

Of Loneliness and Nature

by BlazenPaths2

This is not a tale of a time-traveler who saved a man from himself, though that may have happened. This is, instead, the tale of a researcher & a master, of wand cores & potions, and the discovery that what has been missing all along is oneself.

Of Loneliness and Nature

Chapter 1 of 1

This is not a tale of a time-traveler who saved a man from himself, though that may have happened. This is, instead, the tale of a researcher & a master, of wand cores & potions, and the discovery that what has been missing all along is oneself.

xXoOoXx

Part One - Gardenias

xXoOoXx

Hermione Jean Granger knew many things. She didn't need someone to introduce her at speeches because the people already knew her, already knew how smart she was, how much she had accomplished.

But Hermione Jean Granger also knew that she hated the attention more than she liked it. So, to her, it was no surprise that she would accept a position with the Department of Mysteries.

A career cloaked in secrecy? *Perfect.*

But there were cons to every decision, and losing Ron was one of those. She knew this, and by the time she was ready to tell him about her choice, so did he.

Perhaps he had always known. She was meant for something different.

It was no surprise to Hermione Jean Granger that Ron began to date other people, but it still hurt.

After all, he had always been her dream.

-

By the time her twenty-first birthday came along, Hermione had been living on her own for just over a year. It had been just shy of her twentieth birthday when she'd become an Unspeakable, only a scarce few months after the Final Battle.

Time had flown by. Experiments, Arithmancy tests, failed potions, and Charms successes.

She was lucky.

But as lucky as she was for finding a career she could be happy in, it left little room for other people.

She was as lucky as she was lonely.

When her turn came for her to take a trip in the past for research, she jumped at it. It was new, different, and she needed a change from the life she wasn't really living at all.

And so, Hermione Granger went to sleep one night in the Time Room of the Department of Mysteries in 2001 and woke up the next morning in 1985.

Her life, her career, and her heart would never be the same.

-

July 16th, 1985

"Oh!" a soft voice squeaked in Hermione's ears. She blinked awake. "Are you researching, Madame?" the soft and distinctively French voice asked.

Hermione rubbed at her eyes as she struggled to sit up. "Domina Room?" she asked quietly, looking up at the woman.

A sheath of black hair floated around the woman's pale face and set off her turquoise eyes.

"Ah. Hermione Granger. Welcome back," the woman spoke to her, an all-knowing smile on her face.

"When have I been taken?" Hermione asked her, standing up slowly.

The woman smiled. "It is 1985, my dear Maecenas Tempus. Your task will be completed by the first of September. A mere six weeks," the Mistress of the Room told her, guiding the time-displaced woman to the door.

"How am I to know what to do, Domina?"

The woman smiled at Hermione again. "Time always knows, dear Maecenas."

-

On their first research trip, Unspeakables were neither given a time, a task, nor an idea of what they were to do. It was the Mistress of the Room who told them all they needed to know.

Sometimes they were told very little about their tasks. Hermione was no different.

It was time that chose the task, not the plans of others.

-

Unlike most of the new researchers, Hermione had the forethought to stuff Galleons in her pockets. She didn't know if they'd travel with her...she hadn't even been sure her clothes would...but she had to try.

She was lucky.

Though Diagon Alley had changed much in her own time, in this time it looked like it had that first time she had been there.

Her first stop was Madam Malkin's, where she bought new robes and redressed herself. The second was Ollivander's.

Her wand had not been as lucky.

-

Hermione walked into the familiar and dusty shop, looking around like it was the first time seeing it. In a way, it was.

"Ah. Miss Granger." Ollivander looked decades younger than he had the last time she had seen him...then again, *he was*.

"Sir," she said, nodding to him. He walked into his backroom, pulling out a long and yellowed box.

"Birch wood, sixteen inches. Very firm. The core is the feather of a barn swallow."

Hermione blinked in surprise. *Barn swallow? They weren't magical at all!*

"But..." Hermione started. Ollivander hushed her and placed the wand in her hand.

It warmed her, fingers first, traveling up her arm and then to the furthest parts of her body.

"Barn swallows are just birds. I don't understand, Mr. Ollivander," she admitted, feeling the magic flow throughout her body.

"Ah, Miss Granger. That is where your knowledge needs supplementation. Perhaps you should discover that for yourself. After all, it is not my knowledge that told me to make this wand in your name."

-

Hermione left the wand shop more confused now than ever before. Was she supposed to discover something about the wands? Was it all a cosmic coincidence?

Not for the first time, she wished she had someone with her. Someone she could trust, someone who would be able to help her. Maybe just someone to talk to.

-

The Leaky Cauldron was busier than it had been when she had gone through the first time. She pushed through the crowds and groups of children headed to the Alley with their families. It took a few moments, but she was soon talking to Tom about a room.

The night passed like they always had...in silence, all alone.

-

She awoke early from a fitful sleep. Her nervousness about being in the past was intensified when she realised just how alone she was here. She couldn't Floo Harry with an unnecessary question about anything so that, for just a moment, she would feel less alone. She couldn't write her father, call her mother, or meet Ginny for fashion

advice she didn't really want. She had been relying on other people for moments that would keep her happy for days.

How would she make it through six weeks alone, researching, without anyone familiar? Without the knowledge that most people had of how to make new friends, she wasn't sure if she would know what to do.

What could she do?

-

A few hours later, she stared up at the ceiling of her room at the Leaky Cauldron and daydreamed.

-

She loved being an Unspeakable, First Class. She was a researcher and a scientist...at least, that was the easiest way to put it.

Given her class, she was often alone. If her projects required the help of another, she was rarely assigned the same person twice.

She knew she intimidated most of her colleagues. Those who had spent years as Unspeakables knew that she was one of the brightest among them.

She was the youngest Unspeakable by nearly fifteen years, despite that people had been brought in after her.

The ones she didn't intimidate tended to be above her level in many ways. They rarely got paired with her as a result.

Even in her work, she was alone. Famous. Alone.

-

Hermione had to get out of her room. She had no idea what her task was, but the room was stifling.

By the time she left the Leaky Cauldron, it was nearly nightfall. Many of the shops were closed, but Flourish and Blotts was still open, and what Ollivander had said had stayed with her.

That is where your knowledge needs supplementation. Perhaps you should discover that for yourself. After all, it is not my knowledge that told me to make this wand in your name.

What did it mean? Was she to be researching wand cores from non-magical animals?

Then she found herself staring at a man barely older than herself standing a few feet away, a book on Muggle plants in his hands.

A dead man. A dead man she admired.

"Professor Snape?" She heard the words cut the silence of the nearly empty shop and tried to hide her face.

But she had already spoken aloud; there was nothing she could do.

He turned to face her, standing tall and giving an air of disinterest. Once he scanned her over with his piercing black eyes, those same eyes narrowed.

He didn't recognise her. She did not know why she was surprised. In this time, she was five years old and living with her parents in a flat above their dentistry.

"And you are?" There was a bite in his voice that she recognised all too well.

"Hermione Granger, sir. I need that book." She wasn't sure why she was saying it. She didn't know for sure. But were Muggle plants really that far away from animals?

"I do not recognise that name, witch. So tell me, why should I hand over a book I am about to purchase?" There was a venom in his voice now.

"You will, uh, recognise my name one day, Professor. And you'll remember this day and wonder." She was making it up as she went along.

But if she were honest, she craved his presence. He was more familiar than anyone else.

And he would one day die.

Was it so wrong to want him to spend these weeks with her?

-

She left the bookshop half an hour later, the smallest of smiles on her face.

He wouldn't give her the book.

But he had asked if she was researching the same thing.

She knew with a little work, he would wear down and agree to research with her.

Hermione Jean Granger was making a plan.

And for once in her life, she was ignoring the risk.

xXoOoXx

Part Two - Alive

xXoOoXx

Hermione knew that it wouldn't be easy to do her research. After all, the trip was a rite of passage for Unspeakables and a test as well.

But she wasn't expecting the rates of the Leaky Cauldron to be so high.

She had hoped to get money from the Department of Mysteries to pay for a small flat or perhaps even a tent, but she hadn't known how to approach it. Would others besides Domina Room even know what she was there for?

In the meantime, she needed to find a library. She couldn't afford a stack of the rarely stocked books on Muggle flora and fauna, so a library was her only course of action.

She began her search in Diagon Alley.

And found a library in an obscure corner of Knockturn Alley.

-

The library was run down and crumbling, but it still had that library feeling, that parchment smell. She walked through the stacks ignoring the suspicious looks that an aged witch...who Hermione supposed was the librarian...gave her. She quickly found a shelf on Muggle birds and found a curiously labeled book on swallows. She flipped through the pages carefully before giving up.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" Hermione asked the old witch.

The woman let out a very faint laugh. "Yes, Mudblood?"

Hermione bit her lower lip in an attempt not to retort. "Have you any books that would perhaps link barn swallows with magic?" she asked.

The old librarian did not have a chance to reply as someone else had answered scoffingly instead.

"Barn swallows are not magical, girl. Far from it."

She looked to see her once professor, with a book on Muggle flowers in his hand.

"I suppose you know where I can find information on barn swallows, Mister Snape?" she asked, her voice lighter than she intended.

"I suppose I do," he intoned. She noticed a similar lightness in his own drawl.

-

She'd been to the Forest of Dean before. It held fond memories of her parents, and not-so-fond ones of the year she, Harry, and Ron been hunting Horcruxes. But this, now?

The clearing was bright with sunlight. The grass was a brilliant green and lush. She couldn't help the lightness in her heart that arose from being in this place.

Then she saw the edge of the water and followed her eyes to her side.

The Sword had been hidden in this very place.

"Sir. This is the Forest of Dean," she whispered, amazed at how different the climate of the place was now.

"There is a nest of the birds near the outcropping of flowers at the far end," he told her. "Lyre flowers. They are useful in certain healing potions, especially in those that heal the vocal cords and counteract venom."

"*Dicentra spectabilis*? But they're Muggle," Hermione said in surprise as she turned to face him.

He simply raised an eyebrow at her. She stopped her line of questioning once she realised what he meant.

"Oh. The barn swallows aren't magic either," she said. She looked away in embarrassment.

A moment later, she walked in the direction he had suggested, still blushing.

-

She found the nest easily, but that did not surprise her.

She saw a little bird peeking out from behind tiny pink flowers shaped like bleeding hearts. As soon as she saw the bird, she understood exactly how he would believe that barn swallows were Muggle.

There was something about the unhindered-by-magic, natural way the birds moved, how the flowers fell from the plant. It was a magic of its own. A wilder, more rustic and temperamental kind.

This was why she was back.

"Mister Snape? How can anyone see something like this and not know that there is some other magic, some wild and new and wonderful old natural magic?" She felt the inherent magic of this place echoing through her voice.

And when she saw the way his lips barely and faintly upturned, she knew he understood it quite well.

-

They started researching together, all kinds of animals and plants. They went from tiny libraries to larger ones.

They fought about their studies and argued and drank tea and made visits to see the swallows and flowers. She had made a friend in the past, in the only person she could. She would never be the same.

-

Hermione sat on the cool slab of limestone, a drawing pad balanced on her legs. She was smiling as she made quick and sharp lines across the paper with a self-inking quill, her eyes flickering between the paper and the swallow before her.

"Think yourself an artist, do you?" he snapped at her. She knew he was trying to start a pissing match, but really she was in much too good a mood.

"My mum used to say that if I wasn't so stuck up with knowledge, I could make a living by drawing, Severus," she spoke carefully. His raised eyebrow told her he was surprised at her use of his name, but his lack of speech indicated he was still annoyed with something.

"I highly doubt that, Granger," he bit out scathingly.

She looked up at him, her face burning.

"I'm sorry, sir. Believe what you wish." She shoved her sketch pad into his hands and Apparated away.

She did not see the look of blatant surprise on his face when he saw the delicate drawing of the swallow, nor the way he reached out to pull her back in vain.

xXoOxX

Part Three - Slide

xXoOoXx

Their research led them to the outskirts of Navan, Ireland.

It was a small, isolated forest, aptly named the Foraoise ar Rundiámhair...the Forest of Mystery...by the local Muggles for the strange happenings around the area. Many spoke of a tragic farming accident and the death of a young girl over a hundred and fifty years ago.

The locale was unfamiliar to both of them. Neither had heard of it before, let alone visited the place. Finding a place to stay had been even more of a chore, since there were no hotels in the area. It was sheer luck that Hermione had stumbled upon a supposedly 'quaint' bed and breakfast.

Quaint, indeed.

The Leabhar Beag Inn had a somewhat rustic charm, but was desperately in need of repair. The walls seemed as if they would crumble at any moment if not for the growth of ivy on the outer wall, filling in the cracks and crevices.

Hermione didn't even need to look at Severus to gauge what he was thinking; she could feel his distaste for their new base radiating from beside her.

"That is what you call a decent place?" he enquired, eyebrow raised.

"I . . . Well. . . Obviously they falsely advertised. How was I to know?" she snapped back at him, a bright red blush creeping into her cheeks. Let him see how well he could choose the next time they found themselves without a proper hotel in sight.

Thankfully each had their own room, and while hers was small, it was comfortable enough.

When they left for the forest, she noticed that Severus had no further remark to her choice of accommodation. He had found his room satisfactory.

She tried not to look too smug.

-

To the untrained eye, the forest looked just like any other. To Hermione, the trees were a showcase of wand wood at their finest. There were hawthorn, birch, elm, holly and even oak trees. Any wandmaker would have a field day if they were to visit this place. The magic radiated in the area in the same strange way it had in the Forest of Dean.

The plants themselves were an interesting mix. In between the patches of common yellow daisies were the mundane asphodel and belladonna. Such plants were known to have magical uses, but the dittany took them both by surprise.

"Quite curious, isn't it?"

The plants did not grow the same way as other magical plants usually did. They carried themselves in a natural, unsteady way. Dittany twisted around belladonna and grew shadowed by a daisy in the middle of a sprig of asphodel. It was an odd union, but the plants seemed to be thriving.

Hermione thought that Dumbledore would have loved the sight of such unity between the magical and the supposedly non-magical, even if it were only between plants.

-

For days, trips were made to the forest to collect samples and make notes. Hermione simply had to sketch the plants they had spotted on their first day.

On their last day they made another discovery: barn swallows.

The tiny, little birds seemed to be drawn to the areas of the forest where the magical plants grew together with the non-magical and nowhere else. Both wondered whether this was a mere coincidence or if there was more to it.

As the sun light began to fade away, they returned to the crumbling inn in a comfortable silence one last time to pack their belongings and finalize their notes.

Tomorrow, they would return to England.

-

Hermione Granger had been to Battersea Park before. Her parents had taken her there as a child, simply to walk among nature. She had loved it then, but something about being there now made that feeling of being surrounded in inherent natural magic even more intensified.

She wished that he had come to this place with her, but he had needed to visit Hogwarts to set up something with his next year classes.

She had been taking this summer for granted, taking for granted that she was in the past. She was even taking his ability and willingness to be there with her, to research with her, for granted.

She never wanted September to come.

But she knew it was nearly here.

-

They returned to the Forest of Mystery at the end of August, barely a week from the start of term.

It was near evening by the time they arrived and something about the forest at dusk was captivating.

Neither of them were expecting the wave of cold air to hit them, much less the translucent figure of a young girl to be crouched over the swallow's nest.

She was much less formed than any ghost they had ever heard of, much less seen. She did not seem to possess the ability to speak or the ability to sustain some sort of humanoid form for long.

This was a Muggle ghost in all her glory. More mystical than any ghost in the Wizarding world and more wild than she would have ever expected.

The sudden screeching of metal gears, the sound of bagpipes playing funeral songs, and a girl's screaming pierced the air.

And the ghost was gone.

Hermione turned to run to Snape, but slipped instead. He caught her in his arms as she felt a sharp pain in her ankle.

She looked up at him, trying desperately not to let the pain show in her face.

But there was something in his eyes, something in the way she felt in his arms. She felt her heart beating faster and wanted, suddenly and desperately, to kiss him.

She wasn't sure how long they stood there...seconds, hours...but she moved her face closer to his, preparing to kiss him.

Seconds later, the sky opened with rain.

He let her go and turned away. She did not see the way he calmed himself by closing his eyes and breathing in deep.

She tried to walk, but her ankle twisted further and she fell into the dirt that was quickly becoming mud.

"Hermione?" he said quietly as he turned to her. He saw her in the mud, sitting and pretending that it didn't hurt. She looked away, not wanting him to see the way her face burned with excitement at his use of her name.

He did what he thought best.

-

She leaned against him as he carried her in his arms back to the same inn they had stayed at before.

He stayed with her in the meager shower as she washed the mud off, though he looked the other direction. She clothed herself in the over-sized dress he'd bought her from the owner of the inn, and watched him as he carefully healed her ankle.

She had left the ankle wrapped so the innkeeper would not notice anything amiss, and they slowly walked out, back into the forest.

They Apparated to his quaint little home at Spinner's End and drank tea and argued about the proper way to decant Therbold's Wolfsbane.

They did not speak of the Muggle ghost, her ankle, or that moment. When night fell, she slept on his favorite chair as she was prone to, and he in his bed.

He never asked if she wanted the bed. She never asked if she could take it.

In the morning, she left as she always did. He pretended he didn't miss her.

-

Her favorite place was a small library in a village south of Hogsmeade. There was a stained glass window facing the west that held such a beautiful sunset in its panels. The scene depicted a young woman with a handful of daisies in one hand and a tiny little sparrow perched on the other. A man stood behind her, his arm around her waist.

It was there where they had found the scroll on natural magic that made everything come together. They had all the pieces, but she knew that it could not come together just yet.

She didn't want it to.

She knew his fate, but she didn't know her own. How could she leave when she was just beginning to feel like she *was* home?

-

It was 30th of August when her deepest fears began to surface. They were at Spinner's End, an empty tray in front of them holding the discarded cups from their tea.

"Even though we wield magic, even those Muggleborn among us tend to forget that there is another magic, a certain mystical and natural way of being that no magical being or plant has. A beauty that does not need help from us to work. We ignore this when we make potions and wands, instead we use those which always have. The plants and animals that are of magical origin. There is so much we could gain if we only *looked*." She had been reading from their notes before going off in a tangent, one she was sure to scribble down. They were nearly finished with the paper they'd written to go along with them.

"Granger. We won't be able to publish this right now," he spoke quietly.

She knew it, of course. It was too close to the war, the tension of magic versus Muggle still much too high.

She would have to return to her own time.

"I know." She swallowed, staring down into her tea.

"You have to go back, Hermione. To your time."

Her head jerked up to face him. "You know?" She couldn't help the surprise.

"There is a five-year-old-girl in the register. With your name," he told her.

She winced, afraid now. "How long have you known?"

"Since that first day. You must publish this."

"I know, Severus. I don't want to lose you. You're my best friend. I love you." She knew he wasn't one who was prone to emotion or attachment. Even before this summer, she knew that. But she couldn't help how she felt.

"Hermione. You *must* go," he spoke again. She felt her heart breaking.

-

By morning, Severus had left for Hogwarts.

Hermione stayed at Spinner's End and slept the day away on his barren mattress.

-

At eight the next morning, she entered the Ministry and went to sleep in the Time Room.

xXoOoXx

Part Four - Yellow

xXoOoXx

When she awoke in the Time Room in 2001, only an hour had passed. She had spent the most wonderful and heartbreaking summer of her life over the course of an hour. She had to go back. It couldn't end the way it had. He couldn't die.

Her supervisor was none too happy. "Granger, you can't expect anyone to agree to send you back to 1985. You went back to research, not to find a boyfriend."

"You think I don't *know* that? I need to go back, Unspeakable Porter. You don't understand! He dies and I can't let that brilliance go to waste if I can't even publish this research!" She knew he wouldn't care. He was too much the work and not enough the man.

"Take a few days off, Granger. Take your stupid, mangy cat and your bags, and go to a beach or something. You are hereby banned from entering the Ministry for the next two weeks."

She stilled in shock. Banned? Her work was *all* she had. Crookshanks had died and so had Severus Snape. She felt anger, pure rage building up inside her. She had been too quiet for too long and the last few days had been the hardest of her life to deal with. How could he force her out of the last thing she had left?

"I have given up every piece of my life for this job, Cecil Porter. Every bloody piece. You have worked me to the point where I cannot sleep at night. You sent me in the past for what? To research something you won't let me publish and to fall in love with someone I saw die? No. I will not live my life based on this any longer. I will not return to this office or this building, even. You can take your holiday and this bleeding job and STUFF it."

With that, Hermione ripped the small pin that signified her rank straight out of the fabric of her cloak and threw it at him.

-

Hermione Jean Granger walked away from the office. She walked to the elevator and rode it to the exit. She slipped off the cloak she'd been wearing since she had started working as an Unspeakable and shoved it in the rubbish bin.

She did not look back.

-

Her flat was as miserable as it was when she had left it. There was still a tray of empty tea cups and spoiled fruit in a bowl next to the sink. She sank against the bench top and slid to the floor, crying.

-

She slept for two days.

When she woke up, there was an owl pecking on the glass of her bedroom window.

-

Miss Granger,

Ignore Cecil Porter. Publish your research. And what is your wand made of, anyway? Barn swallow feather?

Unspeakable M. Ollivander

-

Hermione Jean Granger went to the library in Knockturn Alley. She found it had been torn down in 1986.

She went to the Forest of Dean, where he had first taken her. The lyre flowers and the barn swallows were gone.

-

She went to Ollivander's next.

He smiled when she came in, and beckoned her over.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said simply. He handed her old wand over and she motioned to give back the barn swallow wand.

He waved her off.

"The wand chooses the wizard...or in your case the witch. Do not forget the past, Miss Granger, nor the magic you have found." She left his shop with both of her wands and a lightness in her heart.

-

She went to the Forest of Mystery soon after. She did not expect to see him there, though she had somehow believed she had changed his fate when she went to the other places.

She couldn't stop thinking about him, though at times she couldn't separate the memories of her professor and the man who taught her about herself. For the most part, she thought of his memories. About how he has always loved Lily and how he died looking into Harry's eyes to remember her.

She wondered about his death. About how she could have saved him if she really tried.

She had let the rules get in the way, and he paid a price she wished she had been able to stop.

Then Hermione noticed something. The ghost was still there, still wandered the earth helplessly.

"Don't go away. Do you remember me?" Hermione wasn't sure why she said it.

The ghost cocked her head.

"There is something wild and natural about you, no matter how strange this is. And that night, there was magic in that moment, wasn't there?"

The sound of bagpipes played again.

-

Hermione returned to her meager flat and compiled her notes. The next day, she sent in her paper to several of the leading magical academic publications.

She mused, once again, on her wand. On the past and on the barn swallows. And then she mused on what her life had become because of him, and what it would never be again...lonely.

-

Hermione's favorite place was the library in the small village south of Hogsmeade. She loved the stained glass window and the care they gave the books. And she knew the wand was calling her there to the stained glass window.

So she walked into the library for the first time since 1985, a copy of *Potions Monthly* under her arm. The smile on her face lessened when she saw the sign at the check-in desk.

Under new ownership.

How different would be this place she loved, *they* had loved, and in some ways, together.

How he would have loved to sit with her as the sunset shone through those wonderful glass panels and read their research, printed after so long.

Letting out a heavy and labored breath, she opened the door to the room that housed the stained glass window.

"Granger. Hermione."

Her heart stopped in her chest. She froze.

"It was the lyre flowers. The last thing my potion needed."

-

Lyre flowers. *Dicentra spectabilis*.

Bleeding hearts.

She had saved him after all.

Author's Notes: It is important to me that I thank my betas. I would like to acknowledge Kira's helpful addition of ideas as it pertains to the Forest of Mystery, thank Hanifa for her help with wandlore, thank Jessica for being my soundboard and SPaG guide and thank all three for helping me tie up loose ends.

Written for Pennafana in the 2011 SSHG Exchange on LJ. Featured in quiz_sshg's The Unspeakable Quiz in December 2011.