I'm not going to let you take any joy I may get out of traveling, too. And speaking of traveling, why are you..."

"Oh, I'm tired of your ceaseless nattering, Granger. Do as you wish." He gestures at the Acropolis in annoyance. "Go play tourist until your heart's content. Limit yourself to one wand. Get caught and dragged back to England to be stripped of your wizarding rights. See if I bloody care. I'm done with you."

There is a certain finality in the way he whirls about and stalks off through the crowd, shouldering the other pedestrians aside. Hermione watches him go, exasperated and nettled and just a bit hurt, which is entirely ridiculous, because he has been nothing but unpleasant and patronizing and vitriolic since the first day she met him, all those years ago in first-year Potions. She's almost certain he's just abandoned her forever on an Athenian street, which is entirely acceptable to her, she decides, since she now has a wand which they cannot trace, and there is no one to bully her. She can relax long enough to enjoy traveling, since her hands are tied where the tracking magic and her stolen life are concerned.

Yes, it's better this way, she decides and purposefully sets out towards the Acropolis, determined to play tourist until her heart's content, just like he said. As she wanders amongst the ruins, gazing up at the optical illusion of the Parthenon columns and reading about the history of the other temples in a guide book she picked up in a nearby shop, she almost completely manages not to think about the fact that she is once again alone.

To her surprise, she finds Snape sitting in the lone rickety chair that passes as the lobby furniture in the hotel when she returns that evening.

Part of her wants to slip away before he sees her and carry on her traveling alone, but the other part that is homesick and lonely doesn't let her, assuaging her pride by pointing out that he is the one that is sitting there waiting for her to return to the hotel and not the other way around.

"I thought you had left," she says, approaching him with her best courtroom voice and stature.

"What gave you that idea?" he says, closing the French-language newspaper he is reading.

"The part where you stalked off in a snit like a sullen little boy."

Snape huffs. "Says the woman who stomped her foot like a child in the middle of the street because she wasn't getting her way."

"I was just following your example," she says with a shrug. "Besides, I thought you were done with me."

"I should be," he says, standing and tossing the newspaper into the chair. "But I could hardly leave you on your own, or you'd be back in England, Stupefying Ministry officials for bits of hair to break into the Department of Magical Games and Sports in order to free the Snitches or something equally ridiculous."

Hermione frowns. "Don't they sell Snitches at the Quidditch Supply Shop?"

"Your fixation on minutia borders on obsession, Granger. I've taken the liberty of booking our rooms again for tonight."

"How thoughtful of you," she mutters and heads for the lift.

Snape follows, stepping into the small space of the lift without the slightest bit of discomfort and punches their floor number. Hermione notices that he smells nice, clean and a bit musky and appealingly masculine. Then, shaking her head to chase away that thought, wherever it came from, says, "I'm going to the National Archaeological Museum tomorrow."

The lift opens onto their floor, and Snape hands her the room key. "Fascinating."

Hermione slips it into the lock and opens the door, but before she steps inside, she says, "Snape."

He pauses in the process of stepping into his room. "What?"

"You can come, if you'd like," she says, then can't help adding, "because, you know, if you take some time to enjoy sightseeing, you might find yourself appreciating it."

Snape sneers and gives her that special look he used to reserve for Harry, then disappears into his room, slamming the door behind him.

Nevertheless, she finds him in the lobby the next morning, ready to go.

She's so pleased, she doesn't stop to wonder why.

After a few days in Athens, during which Snape tags along with her to museums and temples, commenting snidely on this or that, almost literally dragging her out of the Numismatic Museum of Athens, insisting that piles of ancient coins couldn't possibly be that interesting, she decides it's time to move onto the Peloponnese.

He doesn't argue, but when they set out on their first excursion in Sparta, he's the one attempting to direct their itinerary for the day. They end up fighting about it when he refuses to let her see the few ruins of the ancient city because he insists the Byzantine Mistra is more interesting. Once they negotiate an itinerary that is acceptable to both of them, but which requires an extra day, they do enjoy themselves, and late that afternoon, she's the one dragging Snape out of a museum instead of the other way around.

And that turns out to be the pattern for the remaining time they spend in Greece they can't go sightseeing without an argument about where to go, but when they get there, they enjoy themselves, assuming they can agree on a time to leave. She finds that not only can Snape hold a decent conversation, but she also enjoys them, even if half the time they dissolve into arguments and, on occasion, bouts of childish name calling.

It's bizarre, utterly bizarre, and strangely, kind of fun. None of her friends would have ever let her spend five hours in a museum, let alone would have spent them with her, except for maybe Luna, and after the time she, Ginny, and Luna took the kids to the British Museum and were thrown out because Luna insisted that one of the mummies was still alive and tried to release him from his sarcophagus, she declared Luna the last person she would ever visit a museum with again. Her friends also wouldn't discuss what they had seen with her, or take the same amount of interest, and at the end of the day, she decides she likes having someone to share these sorts of things with, even if he tends to have all the maturity of a sullen five-year-old.

She's enjoying herself so much with Snape that she goes whole hours without feeling pangs of homesickness, and when the question of why Snape is helping her or traveling with her or whatever it is that he is doing with her surfaces, she pushes it away. She's sure Snape has his own reasons, and they are probably selfish, but she doesn't want to ruin her enjoyment with minutia.

She's doesn't want to develop an obsession, after all.

Then, one day, she notices that things are beginning to change on some subtle level.

In their hotel in Patras, where they are spending the night before catching a ferry to Italy the next morning, they have one of those moments you see in romantic comedies, in which the heroine is stepping out of the shower at the exact same moment at which the hero is stepping into the bathroom.

They both freeze where they are. She has the towel in one hand, but it hasn't come anywhere near her body yet, and Snape has the requisite deer-caught-in-the-headlights look, but he hasn't started retreating from the room yet.

A little voice in the back of her head reminds her that somebody has to do something; they can't stand there for the rest of their lives staring at each other in embarrassment and shock. So Hermione breaks out of her paralysis, blushes bright red from head to toe and pulls the towel to her chest.

"Get out!" she shrieks, grabbing the shower curtain and pulling it in front of her for good measure.

Snape stares at her a second longer, then ducks back into the other room without a word.

Hermione is fairly sure that he let his eyes linger a moment too long on purpose, which is sort of disturbing, but even more disturbing than that, she is also fairly sure she doesn't mind.

In Pompeii, after they have spent the better part of the morning arguing about which parts of the ancient city to visit, Hermione notices that something is different about Snape. She is unable to pinpoint exactly what it is as she watches him stride ahead of her down the Via Abbondanza in a snit because she won this round, boots tapping out an angry rhythm on the ancient flagstones. Then, when he pivots sharply to enter one of the reconstructed shops and his hair whips about with the same easy swing as his coat, she realizes what it is.

Snape has washed his hair.

In Venice, she notices that when Snape isn't in one of his moods, he opens doors for her and pours the wine into her glass when he orders a bottle at dinner.

She also notices that washing his hair was not a one-time affair.

In Florence, she catches him looking at her cleavage as she is taking off her coat in a restaurant, but that's okay, because in Assisi, he catches her staring at the dip of his collarbone at the base of his throat with interest.

They finally run out of money in Rome.

They sit in the Piazza Navona on a bench across from the Fountain of Four Rivers. It is four days before Christmas, and Hermione isn't sure how they ran out of money exactly, though it might have been the meals accompanied by the local wines, the hotel rooms, and the illegal wand she bought in Poland. She is eating half a slice of pizza while idly studying the hieroglyphics on the Egyptian obelisk that makes up the architecture of the fountain. The pizza is what amounts to the last of their cash; she has torn it in half in hopes that Snape will share it with her, but he has refused, claiming that he isn't hungry.

He is sitting beside her, stiff with irritation as he scowls at the pigeons, the artists, and the few tourists who are braving the cold, and when Hermione offers again to share the other half of the slice with him, he scowls at her.

"I told you I'm not hungry," he snaps, focusing his black gaze on a pair of teenagers strolling past them, holding hands. The pair exchange nervous glances and quickly move to the other side of the piazza.

"Oh, honestly. There's no reason to go hungry."

"I am not going hungry. I am simply not hungry." He redirects his gaze to a cluster of pigeons waddling towards them, eyeing the pizza and cooing hopefully. "Now finish the rest of your meal."

Hermione frowns and carefully rewraps the slice in the wax paper, her appetite gone. She knows he's lying. He's obviously letting her have their last meal, and she just doesn't know how to feel about that, other than confused. The fact that she knows how to solve their money problems doesn't help, but she doesn't expect the warmest reception to her idea. But they'll freeze to death tonight if they can't find a way to pay for a room somewhere warming charms only go so far and should they survive the night, they will go hungry tomorrow.

Hermione sighs. She shouldn't feel so nervous about this. She isn't his student anymore, she won't get detention, and she can certainly hex him if she needs to sort him out. She has a perfectly viable solution, and really, there was nothing to be done for it other than just putting it out on the table and seeing what he says.

His bark has always been worse than his bite, anyway.

"I have a way to get money," she says at last.

Snape turns his head just enough to look at her out of the corner of his eye. "How?"

She slips a Galleon out of her pocket and shows it to him; his scowl is automatically redirected at her again. "You said you didn't have any more money."

"I don't. This isn't a real Galleon, not any more, anyway."

Snape raises an eyebrow and waits for her to explain.

"This is one of the Galleons we used in fifth year to let the other DA members know when our meetings would be."

"A Protean Charm." He looks almost... impressed. "Like the Dark Mark."

"Yes, well," she says, suddenly embarrassed. "That's where I got the idea from."

"And how exactly will your Galleon make money?"

"I can contact Harry. We changed the Protean Charm so that if I enter the geographic coordinates, he could meet me where ever I am."

His expression shutters almost immediately. "No. Absolutely not."

"Look, we're in sort of a bind here. Besides, I can meet him alone. He doesn't need to know about you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Granger. And what happens if Potter doesn't come, but a cadre of Aurors, ready to arrest you? No, if we summon Potter, I'll go with you."

"So you're not adverse to the idea."

"On the contrary, I am completely adverse to the idea. However, we are in a bind, as you put it, and I don't relish freezing to death on the streets tonight." He paused to focus his glare on a woman strolling past, talking loudly on her mobile. "Just summon him and have done with it."

"If you're sure..."

"For Merlin's sake, woman, stop rubbing salt in the wound," he snarls, then snatches up the slice of pizza. "And stop monopolizing lunch."

He gets up and stomps off to the other side of the piazza to scowl and pout and eat his pizza. Hermione wishes that just once he wouldn't couch his answers in token protests or hide them in complaints.

Harry catches up with them a few hours later as they are wandering aimlessly through the Roman Forum. They've cast warming spells, but as the temperature falls, they are becoming less protective. Hermione has begun shivering, and Snape looks distinctly uncomfortable, huddled down into the collar of his coat as he is.

"Harry!" she cries when she sees him coming around the Arch of Titus and rushes into his arms.

Harry picks her up and swings her around. "You're all right!" he says with a grin as he sets her down. "We were so worried. Why didn't you contact me before this?"

"I didn't know what was going on and didn't want to draw any attention to you."

"As if he needs the help," Snape says from behind them.

Harry takes one look at Snape striding towards them and says, "Where did you find Snape?"

"She knocked me over in Budapest and drew me into her web of dastardly crime."

"Don't listen to him. He came willingly." Hermione pauses, suddenly suspicious; Harry is far too sanguine about meeting a man they both saw die. "Why aren't you more surprised that he's alive?"

Harry looks to Snape. "You didn't tell her?"

Snape raises an eyebrow in Harry's direction. "And excuse you from the task?"

Hermione turns to Harry, hands on her hips and furious. "Excuse you from what task?"

Harry shifts from foot to foot nervously. "Remember when we left Snape's body in the Shrieking Shack because we thought he was dead? Well, when I went back for his body, he was alive. He wouldn't go to St. Mungo's or even to Madam Pomfrey, so I ended up helping him get better."

Well, there is the rest of the story Snape didn't tell her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Harry shrugged. "He asked me not to tell anyone."

Hermione is still a little irritated that Harry hadn't told her, but since she's come to know Snape a bit better over the last few weeks, it would have been perfectly in character for him to want to hide from the post-war fracas and perfectly in character for Harry to help him do so.

With a sigh of defeat, Hermione nods. "Right. Well, I hope you know you were both very stupid. You could have died," she says, wagging her finger at Snape like the old woman in Krakow. "And you," she says, turning her finger on Harry, "you could have killed him."

"And neither happened," Snape snaps. "Now let's go somewhere warm and have dinner. Potter, it's on you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Harry says with a grin as Snape brushes past him, and Hermione can only marvel at how far they've come since the war.

They find a restaurant near the Coliseum that has heat and a fantastic menu. Hermione tells Harry about what has happened since the last time she saw him in Paris, where he met her with Muggle Euros and the small beaded purse she used during the war, packed with clothing and supplies. He tells her about the tracking legislation and the protests of the general citizenry, about the united front of the Aurors against the orders to exile Hermione, and about the efforts the Order is making to get the legislation thrown out and Hermione allowed back in. Snape, for his part, orders the best merlot the restaurant can provide and spends the entire meal making his usual sarcastic comments about the Ministry and the Order and, when he runs out of ammunition for those things, Harry.

Eventually, Hermione pops off to the loo, and when she returns, Harry and Snape are speaking in low serious tones. Hermione thinks nothing of it until she gets close enough to hear them.

"...life debt? That's ridiculous. You don't need to repay a life debt to me. If anything, I should be repaying one to you."

"That isn't how life debts work, Potter."

"Well, life debts are stupid, and if that's the only reason why you're helping Hermione..."

Anger floods Hermione. Anger, and hurt and something that feels like humiliation.

"Excuse me?" she snaps.

Both men jerk their heads up in surprise.

Harry, she knows, is somehow vaguely responsible for this situation, but Snape is the real culprit. She had no idea why he was helping her, but there was a small, naïve part of her who wanted to think he did so for reasons that weren't quite so selfish, but now that she knows for sure, she wants nothing to do with it. "So, you're helping me in hopes of settling the life debt."

"Granger..." Snape begins.

"No, shut it. I've heard enough," she snarls and, grabbing her coat, stomps out of the restaurant. The sharp cold distracts her from her hurt a bit, and as she wanders back towards the Coliseum, shivering, she tries to fight back tears of anger and hurt.

Then from behind her comes Harry's voice, calling her name.

She glances over her shoulder to see Harry jogging across the street and Snape following behind him at a more leisurely pace, so she steps up her own, not exactly interested in speaking to either of them at the moment.

"Hermione! Wait!" Harry calls breathlessly as he catches up to her. Then he's beside her, breathing heavily. "Please, stop for a minute."

"I need money, Harry. Enough to go to the States." She's pulled the States out of thin air but it's as good a place to go as any, since home is denied to her now.

"Hermione, I think that's a little bit further than..."

"Right now, I don't care what you think. My life and my career have been stolen from me..."

"Ron and I are going to get that sorted out."

"And I've been traveling with a man who's using me as a tool to repay some idiotic debt you know doesn't even exist."

"That's what he says, but Hermione..."

"Money, Harry. A lot of it. Enough for me to enjoy myself traveling in the States. I'll pay you back once the Wizengamot rescinds their decision to exile me, and I can go back to work."

Harry grabs her arm and forces her to stop. "Fine. I'll give you what you want, but under one condition."

"What's that?"

"Snape goes with you."

"No. I can take care of myself. I want nothing to do with him."

"I know you can take care of yourself, better than me or Ron, probably, but I would rather you not have to do this alone, especially if you really are going to go to the States. The tracking magic was legalized there last week, and I want someone with you who will watch your back."

Hermione stares at the Coliseum, lit by dozens of flood lights and bright against the night sky. "And if I say no?"

"Then I won't give you the money."

Hermione glares at him, absolutely furious that Harry is bribing her this way, but until she's reinstated, she's at his mercy. "You should have been sorted into Slytherin, Harry."

"Well, it's not like the Sorting Hat didn't try."

Snape has finally caught up with them, and when he sees them, Hermione with tears of fury in her eyes and Harry with a solemn gaze, his eyes narrow with suspicion. "What?" he says.

Hermione looks away, but out of the corner of her eye, she can see Harry grinning nervously at Snape. "Ever fancied visiting the States?"

Part the Fourth: New York and Points West

Chapter 4 of 6

Christmas, Malfoys, and vampires.

Disclaimer: Not mine.

Part the Fourth: New York and Points West

They spend Christmas in New York City.

She didn't think that she could feel any more miserable or homesick than she already does, but the sound of English spoken in a variety of American accents, words like "elevator" and "trash can" used in place of "lift" and "rubbish bin," and the awareness that an entire ocean separates her from her friends and family makes it that much worse.

And then there is the wound of knowing Snape has gone into this with her to pay some life debt he thinks he owes to Harry; she isn't a companion or even a friend that she so naively thought she was becoming. She's a means to an end, a tool, and she feels utterly bruised and misused. And not just by Snape either. Harry has played a part in it, blackmailing her with the seriously needed funds to take Snape with her to the States

Her misery drives her down to the hotel bar on Christmas Eve, where she makes it through about two glasses of the house red before Snape materializes next to her in his trousers and shirtsleeves, looking put out.

"There you are."

Hermione takes a lazy sip of her wine. "Here I am."

"What are you doing?"

"Drinking."

"So I see." Snape sighs and settles on the stool next to her. He beckons over the bartender and orders a scotch neat in his most insulting tone of voice. They sit in silence, listening to the irritating Christmas music, the low chatter of the few patrons of the bar, and the honking and constant roar of the busy street outside.

"Granger, as loath as I am to say this, I wish you would bloody well stop giving me the silent treatment."

"I don't like you, and I don't talk to people I don't like."

"I see alcohol regresses you to the age of seven."

"Sticks and stones, Snape. I'm not fifteen anymore. You can't make me cry by insulting my teeth."

"Insulting your teeth? When did I insult your teeth?"

"In my fourth year, when one of Malfoy's goons struck me with that hex, and my teeth grew out over my lips. You said, 'I see no difference'."

"Did I?" Snape sounds thoughtful and slightly amused. "I don't recall, but I insulted so many Gryffindors in my time at Hogwarts, all of the incidents have blended together."

"I can't believe Dumbledore let you near children."

"Granger, I sincerely wish he hadn't. Those were the most miserable years of my life."

"Good," she says out of spite, but when he only nods miserably in agreement, she suddenly feels sick. Maybe he can be so heartless as to insult a fifteen-year-old's teeth, but this man risked life and limb to save everyone and deserves better from her, even if he does behave like a cruel, overgrown child at times. She's a grown woman, after all. Words really shouldn't be able to hurt her. "Oh, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. You were working for us all those years, and everyone at home thinks you're a hero, even Harry. He named one of his kids after you, you know."

"I know. Albus Severus. The Weasley girl is mad for letting him name the children."

"It's a good name."

"It's a rubbish name. Neither Albus nor I deserve the honor."

"Didn't you hear me? You're a hero. Of course you deserve the honor, even if you are a miserable git who's using me to fulfill a stupid life debt."

Snape stares at her for a minute, then, pinching the bridge of his nose like he has a headache, says, "Granger, that's not precisely why I helped you."

"No?"

"No. That's just what I told Potter."

"Then why did you really help me?"

Snape looks down into his glass of whiskey, frowning. "The only thing I wanted after the war was to be left alone, but constant solitude was not what I expected it to be."

"You were lonely."

He puts on his earwax and vomit Every Flavor Beans look again. "I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did. You're lonely, just like me." Hermione sighs. Everything is kind of blurry now, and she feels warm and fuzzy inside, but she also feels miserable and heartsick and lonely. "I just want to go home. Back to my life and my family and my friends. It would be different if I could just do something about it, but I can't. I'm..." She waves her hand vaguely, her wine-dulled mind searching for the right word. "I'm incapacitated." She sighs miserably again. "I just want to go home." Then she grins sloppily at Snape. "And you can come home with me when Harry fixes everything."

"Merlin's beard, reduced to a seven year old and maudlin." Snape takes the wine glass out of her hand and sets it out of her reach. "You've had enough."

"I'm a grown up, now. You can't make me stop drinking. I can hex you, you know."

"Yes, yes. You're a powerful witch with a big scary wand." Snape stands and pulls her to her feet. "And you need to go to bed."

Hermione looks down at his long fingers wrapped around her arm and grins sloppily. "You have nice hands."

Snape raises an eyebrow at her. "How many glasses have you had?"

"Erm, two?"

"Two. Merlin. I know who will not be drinking anymore if I have anything to do with it. Come on, to bed with you."

Hermione nods sloppily, feeling all floaty and relaxed. She lets him lead her through the lobby and into the lift where she slumps against the mirrored wall. Her eyes travel from his long fingers jabbing the button to their floor up his arm and to the shadow of his collarbone just inside the vee of his shirt.

"I know why the old woman in Krakow was laughing at us," Hermione says as the lift jerks upwards.

Snape nods. "Yes, Granger. So do I."

"Nashville looks interesting," Hermione says. They are in a coffee house on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, having tea and pastries on the twelfth day of the new year. Snape is engaging in his favorite activity of glowering at the pedestrians strolling past the shop while Hermione peruses a travel book, pondering their next destination. They've been in Chicago for a week now, and she thinks they will probably stay another two, but she likes to plan ahead. "There is a full-scale reconstruction of the Parthenon, painted in the original Greek colors. There is even a replica of Athena's cult statue. It would be interesting to see what it really looked like."

"Fascinating."

She flips a few pages ahead to an entry about Memphis, sighs forlornly, and closes the book. "I wish you'd let me try to find a wizarding guide book. I know there must be dozens of magical sites we could visit."

"And get caught by Aurors. Smashing idea, Granger. Two illegal immigrants with illegally procured wands, one a criminal in her native country and the other supposedly twelve years dead. I'm sure they'll let us off with a warning."

"There's no need to get shirty. I was only making conversation."

"And you know how I hate it when you do that."

"So says the man who lectured me for an hour in Philadelphia about the real reason the liberty bell has a crack in it."

"I thought a swot like you would find the faulty cooling potions used by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry fascinating."

"It was fascinating. I'm simply pointing out that..."

Suddenly Snape straightens, his eyes focused on something through the window.

"What is it?" Hermione looks over her shoulder in an attempt to follow his line of sight, panic coiling in the pit of her stomach. She's imagining a battalion of Aurors coming to arrest them, but she sees no one in bunny slippers or a clown suit or anything wildly out of place that a wizard playing Muggle might wear.

Snape doesn't answer, just grabs her wrist and pulls her out of her seat, practically yanking her arm out of the socket. He drags her deeper into the coffee shop, pushing through the line at the counter, and hustles her into the mouth of the hallway leading to the restrooms. She's too unsettled to protest the manhandling, and as he peers around the corner at the street outside, she is vaguely aware that he hasn't let go of her hand.

"What is it?" she asks again, but then she sees what he sees: a pair of platinum blonde heads, a long coat edged with fur, and of all things, a snake headed cane. They are passing the coffee shop arm in arm, her fur-edged coat brushing through the snow piled on the pavement, his cane tapping out a random rhythm on the concrete; she does not see their faces, but she isn't sure she needs to.

She gasps. "Is that..."

"I don't know." Snape withdraws back into the hallway and leans against the wall. "Possibly."

"I knew they'd been exiled, it was all over the Daily Prophet for weeks, but I would expect to find them anywhere but in America." The couple has disappeared into the morning crowd; Hermione withdraws into the hallway with Snape. "You'd think it would be too gauche for them."

"You'd think." Snape is staring off into space. He looks not worried, exactly, but disturbed, uneasy.

Hermione knows what will happen next. "We're leaving Chicago, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. I really did want to visit the Field Museum."

"My heart breaks for you, Granger. I'm sure we'll find some other museum somewhere else for you to drag me through mercilessly. Come." Snape pushes himself off the wall, smooths the lapel of his coat unnecessarily, and plunges back through the line at the counter.

Hermione catches up with him just outside the shop. Together they move along Michigan Avenue in the opposite direction of the couple. "So, Nashville, then?"

"No. You've chosen the last several destinations. It's my turn."

"Fair enough. Where to then?"

"Las Vegas."

Hermione can only stare.

Snape wins ungodly amounts of money playing poker in Las Vegas.

He's having a fantastic winning streak, so much so that they get a complimentary suite in Paris Las Vegas, with a view of the faux Eiffel Tower and the gleaming neon of the Strip. She suspects that he's using Legilimency to cheat at cards, which is a very bad idea on many levels, starting with basic dishonesty and ending with large men in silk suits wanting to break his legs with baseball bats.

"Do you know how dishonest, not to mention how dangerous, it is to cheat at cards?" she asks on the third morning. Snape is enjoying the complimentary breakfast, reading the complimentary paper, and wearing the complimentary dressing gown with more pleasure than seems entirely conscionable. She, on the other hand, is glaring balefully at him, wearing her own clothing, thank you very much, and refusing to so much as touch the gluttonous American breakfast spread out before them.

"No, Granger. It never occurred to me." Snape doesn't even look up, just turns the page with maddening calm. "Besides, I'm not cheating."

Hermione crosses her arms and glares at him. "You're just that good at poker?"

"Poker is a game of bluffing and risk taking, two skills sixteen years as a spy have taught me well. It's a simple matter of discovering your opponents' tells and taking carefully controlled risks while playing your hand. It's just like dealing with the Dark Lord, but with cards. And fewer Crucios."

"I don't believe you."

Snape shrugs and turns another page. "As you like."

Hermione bites her lip and glares at him; she can't decide which is the more infuriating that he's so dismissive of his own safety or just so dismissive of her.

"They're going to get suspicious, and you're going to get your legs broken," she says with the same assurance she used to warn Harry and Ron against the dangers of cheating, sneaking around Hogwarts at night, and playing Quidditch without the proper protective gear.

The paper crinkles as he turns another page. "You've seen too many movies, Granger. They don't break your legs if they catch you cheating."

"No? What do they do, just show you politely to the door and ask you not to visit their establishment again?"

"Of course not, Granger. They kill you."

"What!"

Snape closes the paper with a sigh. "Relax, Granger. I am joking. I'm not cheating, no one will break my legs, and even if they try, I don't think a couple of threatening Muggles would compare to what I had to endure to survive Slytherin house as a half blood. When I have enough money to fund us for another six months, we will leave, but not until then."

"Fund us?" Sometimes the things he says are so incomprehensible that she thinks he must experience the world in a way completely alien to her. "Snape, we're still fine where money is concerned, and when we run out, Harry will give us the money we need."

"No. I'm not taking any more money from Potter."

It dawns on her then. "Wait, is this some sort of stupid male pride thing? Are you risking your life because you hate Harry?"

With a glare that could melt metal, he throws his napkin across his breakfast plate and pushes back his chair. "My stupid male pride," he snarls as he stands, "happens to be all I have."

Then he sweeps out of the room, the complimentary bathrobe billowing out behind him.

Thirteen hours later, as they are being chased along the Strip, ducking into casinos and into throngs of tourists in an attempt to dodge the very large, very vicious, very hungry vampires that apparently take jobs as casino security in Las Vegas, Hermione turns to Snape and hisses, "I hope it was worth it."

"It was," he replies as he takes her hand and pulls into a dark alley where he clutches her around the waist and pulls her in close. She's suddenly very aware of his hand on the small of her back and the jut of his hip against her side as he raises his wand. "You'll think so, too, when I spread out our money on the bed and we roll around in it. But for now, Granger, shut up."

And before she can respond to *that*, magic compresses them and they Apparate out of existence.

"Are you hungry?" Snape asks her two days later while he is driving them through a tiny desert town. The immediate environment is a flat, dusty wasteland, but in the distance there are snow capped mountains and a crystalline blue sky. If Hermione weren't so angry, she'd find it amazing and beautiful and serene, but as it is, Snape's lucky she hasn't hexed him to death and buried his body in the desert.

"Granger?"

Hermione shifts in her seat to turn her body as far away from him as possible and glares out the window.

"Are you still not speaking to me? That's terribly mature."

Hermione elects not to reply.

After ten minutes and the tiny desert town have passed by, he says, "We needed the money."

Hermione lets her silence speak for herself.

"Our funds will run out eventually. It isn't as easy to get a job here as it was in Europe. And I still refuse to borrow any more money from Potter."

She's finding it fascinating how tense his voice is becoming, how panicked, and it makes her feel triumphant and powerful, so she continues in her silence.

"Good Lord, woman, it isn't as if I robbed some pedestrian at wandpoint!"

More silence.

"Granger."

And yet more.

"Granger, answer me."

"That doesn't make it right that you were cheating at cards," she replies finally, deciding that he's suffered enough for now.

"So were the other three people at the table. It was Las Vegas, Granger."

"That still doesn't make it right. And please don't get me started on the part where you nearly got us eaten by vampires. And you lied to me. Not that I should have expected anything else from you."

"Granger..."

She holds up a hand, infuriated all over again. "No, don't talk to me."

The desert glides past the car window, time ticks by, and as they are driving through a larger desert town she isn't sure which, she is too busy fuming to notice they stop at a red light where Hermione sees a homeless man standing on the corner, holding up a sign begging for money. A woman and a little boy huddle together behind him, his wife and son, she suspects. There are two backpacks beside them, probably holding the entirety of their worldly possessions, and they both look cold and hungry. Hermione's heart clenches at the sight. It's positively heart breaking, and suddenly the incredible amount of money in the back seat seems even more disgusting than it had before.

And then suddenly, Snape snarls, "Damn it, woman," and throws the car into park.

Hermione looks at him in surprise, but he's already getting out of the car, the duffle bag holding his winnings in his hand. She watches in open mouthed awe as he stomps round the front of the car, jaw rigid with fury, and shoves the bag into the homeless man's arms.

The homeless man looks taken aback and just a bit terrified. Snape says a few words to him, plunges his hand into the duffle bag, and pulls out a handful of bills. Then he pivots like he's just caught a couple of Gryffindors raiding his ingredients cabinets and stomps back to the car while the man gazes into the bag of money in awe.

The light turns green and the cars behind them immediately begin honking, but Snape ignores them as he gets back in the car and slams the door shut. He turns to her, tosses the wad of bills into her lap, and says, "Don't you dare lecture me about the morality of keeping this much. It's just enough to cushion our funds until I can think of another way to make money."

The cars behind them are honking more vehemently now, and one of the drivers has started shouting epithets at them.

Hermione is grinning widely at him, a warm, liquid feeling expanding in her chest. "That was amazing, you know."

She reaches out for him, not entirely sure what she's going to do, kiss him, maybe, but he jerks out of her reach. "No," he snaps, throwing the car into drive and slamming his foot on the gas. They speed through the intersection, and Hermione settles back into her seat, still grinning, that warm, liquid feeling still expanding and growing within her, and she's fairly certain she knows what it is.

She thinks she might have just fallen in love with Severus Snape.

Part the Fifth: New Orleans and Points South

Chapter 5 of 6

Mardi Gras, driving, and apologies.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

Part the Fifth: New Orleans and Points South

She kisses him in New Orleans.

They've spent about a week and a half driving from Las Vegas though New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, stopping the at Grand Canyon and the Alamo, spending a bit of time in Houston and Dallas. When February comes, she decides that Mardi Gras is the next stop, and so they go, despite the fact that Snape is complaining about the crowds before they even get there.

They actually find a hotel room, and in the French Quarter, no less. It is loud and busy at all hours of the day and night, but is full of people for Snape to scowl at and things for Hermione to drag him off to see and do. He hates the parades with the same intensity that he once hated Harry, but he seems to enjoy the dining and sightseeing, so they do a lot of that.

At midnight on Fat Tuesday, when the mounted policemen begin clearing out upper Bourbon Street, she and Snape get caught up in the mass of drunken revelers and are pressed together, her body flush against his. They have one of those moments, one of those silly, melodramatic moments like you see in the movies when the hero and heroine look into each other's eyes and the music swells and they kiss, except the soundtrack to their moment is the sound of a drunken mob, and they never quite get to their kiss because the current of the crowd forces them apart. Snape swears brutally, which further disrupts the mood, and Hermione thinks the moment is lost.

When they finally make it back to the hotel, Snape is in one of his snits, and she would bet that there were quite a few confused Muggles going back to their hotels with mysterious welts from Stinging Hexes. He's doing the menacing stalking thing, and Hermione's just behind him, glum because she's lost her romantic first kiss moment, but suddenly, he whirls on her like he's about to take points with malicious glee. Hermione stumbles back, startled by the sudden moment, not quite sure what he's about to do...

And then it happens. He grabs her around the waist, pulls her to him like he did in that alley in Las Vegas and kisses her right there in the lobby, with the night staff looking on and a couple of college kids hovering over their friend who is vomiting into a potted plant.

Hermione has never cared for those silly romantic soundtracks, anyway.

The first time with Snape is like having a glass of water after being thirsty for such a very long time; it's lovely, but it happens so quickly that you're left short of breath and gasping for air, in need of another glass soon after because your thirst hasn't been quenched, it's been quickened.

They hurry back to their room, hand in hand, taking the stairs instead of the lift because there are too many people in the way, and Snape barely gets the door open before Hermione is upon him, hungry in a way she hasn't been for quite a long time. After that, it's a quick and desperate flurry of hastily removed coats and bruised shins and grasping hands and heavy breathing. They don't even make it to the bed; the sofa is much closer to the door, and they are both so hopelessly tangled in their clothes that actually making it to a piece of furniture at all is pure luck. His hands grip her hips, her legs go around his waist, one ankle still tangled in her trouser leg and knickers, and so very soon it's over, bright and beautiful and fantastic like a star shooting across the sky.

"I'm too old for shagging half-clothed on hard settees," Snape says, his cheek resting on her shoulder and his breath puffing across her cleavage.

"Then we should try it on a bed next time," she says.

He nods, pushes himself off of her then, tangling his fingers with hers, pulls her up and over to the bed.

The next time is a long, cool drink of water, and all she wants is more.

The next few days are a learning experience.

She learns that Snape is slightly ticklish on his ribs, that he has a heart-shaped birthmark on his hip which makes him blush the first time she finds it, and that if she works her mouth just so on his throat, she can make him moan with need and desperation.

She learns that his mouth and fingers are more talented than his sharp tongue and skill at brewing would have indicated, that the same filthy things that used to repulse her coming out of Ron's mouth are overwhelmingly hot coming out of Snape's, and that there actually is such a thing as one orgasm too many.

She learns that the mattress is terribly comfortable, the wrought iron headboard has more functionality than mere decoration, and the sashes on the canopy are easily manipulated into knots.

She learns that, though he insists that she's as bossy in bed as she is out, it isn't a complaint.

She learns that the faded Death Eater tattoo isn't as repulsive as she thought it would be, but that the scarring from various hexes and curses received from his time as a Death Eater and spy is worse than she ever might have imagined.

She learns that he tastes a bit like cinnamon.

She learns that he is a blanket thief.

She learns that she likes the sound of his heart under her ear when he's asleep and still and relaxed.

She learns that he watches her sleep, and that sometimes, if she opens her eyes at just the right moment, she might catch him smiling.

Also, she learns to drive.

"Those are tail lights, Granger, tail lights! They mean stop!"

"I know," she says pleasantly, shooting a sideways glance at Snape, who is clutching the dashboard with a white-knuckled grip. He's the worst back seat driver she's ever met, and although he's the only one she's ever met, she finds it impossible that she will ever meet anyone worse. "I can see."

"You wouldn't know it from the way you're tailgating elderly drivers in large No, Granger, when they stop, you stop!"

Hermione ignores him as she whips around the idling Cadillac that has just stopped suddenly half way down the parking lot aisle, and slides into a diagonal parking space in front of the Castillo de San Marco. Hermione shuts off the engine, turns to Snape, grinning triumphantly, and finds his open hand under her nose.

"Give me the keys," he says.

"What?"

"Give me the keys. I was mad for even considering letting an impulsive, reckless Gryffindor anywhere near Muggle machinery."

"You were the one who insisted I learn to drive." And she's still a bit stunned even after their drive back and forth across the country that he knew how to drive in the first place, let alone has been able to teach her. Even though she knows he is a half-blood who spent his early years in the Muggle world, she still considers him a part of the wizarding world, as she saw him everyday for six years stomping about in his wizarding robes and snarling out lectures about Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts. And though it seems normal enough that he was living like a Muggle in Europe, especially in that long coat that hinted at the robes he once wore, it was positively surreal to see him in America, doing things like driving and watching television, both of which he had been doing plenty since they stepped foot on American soil.

"And like becoming a Death Eater, it was a mistake I wish I hadn't made."

"That's hardly a fair comparison," she protests, but Snape's hand is still out, so to appease him, she drops the keys into his palm. It isn't like she doesn't know how to persuade him to give them back later.

"No?" Snape says, throwing open the passenger door. "Both have brought me closer to death more times than I can count."

Hermione rolls her eyes and gets out of the car. Snape locks the doors with the remote key, and as they stroll towards the admissions gate, Hermione wrestles her guidebook out of the shoulder bag she has taken to carrying when they go sightseeing.

"St. Augustine, Florida is the oldest continuously occupied European-established city, and the oldest port, in the continental United States," she quotes as they cross the parking lot. "Right, we know that. Ah, here we go. Castillo de San Marco was founded by the Spanish in 1565, but this is the tenth constructed fort on the site. It's made out of coquina, which is a stone formed from the compression of little shells-"

"Granger, must I hear your lecture before I even pay the admission price?" he asks, stopping at the booth to pay.

"I just wanted to get you started," she replies, quirkling a smile in his direction as he begins counting out the American bills. He just rolls his eyes at her, retrieves their tickets, and doesn't say another word as Hermione begins reading from the guidebook again as they enter the fort.

They take their time strolling through the courtyard and meandering through the lower level rooms, then find their way to the battlement where they stand together, looking out over the bay, the chilled, salt-scented wind tousling their hair. It's a warm day for February, though apparently this is the normal temperature for this time of year in Florida; she's comfortable in a skirt and a light sweater, and Snape is only in his shirtsleeves.

She slips her arm through his and looks up at him. The wind has brought up spots of color on his cheeks. It's rather fetching; it makes him look younger.

"You know, I've been thinking about the male pride comment I made in Las Vegas," she says.

"Yes, well," he replies, glancing at her sideways out of the corner of his eye, "I suppose you deserve to get in a cruel comment every now and again."

Sometimes he misses the points of these things entirely; she wonders what kind of home he came from to think that cruel comments were fair and normal in interpersonal relationships. She's sure that one day she will find out, but for now, she's worried about *their* relationship. "But I don't want to get in any cruel comments. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I shouldn't be so dismissive of that sort of thing."

Snape frowns as he stares out over the bay. "And I'm sorry I lied to you about the Legilimency."

Hermione blinks, startled to get a straightforward apology from the same man who so begrudgingly complimented her on her portrayal of Bellatrix Lestrange as an apology on the train out of Hungary oh so long ago. "Well, thank you," she says, unable to refuse such a bald apology from him. "Although, I am glad to know I was right."

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye again. "You mean you doubted yourself?"

"Well, no," she says, a tiny smile stealing into the curve of her mouth. "But it's nice to have proof every now and again."

Snape rolls his eyes, and when she steps close enough to link her arm through his again, he doesn't push her away.

"When we run out of money again," she says after a bit, "will you complain if I contact Harry?"

Snape stiffens next to her. "I meant it when I said I'm not taking any more money from Potter."

"You aren't taking any more money from Harry. I am." She pauses thoughtfully, and, somehow managing to keep a straight face, adds, "You can think of it as being a kept man."

Snape studies her for a moment, then slowly nods, a smile sneaking into the corners of his mouth. "Well, I'm not too averse to being a kept man."

She leans her head against his shoulder and rubs her cheek against the fabric of his shirt like a cat. "Then we're decided?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Good," she says sweetly, even as she is slipping her hand into his pocket to retrieve the car keys.

That night, as they lie curled together in bed with sweat evaporating from their bare skin, listening to the waves crashing in the distance and the wind blowing through the palm trees, she realizes that she can't remember the last time she thought about going home.

And she can't summon the will to care.

Part the Sixth: Home

Chapter 6 of 6

Hermione finally gets to go home.

Disclaimer: Not mine to infinity!

Part the Sixth: Home

She uses the wrong wand in Miami.

It's vampires again. She and Severus are walking along South Beach after a late dinner at an overpriced restaurant, having an insipid argument about whether grouper or tilapia is the fishier tasting fish. The weather in Miami is lovely and mild, even though it is only March, and Hermione is walking along the shore in a skirt and her bare feet, two fingers hooked through the straps of her sandals as the damp sand squelches between her toes. Snape, however, wears his usual trousers and shirtsleeves, though the sleeves are rolled up to his elbows in deference to the weather. For him, it's dressing scandalously, which Hermione finds very appealing; it's positively Victorian that she finds the rare glimpse of his forearm so arousing.

"Really, Granger, they're both fish," Snape is saying just when she has noticed two men walking along the beach towards them. "Therefore they both taste like fish."

"I'm not saying they don't taste like fish," she replies, even as she begins to notice that there is something not quite right about the approaching men, but she isn't sure what. "I'm just saying that one has a less fishy taste than the other."

"Ah. I agree, then. Must everything end in an argument with you?"

She's about to point out that he's the one who started the argument in the first place—she doesn't remember when or how, but she's sure he is the one who started it—but then she realizes what is bothering her about the men. The hotels and restaurants facing the ocean are giving off enough light to reveal that they are wearing Bermuda shorts—matching Bermuda shorts of the bright and tacky neon variety. She frowns a little, beginning to wonder if the men are wizards, though even horrendous Bermuda shorts are a bit too normal for wizards in Muggle disguise.

"Hey, man, got a minute?" the larger one says as they come into conversation distance, his smile flashing brightly in the second-hand light.

Snape and Hermione slow, which seems to be what they were waiting for, because as soon as Snape begins to say something in reply, the two men are on him in a flash.

She doesn't quite know what's going on at first; her brain isn't quite processing the sight of Snape rolling around in the sand with two men dressed in those painfully bright shorts. She thinks they're being mugged in the Muggle way, assuming the two men are attacking Snape because he's male and therefore more likely to be a threat. She hasn't even thought to identify them as vampires; this is the beach, a place of sunshine and summertime, hardly the kind of place she would expect vampires to visit. It isn't until Snape gets one hand under the larger vampire's jaw and pushes him back that she sees the sharp teeth and realizes what is happening.

Vampires she can deal with. She pulls out her wand and fires off a handful of heat-based spells. The smaller vampire squeals in agony as his eye-scarring shorts catch fire; the other one pulls him to his feet and drags him away and up the beach, trailing the scent of singed flesh and burning polyester behind them.

Hermione rushes to Snape's side, wand still in hand, and helps him to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, no thanks to you. Don't the Americans have *any* dark creature restrictions?" Snape says, pushing her away as she is trying to brush the sand off of his clothes. He's covered in the stuff; it's even sticking in his hair. "And how long were you just going to stand there gawking at me?"

"Sorry, I was a little stunned." She brushes a clump of sand from the arm of his shirt. "I didn't realize they were vampires."

"Oh, then it makes sense that you were just standing there while I was nearly their first meal of the night."

"Consider it revenge for Las Vegas," she replies. "And I don't know what you're complaining about." She gestures in the direction the vampires ran with her wand. "I took care of them in the end."

Snape has a sarcastic reply, of course, but she isn't listening to him because she has noticed that the wand in her hand isn't the oak wand she bought in Poland, but the walnut wand she took from Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Uh, Severus," she says in a wavering voice, cutting him off in mid sentence.

He looks at her sharply. "Tell me you aren't hurt, Granger."

She swallows around the lump in her throat. "I'm not hurt, but, um, don't be angry."

"Don't be angry about what?"

She holds out the wand, lying across her open palm. "It's the wrong wand."

Snape looks at the wand, then at her, then the wand again, and then he's got her by the elbow, and he's dragging her up the beach, towards the hotel. He orders her to the car while he checks them out, and then they are on the interstate again, just driving south with no clear destination in mind. Hermione feels sick and scared; she's not only going to get herself caught, she's going to expose Snape, and she doesn't want that for him.

"I can't break my wand," she says, and it's not what she wants to say. She wants to say the bit about not wanting to expose him, not the bit about not breaking her wand, and now she wishes she hadn't opened her mouth at all, because words keep coming out, and they keep being the ones she doesn't want to say. "I took this from Bellatrix Lestranger, and I'm keeping it, because she wanted to torture me and then kill me, but she failed. I'm still here, and she's long dead."

"I'm not going to make you break the wand," Snape says after a moment, the lights of the dashboard casting his face into a sharp chiaroscuro of light and shadow. She thinks he might be angry with her. She's sure he's angry with her. His face is that hard, twisted mask of hate and rage she saw so often when she was still his student and in love with Ron Weasley. "I think it's time you summon Potter. We won't have enough money to leave the country, otherwise."

Hermione nods and crosses her arms over her chest, watching the buildings and trees and lights of southern Florida flash by the window, her stomach churning with guilt and anxiety.

After a few minutes, Snape adds, "Don't worry, Granger. If they come for you, I won't let them take you."

She nods again and purses her lips together, trying to hold back the tears.

It's just as good as if he actually said the words, "I love you."

And in some ways, it's better.

They drive and drive until they can not drive any more and find themselves in Key West.

They find a hotel room and wait for the Aurors or for Harry, whoever reaches them first. But after a couple of days, when no one has come, they realize that the Aurors aren't coming the spells she cast must have fallen within the margin of error of the tracking magic. It doesn't take long for Snape to begin complaining about the heat which, she is willing to admit, is rather excessive for early spring and the people and the consistent lack of Potter and then the heat again. Hermione decides that she's heard enough and rents a beach house on Sugarloaf Key, which takes care of some of the complaints.

She refreshes the coordinates on the Galleon every day for a month, but Harry still does not come. She begins to worry that he won't, that he's lost his Galleon, or he's been found out for helping her leave the country or has even been killed in the line of duty or hit by a bus. When she says as much to Snape, he comments that the likeliness of the last is rather high, considering how Ernie Prang drives the Knight Bus, so she hexes him soundly and makes him sleep on the couch for two nights. After that, he does not make any more jokes about why Harry has not yet come, and his best to distract her. Usually they end up fighting, but then they end up in bed, and that's usually all right with her.

When Harry finally does show, it isn't on one of the long afternoons that Hermione spends walking along the beach, picking up sea shells and wading in the warm shallows, or in the evenings when she and Snape sit out on the porch watching the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico, or even on one of the quiet mornings when they sit on opposite sides of the kitchen table, enjoying breakfast and each other in silence.

No, it has to be right after one of their spectacular rows this time over who is to blame for the burned toast in the middle of a spectacular bout of sex, which is the most spectacularly bad time he could have chosen to come.

Hermione hears him pounding through the house like a gleeful puppy that's just been let out of its pen. She stops what she's doing, twisting around to look at the door, and Snape whimpers in protest.

"Granger," he pants, "what are you..."

"It's Harry," she whispers and begins trying to untangle herself from the knot of sheets and limbs they have managed to twist themselves into, horrified by the thought of poor Harry walking in on them in such compromising positions.

Underneath her, Snape begins muttering about door knockers, door bells and even knuckles, and the ridiculous dunderheads who can't seem to use any of them, but then she puts her knee somewhere sensitive and Snape barks, "Granger, careful!" and then the bedroom door bursts open, and everyone freezes right where they are: Hermione tugging at the sheet, Snape with his hand in a place it shouldn't be in polite company, and Harry in the doorway, his green eyes wide with shock.

And even more horrible, Ron is standing there, too, mouth agape in his best fly-catching pose.

Harry suddenly makes the same noise that Crookshanks makes when he's trying to bring up a hair ball and retreats back into the hallway as quickly as possible. Ron just stands there a moment more before he says in a rush, "Hermione, we're sorry it took us so long to come, but we were sorting out your exile, and you can come home now, and bloody hell, that's Snape!"

"Ron!" she screeches, her outrage at their invasion of the bedroom finally breaking through her horror and embarrassment. "Get out!"

Harry reappears long enough to grab Ron by the back of his shirt and drag him from the room. The door slams behind them, and she hears Ron say, "But she never did that to me when we were together!"

Whatever else is said is lost as they move off down the hall. With a sigh of relief and sudden exhaustion she loves the boys madly, but they just make her so tired sometimes Hermione collapses onto Severus and lies there for a few moments, listening contentedly to his heart beating under her ear.

It takes a bit for her to realize that he is lying stiff and still beneath her, muscles hard and taut. Frowning, she pushes herself up and leans over him, bracing herself on her hands.

"What's wrong?"

He does not reply. He just turns his head away from her to stare at the far wall, his jaw clenched, the tendons in his neck standing out in tension, the scar on his throat elongating and going white.

"Severus?"

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing with the motion. "Aren't you going?"

"Going where?"

"Back to England. Since the day you knocked me down in Budapest, you've done nothing but whine about wanting to go back."

Then she understands. He thinks she'll go with Harry and Ron without a second thought for him, even after she's learned so much like how satisfying an explicative can be when a car cuts her off, and exactly how long she can hold her breath, and how to know when Snape is just being a miserable sod and when he's lashing out in anger or fear, like, for example, now. "Wait, you think I'm just going to up and leave you?"

"Well, you want to go home, don't you?"

Hermione gapes at him for a moment, then with an affection shake of her head, curls up on his chest again, her ear to his heartbeat

"Idiot," she says. "I already am."

A/N: Thanks to everyone who's come along for the ride. I hope you enjoyed it!