

By the Sea

by Hanagasume

After years of being pressured into taking a break, Hermione Granger finally voluntarily goes on a research holiday. What she did not expect was to be sharing her chosen destination with one Severus Snape.

Part One

Chapter 1 of 2

After years of being pressured into taking a break, Hermione Granger finally voluntarily goes on a research holiday. What she did not expect was to be sharing her chosen destination with one Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

A/N Written as a two-part gift for the lovely WriterMerrin. She has been a great help and friend to me ever since I came to know her. I can't thank you enough, my dear!

Kudos and hugs go to Sequana for beta-ing this fic for me.

It was the middle of the day, and the sun was at its peak. The spring of that year had been good with little rain and much more sunshine than usual. Outside, the sound of children playing in the playground across the road could be heard. Inside the lovely old Brownstone, in the main bedroom on the second floor, Hermione Granger stood, looking out at the children enjoying the sunshine. Once, when they had been young, her own children would play in that very same park in the spring when it was sunny and in the winter when there was snow and the pond froze over so they could ice-skate.

But now her two children had both grown up and were already at Hogwarts. Rose was in her third year, and Hugo was in his first. Her two children with her former husband, Ron Weasley, were the apples of her eye. They had to be. She had only them. Ron had them, the former Lavender Brown and their own daughter, Eliza. Hermione had never remarried. There had just never been an opportune time for her to date during the first couple of years of her divorce, and after that, she had just never gotten around to dating anyone with all of her work as an Unspeakable.

Hermione liked her independence.

She and Ron were still very good friends. They had parted on amicable terms and still saw each other regularly at the Burrow and at Harry and Luna's house in Godric's Hollow. The Weasleys were still as much family to her as they had been while she had been married to one of their own. Ginny Malfoy was still one of her best friends. She had never once thought that she might be lonely.

But as she stared out the window that day, watching all the neighbourhood children play, she felt a sudden stab of loneliness go through her. She was lonely. With both of her children away, she had no one at the Brownstone with her, and this jolted her to awareness. She had never considered what her life was to be like when she had no one to come home to in the afternoon on her return from work. She had not given a thought to how she would feel if she didn't have to pack a lunch for Rose or Hugo for school before Apparating to the Ministry for work.

And now she was unsure what she was going to do about it.

Ginny had tried to set her up on several blind dates in the past month. Some of them were Quidditch players who played on the team Draco managed. Others had been Healers from St. Mungo's who worked with Ginny herself. None of them had been the kind of man Hermione could see herself finding happiness with. She considered herself lucky not to have taken up with any of them. Not even for a casual sexual encounter as Ginny had suggested, winking and nudging all the while.

Hermione sighed, pressing her forehead against the cool glass of the window briefly before pulling away and walking back out of her room and down the stairs. She had to get back to work. Every lunch break, she returned home, just so that she wouldn't be harassed at the Ministry by her friends, all of whom thought she needed to enjoy her life more. Harry was the worst he was always trying to get her boss to send Hermione on holiday behind her back, thinking he was being secretive. Of course, she couldn't be fooled so easily. Nobody could get Hermione's boss to do anything, excepting Harry.

But she had to admit, she had been getting a little tired. She might very well need a break away from everyone and everything she knew. It might be a good time for her to use up some of the holiday weeks that she had not used up over the years. With that thought in mind, she returned to work. At five in the evening, when she clocked out of the Ministry building and walked into Diagon Alley, she had officially worked her last day for the next two months.

She was going to take a holiday.

'Hermione!' a familiar, irksome voice yelled from behind.

She turned around and saw Harry walking briskly to catch up with her. He was, in turn, being followed by none other than Ron. Both of them worked together in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, so the two were glued to each other's sides more often than not. Harry finally stood before her, panting a little.

'How can I help you boys?' she asked with a warm smile.

'Luna wanted me to ask you over to dinner tonight,' Harry replied. 'Ron, Lav and Ellie are going to be there too.'

'I would have said yes, but I am going to be busy packing and planning all night,' Hermione replied, grinning at the shock on her two best friends' faces.

'What? Where are you going?' Ron asked, finally having caught up.

'I've taken some leave from work for a couple of months. I'm going to go on holiday starting tomorrow, and I still have to pack and make plans,' she answered. 'I would have told you, but it was more of a spur-of-the-moment decision than anything else.'

'Hermione Granger is going on a holiday?' Harry said, dumbfounded. 'Well, I'll be damned. Since when did you become spontaneous?'

'Apparently some time in the last ten minutes,' she said dryly, raising an eyebrow at him.

Harry had the modesty to look a little sheepish at that. 'Right, sorry,' he murmured. 'Well, I suppose we had better leave you to it, then. Have a nice trip, and don't forget to write and tell us all about what you get up to.'

'Yeah, and we'll try and write you back if we can find anything interesting to write about,' Ron added helpfully.

Hermione smiled and hugged both men. 'Thanks, you two,' she said softly. 'I'll be writing to you, but I won't expect letters back from either of you boys, anyhow.'

She turned and began making her way to the Apparation point once more and, on arriving, went straight home. As soon as she got there, she began making plans immediately, reading up on some popular tourist destinations before ignoring them in favour of some more academic ventures. She finally stumbled upon something that would interest her. It was a lovely seaside town in Scotland. There were a number of old, deserted castles and many ruins and henges both in the area and around the surrounding provinces.

It would give her a chance to relax while also providing stimulus for her mind to keep her occupied enough not to bore of her holiday. She could catch up on some reading. Deciding that this was definitely the place for her, she immediately did a search of the town to find appropriate lodgings and finally settled on a lovely bed and breakfast that was in the centre of the Muggle town. She phoned and made her booking. She would stay there for six weeks. Afterwards, she packed and ate a small dinner before going to bed and drifting off to sleep.

The next day, she showered and dressed, having a coffee before collecting together everything she would be taking with her on her trip. She Disapparated and reappeared at the edge of a forest that lined one side of the small, seaside village. Making the short trek to the rustic inn she was staying in, Hermione checked into her room and then deposited all of her belongings there before leaving to do some exploring.

The village was everything she had thought it would be: small, but lovely, with a pub, bakery, café and post office. Everyone she passed had a friendly smile for her and greeted her cheerfully. By the time lunch came around, Hermione had already decided that she very much liked her chosen destination. She ate a salad sandwich for lunch at the pub and then went to explore the small circle of Celtic rune stones located on the edge of the village near the cliffs.

After the sun had set, she returned to her accommodations and bathed, ordered food up to her room and was in bed by nine that night.

The next morning, she set out early in her khaki shorts, a white polo shirt and a backpack. She Disapparated from the forest's edge and arrived at the sight of an old ruined castle. There was a tall obelisk to the side of the castle, surrounded by stones that were all carved but were weathered by the elements. Smiling, she walked through the doors once she had reached the top of the castle stairs, patting her pocket to ensure her wand was still there. She walked through a hall and had just rounded a corner when she ran into someone. She barely registered the air leaving her lungs as she began to tumble backwards.

She closed her eyes, but her back never met the ground. A pair of strong arms had wrapped around her waist and heaved her up against a solid chest. She opened her eyes and looked up into a pair of very familiar black ones. Pulling back, she recognized her saviour as none other than Severus Snape.

'Professor Snape,' she said faintly.

'Ms. Granger,' he replied solemnly, hauling her into an upright position before setting her on her own two feet firmly.

'What a surprise,' she murmured, unconsciously clasping her hands together.

'Indeed,' he said, releasing her from his grip and stepping back to straighten once more to his full height. 'What brings you to Scotland?'

'I decided to take a holiday,' she replied, looking at her former professor more closely.

He was dressed in dark jeans with a black shirt tucked into them, the sleeves rolled to his elbows and the top buttons undone. He was so much the same, yet unbelievably different, to the man who had been her teacher. It took her a few moments, but she realised the difference was not only due to his lack of formal teaching attire but to the length of his raven hair. He was wearing it a good couple of inches longer than he had while she had been a student of his.

'I see,' Snape said simply, a dark eyebrow going up as he noticed her scrutiny of him.

Hermione had the grace to blush a little at that. 'What brings you to the coast?' she asked curiously, taking a moment to admire the lovely contrast between his dark clothes and hair and his pale skin.

'I am away from the school for the weekend,' he said quietly. 'For research.'

Her face lit up at the mention of research. 'What are you researching?' she inquired in her interest.

'Ancient Celtic history of potions,' he answered. 'I am formulating a new potion, and this research is critical for its completion.'

Resisting the urge to ask him more about it, Hermione simply nodded. 'Well, I'll just leave you to it, then,' she said, stepping away and walking around him.

'Ms. Granger,' he called just as she was approaching some stairs.

'Yes?' she asked, spinning around to face him.

'If you were not opposed, I could accompany you to the upper levels,' he offered quietly. 'It is quite dangerous to go up there alone, especially if you are unfamiliar with the structure of the castle.'

Hermione looked at him, dumbfounded, for a moment. Had Snape just offered to help her? 'I I suppose I wouldn't be opposed,' she stammered, waiting for him to join her at the foot of the stairs.

They ascended the stairs together, and Hermione immediately got to work. She took out her notebook from her pack and started marking down ancient inscriptions on the walls, translating some bits of Gaelic to English. Snape sat down by a crumbling windowsill the entire time, nose down in his own journal, scribbling away. They worked silently all the way through lunch, and it was only at five that evening, when the sun was slowly setting, that Hermione stopped her work.

'You haven't eaten since you arrived here,' Snape said, rising from his seat as Hermione began to pack her notebook into her backpack.

'Oh!' Hermione exclaimed, realizing that he was right. 'I suppose I got a little carried away with this, then.'

'Where are you staying?' he asked suddenly.

'At the Little Raven Inn,' she answered timidly.

'Very well,' he replied. 'You're looking peaky I will Apparate you into town.'

Although she has been surprised by this sudden offer, Hermione accepted it all the same. They Apparated straight into town, but instead of taking her to the inn, Snape took her by the elbow and led her to the local pub. Once inside, he ushered her into a darkened booth in a corner and gently sat her down in one of the seats before going to the bar to order drinks and food. On his return, he brought two glasses of red wine and sat down across from her.

'I hope you like red,' he murmured, sampling his own wine carefully.

'I do,' she replied, taking a small sip of the red liquid.

'I also took the liberty of ordering you the stuffed roast eggplant for dinner,' he said quietly. 'Forgive me for being so presumptuous, but it was the only vegetarian dish on their menu.'

Hermione smirked at Snape's discreet display of nerves. 'How did you know to order that?' she asked out of curiosity.

'All of the teachers at Hogwarts are aware of each student's dietary requirements,' he confessed simply, just as a waiter brought both of their meals out to their table.

She noted that Snape too ate only the eggplant meal for dinner. She supposed it made sense. He was one of the palest men she knew, who still appeared to be healthy for all intents and purposes. Not to mention one of the most naturally fit. His sinewy muscles had rippled under his shirt with each of his movements. Hermione snorted inwardly. She really must have been too long without dating or a good shagging to be checking out Severus Snape the way she was.

The two continued to eat dinner and drink in silence. When Hermione offered to pay him back for her own meal, Snape waved her off patiently. He escorted her as far as the door to the inn, where he bid her goodnight politely. Hermione went to bed that night, feeling extremely bewildered and confused. The next morning, she showered and dressed and then went to have breakfast downstairs in the dining room. There, she stumbled upon Snape, who was sitting alone at a table by the window, reading the paper and sipping at a cup of tea contentedly. Feeling decidedly bolder than she had the day before, she walked over to him and smiled.

'Professor Snape,' she greeted him cheerfully. 'What brings you here this fine morning?'

'Breakfast,' he said blandly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Well it really had been the most obvious thing in the world, but Hermione knew he was being deliberately vague.

'You know what I mean,' she said dryly, raising an eyebrow at him.

'I am a guest at the Little Raven also,' he replied. 'As it is Sunday, I will be returning to Hogwarts after completing my research.'

'Oh,' she said with a hint of disappointment flavouring her tone. 'Have you finished your research in the area, then?'

'Not yet,' he said simply, but did not make to elaborate any further. 'Have a seat.'

Hermione sat down across from him and took tea and toast for breakfast. When she finished, he folded up his morning paper, and they left the inn at the same time.

'Are you going back to the castle ruins today?' she asked him at the door.

'For a few hours,' he answered.

And so they both returned to the castle, Apparating separately. Hermione spent the day making sketches of the second and third levels of the building while Snape remained in his spot by the window from the day before. When he left that afternoon before sunset, he simply nodded at her before leaving the ruins and Disapparating from sight just outside of the castle. Hermione had assumed that she would not be seeing him again while she was on holiday.

However, when she saw Snape sitting at his usual table in the Little Raven's dining room after returning from her research the next Friday evening, she knew she had been mistaken in her assumption. Without waiting for an invitation, she sat down opposite him and ordered her meal. The waiter returned with her order soon after, and it was only after she had taken a couple of mouthfuls that she looked up to see Snape looking at her curiously.

'How was your week?' she asked conversationally.

'The same as any other week teaching useless teenage dunderheads,' he answered. 'Your two children I will exempt from this; however, your daughter seems to have inherited one of your more annoying habits.'

'Oh? And what might that be?'

'Your ability to drive me to distraction with endless questions,' he answered simply with a smirk.

Hermione smiled. 'I did ask a lot of questions when I was younger,' she admitted lightly. 'But, to be fair, I did think that I had a lot to prove back then, being a Muggleborn and all that.'

'Indeed.'

'What research brings you here this weekend?' she inquired, curious to know if he had plans to return to the same castle as the weekend before.

'It's not totally clear to me yet,' he said. 'During the week I stumbled across some information in the library about that castle and three other castles in the area around this village. Apparently all four were lorded over by the same family, but run under different members.'

'Oh! That does sound fascinating,' Hermione exclaimed enthusiastically, her eyes bright with interest.

'I would not be opposed to some company over the weekend while at the second castle,' he said, making the suggestion calmly.

'I wouldn't mind going to have a look at that, actually,' she said. 'I managed to complete the last of my notes and sketches at the first castle today.'

It was all settled after that brief conversation. For the rest of the weekend, Hermione accompanied Snape to the second castle of the four, each making their own notes during the day, before Snape would Apparate them in tandem back to the village. They dined together at the inn and went their separate ways again afterwards. Hermione discovered that his regular room was just down the hall from hers, as they had exited their rooms at the same time for breakfast on the Sunday morning. He left after their work on Sunday afternoon just a short time before sunset as the week before.

By the third Friday of her break, she had come to terms with the fact that she would be faced with seeing Snape most, if not every, weekend during her stay there. He brought a letter from her two children with him that week, which she thanked him for. After dining with him that night, she wrote back to them and her friends, telling them all about the village and her research, and sent the letters with a borrowed owl. She did not dare mention Snape to Harry or Ron.

When he left that third Sunday, Hermione felt a keen sense of loss that she had no words to describe.

Snape didn't return until the Saturday of her fourth weekend, which was unusual for him. She had gotten used to dining with him on Friday evenings in such a short time. Hermione had actually worried that he mightn't be returning at all. How paranoid she had become over Severus Snape. Over the past few weekends, she had come to appreciate his companionship and was finding him attractive, intelligent and stimulating. Initially she had believed she was going crazy or that she was lonely or desperate for company.

But she soon realized it was none of those things at all and that she was genuinely interested in him.

After spending all day Saturday in the third castle researching separately, they returned to the inn together. Both went their separate ways to bathe but met again in the dining room for dinner. The owner of the inn, a plump, friendly woman, had smiled on seeing this. Even she had noticed the growing kinship between them. Hermione could not help but sneak covert glances at Snape during their entire meal. He was so graceful and mysterious. Everything about him allured her. If it were not for her upbringing as a proper lady, she might have attacked him, the other guests be damned.

Once they had finished dinner, they ascended the stairs in silence, both seemingly too nervous to break it. When they reached the top, Hermione worked up the courage and gently touched his wrist. He turned to her and looked into her eyes with his own dark eyes. They were shining with a desire that was surely reflected in hers. No questions were asked or words spoken. Snape went with her to her rooms that night, and in the morning, she awoke naked in his arms, dozing comfortably beneath the sheets and duvet on the bed.

She turned to look at him, finding he was also awake. 'Why?' she asked nervously, her confidence of the night before failing her in the light of day.

'Because these past weeks have become less about my research and more about seeing you,' he answered honestly, stroking her cheek with a long finger.

Tears prickled her eyes. 'That was the loveliest thing that has been said to me in a long while,' she whispered with a watery smile.

'It is a shame, then, a woman as lovely as you has been deprived of such compliments,' he murmured, tilting her face up to his before kissing her with a tenderness she had never known.

They lay in silence for a few minutes until Hermione spoke. 'I wish you didn't have to leave today,' she said wistfully.

'I wish I didn't have to leave,' he replied, dragging her naked flesh against his more firmly.

'Will you come back next weekend?' she asked, looking up into his eyes hopefully.

His expression darkened slightly, and Hermione knew she would not like the answer. 'I have Hogsmeade duties next weekend,' he answered. 'I won't be able to return for a fortnight.'

Hermione controlled her features, resisting the urge to show him her disappointment at his reply. She couldn't believe how quickly she had become enamoured with him how quickly she had come to care about him. She snuggled against his side, nestling her head into the crook of his shoulder and closed her eyes to the daylight. His hand drifted over her back, warming her, but he said no more on the matter. No research was done that day. In the evening, Severus rose from her bed, showered and dressed. He kissed Hermione tenderly before he left, stroking her face affectionately.

That night, Hermione slept poorly and ate dinner at their usual table alone. Only the keeper of the inn saw how unhappy she was without the man who had recently become her lover and companion.

To be continued...

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 2

After years of being pressured into taking a break, Hermione Granger finally voluntarily goes on a research holiday.
What she did not expect was to be sharing her chosen destination with one Severus Snape.

A/N The second and final part of my gift fic to WriterMerrin. Thanks again, my dear!

Also, a big hug of thanks must go to Sequana for being such a diligent and excellent beta! I can't thank you enough for all of the help you have been.

--

Over the next week, the village got more than its fair share of rain. There was not one dry day. Hermione got very little research done, purely because the lack of natural light prevented her from doing so. She was very reluctant to use magic at the sites in case the spells should trigger any ancient wards that were already on the castle. The weekend that she spent without Snape seemed to drag on forever. It seemed time itself was working against her in tandem with the weather. She did, however, manage to get a good two thirds of the way through her holiday reading.

The week that followed was marginally better. The weather had cleared some, and she got a lot more work done on the third castle. She chose to leave the fourth castle until her companion returned that weekend. As Friday drew nearer, her anticipation heightened, and by the time Friday afternoon passed, Hermione found she had lost the ability to concentrate on her task. She returned to the inn early that afternoon and indulged herself with a long soak in a hot bath.

At exactly six that night, she went down to the dining room. To her delight, Snape was already there, and he glanced up at the doorway just as she was entering. He gifted her with one of his small, rare smiles, and she walked over to join him, trying not to run and throw herself at him. He stood and courteously helped her into her seat, dropping a kiss on her forehead before he returned to his own chair. She smiled in relief, glad to see him and even happier knowing he did not regret their night together two weeks beforehand.

'I missed my companion,' she said simply after they had ordered.

He flushed a little at her words, but smiled slightly all the same. 'I missed my companion also,' he replied, gratified to see her smiling so brightly.

She was so lovely when she smiled like that. After dinner, he took her up to his room, and they made love. For Severus Snape, this was a new experience. He had never made love to a woman before Hermione. He cared for her. There was a deep connection that he felt between them that went far beyond his physical attraction to her and his admiration for her intellect. Never had he slept with a woman he felt for before. If he were honest, it touched him far more than he thought was safe. He was in danger of falling in love, and in such a short time.

That night, they slept in each other's arms once more, and in the morning, Hermione surprised him by pleasuring him into wakefulness. He took her again before they showered and dressed for the day of research ahead. They had a quick breakfast before Apparating to the fourth and final castle. Hermione led the way up to the second floor, and they spent a good half of the day studying the runic markings together and deciphering them.

Just after midday, Hermione went up the stairs to the third floor.

A few minutes after she had gone from his sight, there was a loud rumble and a sharp shriek from above. Severus was on his feet before he could think and took the stairs three at a time with his long legs, trying to reach Hermione. What he found was that a column had collapsed, and one of the walls had completely crumbled with it. Hermione was nowhere to be seen, so she had obviously become trapped within.

'Hermione?' he called, beginning to panic slightly.

'Severus, my wand broke,' said her muffled voice, followed by a small sob. 'I think my leg might be broken, too.'

'I'll get you out,' he swore, beginning to move the stones as carefully as he could without disturbing any more or causing the pile to crumble in and crush Hermione any further. 'Are you short of oxygen at all?'

'No, there's a small gap on the left side,' she answered, sniffing.

Severus thought that she was being fairly calm for someone who was in the middle of having a brush with death, as she still wasn't out of danger.

He worked his way to the left side, where there was a gap as promised. There was enough room for him to reach his hand in and grasp hers for a moment before returning to his work of removing the rubble. It took over an hour, but he cleared away enough of the mess to lift Hermione out of her entombment and carry her down to the second level. He felt for the break in her leg and found it, casting a powerful healing spell on it to knit the bone back together. Silently, he packed their things up and shouldered both of their bags before returning to pick her up off the ground. Once outside, he placed her to sit on a sturdy-looking log.

'You gave me the biggest fright of my life,' he admitted to her immediately. 'What were you thinking, going up to the third level on your own? You saw how deteriorated it was before we even entered the castle.'

Hermione looked down at her hands in her lap guiltily. 'I suppose I thought it would be okay for me to look around for a few minutes on my own,' she said quietly.

Snape saw a tear fall and land on the hands clasped in her lap. Feeling guilty himself for scolding her like he would a teenager, he tilted her face up to look at him as he knelt down before her.

'I'm sorry, Hermione,' he said, gently wiping her tears. 'I was afraid. I don't mean to scold you like that, but you had me so worried.'

'I'm sorry for going off on my own like that,' she told him, throwing her arms around him and hugging him fiercely.

They remained like that for a little while until Hermione felt like she could walk. Apparating them both back to the edge of the forest near the village, Snape escorted her back to the inn, leaving a hand to rest on her waist the entire time. They rested for the remainder of the afternoon on her bed and bathed together in the large claw-footed bathtub in her bathroom before dinner.

After dining that evening, the pair went for a short walk along the cliffs, looking out at the wild waters of the Highlands. It was mutually decided that they would not be returning to the last of the castles. Snape had gathered all the research that he required for his potion already, and Hermione simply had no wish to go back to the place where she had almost lost her life and, meanwhile, scared the living daylight out of Snape. They spent the day abed, reading together and going over all of the research they had done over the past weeks. Hermione compared her notes to his and found that there were a few similarities in their work.

Snape found that Hermione's notes were extremely thorough but more focused on the ruins and ancient symbols than his own were. Naturally, they were doing different projects, but he noted that their observations and sketches did overlap where the most important parts were concerned. He realised then that he might actually need her help with his project and decided to ask her for it, his pride be damned.

'Hermione, your holiday will be ending soon,' he stated simply.

'Yes, it will,' she answered softly. 'On the Friday of this next week, in fact.'

He nodded and turned to her on the bed, pulling her into his arms for a hug. 'I want to see you again, after tomorrow,' he told her.

Hermione's face lit up at his words. 'I would be happy to see you again after tomorrow,' she replied with an adoring smile.

'I want to ask for your assistance with my potions project,' he said carefully, testing the waters. 'It seems you have a lot of Arithmetic insights that could prove to be rather helpful for the completion of my potion.'

Her smile only brightened at that. 'You would trust me with your research?' she asked, her voice holding a hint of amazement.

'I would trust no one else with such a precious thing,' he answered. 'I know you would respect my work and appreciate what it is that I am trying to accomplish.'

'Severus, I am honoured that you would even ask me,' she told him honestly, leaning up to kiss him briefly on the lips. 'I will be able to help you whenever you like on my weekends off from work.'

'I think that would be agreeable to me,' he agreed. 'The summer is only a short few weeks away, and the examination period will begin soon. With all of my grading, there will be little time for me to give attention to my project.'

'I could help with that,' she said, smiling and cuddling up close to his side.

He nodded and put his arm around her, hugging her to him also when a thought came to him unbidden. 'Your children,' he said quietly. 'And your family and friends they would not approve of you being associated with me.'

Hermione pulled back suddenly, shocked at what he had just said. 'They will do no such thing,' she said, frowning. 'Who I choose to see has never been any of their business before, and it still won't be.'

'I don't want to be the one who sits between you and having a normal life, Hermione,' he said carefully. 'Our relationship can't be known to them.'

Hermione opened her mouth to argue but stopped just short of it. He was a stubborn man who would undoubtedly think that his way was the only way their relationship would work. She would be his secret lover, and he would be hers. They would see each other only on weekends. Sometimes it would not even be every weekend because he had his duties, and during the summer, Hermione had her children with her every second weekend. She knew that allowing him to have his way would be difficult, but the last thing she wanted to do was tie him down.

'It'll be difficult that way, but if you want to keep this just between us, then I will be happy to oblige for now,' she agreed partially, meaning to change his mind in time.

Snape sighed and set aside their notebooks and journals. He removed his shoes, socks and shirt and slid beneath the covers of her bed, patting the pillow on her side to indicate that she should do the same. It was a good couple of hours until dinner time, and he was feeling a little lethargic from the excitement of their day. Hermione took off her shoes and socks also, joining him under the cotton sheets and the simple duvet on the bed, sliding right into the nook created by Snape's shoulder and arm.

They slept and woke two hours later, combing their hair and donning shoes quickly before they slipped down to their usual table. With it being Snape's final night at the inn, they slept together and made love in his room that night. The next day they spent outside in the sunshine, having a picnic lunch and reading together in the shade of a tree. If anyone that knew Hermione and Severus had seen them together that way, they would think that the world had gone mad. Everyone knew that Hermione Granger was a workaholic and that Severus Snape was one of the most unfriendly men in the wizarding world.

Nobody would suspect that Hermione would laugh so freely with such joy in her eyes. None would have suspected that Snape was capable of doing more than smirking, especially if there had not been a removal of house points from a Gryffindor. But the keeper of the inn had not known the pair before their arrival in the small village. All that she saw was two people that were falling very much in love with one another.

When the sun set that Sunday afternoon, Snape bid Hermione farewell. He kissed her hard and drew a promise from her to go to him at Hogwarts the next weekend. Hermione agreed and promised to use the secret entry by the forest. None of the students, least of all her children, would ever know that she had even come. He gave her one last, lingering kiss and Disapparated on reaching the edge of the forest. She returned to the inn alone and made plans to leave the seaside cliffs of Scotland the very next day. Before she went to bed that night, she settled her bill with the owner and climbed the stairs, suddenly weary.

The next morning, she awoke and packed her things, checking out and heading to the forest before breakfast even came about. While the entire place was still beautiful to her, it just wasn't the same without her lover and companion. Hermione Apparated home and unpacked again, Banishing her unclean clothes to the laundry and sending her books all flying back to her study, where they shelved themselves correctly. It took less time than she had wanted it to, so she had to find something else with which to occupy herself.

Later that day, Hermione owed Luna to see if her friend was home. She got a reply via the Floo soon after, saying yes and that Luna would be delighted to have her over. Pleased at having something to do, Hermione Apparated to Godric's Hollow into Harry and Luna's backyard. She entered the house through the back door, knocking and calling out for the slightly younger woman as she did.

'We're in the sitting room!' Luna called out to her in reply.

Hermione walked through the house and found Luna sitting with Albus Severus on the floor with a pile of books, some butcher's paper and tubes of paint. 'This looks like fun,' she said, joining them on the ground covering that was obviously to prevent paint from getting on the carpet.

'We got bored,' Albus told her with a grin.

'How was your trip, Hermione?' Luna asked, brushing a stray hair out of her face, but getting a smudge of blue paint on her cheek in the process.

'It was very interesting and worthwhile,' Hermione answered as honestly as she dared. She remembered her promise to Severus no one could know.

'You look a lot more relaxed than you did a few weeks ago,' the blonde witch stated, causing Hermione to blush a little. 'Maybe you had a better time than you let on in your letters.'

Albus pulled a face at that. 'You two aren't going to start having a ladies' talk, are you? Because if you are, I'm out of here,' he said simply.

Hermione laughed at this. 'Now, whatever do you mean by that, Al?' she asked curiously.

'You know what I mean. You're going to start talking about boys and kissing and things like that,' he said, wrinkling his nose. 'You girls always talk about kissing and gross stuff like that.'

The two women laughed at that, and Albus took that as his cue to leave the room. Luna then turned on Hermione with a strange smile. 'I know you're not going to tell me who he is, but I know you took a lover,' she confided dreamily.

'Luna, how on earth could you have guessed that?' she asked seriously.

'I just sense a change in you,' she answered simply. 'You're in love with him, aren't you, 'Mione?'

Hermione stopped for a moment and thought about her answer to that. Her immediate thought was that she couldn't possibly be in love with him so soon. However, her next thought was one that was less rational but made more sense to another part of her at the same time. She felt her heart pound at the thought of him. She must be in love with Severus. Everything in her wanted to scream out yes. Only part of her brain, the sensible, uptight part, kept refusing to believe it.

'I think I might be in love with him,' she admitted regardless.

Later that night, as she was readying for bed, Hermione reflected that she had cast off a terrible weight when she had admitted her love for Snape to Luna. While she had not spoke his name or anything about him, saying the words out loud had been a great relief to her. As she lay staring at her ceiling, she wondered for a moment if he could someday feel the same way for her. She wondered how long it would be before he tired of being with her. She feared it, in fact. Her sleep was restless in the nights that followed, her fear growing every day that she did not see him and being reassured that he still found her desirable. It had been so long since a man had looked at her and

touched her the way he had. She was reluctant to give it up so quickly.

Friday afternoon arrived quickly, after the first couple of days alone at her home. Hermione Apparated to the point Severus had told her to go to at the edge of the Forbidden Forest and went to the secret dungeon entrance. She walked down a dimly lit hallway until she reached a door with a brass handle. She opened it and walked in, only to find herself in Snape's office. He was not there, but she was reluctant to stray. Sitting in a chair at his desk, Hermione waited for a full ten minutes before the Potions master himself made an appearance.

He looked a little haggard, as though he had not slept well and had been terribly busy all day possibly even all week. Hermione offered him a timid smile, which he returned slightly once the door was closed and locked behind him.

He led her through to his chambers, giving her his password freely and telling her that she was welcome there whenever she felt the need to be there. With that small gesture and his words, all of Hermione's fears from the week seemed to simply disappear. It seemed to her that while he was unwilling to commit in some ways, in others he more than compensated for that. They ate and made love that night amidst the Egyptian cotton sheets of his bed. Those and the black silk of his duvet covered them as they slumbered in the aftermath. The next day they got right to work on his potions project, and the rest of the weekend was spent in the same manner as they had while in the northern village: work during the day, play during the night.

Hermione enjoyed this routine for a few weeks before the end of the school year came, and she was then forced to see him only every second weekend or for only a couple of hours whenever one of them could find the time to get away. A handful of times, Hermione had been so busy at work and with her children that Severus had come to her for a few hours one night and made love to her in her own bed.

It was only when the summer was nearing an end that Hermione found that what they were doing was taking its toll on her. She was exhausted from work, tired from having to take care of Rose and Hugo and sore from everything that she was putting herself through. She knew she was in love with Severus, but even so, she found herself tiring of having to keep it all a secret from the other people she loved. Hermione had spent the entire weekend with Severus, and she awoke on the Sunday knowing that she was finally going to have to make a decision.

'Good morning, pet,' he told her as she sat up, the sheets sliding off her and revealing her upper body to his hungry eyes.

'Severus, we need to talk about something,' she said, knowing it sounded very much like the kind of line people used when they were about to break things off.

He sat up then as well and faced her. 'What is it, Hermione?' he asked her seriously.

'I can't keep seeing you like this, Severus,' she said simply, not bothering to sugar-coat it. She knew he would appreciate her straightforwardness. 'I can't keep sneaking around and keeping things from my friends and family.'

His expression became a mixture of confusion and annoyance. 'Hermione, we have been getting along fine like this for the past four months now; what has changed?' he asked.

'I have changed,' she answered. 'I'm tired exhausted, actually. And if I don't fix it soon, I'm going to break down and break away from everyone I love.'

'Pet, I'm not sure I follow you completely,' he said, shifting over so that he could rub her back soothingly as she began to cry.

'I've loved you since the moment I saw you again those six months ago, Severus,' she said through her soft sobs. 'I can't deal with having two half-lives. I want you to be a part of my whole life with Rose and Hugo too. They deserve to know the most.'

'They would only hate me more,' he argued.

'They would not,' Hermione assured him, turning her teary face on him. 'They don't hate you at all in fact, Hugo said that you were his favourite professor.'

Snape snorted. 'I don't know how that could be possible,' he scoffed.

Hermione sighed. 'Well, believe it,' she said simply, standing and Summoning her clothing to her, beginning to dress. 'I have to leave to pick up Rose and Hugo from the Burrow in a little while. I'll get cleaned up at home first.'

'So this is it, then?' he asked. 'Are you ending things with me?'

'Only if you want to keep hiding things, Severus,' she answered. 'I'll not say yes or no definitely, but I'm leaving the rest up to you now.'

Hermione left his chambers then and Apparated straight home. She showered and redressed in clean clothes before heading to the Burrow to collect her two children from their grandparents' home. Rose and Hugo both seemed quite happy to see her. On their return to the Brownstone that they had grown up in, the pair had stuck by Hermione's side all afternoon as she read a book, and they either studied or played Exploding Snap. When the time to prepare dinner came around, Rose helped her in the kitchen, while Hugo set the table in the dining room.

Once dinner was ready, all three moved the serving dishes out to the table and served themselves. While Rose had taken after her mother and chosen to be vegetarian, Hugo still ate meat as hungrily as Ron ever had. Halfway through their meal, however, the front doorbell rang.

'I'll get it!' Hugo exclaimed excitedly, jumping down from his seat and rushing to answer it.

Hermione looked over to the doorway and strained to try and listen to the two voices so that she could hear who it was. 'Hugo, darling, who is it?' she asked.

'Mum, you had better come out here!' he called right back.

Hermione rose from her chair and walked out of the dining room, her brow creased a little in partial curiosity and panic. She made her way down the hall and nearly fell over when she that Severus was handing Hugo his coat at the front door. Her son was smiling at her, and she looked up to see that Severus' dark eyes were on her also.

'Severus?' she said softly.

'I don't want to be without you,' he said simply. 'I love you, too.'

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. She looked at Hugo who nodded and smiled at her and felt a hand touch her own gently. She looked beside her to see that Rose was also nodding and smiling, urging her forward to Snape. Smiling and crying softly, she walked over to the man she loved and threw her arms around him for a hug, kissing him soundly but gently on the mouth.

And as he lifted her easily into his arms and swung her around, she knew that everything was going to be fine from then on.

--

Terminus.