

## Like A Sister

Hermione sighed and turned off the computer in front of her. It had been a surprise for her to come home for the summer to a PC that had been placed in one corner of her room. Her father had told her that they wanted her to keep in contact with Muggle culture.

It hadn't taken her long to pull out the instruction manuals – forty-five seconds to be precise. She was now the proud owner of a 300mhz Pentium 2 processor, with 64mb of ram, and a Riva TNT graphics card. It came with an eight speed CD-rom drive, a sound card, a 15" monitor, and a lightning fast 33.6k modem.

It had been a good way of keeping herself occupied over the summer, as she was pretty bored once she had finished her homework.

Professor Dumbledore had banned her, Ron, and Harry from seeing each other in person because of the problems with the Death Eaters, so they had all spent the summer under the *Fidelius* charm, communicating by Owl and by Floo. While they had kept in as constant contact as they could, it wasn't the same as it had been in the past.

So she'd found and explored the internet. She had to keep her browsing down to a minimum, because paying by the minute for the connection was expensive. Even if both her parents were dentists, phone bills in the hundreds of pounds range would not have gone down well.

She'd started off innocently enough, but had soon explored some of the seedier side of things, and while the pictures had done nothing to her, the stories had.

She'd never look at Kirk and Spock the same way again.

It had also given her a lot of time to think about her life, and about the sort of future she wanted. In the past, she had avoided thinking of it, because of the uncertainty due to Voldemort and his random attacks. She'd decided not to let him win, even in that respect any more.

So it was about time she got herself the boyfriend she wanted.

Unfortunately, it wasn't quite that easy. With her having two very close male friends, there would always be problems if she started going out with one of them.

But now that she was seventeen, and with the war with Voldemort still raging, she wasn't going to wait much longer for him to get a clue. She'd waited this long, and he still hadn't made a move, so she was going to have to.

She just hoped the other one wouldn't take it too badly.

With a sigh, she lay down on her bed and started to plan. It was no use trying to wing things; it needed to be done properly, since otherwise it wouldn't work at all.

At least she knew what his first reaction would be. That helped.

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Hermione sighed as she saw him walk up the platform; she could spot his hair in a crowd with ease. It was certainly distinctive, and she really wanted to run her hands through it.

She watched as he greeted their other friend, and they both walked towards her.

"Hey," he said, giving her a quick hug. That was unusual; perhaps it wouldn't be that hard after all.

She hugged her other friend and followed them as they went to get a carriage. As head girl, she would be spending most of the journey in the prefects' carriage, before she would have a chance to join them.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You seem a little distracted."

He would notice. He'd always been her friend, even if they had argued at times.

"I'm fine," she said, with a half smile. "Honest."

He nodded and went back to talking about the Cannons again.

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She looked at herself in the mirror critically. She wasn't like the girls on TV – but she was pretty enough. Sure, she might not weigh under a hundred pounds, but she had a good figure – when the shapeless robes she was forced to wear in school didn't hide it.

She thought about taking them off, or doing something to her hair, but she decided not to. She wanted him to like her for herself, not for an idealised image that would fade like a rainbow after the storm.

She left Gryffindor Tower and walked outside to the Quidditch pitch. Both her friends were nuts about the game, while she liked it as well, she loved to watch him fly most. She'd hidden it well, but every time she watched the sport, her thoughts and eyes were locked onto him.

Before they finished, she turned and walked back to the Great Hall. She didn't want to talk to them both together, not at the moment.

For too long now, she'd felt trapped. Trapped in a way that was both comfortable and safe, but not for much longer.

The food tasted dry and unappetising, but she swallowed it down. It was important not to feel faint later. Especially not if it went well – then his calloused hands would touch her like she longed to be touched.

She had dreamed of her hand in his, of his arm around her shoulders, of feeling safe with him, her head on his chest, protected from the world.

"It's not fair that I've got detention tonight," her other friend said moodily. "Snape."

"I know," she said, looking sympathetic. She'd seen Malfoy sabotage his potion, as had Snape, but that hadn't stopped the professor from handing out the detention anyway.

She'd have been more upset for him, if it hadn't opened the doorway to what she wanted.

"I need to study," she said to her detention-less friend. "Are you going to do your homework as well?"

He sighed and fixed her with that little smile that twisted her insides. "Yeah."

It was another sign that he had grown up now, and that it was the right time for her.

"I'll see you two later," her other friend mumbled as he walked off.

He stood. "Let's get it over with," he said with a sigh.

"Is it so hard to spend time with me?" she asked playfully. Only it suddenly wasn't playful. It was important to her, and she needed to know the answer. She needed it now, and she couldn't breathe again until he gave it.

"Of course not," he said simply, as if the question itself was ridiculous.

And it was.

"Can we talk?" she asked, as they walked towards the library.

"I thought we were," he said, looking a little confused.

She shook her head. "Not here. Once we're alone."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hermione not wanting to go to the library?" he teased.

She elbowed him in the stomach gently and diverted him away. Being Head Girl had some perks, and her own room was the main one. It was located away from the common rooms of all four houses, and conveniently near the library. It gave her some solitude that she found was the greatest bonus.

She walked in, feeling at home in her room already. "Drink?"

"Please," he said, a little formally. She could see that he was teasing her, his eyes were always so expressive.

"Take a seat," she said, as she walked to the corner and poured him a glass of fresh orange juice. So many years of being locked in a role of her own devising meant that she knew everything she needed to about him.

She walked back over to him, absently wetting her lips. She gathered her courage, and passed him the drink, noticing he was making himself at home – his robes were folded neatly on the back of the chair. She sat upright opposite him. For a second she, wished she were wearing something more revealing, something to help give her confidence a boost so that she could do this.

But that wasn't what she wanted, she reminded herself.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

He looked confused at her abrupt and unexpected question. She knew it wasn't like her to be vain, but it was the only opening she could think of. She had an IQ off the chart, the smartest witch in their generation, a workaholic, and yet here she was, asking ridiculous questions to try and get things started.

"Yes," he replied honestly, his eyes wide and curious.

That's what she loved about him. He would give you a direct response if you asked for it, and he was comfortable giving it.

"Why have we never gone out?" she asked.

He looked surprised.

Actually, he looked shocked.

"I..." he started.

This was it. This was her chance.

She moved off the chair, sliding on to her knees, and crawled over to him, kneeling by his feet. She kept her body language as open as possible; the last thing she wanted to do was scare him off now. She had waited too long for this, planned too hard for this. She had to appear vulnerable to him, because anything else would put him on edge, and she'd never be able to break through to him. She saw the confusion grow in his eyes – it wasn't normal behaviour for her, but normal behaviour would mean falling back into old patterns, and she couldn't do that.

"Do you want me to answer?" she asked softly.

He nodded slowly.

"Because you don't think of me like that. Because you think I'm more like a sister than a girlfriend. Because you think that I'm Ron's?"

He nodded again. "In a word, yes."

"Dealing with those in reverse order, why do you think that I'm Ron's?" she asked, looking up at him.

He slid off the chair to sit next to her, and she hid a small sigh. He had an intuitive nobility that was far beyond the comprehension of Ron or most of the other boys. The other girls all knew it when they saw it, but they weren't quite sure about the rest of the package that came with him.

"Well," he said slowly, as he looked at her. "I kinda thought that you'd been flirting with Ron for the past few years. And it's always been obvious that he likes you, so, you know, it made sense."

Hermione nodded. "I know," she whispered bitterly. "That's my role, isn't it? I'm supposed to spend my time with him, supporting you like a good sidekick and watch as you make some other girl deliriously happy, while I spend the best years of my life bickering with someone, wondering why I am with him, but knowing that I can't leave because it might break the three of us up, and I couldn't stand that."

He looked at her; the shock evident in his face, in his eyes.

"Have you ever thought about what I want from life?" she asked, keeping the bitterness back this time. It wasn't his fault; it certainly hadn't been done on purpose.

"I thought you wanted Ron," he said openly. "And I guess I never considered the rest; I thought it would be something you would talk about with him."

"I thought I could settle for Ron," she said with a sigh. "And it was a safe place to be. I'd have your friendship forever, and – hopefully – wouldn't be too unhappy. But I can't do that. I'm not fourteen anymore, I'm not a little girl now, I'm not the girl who fell in love with her best friend so hard that she did everything she could to hide it."

She almost smiled at his expression. She didn't think she'd ever seen his eyes quite this wide with shock, and was pretty sure she never would. Unless Voldemort recanted his sins and joined a nunnery.

"Do you know how I see my life with Ron now? Now that I'm older and a little bit wiser?"

He shook his head, his eyes wide.

"As a form of a living nightmare," she whispered. "How can you have a relationship based on sniping? Where we cut each other up with our words, where we scar each other in our arguments. We argue over everything, Harry. Everything. You can't base a relationship on that."

"I kinda thought it was some form of sexual tension," Harry murmured.

"I'd guessed," she said with a sigh. "It's not. Ron and I are friends, but we will never be anymore than that now." She watched him, saw the confusion in his eyes, and nodded slowly to herself. "Why don't I start at the beginning?"

He nodded, as if he wasn't sure what to say.

"You were always nice to me. I was the bookworm in the corner, and you tried to stop Ron from picking on me. I had a crush on you the size of Hogwarts. And then you saved my life from the Troll, clearing up for Ron's mistake. And I saw you, as Harry Potter, the saviour of the Wizarding world. And I knew what my purpose in life was. I was there to help you – to do what I could to make it easier for you, to try and make sure you survived what was going to happen.

"All my childhood books came back to me. I knew what I was. I was the spunky sidekick. And I knew it, because the hero never falls in love with the sidekick. The hero gets the fair princess. The sidekick gets the comic relief, the slightly flawed guy who hangs around the hero, and is there to break the tension and to show occasional flashes of his bravery. I knew it, because I was the bookworm with big teeth.

"And that's how it stayed. I got more confidence from you, from having my teeth fixed, from Viktor. And every time I looked around, my worldview

was reinforced. You saved a helpless maiden on your own, while I was unconscious.

"I was jealous of Ginny. I was sleeping beauty, dreaming of my prince waking me with a kiss, while she was the one being rescued by her fairytale prince. You duelled evil for her, risked your life.

"I know it's silly, but I'm allowed to be silly at times because even silly thoughts are real feelings. I was always trying so hard to act like I was the most mature. You never saw the times I went to my own room and bawled my eyes out, or kicked a pillow across the room. I used as many silencing charms around my bed as you did to make sure no one knew I was crying myself to sleep.

"But I'm digressing. I managed to sink myself into that mindset for so long that I thought it was the only thing available for me. If that was my role in life, I was going to play it to perfection. I had accepted it back then. I wanted Ron to ask me to the Yule Ball in our fourth year, but he didn't, so I went with Viktor, because I hoped he would be jealous. But he never took the hint, and we continued to argue. And I began to get scared. My destiny seemed to delight in annoying me. So my hope turned to despair, and despair to fear. I wondered what I had done to deserve it.

"I knew that by staying as the sidekick, I would remain close to you for the rest of my life. I'd try and make friends with whomever you wanted, and hide my jealousy that you were making her deliriously happy and not me – comforted by the fact that your wife would never know you as well as I do.

"But this summer, I spent a lot of time talking to Mum. And I told her everything; *everything* we had been through, and she asked me why I was convinced that my role was with Ron.

"So I told her. I told her the history of us, and you know what she told me?"

He shook his head.

"That life isn't a fairytale."

She paused for a second. "Everything changed in that moment. For the first time, I consciously admitted to myself that I didn't want Ron. I wanted you." She gave him a crooked, knowing smile. "I was one of many who wanted you."

"Ron is a great person. He can be smart, he is extremely loyal, and he is a wonderful friend. But that's it. My heart doesn't beat faster when I see him. I don't feel like putting on some makeup and wearing tight clothing when he looks at me, I don't want to make myself attractive for him, like I do for you. I can't love Ron because he might turn into a better person in the future. I can only go by what he is now, and that isn't enough for me. When I said that to Mum, you know what she said?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "She said that it sounded like he was more of a brother than a love interest. And she was right.

"We argue, we fight, we make up platonically, and we know that we'll always be there for each other. But that's it. There's no spark; not from me at least."

She reached over him and picked up his drink, using it to soothe her dry throat. She moved from her knees, folding her legs Indian style. She knew he wasn't going to run now, so could sit more naturally. "What do you want in a girl, Harry?"

He looked a little lost at the sudden subject change.

"Please," she begged. "Tell me the truth."

"I've not really thought about it," he sighed, looking away from her. A sure sign he wasn't telling the truth. "After Cho, and everything."

"Think now," she said.

He smiled slightly. "I guess I want someone strong," he said, his eyes going distant. "I want someone who can stand being near me all the time, who can stand my moods and my troubles. Someone who will be there when I fight Voldemort.

"I want someone who's down to earth. Who doesn't want me as a trophy or as a prize. Someone who wants me for myself, not because I'm rich and famous.

"I want someone I can be proud of. Someone who will be a success in her own right. Someone who will stand up to me when she thinks that I'm wrong and being pig-headed, but won't hold it against me.

"I want someone who loves me," he trailed off in a small voice. "I want someone who loves me more than anyone or anything else. I want someone who is totally mine, who I can have the family I've never had with."

She felt a single tear drip down her cheek as she listened to him, and she quickly brushed it off. He looked so vulnerable, and she wanted to pull him into her arms and kiss him. She paused, waiting for him to look at her again. "I've been with you every step of the way," she said softly. "I've followed you everywhere, and I won't stop doing that."

She decided to give him a few seconds to let that sink in before speaking again. "Do you know what I want to do when I leave Hogwarts?"

"Be the Minister of Magic," he said instantly.

She felt her jaw drop as she looked at him. She'd never told anyone that.

"How did you know?" she asked.

He smiled slightly at her again, that little half-smile that made her heart race, forcing the pulse through her veins. "Because it's you."

She smiled slightly. Such a Harry answer. "Would it bother you to be married to the Minister?"

"Of course not," he smiled.

"How do you think it would affect Ron to be married to the Minister?"

He opened his mouth, and then paused, wincing.

"Exactly," she said dryly. "Can you see him encouraging me, or can you see him giving into his fear that he'd be no one again? Can you see him doing what he can to support me, but failing because deep down inside, he doesn't want to be over-shadowed again? I know that I can't fulfil my potential with him, and I'm not going to accept that any more."

"Ron might change," he said, a little limply.

Loyalty: another facet of his personality that she adored. "And he might not," she said with a sigh. "Like I said, I can't fall in love with potential, and I'm not willing to take the risk."

He looked unhappy, and she guessed it was more that the idea of Ron and her having a relationship was not going to happen, than anything else.

She was struck by a thought and felt herself go pale. "You wanted us together, so that if you died, we'd have each other, didn't you?"

His eyes turned quickly towards her own, searching her, digging into places she wasn't sure she wanted anyone to look.

"Yes," he said simply.

She rocked back. How horrific it must be to know that you will have to fight for your life at a young age. How terrible it must be, beyond the nightmares and the abuse, to know that it won't be over till he had killed, or been killed. How many of his decisions had been made with that in mind? How many times had he turned down a girl after Cho, for one reason or another, each time with a soft smile and a gentle apology that made the girl in question feel like she hadn't been rejected but just turned down?

She looked back at him, meeting his eyes directly. "I've never failed at anything I've set about to do," she said. If there was one thing she was confident in, it was her own ability with magic and studying. "I am not going to let you die, Harry."

He smiled gently at her. "It might be out of your hands."

"I refuse to believe that."

She could see that he didn't believe her, but that didn't matter at the moment; she could work on that later. It was time to move things on.

"So," she whispered. "You now know that Ron and I will never be. I'm refusing to be the sidekick anymore; I want to be the heroine. So, let's talk about the other reason you don't think of me that way; that I'm some sort of sister to you."

He nodded slowly.

"I don't feel that way about you," she said softly, shifting a little closer to him. "I dream about you kissing me. I dream about walking in the snow with you. I dream about you forcing me to stop studying, with soft words and gentle kisses, pulling me away from my books just because you can."

"I dream of waking up next to you, a little sore, but so deliriously happy that I don't care. I dream of kissing you good morning, tasting your morning breath, and making love to you again before breakfast."

"I dream of being able to follow the instructions in all the books I've found with you, all the ideas and positions. You might think that Lavender or Parvati would be better in bed, but I would be. Why? Because I know how to research when there is something I want to learn about. I've found things that you can do that they've never even dreamed of, and I want to do them with you."

"Does that sound like a sister to you?" She paused, fighting the blush that was trying to turn her face as bright as Ron's. She'd never talked about sex like this before, but it was the only way to get through to him. It was her plan to prove that she wasn't his sister, no matter what mental role he had placed her in.

He shifted uncomfortably, not moving his eyes from hers. "No," he whispered. "That doesn't sound like a sister."

"You've already said I'm pretty," she continued. "Have you ever fantasised about me? Looked at my chest or my bum and wondered?"

He shook his head negatively.

She nodded; she'd expected that. The fantasies had all been one sided all these years, as she had thought they would be. She occupied that part of his brain that was non-sexual, and as such, had never moved in his mind. It was up to her to move them.

She raised her hand and lightly touched his leg. She could feel the heat of his body through his trouser, could feel the leg muscle twitch. She had thought about going further, and touching him intimately to prove her point. But that wouldn't work. He'd run, fast. She needed to take it slowly.

He was tense now, uncomfortable. Such a contrast of innocence and experience. He could fight anyone, ever more than one person now, since he began his training, but a simple hand on his leg, a simple touch made him more afraid than facing a legion of Death Eaters.

She tried for a gentle expression. "Will you tell me something?"

He looked at her, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, as he waited for her to continue.

"What do you fantasise about?"

He blushed furiously and looked away.

"Harry," she called softly. "Look at me, please."

"I'm not comfortable..." he started.

"I know you're not," she interrupted. "But please, answer, for me." He would never turn down a direct request from her.

"I..." he started, his voice breaking slightly. He was still very red. "Girls," he eventually said. "Just girls, you know, doing it with me."

"Having sex?" she offered, to help him a little, and to show that she wasn't afraid of his answers.

"Yeah, that," he agreed.

"Where are you making love?" she asked. "In your fantasy."

He tried to look away again, but she reached up and touched his face, stopping him. "It's okay," she assured him. She leant back, grabbing her wand off the table, and lowered the lights. "Tell me, Harry, please."

"Everywhere," he whispered. "In my bed, in the Room of Requirement, the Astronomy Tower, and in Dumbledore's office." He paused for a brief second. "On Snape's desk."

She shuddered suddenly and gulped. The idea of him taking her on the desk of the evil Professor wasn't something she had expected. It was a powerful image. She'd been thinking about sleeping with Harry for years, the thoughts getting more erotic as she grew older and understood more about her own sexuality, but she hadn't thought of that. The idea of doing something so private, something that seemed so right with him, combined with the thrill of doing it somewhere so wrong was unbelievably exhilarating.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She smiled gently at him; he was such an innocent. Most boys would have her on her back right now, having read between the lines, and presumed she was offering. "Whom have you fantasised about?" she asked. She was pretty sure she could guess the names: Ginny, Parvati, Lavender, Susan Bones, maybe Tonks.

He reached up and took off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He looked at her, and she felt herself sinking into his eyes. The effect was more vivid when he didn't have the glasses on.

"I don't really fantasise about anyone in particular," he said into the soft light. "She's faceless, even formless. It's more about the emotions I feel than the people involved. I've tried a few times, you know? After seeing something – a flash of Parvati's underwear or Susan when she wears those loose-fitting tops and bends over in front of me."

She did know. The red-haired Hufflepuff was very proud of her attributes and used every chance to show them off. Harry was one of her favourite targets.

"But," he continued. "It soon fades away, and I can feel someone's hands on me, their mouth on me, encouraging me, and I close my eyes and just feel."

She reached out slowly and touched his hair.

He looked like he wanted to pull away from her touch, but didn't. It gave her a little hope. His hair was as soft as she had hoped, and it felt wonderful sliding through her fingers.

There was silence between them; his eyes still watching her endlessly. Her fingers playing with his hair. The problem was that the hair touching could still be like a sister for him – a sister playing hairdresser.

Being wrong about his fantasies was unexpected, but kinda good as well. Ron was an open book to her. She knew how he would react, which buttons to press to get him to do something – it was easy. Even after all this time, Harry could still surprise her and make her a little confused, a little on edge.

It's what she wanted from a partner.

"I am not your sister, Harry," she said simply.

He nodded softly.

"What is a sister to you?"

He blinked.

“You think of me like a sister, right?”

He half nodded, as if that had started to change.

“So,” she repeated. “What is a sister to you?”

He frowned in thought. He seemed more comfortable now that the conversation was away from sex. It made her think about his innocence, and lack of experience. He had no one to take him to one side and talk about sex, and she really couldn't see him talking to Ron or Seamus or one of the others about something so intensely private to him.

“Someone who's always there for me, someone who I know will love me even if I screw up. Someone who will support me.” He smiled faintly, “Someone who will allow me to copy their homework when I've been playing Quidditch.”

She felt touched, well – apart from the last part – that he thought of her that way. “That can be a sister,” she pointed out gently. “But it can also be for a lover as well.”

His eyes widened in surprise.

“Imagine all of that, and more. Imagine needing support and knowing you can hug someone who'll stroke your back and kiss your fears away. Imagine having a bad day, but knowing that someone is waiting for you at home, or in bed, and that you can snuggle up to them, and spend a night being held.” She could hear a little tremor in her own voice, and wondered if she sounded sure to him. This was the start of her argument that she didn't belong in the sister category – that she belonged in the life partner category.

“A sister would never leave me,” he whispered.

“A sister might,” she said softly. “People grow and change; they separate and come back together. But someone who gives you their heart through choice, not through blood, will be there forever.”

He looked surprised, as if he had never considered that. Now that she thought about it, it wasn't that much of a surprise. He wanted someone who loved him, to be there for him, and with him thinking that she was Ron's, it was perfect for him. And would have remained that way, but she could offer him so much more, and she hoped he was starting to see that.

She stood up slowly and undid her robes, draping them neatly on the side of a chair. She was wearing the standard school uniform. She had contemplated wearing a purple bra underneath the white shirt, but that wasn't her. Sure, she liked wearing expensive underwear as much as the next girl, but sometimes old and comforting was the best, and she didn't want to give him false impressions.

She knelt next to him again, aware that the atmosphere had shifted very slightly. He was nervous again, but not as much as before. It was time to try and remove the last barrier. All her research from the summer flickered through her mind, important points appearing highlighted before her eyes.

“Close your eyes, Harry,” she whispered.

“I don't know if I want to,” he said back, honestly.

“Please,” she begged. “Trust me.”

He rested his head back against the chair and did as she was asked.

“I'm going to tell you one of my fantasies,” she said, licking her lips nervously. She'd never thought that it would end up like this, but she still thought that if she touched him too much, he'd leave. “You don't have to say anything or do anything. Just listen.”

He nodded, his eyes still closed.

She watched him for a few seconds, how relaxed he looked and smiled gently.

“I know you've had a bad day,” she said softly, trying to make her voice as smooth as possible. “And I want to help. You come home, calling for me, sounding a little exasperated. But you can't find me, so you walk into our bedroom.”

He shifted slightly, his breath just a tiny bit faster, and she felt a surge of hope shoot through her. It was almost intoxicating in its power.

“You freeze, unable to believe your eyes. Because I'm there, kneeling on our bed, wearing only your Gryffindor tie, and looking at you, a mysterious smile on my face.

“I watch as your face changes colour slightly. Whatever had been bothering you has been forgotten, as you slowly walk towards me, awe on your face. I arch my back a little, making my breasts stand out more. I'm more turned on than I can remember; I want your touch, your caress, and your kiss.

“You stand in front of me, looking down at me with fire in your eyes. Your hand moves to my hair, and you tangle your fingers in it. You force my head back, and kiss me, hard. You're not being gentle; you're taking what you want from me. You're taking me.”

He swallowed reflexively; his tongue flicked out and wet his lips.

"You break the kiss and step back, we're both breathing hard, my chest is heaving," she continued, her own fantasy affecting her as much as it was affecting him. "You start to undress, fast. You throw your tie in one corner of the room, your shoes in different direction, and your trousers onto a chair. But I don't care about the mess, all I want is you."

"You stand before me, naked. I can see you're as turned on as I am. I start to take your tie off, leaving me as naked as you are, but you stop me. 'Leave it,' you growl, and I smile at you, as I slide off the bed."

"I kneel in front of you, looking up at you. Thoughts flash through my mind, how when I was young this sounded so demeaning, but now I'm older I understand. I thought that if I did this, I would be submissive. I lean forwards, keeping eye contact, and watch your reactions, realising I have power over you."

She looked down into his lap, and restrained the urge to jump up and down in celebration. "Harry," she whispered.

He opened his eyes, looking at her.

She had him.

Even if he didn't know it yet, she had him. His eyes were full of fire, full of desire, full of longing. She just had to get him to accept it now. "If I was your sister, you wouldn't be so aroused now. You'd have left the room a long time ago. I'm not your sister, but I can be more for you."

He looked like he didn't know what to say; there was a blush of embarrassment in his cheeks.

"There's one more test, Harry."

"What?" he asked, his voice lower than she remembered it.

"I'm going to kiss you."

He smiled faintly, as if he'd guessed that part.

She shifted, and straddled him, sitting in his lap. She'd never sat so intimately with anyone before. She could feel him through his trousers, and she really, really wanted to take her time and study him. So many new experiences, so much knowledge she could gain.

Her nerves suddenly returned with a vengeance. This was the moment that was going to change everything for him. He could ignore her words, but he would not be able to ignore a kiss. A kiss was the sign of the physical affection he had grown up without.

"I'm scared," he whispered, looking up at her. "I can't lose you."

"You're not going to," she promised. "Even if this doesn't work, I'll always be your friend. But you're going to gain so much." She knew she sounded more confident than she felt. She'd never actually kissed someone, at least not a serious, on-the-mouth kiss. She licked her lips again and slowly leaned forwards. He didn't back away, and kept his eyes open, watching her intently.

She hovered over his mouth, feeling his warm breath against her lips, before she gathered all of her courage and closed the distance between them.

The web page she had read on how to kiss said that it was best to start simple, so she did that. She let her lips brush against his, gently. This was her chance to show him that she really loved him, and she wasn't going to get it wrong. She slid her hands up and lightly cupped his face, holding him still. Gently, tenderly, she moved around his face, kissing him gently, his nose, his forehead. He obviously trusted her, even when she removed his glasses again and kissed his eyes.

She moved back to his lips and kissed him again, a little more firmly. She giggled slightly, the sound surprising her, and making him smile, as she found that she needed to tilt her head slightly to avoid mashing her nose against his. She tried again, and this time got it right, and opened her mouth against his, wanting him to do the same.

And suddenly, he did. She felt a wave of pure heat shoot through her. She felt his arms slide up, awkwardly holding her, but it didn't matter. They could work on that later – they could work on everything later.

She released his face and slowly broke the kiss, unable to resist the widest smile she'd ever had.

He smiled at her, that little smile again. "I was wrong earlier when I said you were pretty," he whispered. "You're beautiful."

She flushed slightly; it didn't matter if she was or wasn't, as long as he thought so. She wasn't averse to using a bit of behaviour modification, and it seemed like a fair deal. If he gave her wonderful compliments like that, then she would wiggle on his lap. She did, and found that she enjoyed it as much as he did. She'd never thought of herself as being the type to be a sex kitten beforehand, but here she was, writhing on an aroused boy's lap, with only underwear, and his trousers, separating them.

It was something else that he could give her that no one else could. The freedom to try, knowing that he'd never take it further than she wanted it. It was his ingrained nobility again. She knew that if she had done this to Ron, or Seamus, or Dean, their hands would be all over her like a rash, and she'd be fighting them off.

Harry's hands were still on her back, as if he was scared to move them. He probably was.

"Will you go out with me?" she asked him.

He laughed softly. "You really are a scarlet woman aren't you?" His voice was warm and teasing and had something in it that she hadn't heard before. "You entice me to your chambers, effectively alter my long-held views, and then kiss me. Only then do you ask me out."

She lightly prodded him. "Most girls would wait for a guy to ask her out."

"But you're not most girls," he smiled. "You're Hermione. My Hermione."

She froze; the pleasure that shot through her with that simple possessive statement was almost sexual in its intensity.

"We are going to have to talk to Ron," he continued. "We're not hiding this."

She gave him another kiss. She was so pleased he wasn't thinking of hiding it. "So was that a yes?"

He shook his head, a new lightly teasing grin on his face. "Nope."

"Why not?" she asked, pouting a little. She honestly didn't think that she'd ever pouted before.

"Hermione, will you go out with me?"

She laughed and buried her face in his neck. "Yes," she said, as she inhaled deeply, giving into another fantasy.

He stroked her back softly, which reminded her. She sat back up, so that she could look into his eyes, and reached around her, grabbing his right hand.

She brought it around, and held it in front of her. "Let's talk about hands," she said.

"Oh?" he asked.

She nodded. "You're nervous about what to do with them, right?"

He blushed a little and nodded.

"Listen carefully. You can put your hands anywhere you want. If I don't like it, I'll tell you, and I'll tell you why, so you understand." She knew she had to spell it out for him, because he honestly didn't know any different. It wouldn't take him long to gain confidence with her, but until then, she was going to help him along every step of the way, and the best way she could do that was by being as open and honest with him as possible.

He blinked at her, repeatedly.

"We're not going to be a normal boyfriend and girlfriend, Harry. Even ignoring the whole Voldemort malarkey, we already know each other better than most people ever do. Sure, there will be new things for us to learn about each other, but we've already passed through the first several stages of a relationship.

"And I've been waiting far too long to do some practical research with you. Everything has been theoretical so far, and you can't experience something properly until you actually do it."

He laughed and shook his head, before he went serious. He sat up, holding her gently, so that she remained upright as well. As carefully as she had earlier, he slid his hands up and softly cradled her cheeks; she could feel the calluses from his broom. He leant forwards and gave her a kiss full of such tenderness and affection that it took her breath away.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?" she asked, suddenly fighting the urge to cry.

"For showing me something different. For wanting me. For being yourself and attacking the problems in a logical way. For being Hermione. For making me feel like I do now."

"How do you feel now?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," he said with that crooked grin. "But I do know I've never felt like this before, and I never want to stop feeling it."

"Oh, Harry," she cried, and hugged him tightly again.

His arms were a lot more relaxed as he held her now, as if he was now getting used to the idea of holding a warm female.

"We need to talk to Ron," he said. "He'll have finished his detention now."

She leaned back and looked at him. "You don't want to take me up on my earlier offer?"

"About my hands?"

"Yes."

"I do," he assured her. "But after we've told Ron."

He might not take it well," she said, more to see what he would say, rather than from any serious worry.

He sighed, "I know. But he's going to have to deal with it."

She smiled and kissed him briefly before standing.

"I look at you differently now," he said, as he looked up at her.

"In what way?" she asked.

"For the first time," he said with a grin, "I'm fantasising about what's under your skirt."

"Plain white knickers," she replied instantly.

He choked slightly and went red.

"It's boyfriend privileges," she explained cheerfully. "You can ask what you like, and if I don't want to answer, I won't."

He climbed to his feet. "I should also say thank you for making it so easy for me."

She walked up to him and hugged him like she wished she had a thousand times before.

"When have I ever done anything without a lot of research first?" she asked.

"I can think of a few times," he smiled at her, his hands locking around the small of her back.

"And if you don't include the times you and Ron dragged me into something?"

"None?" he asked.

"Good boy," she praised, and dropped a kiss on the side of his mouth.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand in his and walking out with her.

She smiled happily; this felt as right as she had hoped. They walked in silence, and she liked the fact that it was comfortable – that he didn't feel the need to talk nervously with her.

He said the password to Gryffindor Tower and ushered her in first. Just another tiny touch than she appreciated a little more now.

She walked over to the fire where Ron was talking to Dean.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said casually. "Can we have a word?"

"Of course," he smiled. "Bloody detention was the same as always. You'd think Snape could come up with something different after all these years."

They walked out of the common room, and to the Room of Requirement. Ron walked ahead of them, bouncing along cheerfully. He was talking about his detention, but she wasn't paying attention to him. She was paying attention to the way Harry's hand would occasionally reach out and brush against her arm, as if he was reassuring himself that she was still there.

Inside was a miniature version of the Gryffindor common room. "What's up?" Ron asked.

"I asked Hermione out a few minutes ago," Harry said calmly, sitting down.

She watched Ron curiously, and sighed as he slowly turned red. She pulled her wand out of her pocket and held it behind her back.

"You've bloody done what?" he yelled, stalking forwards. "How could you?"

"*Petrificus Totalus*," she said firmly, pointing her wand at him. It was typical for Harry to try and take all the blame, but the sooner he learnt that this was going to be a partnership, the better.

Harry looked at her, and flicked a smile at her. "I was planning on letting him hit me, to get it out of his system."

"We're not fourteen anymore," she said, smiling at Harry.

She flicked her wand a few times, removing the spell, forcing Ron to sit down, and tying him down. She was going to have to find out just how powerful Harry was now; as she was pretty sure he could have done the same things wandlessly. She knew there were a few secrets he was keeping from them and hoped that he would share them with her now. She wouldn't probe, much, as it was obvious he was keeping them for a reason.

"If we're going to be accurate," Hermione sighed at Ron. "I should point out that Harry asked me out, only after I spent an hour doing everything I could, including climbing into his lap and kissing him, to show him that I wanted more than friendship."

Ron's mouth snapped shut, and he glared at her.

"So," she said. "Exactly why are you upset?"

He blushed and looked away.

"I'm not releasing you until you answer me."

"I kinda like you," he muttered. "He," Ron said, nodding his head towards Harry, "knows that."

She nodded, hiding her smile. Unlike Harry, she could read Ron like a book. "Really?" she asked dryly. "And you were planning on telling me this when?"

Ron looked down.

"Ahh, I see," she nodded. "I was just supposed to wait like a good girl for you to grace me with your interest?" As he refused to answer, she continued. "You had four years to ask me out, Ron. And you didn't. Doesn't that tell you something? Doesn't that tell me that you didn't really want to?"

"But..." he said, shaking his head.

She smiled faintly and sat opposite him. She might kneel in front of Harry, but there was no way at all that she was going to kneel in front of anyone else. "Think about it," she encouraged him. "If you had really wanted me, you would have done something, said something, anything. You didn't do anything at all. Except argue with me a lot and frustrate me.

"I was never in love with you, Ron," she said softly, looking directly in his eyes. "And I don't think you ever loved me, either. We were both playing games, neither of us brave enough to let go."

She settled down in the chair and sighed internally when Harry sat next to her on the arm of the chair and lightly put his hand on her shoulder. Just the little gesture of support meant so much to her.

"Tell me," she said. "Do you love me, or do you love the idea of loving me?"

"It seemed right, you know, that I'd have something Harry didn't. The fact that at times I didn't actually like you was irrelevant."

She felt Harry's hand tense over her shoulder. It was so typical of Ron to look at it like that. It was one of the reasons she hadn't wanted to be with him. He had immense problems putting himself in other people's shoes. She restrained the urge to lash out at him, like she normally would. She'd save it for the next person to hurt Harry – it wouldn't help now.

She liked the idea that she could now be as protective of him she wanted to be. "Isn't that a really silly thing to base a relationship on?"

Ron paused. "Well, you're hot as well."

"Thank you," she said with a small smile. If Harry had said that, she'd probably have jumped him. Ron saying it left her cold. And that was the difference he would never understand. "I believe you've also called Parvati hot, and Lavender, and..."

"Yes," Ron interrupted. "I get the point. Can you release me; I'm not going to do anything stupid."

Harry nodded, and waved his hand, cancelling her spells. She knew it. He *had* been keeping secrets.

Ron gulped. "What did you just do?"

"Should I tell you?" he asked bitterly. "It would only be something else for you to be jealous over."

Ron blinked, obviously thinking and then went pale. "I didn't mean it like that," he protested.

"It sure sounded like it," Harry stated.

*"Don't interfere here, please."*

It took all of her self-control not to jump as she heard Harry's voice inside her mind.

*"I'm not planning on telling anyone else I can do this,"* his voice continued. *"Not even Dumbledore. But I figure that if I get boyfriend privileges, you get girlfriend privileges."*

She concentrated hard, figuring that if he was in her head, he may as well see that she wasn't lying earlier. She pulled together all the times she had wanted him, every time she had squashed the urge, every time she had cried herself to sleep, and every feeling of love for him that she had, and pushed it towards his voice.

"I know," Ron said apologetically. "But that wasn't what I meant."

*"A little warning would be good next time,"* she heard him whisper. *"It's very difficult to handle that sort of emotional burst at once; I'm still going through it."*

She sent apologetic thoughts to him. It hadn't been her intention to overwhelm him. She was going to have to do some research urgently to find out

what was happening, and how she could learn to control it herself.

"It's okay," he assured her. And she felt him gently caress her mind, and she fought to stop a visible shudder of pleasure showing.

"There's not a single thing in my life," Harry said slowly, "apart from Hermione, I wouldn't exchange with you in a second."

She decided that that comment alone was worth a very firm kiss as soon as Ron had gone. And maybe a little more.

Ron looked blankly at him. "Like what?" he scoffed.

"Your family, for my money?" he offered. "You can spend your time with that, and I'll spend my time being loved and cared for. I'll spend time knowing that I have a family around me if I need support or someone to care for me."

She admired his cleverness here. She hadn't expected him to go down this route but was pleased that he was.

"Or," he continued inexorably. "How about you can have my fame, and I'll have your fame. Of course, you will be the only person who can kill Voldemort, and the whole world will be on your shoulders. Every move you make will be looked at by everyone and examined closely. But what does that matter? You'll be famous."

"The thing that you've never realised is that everything is double-edged sword," Harry said as he sighed. "I'd love to be normal. I'd love to not have to wake up each morning wondering if this is the day that I will have to fight for my life."

"I've turned down six girls who have asked me out, including your sister. You know why? Because I was scared for them and scared for me. You know why I didn't turn Hermione down? Because she has been with us through everything we've done. Because she's never been afraid to argue with me, or hold different opinions to me."

He paused and shot her that crooked smile of his. She wondered if Ron would mind if she knocked him out quickly, so she could kiss Harry. She'd never been like this before, but was enjoying it all the same.

"She's been my friend, as you have, through my moods and my despair, and through the other side as I've started to deal with it."

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You've never actually come out and said that you like Hermione," he said softly. "And we're not fourteen anymore, Ron. This is our last year. She's Head Girl, you're Captain of the Quidditch team, and I've got Voldemort to take care of."

"I liked the status quo," Ron sighed, leaning back. "I knew that eventually one of us would move on, but I didn't want it to. You know, it was the three of us."

"It still will be," Harry said. "Although there will probably be kissing between me and Hermione. But are you really telling me that you don't want a girlfriend?"

Ron shook his head and smiled. "Actually, there is Susan Bones. She's cute."

Hermione laughed softly. "Ron, why can't you think first, and act afterwards?" she asked. It was like this every time with him. He'd get mad, try and hit Harry, or say something stupid, and only then think about it and realise that Harry was right in the first place.

Susan would be perfect for Ron. She was non-threatening, a homebody, and as much as she hated to make the comparison, a lot like Molly. And she had big breasts.

"Where would the fun in that be?" he asked, standing. "But I do owe you both an apology. And I'm going to give it to you now, by going back to the Tower and leaving you two alone," he grinned.

Ron walked to the door, and then paused, looking back. "You know," he said thoughtfully. "I actually feel kinda free for the first time." He grinned. "Are you sure you want to date her Harry? She's batty."

Harry laughed softly. "She might be, but she's mine. Oh, and Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Susan's not seeing anyone, likes the Cannons, and absolutely adores Sugar Quills. You might find her very easy to talk to if you sit next to her at the Hufflepuff practise tomorrow and offer her one. There's a supply in my trunk."

Ron grinned massively. "Thanks. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He walked out, and then leaned back. "Which admittedly isn't much," he said, with a wink, before vanishing.

"Let's go back to my room," Hermione said with a sigh.

He nodded, and they walked together in silence. No one bothered them; as Head Girl, Hermione had a lot of responsibilities and privileges.

"Were you really going to let him hit you?" she asked when they arrived at her room. She shrugged her robes off again and laid them neatly across her desk chair.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "It's often the quickest way to get through to him."

"What if he hadn't stopped?"

"I'd've blown him through the nearest wall," he said with a smile, before he reached out, grabbed her, and pulled her in for a deep kiss.

"What was that for?" she asked, a little shakily, as he released her.

"I'm going to kiss you for every time you were upset or crying about me," he said, a sad look on his face.

"Oh, Harry," She sighed and pulled him towards her bed. "Sit, in the centre," she ordered.

"Yes, Ma'am," he said with a teasing grin.

As she had before, she lowered the lights and then kicked off her shoes. She climbed onto the bed, and sat as close to him as she could, straddling his legs. "I didn't show you that to make you feel ashamed," she said gently. "I showed you because I wanted you to know that I wasn't lying. That this isn't a flash in the pan for me. I've wanted this for a long time; I just had to grow up enough first."

He nodded softly and then kissed her gently. "I like this," he said softly. "I like kissing you. I like being alone with you. I meant what I said, Hermione. I've turned down other girls, but I couldn't and wouldn't turn you away. Not just because you managed to get through to me, but because you're you."

"Even if I'm not like those girls you've seen on TV?"

"You're not," he agreed solemnly. "You're much better looking than they are."

She tilted her head to study him, and felt him start to pull her mind to him. Following him into his mind was like juggling soap with oven gloves on. But eventually she made it, and she gasped as she realised he wasn't lying. He simply showed her how he saw her, her bravery, her intelligence, and his absolute belief that if he needed something, she'd be the one to find it. And that, now that he was allowing himself to think of her that way, he really did think she was beautiful. It was like he saw an idealised version of her in his mind.

She felt the connection slip away and made a firm note to learn everything about Occlumency and Legilimency as soon as possible.

"Thank you," she whispered. And then allowed her smile to turn slightly wicked. "You remember that conversation about hands we had earlier?"

He nodded, flushing a little.

"Good," she said and kissed him seriously.

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She sat down for breakfast, unable to keep the smile off her face. He really did have magic hands and he had proved it. All she had to do now was bring out his more adventurous side. It wasn't that she was disappointed – quite the opposite; she would have just liked things to have gone a bit further last night.

And she didn't like the idea that he went back to his own bed either. He was hers now, so surely that meant he should stay with her. For the first time ever, she grumbled to herself about the school rules.

Maybe there was an exception in *Hogwarts: A History*. She'd have to read it again, as she knew there were some exceptions for Head Girls, and there must be some for heroes.

"You're looking happy," Lavender pointed out.

She smiled at the girl. She'd heard the flirty thing talk about Harry many times, but it didn't matter anymore; she had got there first, and – hopefully – had also got there last.

She felt Harry walk into the room. It was like her senses were completely attuned to him now. He looked awake, but then, he was having training before classes, so he would be.

"Morning," he smiled and kissed her softly, in a very surprising public display of affection.

There was a silence that seemed to sweep around the Hall, even among the Professors. Obviously, no one else had been expecting that.

"When you two have finished," Ron said, interrupting them casually, "can you pass the juice?"

Harry smiled and slid his arm around her waist, reaching across her to pass the jug to Ron.

"What the hell are you doing with the filthy Mudblood?" a hated voice shouted shrilly across the Hall. It was a remarkably stupid thing for him to do. Not just doing it in public and in front of professors, but doing it in front of Harry.

Harry's hand shot out, and Draco went flying back from the Slytherin table and against the wall where he was held still. The blonde boy seemed unable to actually make any noise, no matter how much he tried.

"Sleep well?" Harry asked Ron in the silence.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Look, about last night, can you do me a favour?"

"What?"

"Next time I screw up, can you let Hermione deal with me, not you?"

She smiled, amused.

"Potter!" Snape yelled, getting to his feet.

"I do so hope, Professor Snape," McGonagall's voice interrupted him. "That you are going to praise Mr Potter for showing such restraint in the face of such appalling provocation. A student of Hogwarts, insulting another so blatantly. Never in my days have I seen something so reprehensible!"

"Absolutely," Snape said in a thin voice. "Ten points to Gryffindor." The words sounded like they were being dragged from him with the utmost protest.

"I presume that Professor Dumbledore and I will learn of how you have punished Mr Malfoy later," McGonagall continued. "I'm sure it will be fair and equitable, based on your past treatment of Mr Potter."

"Quite," Snape said, his pale face flushed. He stormed down from the table, and over to where Draco was still being held against the wall. The Professor pulled out his wand and cast *Finite Incantatem* at the prostrate boy.

She heard Harry whispering under his breath and restrained a laugh. He picked up a drink and started in on his breakfast.

Snape, having failed to remove the spell, tried to pull Draco off the wall physically. Which, apart from causing an expression of pain on the prisoner, had no affect at all.

"Please, Mr Potter," Snape eventually said through tightly clenched teeth, casting hate filled glances at him.

"Of course, Professor Snape," her boyfriend said calmly. He nodded once, and Draco fell to the floor in a heap.

"My office, now!" Snape roared at the boy.

"But..." Draco protested.

Snape reached out and grabbed Malfoy's ear, pulling him out of the Hall, looking thoroughly humiliated – and determined to take it all out on Malfoy.

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," Ron said cheerfully.

"Professor Snape, or Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"Does it matter?"

She smiled. "No, I guess it doesn't."

"Wait a second," Ron gasped. "No lecture about propriety? About giving a professor respect? About fighting back?"

Hermione shook her head, a little smile on her lips.

"Damn it, Harry," he sighed. "We should really have sorted this out years ago. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's a Hufflepuff redhead who I need to check is going to the practice later."

"I believe that congratulations are in order," Professor Dumbledore said, as he approached the table.

Harry nodded. "I believe she does deserve them. Hermione did all the work; I just hung on for the ride."

The professor inclined his head. "Then congratulations, Ms Granger. I believe that you will find page 3732 most useful."

She smiled at the old man. He might have made mistakes, but he had recognised them and had taken steps to rectify them. And while she hadn't completely forgiven him, if the page was accurate, she would.

And she was pretty sure Harry would as well.

"Thank you, Professor," she smiled. "I appreciate it."

"I'm sure you do," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "I'm sure you both will."

So, if this was what dating Harry Potter was going to be like, she was all for it. It seemed that a few more people than she had thought were concerned about him, and they were being encouraging. Just being with him was as exciting as she had hoped, and he certainly wasn't ashamed of her, as the whole school probably knew now.

She idly wondered how he would handle the Prophet, and decided that she'd have a quick word with Skeeter herself. The old beetle would kill for an exclusive interview, and if the reporter betrayed her now, well, she'd just ruin her later, when she was Minister.

"Come on," Harry smiled, as he finished breakfast. "Let's go to your room and get my homework out the way."

Homework, on a Saturday?" she asked, disbelievingly.

"If you know I've done it," he smiled. "You won't object to what I want to do this afternoon."

She grinned and nodded. He had a point.