

My First Friend

by blue artemis

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This was written for the 2010 Granger Enchanted Christmas Challenge.

I wonder if anyone will even notice that I'm gone? I doubt it. They are all caught up with themselves. Hermione Granger's thoughts were in a whirl as she headed for the International Floo station at the Ministry. She was heading to Portugal for the holidays. She had to get away from it all. It was seven years since the Final Battle, seven long years from that one heated kiss she shared with Ron. He had moved on, citing too much familiarity. She couldn't begrudge him the truth, but she had been so ready to settle for what everyone expected that she was almost blindsided. He was married to Hannah Abbott, he had somehow stolen her away from Neville, and they were blissfully happy raising their brood of children. They were on the fifth, she believed. Harry, Ginny and Draco were happily making both the Weasleys and the Malfoys crazy. There was currently an heir for the Malfoys, one for the Potters and a little girl who had everyone wrapped around their fingers. However, no one could explain how it was she had blonde hair, green eyes, and freckles. Hermione knew, but she wasn't telling. *For Circe's sake, even Snape is happy. Although no one knows why Luna persists in calling him Rolf.* The Scamanders were quite happy to accept the world-reknowned Potion Master as their son, even moreso since he seemed delighted to help Luna search for rare animals.

Customs officials are the same the world round, it seems. Hermione was subjected to a rather personal search, until she basically threatened to go to the press.

"C'mon, Granger. Give a bloke a chance. It might even be true love."

"You know, Pucey, I doubt it. I like being treated with respect, not groped in public."

"It's my job. Gotta have my fun when I can find it."

"Happy Christmas, Pucey," Hermione said with a wry smile.

Adrian Pucey smiled and waved at the departing woman. "Damn. Just wait until Blaise hears I got to feel Granger up for Christmas."

Hermione arrived in Portugal at a beautiful villa with a vineyard, a huge magical garden and greenhouse, and none of the reminders of what she didn't have. No children, no redheads, no drama, *no love, no comfort* Just a box full of books she hadn't read yet, and an appetite for the local food. She was hoping to forget what she didn't have and enjoy what she did.

The first night there she was served a dinner of fish with tomato and bean sauce with lots of fresh vegetables and herbs, freshly baked bread and the house wine.

"Oh, my, Mrs. Mariposa, this dinner was excellent. And where did you say the wine came from?"

"Thank you, dear. The wine was made here. Actually, everything you ate except for the fish was from the villa proper. The owner has a grand business with his plants and herbs, and he decided to set up the vineyard to actually make wine. It is quite popular in the countryside."

"If the owner has any time, I would love to take a tour of the grounds and see the winery."

"I will ask him when he returns from his trip. He likes to go out and find new plants. Right now he is in Australia, since it is their summer. He should be back in a week, right before Christmas."

"Thank you, Mrs. Mariposa."

For the next week, Hermione would take long walks around the villa and surrounding countryside, noting the wards, which were not as good as she could make them, the winery, the magical plants and herbs, which would make most potioners drool and mostly, the serenity of the area. It was a panacea to her bruised spirit; she was rediscovering herself in a manner that made her realize that she had let quite a few of her friendships go because she was jealous of what they had, instead of being happy for them and finding her own way. She wasn't certain when she had become the most immature of her friends. She decided to write to all of them, apologizing for her behavior, and thanking them for still trying to include her, even when she must have been a drag. As the owls went out, she felt a peace she couldn't remember feeling for a very long time.

Harry took the letter he received to Ginny and Draco; although he was the primary addressee, they were included and mentioned in the body of the letter.

"I'm glad she ignored us this year and went away. It was time for her to take stock of her life."

"You are right, Red. I've been telling you guys that wasn't Granger. She wasn't being herself."

"So, what should we say back to her?" Harry asked.

"The truth. What do you feel like saying?" Draco responded.

"That I love her, and I'm so glad she is feeling better."

Ginny nodded her head in agreement. "I agree. She seemed so lost when Ron left her, like she had given up on life. I don't think they would EVER have made a great match, but she seemed so tired and ready to settle. Oh, and I want to tell her there is nothing to apologize for; she was just dealing with the war her way. It just took her longer."

Hermione's parents just about threw a party when they got their letter.

"I'm glad we didn't have to hold an intervention," her father said.

"Do you do interventions for depression?" asked her mother. "In any case, let me send her this bottle of wine we found. She's certain to enjoy it. Remember the wine tastings we used to go to together?"

"I think that, with a note of our own being glad we have our girl back will let her know how we feel."

"Hannah, did you see this?"

"It was addressed to you, Ron. I don't read your mail."

"I know, sweetheart, but don't worry. All those things you were saying about Hermione being depressed and not herself seem to be true. But why would she apologize?"

"Because she's that kind of person, Ron. You all had seven years of living on the edge. It kind of makes sense that she's taken seven years to let it go."

"You are wise, my wife. Does it come from owning a pub?" Ron didn't manage to keep a straight face for long.

Hannah hit him on the back of the head with the flat of her hand, then gave him a kiss and summoned the parchment and a quill so he could write back to Hermione. "Be sure you tell her she is family and always welcome, and send her a hug and kiss from me." Ron smiled at his wife. He may have been teasing, but he did love her homey wisdom.

"Oh, yay! I knew those Wrackspurts couldn't survive in Portugal. The Humdingers eat them there."

"I agree, love. Hermione certainly needed to find a place where her thoughts weren't weighing her down. I'm glad she went there. No mention of Longbottom, though."

"No, he's not due back until tomorrow. I hope my feeling is true."

"They usually are, my moon-girl. Although I'm still trying to picture Granger and Longbottom together."

"You are imagining them at eleven, Rolf. Add fourteen years, and then think about it again. Even you said Neville had turned out surprisingly well the last time we saw him."

"He couldn't brew a potion to save his life, but he certainly makes a good bottle of wine."

Hermione read her letters, which had arrived in the morning's mail. The change in her mood was palpable. "The air almost exudes a cheering charm; this place was a perfect choice for what I wanted this year."

"There is magic here." Hermione startled at the deep voice that answered her. It seemed vaguely familiar.

"There must be. I was lost, wondering what to do with myself, I came here, and now everything's changed." Hermione took a chance and spoke as she turned toward the voice.

"Listening to Luna can do that to you. You just have to understand what she is saying."

Hermione finished turning and came face to face with the owner of the voice. "Neville! Oh goodness, you look wonderful!" He did. He was tall, tanned, muscular and calm.

Neville smiled and held his arms open, hoping Hermione would respond the way he wanted her to. Hermione took one look at the familiar face offering comfort and jumped

into his arms.

Neville laughed out loud and swung her around. "So, Mrs. Mariposa tells me you would like a tour of the magical part of the grounds?"

"You own this?"

"Yes. Once Hannah left me, and my Gran passed, I decided to start anew. I wanted to have my own greenhouse and garden, and I started to travel to find the best place. I found this villa, and I realized I was home. This place sits on a conjunction of minor ley lines, which help the calming effect. I've made a lot of money with my potion supply business, the winery and the villa."

"No wife, Neville?"

"No. The right witch hasn't figured out how much I care about her."

"Oh, too bad. I don't have anyone either. I'm hoping that will change, now that I'm feeling myself again."

Neville smiled, and held his arm out to Hermione. "Let's tour the grounds, shall we?"

Hermione took his arm happily and went along. Neville pointed out various things on the grounds: his more unusual plants, the small but productive winery, the vegetable garden, the barn, where there were goats and sheep, including some kids and lambs and his pride, the greenhouse.

"Neville, I hope you don't think I'm being too much of a bossy know-it-all, but I noticed your wards are kind of primitive. I can make them much better pretty easily. Or I could show you how."

"I knew they aren't the best, but there aren't many people I'd trust with the wards here. People tend to forget the plants and livestock that might not respond well to the wards."

"Oh, I know! I'm so glad you were thinking of that. I will have to research which wards work best with what, but I think most successful wizarding farms have an interwoven set of wards that have different wards at the forefront, depending on where they are in relation to the central focal point, which here would be the villa."

Neville looked at her. "You mean like at Hogwarts?"

"Exactly! You've always understood me when I go off on one of my educational rants, haven't you?"

"You were my first friend, Hermione. You may not have been as close to me as you were to Harry or Ron, but I always paid attention." Neville looked away after smiling ruefully.

Hermione looked at the handsome man standing with her and saw the chubby, sweet face of the boy she befriended on the train. "Oh, Neville." Giving in to her emotions, she threw her arms around him again. After a couple of seconds, he pulled her in close, burying his nose in her hair. Hermione was astounded by how safe she felt.

The couple went in to dinner, which had been laid out for them by Mrs. Mariposa. Tonight it was roasted lamb, jacket potatoes, a tomato, mozzarella and basil salad, fresh green beans almondine and a flan for dessert. After they ate, they moved to the living room and sat on the couch together.

"You eat the most amazing food here, Nev."

"It is mostly because it is fresh, and Mrs. Mariposa and her sister are excellent cooks."

"They seem to understand the magic but not use it. Were they married to wizards?"

"Mrs. Mariposa was, but I believe she is a Squib. Her daughter is the local Healer. She uses both magical and natural techniques; she's very effective. Her name is... "

"Lizette Aurora."

"How did you know?"

"I studied some of her techniques when I was getting my Mastery in Warding. She takes the entire ecosystem into consideration when healing, and it gets really good results. I use the same in my warding."

"I didn't realize you had attained your Mastery."

"You are the first person I've told. Most people thought I was just wallowing in my misery, and yes, I certainly did that, but I couldn't let my brain go. I got interested in warding because Gringotts had said that if I worked under one of their teams for six years, I could pay them off. I had my money from the Ministry to live off of, and after the second year Coragok was willing to take me on as his apprentice for the remainder of my time there. I had my portion of the damages paid off after my fourth year, but I needed the apprenticeship time."

Neville smiled. "You are one of the few witches I know who would apprentice themselves to a goblin."

"I think the offer was originally meant to show that I was all talk and would never accept it. But when Bill found out, he was in hysterics because his boss had never made him that offer, and he had to figure out his Curse-Breaking on his own. I'm not stupid, I know goblins are the best warders around. I've become quite popular with the legacy families."

"Of course you have," replied Neville wryly. "A Mudblood is far better to have warding your property than a goblin. At least you are still a witch."

Hermione raised an eyebrow archly. "Is there a script out there? That is exactly what Pansy said to me."

Neville and Hermione caught each other's eyes and started laughing. Hermione snuggled close, and Neville put his arm around her. He leaned down to kiss her on the forehead, as he had done many a night in the Gryffindor common room, when she unexpectedly looked up. The kiss caught her lips, and instead of backing away, she leaned into it. The kiss deepened, and Hermione started to move upward, when Neville placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed her away gently.

"I'm not rejecting you, Hermione. Yes, I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that I don't want the know-it-all, that I know about your scars and am put off by it, that I just couldn't possibly want you." Neville sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "I want you too much. I could live with Hannah leaving me. I made my life here, and I'm happy. But if you started something here and changed your mind and left, 'Mione, it would break me."

"I understand, Neville. But that was the best kiss I've ever had. And I loved being snuggled up to you. It felt like home."

They both stared at each other for a while, then laughed again.

"OK, 'Mione, let's try this again. You are here for another two weeks, right?"

"Three."

"Even better. We will get to know each other, all those little things we take for granted because we were at school together for so long. We will go on dates and snog on the

couch. How does that sound?"

"That sounds wonderful, Neville. Good night." Hermione headed up to bed. She had a lot to think about.

Neville looked after the woman he had loved ever since she had taken him in hand and helped him find his toad on the train; he sincerely hoped this worked.

Early that next morning, Neville knocked on Hermione's door. He had to stifle a laugh when he saw her. She had on one of Harry's old Quidditch jerseys, which hung to mid-thigh, but was starting to get worn in spots, her hair was escaping its braids and her feet were encased in gigantic dragon slippers that were puffing smoke. "You look adorable."

Hermione squawked and was about to shut the door when Neville pushed one of his shoulders through. "Don't worry about that. Just dress warmly; we are going to get ourselves a Christmas tree today." Hermione nodded, thunderstruck. She wasn't used to Neville being assertive.

Once they had breakfast, Neville walked Hermione out to the Apparition point. "Hold on." Hermione put her arms around him, and Neville began his turn. Hermione felt the stomach twisting turn of Apparition, then they landed. She looked around to the completely unfamiliar place.

"Where are we?"

"The Swiss Alps. Best place to get a tree."

"You Apparated us this far?"

"Harry and I had a little contest last time he and Draco and Ginny came out here. He only beat me by fifty feet."

"Wow, Neville. I'm impressed. You seem to have channeled that raw power a little better than he has."

"Not exactly. My magic is more earth-based. Harry is air-based. It is why he flies so well. It is also why his trio works. Ginny is a double-elemental witch, earth and fire, Harry is air, as I said, and Draco is water. They are complete together."

"I know. It is why they could actually have a triad baby. Well, that and Ginny's pretty much up for anything in bed."

Neville cocked his eyebrow at her. "You have to have a triad with a double-element woman, then she has to be willing to take them both at once."

"Wouldn't that hurt?" Neville looked pensive.

"Apparently not. I was doing the Arithmancy for them based on some books Draco had, and that is what came up as the result. Jade is what resulted." Hermione smiled, thinking about it.

"I was wondering if you had anything to do with it."

"Why would you think that, Neville?"

"Because a true triad child is so very rare, and all the documentation says they need someone expert in Arithmancy to do the calculations. My Arithmancy is good, I need it for the wine-making, but not that caliber."

"You studied Arithmancy?"

"Yes, I did. After the war, I realized I needed to have a well-rounded education to do what I wanted. I now have NEWTs in Arithmancy and Potions as well as Charms, Herbology, which I have an International Distinction and Mastery in, Transfiguration and DADA."

"I'm impressed. You were so quiet about it."

"I learned for me, and to have some clout in the international community. Except for Britain, no one else really cares that I got the Sword of Gryffindor out of a manky old hat and killed a snake."

"That is why I studied with the goblins."

"What NEWTs did you take, Hermione? I know you did, and that you asked that the results be confidential, other than stating which ones you passed."

"I didn't want to make anyone feel bad that I could pass my NEWTs after being on an extended camping trip that year."

"Everyone knows you took your books. We would have expected nothing less."

"All right. Arithmancy, Charms, Care of Magical Creatures, DADA, Runes, Transfiguration, Herbology, Astronomy and History."

"You passed all of them with O's?"

"Not quite. I had two E's."

"Did it matter?"

"Not one bit."

"What do you think of this one?"

"That is a perfect tree, Neville. Let's take it home."

Neville smiled to himself. She called his villa home. He wondered when the rest of her was going to catch up to her subconscious.

Two weeks passed quickly. Hermione and Neville found that the comfort they found in one another was equally matched by their passion. They hadn't done anything more than have some heated snogs on the couch, but they both realized that they were more fulfilled than with any prior relationship.

Christmas Eve arrived, and they had a feast. They sat together, sipping eggnog, happy with each other's company.

"Do you miss Christmas at the Burrow?"

"No. The chaos was always a bit much for me. But I do miss my friends this year."

"Glad to hear that. We'd be worried about coming over for a drink otherwise."

"Harry!" Hermione raced to the Floo and hugged her friend fiercely. She then hugged Ginny and Draco. They were closely followed by Ron and Hannah, Luna, Severus/Rolf, George, Charlie and Minerva McGonagall. They were all hugged within an inch of their life. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but why are you all here?"

Minerva answered, "Neville invited us. He said to come over after dinner, and the children were in bed, to see you. He thought you might need it."

Hermione turned to Neville with her eyes shining. "Thank you!"

Ginny poked Harry. "See, they are perfect together."

Once they had all reminisced, and had eggnog and brandy and lots of Neville's wine, the guests all flooded back to the Burrow, where Molly and Arthur were waiting for news.

"I'd say they are married before the New Year."

"What makes you say that, Draco?" asked Molly.

"Because they won't be getting out of bed until close to then."

Everyone at the Burrow laughed, pleased that Hermione and Neville both had found happiness.

"I'm going to write them a letter," said Molly.

"Let us know what you plan to say. We might all want to sign it."

"Good enough. Now to bed with all of you."

Hermione was snuggled up to Neville on the couch in front of the fire at the villa. "You knew exactly what I needed for Christmas. You've always seemed to know just when I needed something."

"I love you, Hermione. I always have. But I never, until now, thought I had a chance at forever."

She nodded. "I think I love you, too. I've never felt like this about anyone. I've always thought I would have to make all sorts of changes to find a home. Here with you, I just fit right in. Now, come upstairs with me to get your gift."

Neville followed Hermione up the stairs. He stopped at the door to her room. "I'll be right back; let me get your gift."

Hermione went into the room and quickly put on the lingerie she had found in Paris three years ago that she thought she would never wear. She let her hair hang loose down her back and wore no shoes.

"Here it is, Neville."

He turned from the window to see his Hermione wearing a short, complicated bit of lace and silk that seemed to come together in a large bow between her breasts. He took a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

"More than anything."

He reached out and pulled on the end of one of the ribbons that made up the bow, and the lingerie fell right off. He looked at her so long she started to worry, and then he whooped, picked her right up off her feet and dashed into his room. He tripped on the rug, and she went flying and landed on his bed.

"Are you all right?" he asked. Her shoulders were shuddering.

"I'm fine, Neville." Hermione said between gasps of laughter. "I'm just glad that amidst all this perfection, you are still just you. Now, come over here; I don't think you are done with your gift."

"No, I'm most certainly not."

Draco was right. They were in bed for almost a week, just taking breaks to eat and check on those plants that needed immediate care. New Year's Eve, they stood at the Coliseum, under the stars, saying their vows with all the other witches and wizards who wanted to start their New Year off with their beloved.

They finally read the letter from Molly, which was signed by all their friends.

Dearest Hermione and Neville,

Sometimes we find love right away. And sometimes it takes a while. But never forget, love actually, is all around.

Love,

Molly (and all the rest)

Prompt: 9. The holidays always remind Hermione of what she doesn't have in her life. This year, she decides to spend her Christmas away from the reminders of those she has lost and those who have chosen a life without her. While away, she runs into someone she never expected to, and discovers that love is all around. (Hermione/Rare Pair)

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