

Choices

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Neville Longbottom paced back and forth outside the Hogwarts library, pondering the course of action he was about to take. He wasn't sure if it was his place to speak up, but he felt he needed to do something. He owed it to Harry. During this past year he had become good friends with the Boy Who Conquered. He'd probably never be as close to him as Ron and Hermione had always been, but ... well, that was part of the problem. The situation that had developed simply couldn't be allowed to go any further. He stopped his pacing and squared his shoulders, resolving to go ahead with it. He pushed open the door to the library and entered.

It didn't take too long to find his quarry. Hermione was sitting at what had long since come to be regarded as 'her' table, accompanied, as was always the case these days, by Terry Boot. The two of them were together, as usual, sitting side by side and holding hands while they read. They were in that sickeningly sweet part of a relationship where they were always touching, smiling at each other, sneaking quick kisses, and exchanging thoughtful remarks and precious little endearments with each other. The sort of behavior that caused girls to sigh and comment on how cute they looked while boys rolled their eyes in disgust.

"Hey Hermione?" Neville interrupted them after standing next to the table for several seconds without being noticed. Hermione turned away from Terry and smiled at him, while Terry looked annoyed at being disturbed. "Do you happen to know where Harry is?" Neville asked once he had her attention.

Hermione frowned in thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No, not really. Why?"

Neville affected a look of surprise. "Really? Wow, that's different." Hermione frowned again, this time more in consternation. "I mean, different than the way it used to be. You could always be counted on to know where Harry was, if he wasn't with you as was usually the case." Now Hermione's frown began to change into a scowl. She didn't like the implication of what Neville was saying. But he wasn't finished yet.

"But on the other hand that's different too. I don't see him with you very often at all now. Pretty surprising, don't you think? In fact, do you ever know where he is these days?" Hermione opened her mouth to begin an angry retort but was cut off. "Besides at night, I mean, since you share a room, or when you're in the same class," Neville added.

Hermione's mouth snapped shut, as she had undoubtedly been about to cite one of those two instances. Her face turned red as she tried to think of another example, but couldn't come up with any time other than at meals in the Great Hall that she could claim to be certain of Harry's whereabouts, and that would only reinforce what Neville was implying. Her irritation wouldn't let her sit quietly and take it, however.

"Is there some point to all of this?" she snapped.

In the past Neville would have cringed under the glare he was now getting from the girl who knew more hexes than anyone of her generation, but his concern for his new best friend bolstered his courage, and he stared her down until she shifted uncomfortably under his accusing gaze. "I'll bet the Sorting Hat had a hard time deciding whether to put you in Gryffindor or Ravenclaw," he remarked in an apparent non sequitur. Hermione could only respond with a puzzled nod. "But it's pretty obvious why it didn't put you in Hufflepuff," he finished sarcastically. As Hermione's face darkened he spun on his heel and marched back out into the hall.

Once in the corridor he paused, knowing that this confrontation wasn't over yet. He wasn't disappointed, as less than thirty seconds later Hermione came storming out of the library in a fury. "Just what is that supposed to mean, Neville Longbottom?" she hissed.

Neville stood his ground. "Exactly what it sounds like," he retorted, matching her ire. "You've abandoned Harry."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded incredulously. "I never abandoned him, not once! I stuck with him every step of the way, no matter what. When everyone in the castle was against him, I stood by him. I fought at his side until the bitter end, and I was right there when he finally defeated that monster. You know that!"

"And then what?" Neville challenged. "Once the battle was over you just dropped him? What, were you only in it for the thrill? For the fame?"

"Neville!" Hermione protested. "You know me better than that!"

"So why then?" Neville persisted. "Why did you drop out of his life?"

"That's not true!" she repeated. "I see him every day."

"But how much time do you spend with him?" he demanded. "When was the last time you did homework together? When was the last time you looked over one of his essays? Do you even know how he's doing in his classes? When was the last time you actually *talked* to him – more than just to say good morning when you pass each other by in your common room?"

Hermione started to counter his assertions but then stopped, because she couldn't come up with an answer. Truth be told, there were some days when she didn't even have that much contact with her long-time friend, when she got dressed in the morning and hurried off to meet Terry without waiting for Harry to emerge from his room. Now that she thought of it, she couldn't recall the last time she'd done any of those things with him, or even what their last conversation had been about.

Well," she temporized. "I've been spending a lot of time with Terry so maybe I haven't had as much contact with Harry lately. What of it?" she finished a bit petulantly. Neville just nodded in response, and Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"Is that what this is all about?" she snapped. "Is this because I'm dating Terry? What, I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend?" Her voice began to rise as she gathered a head of steam. "Is Harry actually jealous that I'm not spending all my time with him now? That I have someone else in my life?"

Neville managed to keep his cool under her renewed attack. "You know as well as I do, Hermione, that Harry is only ever jealous of one thing," he stated in a calm voice that did not betray the turmoil inside him that this subject stirred up.

Hermione's ire deflated instantly, and she had the grace to look abashed. "I know," she replied softly. "He envies anyone who has a loving family."

Neville now pressed his advantage. "When Harry was dating Cho, he still spent most of his time with you and Ron. If anyone had suggested that she was more important to him than either of you he would have looked at them like they were crazy." Hermione nodded guiltily.

"You know," Neville declared. "I used to envy you three. The friendship you guys had, how close you all were. It was really something to see. I'd have given anything for a friendship like that. I can't believe either you or Ron would throw something that precious away because of a boyfriend or girlfriend."

"But I haven't thrown anything away," Hermione protested. "Harry is still my best friend!"

Neville's scornful expression brought her up short. "Don't act dumb, Hermione. No one will buy that from you. Ron, maybe, but not you. You made a choice. You need to decide if that's really the way you want it."

Hermione was silent for several long moments as her mind carried on an internal debate on Neville's assertion. Then without meeting his eyes she asked meekly. "So where *is* Harry right now?"

Neville wasn't letting her off the hook so easily. "You used to know him better than anyone. You figure it out."

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To Hermione's embarrassment, it took her three tries to deduce Harry's location. The problem was, she decided, that she had been trying to come up with places where he'd go when he wanted to be alone (the Room of Requirement or flying out on the quidditch pitch) rather than where he'd go when he was *feeling* alone (down by the lake). During the time she spent hunting him down she went through a critical self-examination.

After attempting a relationship with Ron over the summer, which failed miserably, she had decided that she wanted a normal, teenaged, school year romance. Upon making this determination, she had made a list of all the boys in her year who were potential candidates, noting their strengths and weaknesses as possible boyfriends, as well as things she and they would have in common. She had concluded that she would be best matched with Terry Boot. He was a Ravenclaw and thus would share her love of learning, a former member of the DA, which indicated that he had the courage to stand up for what was right, and finally he was also a muggleborn like herself. And he wasn't bad looking either.

The next step was to initiate a relationship with him. She had expected this to be the difficult part, not having any experience with trying to attract a boy's attention (Viktor Krum had approached her without any effort on her part) but this turned out not to be the case. Her celebrity from her role in Voldemort's defeat resulted in everyone wanting to get to know her better. An Order of Merlin was apparently quite a powerful attractant. She suddenly found herself the most desired girl at Hogwarts! She realized that this was what Harry had been going through on and off for the past six years, but it was quite new for her. It didn't take any effort at all to let Terry know she was interested.

Consequently, she had been enjoying all the benefits of having a boyfriend for the first time, savoring each new experience, mentally checking them off one by one on the list in her head (but resisting assigning grades!). All in all she was quite satisfied with their progress. Unfortunately, she now realized, the single-minded obsession with which she typically approached an important project had caused her to neglect her relationship with her best friend. But now it was time to fix that.

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Harry sat out by the lake in his private spot, which only his best friends knew about – Ron and Hermione, and now Neville. He was taking advantage of one of the warm, sunny weekends that sometimes graced Scotland in late October, but which was likely to be the last one for this year. His special location was a small cove across from the castle where the woods came all the way down to the shoreline so that it was blocked from view on either side. (Not far from where he'd sent his patronus across the lake to rescue Sirius, Hermione and himself during his time-turned adventure in his third year.) It also had several large boulders that one could lean back against, as he was currently. He'd spent a lot of time sitting here thinking over the past years, which was exactly what he was doing right then.

He'd expected that things would be different at Hogwarts this year, without the threat of the Dark Lord hanging over them, but he had not anticipated the situation he now found himself in. What he'd hoped for was a peaceful year in which he could have fun with his two best friends. What he hadn't taken into consideration was the attraction of the opposite sex.

Oh, he'd realized that being war heroes would lead to quite a bit of attention for them, but he'd never followed through with that thought to the possibility that both Ron and Hermione would get into serious relationships. Well, actually he had, but he'd expected it to be with each other. He had been partly right about that, in that they had given it a try over the summer. But after a month of increasingly bitter arguments it had become obvious that it wasn't going to work. With the advantage of hindsight, he wondered why he had ever expected it to. After all, they had almost nothing in common, and the bulk of their interaction with each other over the years had been criticisms and insults.

But Ron now seemed quite happy with Lavender, if the public displays of affection were anything to go by, and Hermione seemed to spend every waking moment with Terry Boot. He couldn't really blame either of them. Lavender was certainly a very attractive girl, and flirtatious to the point of being overtly suggestive. While easy on the eyes, she wasn't really Harry's type, though, coming across as being a bit too empty-

headed for his taste. She was most interested in things that he didn't take seriously, and vice versa. But she'd certainly captured Ron's attention.

And Terry was a nice enough guy. Even though Harry tended to be overly protective of Hermione, much as Ron was with Ginny, he really couldn't find anything to object to about the way Terry treated Hermione. He was a bit uncomfortable whenever they became affectionate with each other, but they were pretty good about keeping that side of their relationship mostly private. The only legitimate complaint Harry had was that Terry monopolized so much of her time.

Harry had to admit that Hermione had also turned into quite a desirable woman. She'd filled out nicely over the years, and now that she was dating Terry she'd begun to use a bit of makeup and dress more attractively. Harry had always thought she had a pretty smile, but now the overall effect was to make the male students of Hogwarts sit up and take notice, and Harry was no exception. There had been quite a few disappointed potential suitors when she'd chosen Terry to be her boyfriend.

Harry had wondered if he should feel guilty about the fact that he noticed how attractive Hermione was, given that he thought of her like a sister, but he'd concluded that it was OK. After all, he'd always thought of Ginny like a kid sister too, but that didn't stop him from noticing how pretty *she'd* become. Lots of guys had their eye on her as well, and Harry had even considered asking her out over the summer before deciding that it would just be too awkward.

No, the problem that Harry now found himself in was that he desperately missed his best friends. On the plus side, he'd become much better friends with Neville, and was able to discuss guy-type stuff with him that he used to talk about with Ron. But close relationships are built on shared experiences, and Neville simply didn't have the six years of nearly constant companionship with Harry that Ron and Hermione had. And there was no substitute for Hermione. No one knew Harry the way she did; could read him like she could. For six years she had always been there when he needed her, and was always available when he wanted to talk about whatever was on his mind. But not this year.

He really missed her.

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Harry was brought out of his musings by the sound of someone making their way toward him through the woods, and he sat up and twisted around to see who it was. As soon as he caught sight of the bushy hair of his visitor he relaxed and leaned back against the boulder again and waited for her to join him.

"Hi," Hermione greeted him with some apprehension in her voice. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking," he replied with a shrug.

"I thought that was my job," she joked in an attempt to break the ice (which was yet another indication that their relationship was askew, since she'd never needed to do that before). He acknowledged the attempt with a weak smile, but did not return the banter. A bit disappointed, she sat down by another boulder facing him.

"Where's Terry?" he inquired after a few seconds when it became apparent she was alone.

"In the library," she replied, affecting a tone of unconcern. "I thought I'd see how things were going with you." He shot her a questioning look that clearly communicated how out of the ordinary this was. "Honestly, it's not like I spend all my time with him," she protested.

His look grew more skeptical and she glanced away, unable to maintain the pretense, knowing that it wasn't true. He continued to look at her but his gaze softened as her head came back up and her eyes locked once more with his, this time clearly showing her discomfort with his unspoken accusation. He relented and she relaxed, her eyes now expressing her gratitude for his forbearance. They went on that way for several seconds, utilizing their ability to communicate merely with a series of looks.

"That's OK, as long as you're happy," he assured her in an attempt to put the subject to rest. His statement did not completely ease her inner turmoil; while she was grateful that he was being so understanding about it, she still felt guilty.

"You're right, though, we haven't talked with each other much lately," she admitted, "and I want to change that. So tell me, how have things been going lately?"

He smiled for the first time since she'd arrived. "I got an O on my last Charms assignment," he announced with satisfaction.

"Harry, that's wonderful," she beamed. "I'm so proud of you." The look of gratitude in his eyes in response to her praise caught her off guard. Did her opinion of his efforts really mean that much to him? Her guilty feeling returned – she'd seldom bothered to even inquire how he'd been doing in his courses this year, much less offer her approval of his work.

"Thanks," he replied. "You'll be happy to know that I've been working a lot harder in my classes this year. I decided over the summer that you've been right in trying to get us to put more effort into our studies. Of course I thought ..." He broke off abruptly, and both of them knew he'd been about to say that he'd expected that she'd be working on the assignments alongside him as she'd always done, but that hadn't happened since she had a new study partner now. "... erm, well, like I said, I've been trying harder this year," he finished awkwardly.

Hermione felt like she was about to cry. She'd not realized until now how much she'd missed. After all the effort she'd made over the years to get the two boys to take their work seriously, and then she hadn't been around for the payoff, for one of them at least.

"How about you?" Harry tried in an attempt to move along a conversation that kept veering into uncomfortable areas. "Any classroom triumphs to report? Other than the usual perfect paper, I mean," he teased.

"Oh, McGonagall asked me the other day if I'd like to apprentice under her next year," she informed him excitedly. "I could work toward a mastery in transfiguration and do some teaching in the lower years. If I like it I could be asked to join the staff when she moves up to take Dumbledore's position after he retires." Her excitement was tempered by the flash of hurt she detected in his eyes, which resonated as a stab of pain in her own chest, at the fact that she hadn't told him about this sooner. She'd told Terry immediately, of course, but in the past it had

always been Harry who had been the first recipient of her good news.

"That's great!" he congratulated her enthusiastically. "If anyone deserves something like that, you do. I'm so happy for you!" And she knew that he genuinely *was* happy for her, his disappointment having been banished as soon as it had appeared. Only she could even have detected it in the first place. "Have you decided whether you're going to take it?"

"Not yet," she confided. "I'm going to wait and see how the rest of the year goes, and what other opportunities arise." Now this was something that she hadn't shared with anyone else, even Terry, and she was surprised at the warm feeling it gave her that Harry was the one she was discussing it with first.

He nodded. "That's probably a good idea. I'm sure there'll be a lot of people interested in you." She flushed at his praise, noticing how good it felt. She also noted that the word 'interested' could be taken in more than one way, and this caused the redness in her cheeks to deepen.

In her flustered state she was unable to come up with a response and they lapsed into silence again. Unfortunately, it wasn't the comfortable silence of years past, when they would sit at this very spot staring across the lake at the castle, her mere presence being enough to assure him of her support in whatever difficult time he was going through. No, that camaraderie had dissipated due to her absence the past few months – the assurance that she'd always be there for him being negated by the fact that she hadn't been there and he'd had to make do without her. Only now that she'd lost it did she realize how much she'd valued it.

"This isn't how I thought things would be this year," Harry commented softly, breaking the stillness. Hermione looked up at him questioningly, and he shrugged and put his head down.

"I didn't think I'd be so lonely."

The forlorn tone in his voice and the slump of his shoulders broke her heart. This just wasn't right. After all he'd been through, after all he'd done for the wizarding world, Harry Potter deserved better. And the thought that she was at least partly responsible for his depressed state of mind made it all the worse.

She moved across and sat next to him and put her arm around him for a hug, at the same time cursing herself that the situation between them had deteriorated so much that she'd actually hesitated to offer this comfort that had always been automatic.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, as tears welled up in her eyes.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't mean it like that, to make it sound like I was blaming you. It's not just that. It's also that I'm sort of lost as to what to do with myself now. What's my purpose in life? Other than being an Auror, which I don't really want to do now, I'd never thought about what I'd do after Hogwarts, or after he was gone, actually. I'm not sure who I am anymore."

Hermione nodded against his shoulder to indicate that she understood, and he continued. "What about you? You probably have a whole list of goals for this year, now that we aren't fighting for our lives anymore."

"I do, as a matter of fact," Hermione replied, now in more comfortable territory. "And yes I did make a list, so you can stop teasing me about it." As she'd hoped, this got a chuckle out of him. First, I wanted to be Head Girl, which happened, and for you to be Head Boy, which also did." Harry turned his head to give her a look of surprise – he'd long assumed her desire to be Head Girl, but hadn't realized that ambition included him.

"I also had goals for NEWTs, as you'd expect," she continued.

"Let me guess, twelve O's?" he interrupted with a grin.

"You prat," she huffed as she pulled away and smacked him on the arm. "You know I'm only taking seven subjects."

"Bet you could still get eight O's though," he countered. She gave him a puzzled look in response. "Muggle Studies," he revealed. "Heck, you could probably write that exam better than the Ministry could."

"Oh stop," she protested, reddening once again. Harry just chuckled again and draped his arm across her shoulders. Hermione was silent for a moment, and then without looking up added hesitantly, "I did have another goal for the year." Harry quieted down and waited for her to reveal her next item, but instead she said, "Promise you won't laugh."

"OK," he replied, now curious.

"I decided I wanted to have a boyfriend this year," she murmured shyly.

Harry didn't quite know how to respond, so there were a few awkward seconds of silence. "Well, it looks like you've succeeded at that one too," he finally managed, while giving her arm a quick squeeze to show he supported her decision.

"Maybe you could try that too," she suggested. "You should find yourself a girlfriend." Harry now realized why she had mentioned that as a goal of hers, and that she was attempting to help him out with the problem he'd revealed earlier.

He just shook his head. "Who?"

"Harry," Hermione sighed in exasperation. "There are plenty of girls who'd want to be with you."

"You have no idea," Harry retorted sarcastically. "But every one of them wants to be with Harry Potter the hero, not just plain Harry."

"What about Ginny?" Hermione persisted.

"I don't know," Harry answered honestly. "I did think about that this summer, but decided it just wouldn't work. You know she had a crush on the Boy Who Lived before she even met me, and it only got worse after her first year when I saved her in the Chamber. How would I ever know if

she was completely past that? I'd always be afraid she was dating her hero and not seeing the real me. I just don't want to risk it. I'd rather have her as a friend." Hermione nodded to indicate that she understood. She had the same concern about Ginny, and didn't blame Harry for erring on the side of caution.

"You're the only girl that I know for sure thinks of me as just Harry," he revealed. "You're who I want to spend time with. I miss you."

"Oh, Harry ..." Hermione didn't know what else to say to that, so she simply hugged him again. How was she supposed to react to hearing that the most famous wizard in the world, who thousands of girls would give their right arm to date, would rather spend time with her than any of them?

"I'm so sorry for the way I've let this situation develop," she apologized. "I promise this won't happen again. I'll always try to make time for you."

Harry gave her arm another squeeze. "I can't help think that if you'd stayed with Ron we'd all have been able to spend more time together," he mused. "I'm sorry but I don't feel comfortable around Ron and Lavender, or you and Terry. So it's partly my fault too, I guess."

"You do remember what a disaster that was, right?" Hermione chided him.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not suggesting you try that again," Harry agreed. "I was caught in the middle of that mess."

They sat together in silence for a time before Harry spoke up again. "I don't think it was like this when I dated Cho, or you dated Viktor. The three of us still spent most of the time together."

"Well, I didn't exactly date Viktor," Hermione pointed out. "Other than the Yule Ball, the only time we spent together was in the library." She had no counter for his point about Cho, however. He'd even broke off his one real date with the pretty Chinese Ravenclaw because Hermione had asked him to meet her. She wondered uneasily if she would have returned the favor if Harry had asked her to interrupt a Hogsmeade outing with Terry.

"But still, I never spend any time with you or Ron now," Harry contended. "You're just never around."

Hermione couldn't dispute that either, so she tried for a more general reassurance. "Harry, we're still your best friends!"

But Harry cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. "Best friends spend time together," he pointed out simply. Hermione cringed and looked away.

"You could try to make other friends," she suggested. "Like you did with Neville." Harry gave her a long look that made her uncomfortable, as she knew she was on thin ice with this argument.

"I never had friends before Hogwarts," Harry said softly.

"Me neither," Hermione replied in a matching tone.

"That's why I thought you'd understand," he continued. "It's not easy for me to make friends. Not many trolls around these days to save someone from." The bit of levity brought a fond smile to Hermione's face.

"You should try anyway," she insisted.

"Is that what you want?" Harry asked sadly. "For me to find another friend?"

"Harry, that's not what I meant," Hermione protested. "Quit twisting my words around."

"I'm sorry," he replied contritely. "I'm just trying to figure this out."

"I understand," she said as she leaned against him and pulled his arm tighter around herself. "I wish I had a better answer for you."

They lapsed again into companionable silence, having regained their comfort level with each other already in the just the short time since Hermione had joined him. Harry found himself trying to think of ways to extend their conversation, knowing it might be some time before they shared a moment like this again, and not wanting it to end. He'd really missed having her advice on things, and wanted her input on the decisions he needed to make about his life.

"Do you think Ron and Lavender are shagging yet?" he wondered, his mind still occupied with trying to understand how the three of them had drifted so far apart.

Hermione was surprised, not at the idea that their other best friend would be engaging in that activity but that Harry would say it out loud. She had in fact speculated to herself about that very topic.

"I don't think so," she confided to Harry. "At least not yet. I think we would probably be able to tell by how they acted afterward. Ron would be strutting around like he owned the place and Lavender would have a knowing, self-satisfied smile on her face. I'm glad I'm not sharing a room with her and Parvati this year; that would be difficult to have to put up with."

Harry chuckled at her spot-on descriptions of the pair, and nodded in sympathy at her last comment. He could envision Lavender rubbing in the fact that she'd succeeded where Hermione had failed – in building a serious romance with Ron.

Suddenly Harry leaned back and cocked his head. "What about you and Terry?"

"What about me and ...?" Hermione began in puzzlement before her head snapped back and her face turned bright red. "Harry James Potter! I can't believe you would ask me that!"

"Why not?" Harry asked, a bit surprised at her vehemence. "We just talked about whether Ron was doing it. It seems only fair ..."

"No, it's not that," Hermione interrupted, feeling hurt that he would even suggest such a thing. "I mean ... what kind of girl do you think I am?"

"Well," Harry tried to reason. "You just said Lavender ..."

"Harry," she began, then closed her eyes and willed herself to calm down. "Other than the fact that we're both in Gryffindor, are there *any* similarities at all between Lavender and me?"

Harry could see her point and understood that he'd offended her. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm not too clear on what's acceptable and what isn't."

Hermione relaxed and decided to try to explain. "It's a bit of a double standard, I know, but girls who are willing to have sex early in a relationship are, shall we say, not well thought of."

"I guess it depends on your point of view," Harry grinned, relieved that they were back on track. "Quite a few guys I know think that's a point in their favor."

"Oh really," Hermione replied archly, but with a tone in her voice that let him know she wasn't really upset with him. "And do you think that's the sort of reputation I want to have?"

"Of course not," he answered quickly. "After all these years I know you better than that." She smiled and he went on. "I was just having you on a bit."

"And if we'd been spending more time together and actually talking to each other the past two months you wouldn't even have needed to ask that," Hermione admitted with regret. "But seriously, and since you brought it up, that is an important and difficult decision for a couple to make – at least, those of us who aren't ruled by our hormones." Harry nodded, acknowledging that she would certainly be in that category. "I mean, even Ron and Lavender will probably talk about it first – well, Lavender will talk about it and Ron will listen."

Harry smiled at the thought of that particular conversation and shifted his position to get more comfortable. The two of them had moved apart somewhat while they talked and faced each other to make conversation easier, assuming positions that were very familiar to them from countless discussions in times past.

"To begin with, Terry and I aren't even close to that point," she clarified. "After all, we've only been going out for less than two months. We're still at the getting to know each other stage. I would want to be sure I was really in love with someone before taking a step like that, and seriously considering marriage. And even if it ever does come to that with Terry, then where? I certainly don't want my first time to be in a broom closet."

"But you have a private room," Harry pointed out.

Hermione blushed. "Well, yes, but I think it would be quite uncomfortable knowing you were right next door. I even feel awkward bringing him back to our common room."

"I'd leave," Harry declared. "If you ever want the room to yourself just let me know and I'll spend the night in Gryffindor or somewhere. "You wouldn't even have to tell me exactly what you were getting up to. I'd prefer that, actually," he added with a blush of his own.

"Really? You'd do that?" Hermione asked in wide-eyed amazement.

"For you? Yes." Harry couldn't meet her eyes anymore and dropped his gaze. "I want you to be happy." Hermione was at a loss for words, but reached out and took his hand and gave it a squeeze to show her appreciation.

After a moment Harry looked up again. "Do you think you and Terry will get married?" He wasn't sure why, but the thought made him uncomfortable. Perhaps because he didn't know Terry very well.

Hermione was startled by the question but managed to answer. "I ... probably not. I suppose it's possible that I'll fall in love with him but it's not likely. It rarely happens that one falls in love with and marries their first boyfriend or girlfriend. Why ..."

"Do you think Ron and Lavender will get married?" Harry broke in before she could finish her query.

"Possibly. I'd say they're more likely to than Terry and I are." Due to the previous few minutes of the conversation she didn't need to add that the couple in question were much farther along in their physical relationship. "They seem pretty compatible. But Harry, why all the interest in marriage all of a sudden?"

"I've actually been thinking about it for a while now," he responded, not looking at her but gazing off toward the castle." Once more she felt the pain of loss, that something this important had been on his mind and she hadn't known, because of her neglect of their friendship.

"Anyone in particular?" She found herself almost choking on the question. It was inconceivable to her that Harry could be considering marrying someone and that she had been totally in the dark about it.

"Not exactly," he revealed. "It's more general at this point but ..." He trailed off and turned to face her. "Just how do you go about choosing? Do you ask a girl out, snog for a while, gradually work your way up to shagging and then decide if you're compatible?"

"Well, I suppose that some people may do it that way," she offered while shaking her head in dismay at the cynicism he displayed with that question. "But that's certainly not the way I think it ought to be. I think that first you fall in love with someone, then discuss the possibility of a future with them. Talk about your goals in life and see if you're on the same page."

Harry nodded that he understood and looked away again. She could see that this answer troubled him but didn't understand why. Then he surprised her with another query. "If you're not in love with Terry, how will you know when you are? For that matter, how does anyone know when they're in love? How do you fall in love?"

"Those are actually good questions, Harry," she answered. "I think a lot of people, especially our age, confuse other feelings for love. I've read some books about it, and talked with my mum. It also helps to observe people in loving relationships, because love is a matter of how you act as much as, or more so, than how you feel, so I watch how my parents interact with each other."

"OK," he responded, and she noted a touch of sadness in his expression. She felt bad knowing that this was something he'd never been able to do, and couldn't resist reaching out and taking hold of his hand again.

"Love is something that develops gradually as you spend time with someone and grow close to them. You start to share more and more of your selves with each other. Eventually that person becomes the most important person in your life. It's not all physical, although I think the physical part of a relationship would be so much better when you're in love with your partner. But when you love a person you're happy just being with them. You want to share things with them, both good and bad. You're excited when something good happens to them, and you want to share your good news with them, because their approval means everything to you. But you also want to comfort them when they're sad, and you look to them to comfort you as well.

Ultimately you get to the point where their happiness is as important or possibly even more important to you than your own. If you really, truly love someone you want what's best for them even if it might not be what you ..."

Hermione's eyes went wide as she broke off her explanation. The realization hit her like a ton of bricks. Harry loved her! Everything she had just said described him perfectly! In fact, she could list point by point examples of what love is from the things he'd said in the conversation they had just been having. He'd all but said the words 'I love you', at least as far as he was able, when he'd said, twice, 'I want you to be happy.' He really, truly, deeply ... loved her.

The shock of this revelation echoed back and illuminated her own feelings and actions regarding her best friend with an entirely new light. Everything she had just said applied to her as well! Of course she loved Harry! How had she managed to miss that? Somehow she must have convinced herself that a guy as incredible as Harry could never fall for her, and so had managed to block her mind from even considering the possibility.

The preceding thoughts had flashed through Hermione's mind in just a few seconds. She looked up at Harry, who had a questioning look in his eyes at her abrupt silence, still in shock at the revelation she'd just had.

"I am such an idiot!"

She almost smiled at the perplexed expression on his face in response to her seemingly out of nowhere exclamation. Now her mind kicked into overdrive trying to figure out what to do with this new knowledge. The first thing was to establish what kind of love he felt for her. It might be entirely platonic but she didn't think so.

"What ... what are you talking about? What are you doing?" The first question was a reaction to her 'idiot' declaration, but the second was because she had begun taking off her robes. She even had a plausible excuse, since it had grown warmer as the sun had reached its zenith.

"Making myself comfortable. You should too. I have something important to ask you," she replied briskly. As she finished removing the bulky garment and reached up to check that her hair was still in place, she noted that his eyes widened. Instead of the standard uniform blouse she was wearing a knit top with a rather snug fit, which emphasized her shape quite nicely. Along with it she was wearing a skirt that ended just above her knees. When she'd dressed that morning she'd intended this view to be for Terry when they were alone later, but now her (soon to be ex) Ravenclaw boyfriend was the furthest thing from her mind. She smirked to herself as Harry noticed that she'd caught his appreciation of her figure and looked away in chagrin, and she resisted the urge to pump her fist in the air in triumph.

She waved off his automatic apology. "Why should it bother me if you think I look nice?" she assured him. "It's actually a compliment."

"I guess it doesn't sound so bad if you put it that way," he decided with evident relief that he wasn't about to get hexed. "You look really good," he added as he complied with her instructions and removed his own robes.

"Thank you. You look good too," she complimented him in return. It was true – he was no longer the scrawny little kid who'd first arrived at Hogwarts, and she now allowed herself the pleasure of running her eyes over the muscular torso that was usually hidden by his robes.

"I do?" he asked, looking down at himself with some disbelief.

"Of course. You're very attractive," she confirmed. "Any girl would be lucky to have you."

The way she said this took him aback. "Any girl?" he repeated. Hermione nodded with a sly smile that surprised him even further. "I'm confused." If it had been any girl other than Hermione, Harry would have been sure she was flirting with him, but ...

"Harry, I want you to do something for me," Hermione instructed as she leaned against a boulder and beckoned him to sit in front of her. When he complied she wrapped her arms around his upper body and pulled him back against her chest. "Close your eyes." Harry swallowed hard. Hermione had hugged him often enough but this was clearly different. He was very aware of her breasts pressed into his back and the way the skirt had slid up her legs. But he trusted her and did as she asked.

"Now, I want you to picture your future," she continued. "You have a house, a wife, some kids in the yard." Harry smiled as he envisioned this scene of domestic bliss. It had been something he'd been pondering ever since the final battle, but now Hermione was making it more focused for him.

"Ron lives next door," Hermione continued, "and he's helping you teach your kids to fly." Now Harry's smile broadened, which brought a matching one to her own face. Suddenly his smile faltered.

"Where are you?" he wondered. Hermione's heart leaped in her chest, but she managed to keep her voice calm.

"Maybe I live next door on the other side," she suggested. Harry's smile returned at this reassurance.

“Who’s your wife?” Hermione held her breath – this was the critical juncture.

“That’s the part that bothers me,” Harry told her with a frown. “I keep putting different girls in that position but they all feel wrong.” Hermione managed to refrain from asking which girls were under consideration for that important role.

“OK, what if you picture me next to you holding our baby?” A brighter smile than any thus far broke out on Harry’s face. An instant later the full realization hit him and his eyes shot open wide.

“Hermione!” he gasped as he whirled around to face her. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Hermione found herself too choked up to answer immediately, and could only nod as her eyes filled with tears.

“But when? How?” Harry was having difficulty grasping this sudden change in their relationship.

“It doesn’t matter,” she declared. “I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to realize it, but all that’s important now is that I know you love me. And I love you too.”

“I ... I ...” Harry stammered as his mind tried to catch up with the conclusions she was arriving at. He paused as the pieces began to fall into place, and he made the same connections that she had between the things he’d felt for her and her description of love.

“You’re right,” he finally decided as his eyes widened in wonder. “I ...” He was unable to finish because all of a sudden his lips were otherwise occupied by the witch who seemed to have apparated into his arms. It didn’t take very long for both parties to conclude that Hermione had been absolutely right when she’d claimed that the physical part of a relationship was much better with one you loved.

After they finally broke apart from a kiss that might have lasted the entire afternoon if they’d let it, Harry had another question.

“Now what do we do?”

“Well, the first thing I need to do is go find Terry and break up with him,” Hermione decided, looking down at the ground with some embarrassment, but thanking all the wizarding deities for Neville’s intervention that morning.

“Oh.” Somewhere along the line the detail that Hermione already had a boyfriend had completely slipped Harry’s mind. “Look, if you want to ...” he began. But Hermione, who was well aware of Harry’s self-sacrificing tendency, cut him off with another kiss.

“Don’t even think it,” she stated firmly. “I already told you he’s just a casual boyfriend and we don’t have any deep feelings for each other.”

“But you must have felt something for him,” he protested. “Or you wouldn’t be going out with him.”

“Like I said, I’m an idiot,” she admitted sheepishly.

“Hermione, you could never be an idiot,” Harry disagreed. “I don’t think it’s possible for you to do something idiotic.”

“Oh really?” she countered. “What about knitting hats to free house elves?”

Harry stared at her for an instant before his mouth began to twitch, then slowly widened into a grin. “OK, I concede,” he laughed. “It is possible for Hermione Granger to be an idiot on occasion.”

“Just don’t expect to see it very often,” she smiled back. “But trust me, this is another example.” She proceeded to explain about the process that she’d used to select a boyfriend, much to his amusement. She finally had to pout and hit him on the arm in protest to make him stop laughing.

“I thought I was being so clever, but I left out the most important consideration,” she concluded softly, catching his eyes with a warm smile. “And that is to find someone who loves you.”

This naturally led to another round of kisses. Once this urge had been temporarily satisfied, Hermione suggested that it was time they were getting back to the castle. But Harry stopped her.

“Actually, there’s something else I was hoping to get your advice on while we were out here. But now it affects you a lot more than I thought it did. I think we’d better sit down again, but this time I’ll hold you.” Hermione didn’t think she liked the sound of the first part of what he’d said, but did like the idea of him holding her.

She settled into his lap and he wrapped his arms around her waist. She smiled at the thought of how much she trusted him. With some boys, a girl had to be on her guard in this situation, in case his hands decided to wander into inappropriate territory. But she knew Harry would never do anything to make her uncomfortable. In fact, when they got to the point where she was ready for him to touch her like that, she’d probably have to put his hands there herself.

Unfortunately, as he began to explain his situation, her concern that she wouldn’t like what he had to tell her was confirmed.

“Over the past month I’ve received quite a few offers for marriage contracts,” Harry informed her as calmly as he could, while retrieving a small packet from his robes. He quickly undid the shrinking charm on it and the packet expanded to a pile of official looking parchments.

“What! Why didn’t you tell ...?” She caught herself before she could complete the complaint, as she knew very well why he hadn’t told her before now. She began to wonder just how much her mistake was going to end up costing her, and she began to fear that the price was going to be higher than she could bear to pay.

Harry shrugged off her aborted question and continued. “I couldn’t believe they were for real, but evidently it’s some old-fashioned pureblood thing. Since I’m the head of a Noble House it’s something I have to deal with. Neville’s been helping me sort through them. Some of them are pretty tricky with the wording, so I have to be careful how I respond to them. I’m hoping you can help me with that now.”

Hermione scarcely heard him as she stared at the offers in her hands. *No, it can't be! It just can't be, not now. This was why he was asking about choosing someone to marry. He has to decide on one of these.* "Harry?" she almost whispered. There must be nearly thirty of these!"

"Actually, there are almost a hundred altogether. These are only the ones from girls I know, either in our year or the one ahead of or behind us," he clarified as she began to flip through the parchments. *So these are the ones he's seriously considering,* she thought dejectedly. *Abbott ... Bell ... Bones ... Brown ... Wait! Lavender?*

Harry had been looking over her shoulder watching her progress. "Yeah, that one's going to be tricky. I'll have to turn her down on the sly and try to make sure Ron doesn't find out."

"Of course," she choked out, fighting back her tears. "But Hannah and Katie and Susan are all nice. How are you going to choose?"

"Hermione, I don't think you understand," Harry quickly moved to reassure her. "I'm planning to turn them *all* down. That's what I want your help with."

Hermione went limp in his arms as she almost passed out in her relief, and he responded by tightening his grip on her and hugging her to himself. "Oh Harry, I was so ..." she gasped. "I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

"That's OK," he murmured gently as he kissed the top of her head. "I should have been clearer about it." She nodded and took a couple of deep breaths, then gave his arms a squeeze to signal that she was ready to continue. "Now, there are some particularly tricky ones," he went on. "For example, check out the G's."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "Harry, there's no way my name could be in here," she objected, but followed his instructions anyway.

Harry chuckled. "No, there's another girl in our class whose name starts with G." Hermione mentally scrolled through the names of her female classmates and arrived at the answer just as her hand found the correct parchment.

"Daphne Greengrass? You're kidding!" she blurted out. "But besides the fact that she's in Slytherin what's so tricky ... Oooh!" A wizarding photo of an extremely attractive, and quite nude, young witch slipped out of the folds of the parchment.

"Right. Can you believe that?" Harry complained. (Although Hermione noticed that he didn't shy away from looking at the photo, which was striking a very alluring pose.) "There are several pictures like that, all from pureblood families. There a clause in those contracts that suggests that I should 'get to know the girl better'. I assume it's supposed to be something like a test drive," he added wryly.

"You mean ...?" Hermione trailed off, suddenly understanding his earlier sarcastic comment about shagging a girl to decide if they were compatible.

"Take her for a ride on my broomstick, yeah," Harry mumbled. She could feel the heat from his red cheeks on the back of her neck as he buried his face in embarrassment.

"So, how am I going to turn her down?" he moaned.

"Yes, I can see that you might have trouble giving that up," Hermione sniffed irritably.

"No, I mean how am I going to go about it?" Harry quickly corrected her.

"Are you sure you want to?" Hermione challenged. She was happy to hear of his intention, but needed to be certain. "I mean, I knew Daphne was good looking but her body is perfect!" she added enviously.

"Hermione, what kind of guy do you think I am?" Harry asked indignantly. Hermione perked up immediately at hearing this confirmation of his character.

"Oh, I can think of quite a few guys who would be swayed by that," she teased, deliberately mirroring their earlier exchange.

"Oh really?" he retorted as he moved his hands into position to tickle her. "And do you think I'm that sort of guy?" Hermione giggled and shook her head vigorously as she grabbed his roaming hands and returned them to her stomach. Harry gave her a quick squeeze and leaned forward. "I want to marry a woman because I love her, not just because she looks good naked," he insisted. "Although I'll bet you'd give her a run for her money in the naked looks category," he added in a soft whisper that sent chills down her spine.

"Oh Harry, that's sweet of you to say, but don't get your hopes up," she protested with a deep blush. "Now," she went on before he could counter. "What other ones do I need to see?"

"Well, you might want to take a look at the P's," Harry suggested.

"No! Not Pansy Parkinson!" Hermione gasped.

"No, no, nothing that horrifying," Harry grimaced with a shudder. "Patil."

"Oh, which one?" Hermione asked as she found the document in question.

"Both. Together," Harry informed her.

"Oh my. That would be ... interesting," she replied carefully. "A teenage male fantasy come true, I suppose."

"Yeah," Harry responded. Feeling her tense up he rushed to add, "but not one of mine of course."

"No, of course not," she agreed with a smile, patting his hands lovingly.

"See, the tricky part there would be whether to turn them down one at a time, or if I need to do it while they're together," he explained hastily. "That's the part I'll need your help for. That and I was hoping you could maybe help me get all these girls alone, you know, away from the other girls they hang around with."

Hermione laughed, recalling Harry's difficulties in asking a girl to the Yule Ball. "Of course I will," she confirmed. "So, is there anything else I should know about?"

"You'd better look at the W's," he replied with some trepidation.

"They wouldn't! How could they!" Hermione exclaimed as she moved to the bottom of the pile and quickly scanned through the offer. "Well," she noted in an attempt to lighten the situation. "At least there's no naked photo of her."

"Too bad, Ginny's really hot ... Oof!" Harry's teasing response was abruptly halted by Hermione's elbow finding his ribs.

"Behave, Harry," she chided affectionately. "This is going to be awkward enough for you without that complication."

"No kidding," he agreed. "And since there hasn't been a girl born in the Weasley family for several generations, it must refer to Ginny specifically, rather than being some long-ago offer that everyone forgot about."

"You'll need to be very careful with that one to keep from offending them," Hermione commiserated.

"Well, Neville says there's standard language that you're supposed to use to decline the offer, so I don't have to get into any uncomfortable explanations," Harry pointed out. "I've pretty much got it memorized. 'In accordance with the traditions of our fathers, I wish to respectfully decline this offer of your hand in marriage, and surrender all rights and privileges thereunto appertaining.' That should work for the simple, straightforward ones like this."

The reference to tradition and rights and privileges got Hermione's attention. "Harry, you know that these old-style marriage contracts were more about political alliances than anything else," she pointed out nervously. "Perhaps you should wait and hold on to a few of them, in case you change your mind or something."

"Hermione, I can't believe after all the things you said about love that you'd even suggest that!" Harry shot back in surprise.

"But Harry," Hermione wrung her hands anxiously. "Maybe there's something we don't know about ... I don't know, like maybe you need two wives because you're the head of two houses."

Harry realized that this was his best friend turned girlfriend's insecurities speaking now, and pulled her tightly to his chest. "Hermione, think of how absurd that sounds. I know for a fact that wizarding families die out all the time. How else do you explain that I'm the heir of the Peverell line as well as the Potters? My dad didn't have two wives, nor my grandfather. And Bill's going to be the head of both the Weasley and Prewett houses. Can you see Fleur agreeing to him having a second wife?"

Hermione actually giggled in her relief, thinking about the French part-Veela's reaction to that idea, and relaxed in his arms once again. Harry held her tight, enjoying the new physical intimacy that immeasurably enhanced their already close friendship.

"So, exactly what do we need to do then?" Hermione asked.

Harry chose his words carefully. "Some of them are simple, but others are pretty complicated. Some are marriage offers, some are betrothals; some are open-ended and some refer to previous agreements, and some are conditional and take place in stages. Apparently everything started happening on my birthday when I came of age." He felt Hermione take a breath to ask the obvious question but headed it off. "The Ministry was in a shambles after the war, and they're buried in paperwork, so that's why they only started showing up this month. But that's a problem for me because I've got exactly three months from my birthday to respond, so I've got to make a decision by the 31st or one of them will go into effect automatically."

Hermione had forced herself to remain calm and analytical during his explanation so that she could give him her best advice, but the last condition had thrown her off balance. "Which one?" she asked immediately.

"The way Neville explained it, whichever one was judged to have the strongest claim," he explained. "I don't know which that would be, but probably one of the pureblood offers that are based on pre-existing agreements."

"OK, before today what course of action were you leaning toward?" she queried, temporizing while she tried to work out a way to get him out of this mess.

"I was thinking of accepting one of the conditional betrothal contracts that had an out clause," he revealed. "That would prevent any of the automatic ones from kicking in and give me more time. At some point I'd have to decide whether to stay with her or accept another one. Unless, of course, we'd found a loophole by then. Figuring out which one to choose is what I was hoping to get your help with."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully and he gave her a massive hug. "But after what just happened today I'm hoping that I might have another alternative."

A smile started to grow on Hermione's face as she processed what he was suggesting and worked out a possible way to make it happen. She turned around in his arms to face him and sat herself on his lap with her legs straddling his waist. "Are you suggesting that we make a formal announcement of our relationship?" Harry grinned and nodded. "Would that be sufficient?"

"We'd probably have to call it a conditional betrothal, which would give us three months to, well, date for a while before we decide for certain," he explained eagerly. "Then we could ... I mean if you were sure you wanted to ... well, get engaged?"

Hermione's heart was pounding so hard she couldn't do anything but nod her head enthusiastically. Then she decided she needed to kiss him again. As their passion built, Hermione suddenly realized she was in a rather compromising position on his lap, with her skirt pushed up to her

hips. She also decided she didn't care, and wrapped her bare legs around his waist and locked her ankles behind him. Harry moaned and she could feel his excitement rising through his trousers. Feeling especially daring, she ground herself against his crotch a few times.

"Hermione!" Harry gasped. The wonderful, warm, wiggling woman in his arms was nearly driving him insane with desire. "I think we need to stop!" This was exactly the opposite of what he really wanted to do, but his noble nature compelled him to restrain himself.

Hermione beamed at him as she pushed herself away and stood up, straightening her skirt and smirking at the expression on Harry's face. "I'm sorry," she smiled, betraying the fact that she wasn't sorry at all. "I just felt like being a bit naughty."

Harry shook his head in wonder as she reached out a hand and helped him to his feet. This was certainly a version of his best friend that he'd never seen before! "That's, erm, that's OK. It's just going to take me a while to get used to this side of Hermione Granger."

As they picked their way back through the woods he stretched his arm tentatively across her back and she reached out and drew it the rest of the way around her waist, pulling them together to let him know that this level of intimacy was now allowed. Then she leaned her head against his shoulder and whispered, "Do you like it?"

"I do," he responded happily. "Very much. I wish I'd discovered it sooner." He stopped and turned toward her and put both hands on her waist. "Thank you."

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again. "For what?"

"For helping me," he replied. "For helping me with everything, really, but especially for helping me realize how I feel about you. For helping me see that I love you. And most especially for loving me."

Hermione blinked away the tears that had begun to well up in her eyes. "Thank you for choosing me."

"I'd always choose you, Hermione," Harry declared fervently.

"I know, Harry. And I'm so sorry I didn't realize that sooner. I'll never choose anyone over you again," she promised with equal fervor. The passionate kiss that followed as the natural consequence of these pledges was breathtaking.

"You're very good at this," she murmured as their lips broke apart.

"Better than Terry?" Harry inquired with just a bit of regret that she had been with the other boy for the past two months.

Hermione pulled back and turned serious. "Let's just set this straight and then we can move past it," she declared. "I didn't do anything with Terry that I'm ashamed about, or that you need to be concerned with. In fact, I went farther with you just now than I ever did with him." He nodded with evident relief. "And I think the same thing is true about you and Cho, right?" she continued. He nodded again, this time somewhat sheepishly. "So now that that's settled we'll never need to bring it up again." He agreed and the smile returned to her face, generating a matching one on his own. They each wrapped an arm around the other's waist and turned back into the woods.

As they resumed their trek to the castle Hermione looked up at Harry with an impish grin. "So, do I need to have my father submit a Betrothal Agreement for your approval?"

Harry chuckled. "No, I think we can file the necessary paperwork. Unless ..." He looked down at her with a wicked grin of his own.

"Unless what?"

"Well, if he were to include a certain type of photo I might be persuaded to give it my immediate attention," he suggested with a leer.

Hermione's elbow found his ribs again. "Harry!" she squeaked as her face turned scarlet. But then she gathered her wits for a counterattack. "But why would you need one when you have the real thing right next door?" she purred in a sultry voice he'd never, ever heard from her. "Play your cards right and who knows what might happen over the next three months."

Her comeback had the desired effect, as Harry turned as red as she had.

"Hermione! I thought you said you weren't that kind of girl!"

"I said I wouldn't do that unless I was sure I was in love and considering marriage," she corrected, her blush still in full bloom. "And I suspect that it won't take too long before I'm absolutely certain that I have the man I'm going to spend the rest of my life with. We'll just take it a step at a time, but I wouldn't be surprised if by the end of the year we were together in every way." She shot him a devilish smirk. "And just think, we won't even have to throw anyone out of the room."

Harry's open-mouthed stare gradually shifted to an eager grin. "This is definitely going to be the best year, ever!"

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Choices Consequences

Consequences

"Hermione? Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you."

Hermione inwardly winced at the anxious tone in Terry's voice as he approached her in the corridor outside the Great Hall. She and Harry had split up as they'd entered the castle, with him understanding that she needed to meet with Terry alone. He'd given her hand a squeeze and told her he'd go find Neville and thank him for his insightful intervention.

"Terry, we need to talk," she blurted out as she took his hand and tugged him toward an empty classroom.

"Uh oh, that doesn't sound good," he joked as he followed her. "Isn't that what the girl says when she's about to break up with you?" Inside the room she turned to face him and as soon as he saw her face his attempt at humor vanished. "Oh no ..."

"I'm sorry ..." she began, searching for words to explain the seemingly sudden turnabout.

"What did I do wrong?" he interrupted. "I thought things were going so well."

"You didn't do anything wrong," she tried to reassure him. "You've been very sweet these past two months, and I enjoyed being with you."

"Then why ...?" he began to protest before she raised her hand to cut him off.

"It's my fault," she explained, trying to avoid all the cliché's she'd read about. *It's not you, it's me*, was one. *You're a nice guy but ...* was another. "I had a sudden realization this morning."

"What, you just discovered you're in love with another guy or something?" he wondered with a touch of sarcasm.

"Well, yes, actually," she acknowledged sheepishly.

"What? Who?" he asked in disbelief, before a flash of insight hit him. "No, wait, don't tell me. Harry Potter?"

Hermione's guilty nod confirmed his conclusion.

"I knew it was too good to be true," Terry sighed as he slumped against a desk. "Frankly, I was surprised that you didn't get together with him in the first place. I figured the two of you must have decided that you were going to be just good friends."

"For some reason it just never occurred to either of us," she admitted uncomfortably. "It was only after Neville confronted me in the library and I sat down and talked with Harry that it just hit us. I'm so sorry for the way this turned out."

Terry gave a grim smile in acknowledgment of defeat. "Well, if I have to lose out to anyone I'm glad it's him. You're a wonderful girl Hermione, and he's a great guy. I'm sure the two of you will be good together."

Hermione reached up and gave him a hug. "Thanks, Terry, that means a lot to me. You're a good guy too. Thanks for being so understanding."

"So, how did it go?" Harry asked when Hermione returned to their common room.

"Better than I'd expected," she replied after she gave him a kiss. "He said it wasn't so bad since it was you. He was actually quite nice about it." Harry nodded and let go a sigh of relief. "What did Neville have to say?"

"Oh, he was pretty annoying," Harry groused good-naturedly. "With that blasted 'I told you so' smirk on his face." Hermione smiled as she sat down next to him on their sofa and snuggled under his arm.

"Do you want to get started on the contracts right away?" she asked. Harry got a sour expression on his face but nodded. "Who do you want to do first?"

"Better be Lavender," Harry noted. "Get some of the easy ones out of the way."

"All right. I'll see if I can find her," Hermione agreed.

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As she entered the classroom where Hermione had told her Harry wanted to meet her, Lavender's eyes lit up when she spotted the parchment in his hands. Harry, however, didn't notice as he was concentrating on saying his lines correctly.

"In accordance with the traditions of our fathers," he recited. "I wish to respectfully decline this offer of your hand in marriage, and surrender all rights and privileges thereunto appertaining."

"Oh." Harry looked up in surprise at the disappointed tone in her voice. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Well ... yeah," Harry replied in puzzlement. "I mean, you're with Ron."

"I could break up with him," Lavender offered, standing up straighter and thrusting her chest out, which had the effect of calling attention to some rather prominent assets.

"Ah ... no, no you don't need to, um, to do that," Harry stammered. "I mean, you're, ah, better off with him. That is, I think you two are, erm, well suited for each other. More so than you and I are that is." He was sweating now. *This was supposed to be one of the easy ones!*

"Well, OK." Lavender put on her best pout. "If you say so."

"Yeah, I really think it's best this way," Harry responded as decisively as he could, while handing her the contract. He walked over and opened the door for her. With one last long appealing look, Lavender exited and Harry let out a long sigh of relief.

Harry didn't relax until he was back on the sofa with Hermione curled up against him. With his girlfriend making appropriate sympathetic noises, he related the details of his encounter with their Gryffindor housemate.

"Do you think that Lavender was just dating Ron to get close to me?" he asked her in disbelief once he'd concluded his tale.

"I couldn't say for certain," Hermione answered thoughtfully. "If so, it didn't work, since you didn't really spend any time with them. It's possible she was just jumping at an opportunity."

"What do you mean?" he queried.

"Well, it's obvious that you're a better catch," she teased, punctuating her declaration with a searing kiss.

Once he was able to get his mind back on the conversation Harry frowned. "We absolutely can't ever tell Ron this," he stated firmly.

Hermione hesitated. "But what if she's just using him?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "Then they'll break up eventually." Hermione thought a moment, then nodded her agreement.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry looked up as Hannah Abbott entered the room. Trying to learn from his experience with Lavender he smiled and invited her to sit down. "Hi, Hannah, I've asked you here to formally decline this marriage contract." Hannah nodded with a neutral expression and Harry launched into his recital. When he finished he was surprised that Hannah just smiled and walked to the door.

Opening it, she called out into the corridor. "Come on in Susan, it's what we thought." A grinning Susan Bones entered. Caught by surprise, Harry nevertheless managed to blurt out the formal language of declination. In response, Susan looked over at Hannah and sighed theatrically.

"I knew I should have had father include the photo," she complained while undoing the top buttons on her robes. "What do you think, Harry, would that have made a difference?" Harry stood gaping while some very attractive cleavage was gradually revealed.

Before her best friend could expose herself further, a snickering Hannah stopped her. "Now put those away Susan, before you give Harry a heart attack." This triggered loud laughter from both girls, and Susan buttoned back up.

"Don't worry Harry, I was just kidding," Susan teased. "We both know who you really want." Each girl stepped up and gave Harry a peck on the cheek while he just stood there, still in a daze, then took the rejected contracts and exited, still laughing. After a minute Harry shook his head in a 'did that just happen?' gesture, then followed.

Back in their room Hermione couldn't stop giggling at Harry's retelling of the episode, no matter how much he scowled at her, but eventually she made it up to him with a thorough snogging.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry and Hermione had concluded that it would be proper to decline the contract for Parvati and Padma with both witches present at the same time. Accordingly the twins entered the room together and Harry greeted them politely before producing the parchment. Once more, eager expressions turned to disappointment as he recited the words of rejection.

The pair shared a look for a few moments before Parvati turned back to Harry and blurted out, "Harry, if it's just because you're uncomfortable with it being both of us, Father could rewrite the contract so that it's just me."

"Hey, why should it be you and not me?" Padma asked indignantly, being taken by surprise by her sister's maneuver.

Parvati had evidently come prepared. "Because Harry knows me better, of course. And besides, everyone knows you're the smart one, but I'm the pretty one."

"We're identical twins!" Padma objected, nonplussed by this assertion.

"You know what I mean," Parvati waved dismissively. "You don't care about how you look and I do. Boys appreciate that. And I'm a lot more fun than you are." She punctuated this explanation by giving Harry a seductive smile. "And boys *really* appreciate that, right Harry?" She moved up to him and caught him by surprise, putting her arms around his neck and rubbing her chest against his. For a moment Harry was frozen in place and unable to answer.

Padma reacted at once and pulled him away from her twin, then duplicated her actions by pressing her body close to his. "Well, I can be that way too," she declared rather convincingly. "And I bet he actually likes smart girls, don't you Harry?" But by this time Harry had finally regained his wits, and he gently pushed her away.

He took moment to collect himself before addressing the pair of expectant faces. "Look, you're both really nice, and you're both very attractive," he agreed. "And I do like smart girls. I mean, obviously, since Hermione's my girl ... good friend. Good friend who's a girl, that is." By this point their faces had started to fall as the realization set in that he wasn't changing his mind. "But I really don't think it will work out, for either of you or both of you. OK?"

The two pretty Indian girls slumped noticeably before sharing another look, communicating silently. Then they shrugged and turned back to him and nodded, and left the room as gracefully as they had entered, leaving Harry slumped against the desk, shaking his head.

Once again, Hermione was eager to hear his story, and this time commiserated with him without letting her amusement show too much. "So," she queried when he'd finished. "Which *do* you prefer, smart girls or fun girls?"

Harry wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. "I thought I had both."

"Ooh, good answer," Hermione purred, rewarding him with a kiss. After she pulled back she cocked her head thoughtfully. "You know, if this is going to keep happening perhaps I should accompany you on these tasks."

-oooOOOooo-

The next weekend, Harry and Hermione received permission to go off the grounds so that Harry could personally handle the contract offers of two witches in the class above theirs that he knew particularly well. Once outside the gates they apparated to Diagon Alley.

"Are you sure you don't need me for either of these," she asked once they'd arrived in the wizarding shopping district. Harry assured him that he could handle these two on his own, so she gave him a kiss and apparated away again, this time to her parents' home.

As they'd arranged, Harry met Katie Bell outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Katie greeted her former teammate with a hug, then linked her arm with his as they walked down the street. After exchanging a few pleasantries about how she'd been doing since graduation, Harry got to the point.

Katie nodded when he pulled the parchment out of his pocket, having expected that this was the purpose of the visit. After Harry had delivered the standard speech, she smiled wistfully.

"I knew it was a long shot," she acknowledged with a quick squeeze of his arm. "I probably should have cornered you in the quidditch locker room last year like Alicia and Angelina suggested."

Harry was initially startled at hearing this scenario, but then managed a laugh. "Maybe," he allowed with a grin. "Not sure how I would have reacted. Probably run away." Both of them laughed at that admission, which both agreed was as likely a reaction as any from the shy Gryffindor.

"So, have you figured out yet who you really love?" Katie asked, turning serious.

Harry nodded, surprised at the suggestion. "You knew?"

"Yeah, it seemed pretty obvious to me how you felt about her," Katie claimed. "And she was always so protective of you. I just wondered if you'd both wake up and realize it in time." She turned and gave him a hug. "Good luck."

"Thanks Katie," he replied appreciatively. They broke apart and turned away from each other to take their leave.

"I'm sure you and Ginny will be happy together," Katie called out. At this, Harry whirled around so fast he fell over. But as he tried to clarify the situation, Katie burst out laughing.

"It's not ... I mean I'm not ..." he stammered.

"I know, it's Hermione," Katie now revealed, holding her side and still chortling. "But you should have seen the look on your face."

Harry tried to scowl briefly, but gave it up and joined her in laughing at himself. "You've been hanging around Fred and George too long," he grumbled. Katie agreed, and with a wave she headed off down the street, congratulating herself at so carefully disguising her disappointment.

Harry took a deep breath as he stood outside the Chang family apothecary shop. Despite what he'd told Hermione, this one made him nervous. He'd simply never been comfortable around his former Chinese girlfriend. Entering the store, he caught Cho's eye and waited until she was finished with a customer. Once the shop was empty she motioned for him to join her behind the counter, and they sat down at a small table used for measuring out potions.

Cho listened intently with an inscrutable expression while Harry declined the contract, but once he'd finished she nodded sadly.

"It was my grandfather's idea," she explained with her eyes cast downward. "He made his decision as soon as he heard that we were dating,

and drew up the contract at that time.” Harry reached his hand across the table and gave hers a squeeze to show he understood. “Even though I told him later that we didn’t work out, he wouldn’t change his mind. He submitted it that summer.”

“We were both pretty messed up that year,” Harry offered consolingly. “We never really had a chance.”

Cho smiled the smile that three years earlier would have made his heart pound. “That’s sweet of you to say, Harry, but even so I don’t think it would have lasted. I knew after you left our date to go meet Hermione, that she was more important to you. I could never compete with that, even without all the other drama.”

Harry shook his head bemusedly. “It seems a lot of people figured it out before we did.”

“So you’re together now?” Cho asked with another smile. Harry nodded as a happy smile of his own crept onto his face. In response Cho stood up and walked to his side of the table and pulled him up into a congratulatory hug.

With a shy, pleading look into his eyes she made a request. “Can I give you a kiss? For old time’s sake. And so you have a memory of one without me crying.” Harry thought for only a brief moment before nodding his agreement, and they shared a short, tender kiss, bidding a final farewell to a romantic relationship that had been doomed from the start. Perhaps now, with that obstacle cleared away, they could develop a new friendship in its place.

-oooOOOooo-

“Hermione, what a pleasant surprise!” her mother exclaimed as she opened the door. Then her pleased expression suddenly changed into one of concern. “Oh, but is something wrong?”

“No, Mum, nothing’s wrong,” Hermione reassured her as she gave her a hug, and repeated the gesture of affection with her father. “But I do have some pretty exciting news for you.” As the three of them settled into the living room she told them the story of how she and Harry had come together and realized their feelings for each other (leaving out most of the details of her temporary abandonment of him due to her pursuit of Terry).

“Oh, that’s wonderful, dear,” her mother responded with delight. “We’ve both always thought so highly of Harry. We’re so happy you decided to give this a try.”

“I agree,” her father confirmed. “The two of you always seemed to get on quite well together. And I liked him much better than the other fellow.” Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head. Her father had never been shy about expressing his opinion of her interest in Ron.

“Daaaad, you know I broke up with Ron ages ago,” she chided. “I don’t really know why I never considered Harry that way before. It’s true I’ve always gotten along better with him. But I’m glad to hear that you’re so happy about this, because it’s pretty serious.”

The jovial mood vanished instantly. “Exactly how serious?” her father intoned in a low voice.

Hermione leaned forward and took hold of a hand from each of her parents. “It’s a complicated story. Have you ever heard of betrothal contracts?”

Half an hour later the elder Grangers had finally calmed down enough that Hermione pulled out a parchment and asked her father to sign it. “And you’re certain it’s not binding?” he asked with some trepidation. “You can change your mind and back out of it in three months?”

“That’s right, Dad,” she assured him. “It’s a statement of intent but it has an escape clause.”

“It sounds rather more like a promise ring as opposed to an engagement ring,” her mother observed. Her father nodded and signed the agreement.

“That’s a good analogy,” Hermione agreed. “Although I’m hoping it will be permanent. I can’t believe how happy I’ve been since we got together. I feel like I’ve found what I’ve always been looking for.” Her mother and father exchanged a look, noting that their daughter was almost glowing with happiness, and stood up to hug her.

“Thank you both for being so understanding about his,” Hermione sighed in relief as she pulled away.

“Well, given all of the unbelievable and downright frightening things we’ve had to accept from you over the years, this is rather mild by comparison,” her father joked. “To tell the truth, we’re not exactly surprised. And if we could have picked a boy for you to marry it would have been Harry, or someone like him.”

“Thank you Daddy,” Hermione replied as she leaned up to give him another hug. “Now there’s something else I want to add to this contract. A certain picture I remember from when I was little.” Once she explained what she was looking for, her parents chuckled while her mum got out the family album.

-oooOOOooo-

The meeting with Daphne Greengrass had been one of the more difficult ones to set up. She stood in the empty classroom giving Harry an imperious, ‘I’m in control here’ look when he greeted her and asked her to make herself comfortable.

“So, Potter, come to claim your privilege?” she sniffed haughtily. Slinking her way toward him while he was pulling the parchment out of his pocket she suddenly grabbed the front of his robes and pulled him close to her. Before he could say anything she began rubbing herself against him and reached her hands around and grabbed his bum. “I think we should go someplace where it’ll be more comfortable,” she purred into his ear. Like that room on the seventh floor that can turn into whatever you want it to be.”

Once he’d recovered from the shock of her blatantly forward behavior, Harry caught her hands and removed them from his body, then pushed her away. He was glad that Hermione had decided to accompany him this time, and was concealed across the room under his invisibility

cloak. This was obviously going to be the most difficult one yet.

"I'm afraid you've misunderstood the purpose of this meeting, Daphne," he informed her coolly. "My intention is to decline this offer."

A look of surprise blossomed on Daphne's face and quickly turned to outrage. "What!" she demanded. "Who made a better offer? You can't seriously be considering Weasley or Bones! My family can do much more for you than they can."

"Actually, I've decided I want to marry for love, not money or power," Harry shot back, not intimidated in the slightest.

"Typical Gryffindor," she sneered, doing a passable impression of her former Head of House. "Foolish and naive. That's not the way the wizarding world works, Potter."

But quickly realizing that this approach would not be productive she changed her tactics. "And you know, those aren't the only advantages I can offer you," she declared in a low, seductive voice. With a quick tug her robe fell open in front. As she thrust her shoulders back it parted, making it very evident that she was wearing absolutely nothing underneath. "Now, what do you say you forget that nonsense and I'll show you what else I can do for you."

Without taking his eyes off the display before him, Harry backed away and moved over to where Hermione was stationed. Daphne's eyes went wide as the Head Girl dropped the invisibility cloak and drew her wand, making a quick circular motion with it. Daphne's robe immediately fastened itself back up. "That's enough, Daphne," Hermione intoned coldly.

Daphne looked at her incredulously. "You've chosen Granger! Are you insane? She's just a Mud ..." Harry's wand was now out as well and he silenced her with a sharp gesture. Furiously he snapped out the words of declination.

"In accordance with the traditions of our fathers, I wish to respectfully decline this offer of your hand in marriage, and surrender all rights and privileges thereunto appertaining. I have accepted another. Therefore, the agreement referenced herein will not be satisfied in this generation." He pushed the parchment into the shocked Slytherin's hands, reached down to take Hermione's hand in his own, turned and left the room.

-oooOOOooo-

Harry and Hermione had carefully set up the meeting with Ginny to take place in the Heads common room. She was one of their friends, who regularly visited with them there, so it would have sounded strange for them to tell her they wanted to meet with her in an empty classroom. While Ginny had been curious about the serious nature of the invitation, her eyes went wide when she recognized the parchment in Harry's hands. With a loud squeal she jumped up and hugged him.

"Ginny, wait!" Harry stepped back in dismay, stumbling slightly in his haste to put some distance between them. "You knew about this?"

Unsure now about exactly what the situation was, Ginny calmed herself and sat down on the sofa, noting with some consternation that Harry kept his distance as he settled himself at the other end. As dispassionately as possible she began to explain things from her point of view. How she had dreamed about marrying the Boy Who Lived while growing up. How excited she had been when Ron became his friend and told his family what a great guy he was. How upon learning that, her mother had persuaded her father to write up and submit a marriage contract offer that summer. And her resulting nervousness around him when they first met, at the thought that this messy-haired green-eyed boy might actually become her husband!

Harry began to put some things together as she spoke, for example why Molly had treated him like a son when she hardly knew him, why she'd sent him a Weasley family jumper before she'd even met him, and why he had been so welcome that first summer at the Burrow.

Ginny went on to reveal that his saving her life in the Chamber of Secrets had been the clincher as far as she was concerned. From that moment on she was his, knowing it was just a matter of time until they finally came together and completed their bonding. She admitted that she had expected him to approach her about starting a relationship the past summer, but reasoned that he had not because he was still recovering from the ordeal with Voldemort.

At this point Harry shook his head, and Ginny's face fell. While she fought to keep the tears from her eyes, he said simply, "I'm sorry, Ginny."

"But why," she protested. "I've worked so hard to get to know you, and make myself into a wife you'd be proud of. I was one of the hardest workers in the DA; I supported you through everything you had to deal with. I stuck up for you against Malfoy, believed you about the tournament, helped you when you thought you were being possessed by V...Voldemort. I was always there for you." By now she had lost her battle against the tears. "Who else would be better?"

At this question Hermione stepped up behind Harry and took his hand in hers, as he looked up and smiled at her. Ginny's eyes went wide. "But she was dating Terry. And I thought you considered her to be like a sister."

Harry smiled sympathetically and shook his head, and Ginny's shoulders slumped in defeat. She knew that this was the one girl against whom she had no chance of competing for Harry's affection. "That's changed recently," he replied softly.

-oooOOOooo-

On the morning of October 31, Harry settled himself into his seat at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, with Hermione on his right and Neville on his left. As they began to dish up their breakfasts, Neville leaned over. "So, have you taken care of all the contracts?" he asked quietly. Harry nodded.

"Just finished with the last one yesterday evening," he confirmed. "And believe me, that's not something I ever want to go through again!" After a moment he turned to Hermione. "We need to send our notification in to the Ministry today," he commented. Neville had advised them, and they had concurred, to wait until all of the outstanding proposals had been dealt with before submitting the one for Hermione. "Have you written something up?"

Hermione smiled and gave his arm a squeeze. Up to this point they had been keeping a low profile with their new relationship, but that would change after today. "I think you'll like what I have planned," she replied with a twinkle in her eye. Harry caught this, and raised an eyebrow questioningly. "You'll see," was all she would say. By this time the rest of the table was filling up. Ron and Lavender took seats across from them, with Parvati occupying her usual place at her best friend's side, and normal morning conversation ensued.

When it came time for owl post, Hedwig made her customary dramatic appearance, her white plumage amongst the brown and grey of the other owls catching many eyes. Alighting on Harry's shoulder, she reached out her leg for him to detach the official looking parchment. Noting Hermione's ill-disguised interest, Harry realized what it was before he opened it. A brief scan confirmed his supposition, but then he spotted the picture and burst out laughing! It was a photo of Hermione as a toddler, naked in a bathtub, reaching out her arms to the viewer.

He turned toward Hermione's grinning face and wrapped an arm around her for a quick hug. "This is bloody brilliant!" he complimented her before sneaking a kiss.

"You said if there was a photo you'd give it your immediate attention," she reminded him teasingly.

"Hermione, I'll always give you my immediate attention," he promised in the same tone. Still chuckling, he took up the contract again, signed it with a flourish, and sent it off with Hedwig. Then he looked up to discover that he had the full attention of everyone at his end of the table.

"What was that all about?" Ron blurted out. Harry and Hermione locked eyes, came to a consensus, and Hermione nodded, as her cheeks turned pink in anticipation.

"Oh, that was just a betrothal contract between Hermione and me," Harry responded, while picking up a goblet of pumpkin juice and taking a swallow, as if this were an everyday occurrence. Of course, it was anything but, and bedlam broke out at the Gryffindor table. Among the babble of questions and exclamations Ron's voice stood out.

"You can't marry Hermione! You're supposed to marry Ginny!" That declaration managed to draw the bulk of the attention temporarily away from Harry and Hermione, although a background murmur of comments continued. For her part, Ginny's face turned far redder than Hermione's had, and her expression indicated that if she'd been sitting next to her brother she would have throttled him. "Dad wrote up a contract," Ron continued with his objection.

Now Neville spoke up. "Join the queue," he muttered sarcastically. Ron redirected his attention to his other dorm mate.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Neville snorted. "Just that Harry got contracts from half the witches in Britain."

"It wasn't *that* many," Harry mumbled under his breath. Hermione heard him and grinned, giving his arm another squeeze.

"Well, most of the ones we know at least," Neville corrected. Harry determinedly avoided looking in Lavender or Parvati's direction, taking the opportunity to closely examine the eggs on his plate. It didn't work. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ron's eyes narrow.

Before his hotheaded friend could begin the obvious question, Harry snapped his head up and turned to Neville and remarked. "You know, I didn't get one from Luna's dad, though."

This succeeded in temporarily diverting Ron. "You want to marry Loony?" he sputtered in shock.

"No, I'm not saying that," Harry clarified quickly. "But it might have been interesting to hear what she would have had to say as I turned it down." Ron was now clearly confused. "Ron, I turned them *all* down," Harry tried to explain. "But some of their reactions were ... interesting."

Hermione jumped in to keep the conversation going in a harmless direction. "She probably would have demanded that you pledge to help her find a Crumble Horned Snorkack as one of the conditions."

Harry turned to his newly betrothed and grinned. "Either that or asked if I had been infected with Wrackspurts." This banter generated smiles and chuckles all around from everyone who'd dealt with Luna. But soon Ron began to frown again. This time Lavender spoke up.

"Yes, Ron, my father tendered a contract, just like most of the other girls in our class. Harry declined it and said he thought you and I were good together." She squeezed his arm to punctuate the message, and Ron suddenly turned pale as the implication hit him. Another chorus of laughter broke out, his housemates clearly enjoying his discomfort.

Ron, trying desperately to change the subject, committed one of the worst foot-in-mouth blunders of his Hogwarts career and blurted out, "So if you had all those girls to choose from why in Merlin's name did you pick Hermione?"

In the awkward silence that followed Hermione clamped down hard on the urge to burst into tears. If there was ever a definitive illustration of why she and Ron hadn't worked out, this was it. She could feel the sympathetic looks from the other girls in her house but kept her gaze focused on Ron, trying not to glare at him.

Several different snarky replies passed through Harry's mind as he leveled a cold stare across the table at his onetime best mate (a title that more correctly belonged to Neville now) but in the end he settled for the simplest, and at the same time the most accurate answer.

He reached down and clasped Hermione's hand in his, and raised their joined hands to rest on the table in front of them. "Because I'm in love with Hermione."

-oooOOOooo-

Harry leaned back and moaned loudly as warm water enveloped his body. One of the perks of the Heads suite was a miniature version of the Prefects' Bath, and this evening he was putting it to very good use. He had just come in from quidditch practice, and had been cold and miserable (calling a quidditch practice in the middle of December had *not* been one of his better ideas), only to find that Hermione had a warm,

steaming bath drawn and waiting for him. He reflected yet again how lucky he was to have such a considerate friend, now girlfriend, in his life. And he had every intention of keeping her that way. The painful breach between them that had been mended two months ago was now only a fading memory.

A knock on the door caught him by surprise. "Hermione?" he called out in response.

"Harry, do you mind if I come in? Are you under the water?" came the reply from the other room. Harry shrugged to himself and decided that he was certainly adequately covered up, considering the luxurious foamy suds that filled the large tub. Not to mention the fact that he and Hermione were gradually getting more comfortable with each other's bodies. Each of them had seen the other partially dressed or wrapped in just a towel in their shared bathroom on more than one occasion in the past month, and their hands had begun to roam during their snogging sessions.

"Sure, come on in," he called back. "What's on your mind?" he continued as the door opened and Hermione slipped in. She was wearing a dressing gown, as she often did in the evenings when she got comfortable after they'd retired to their room for the night, but she was acting rather hesitant compared with her usual, self-assured manner.

She was also carrying a camera.

"Um, what are you doing?" he asked nervously.

Hermione gathered up her courage and blurted out, "I decided that since you had a picture of me in the bath, it was only fair if I had one of you too."

"Seriously?" She didn't seem to be joking about this, but the request certainly caught him by surprise.

Hermione had planned this whole scenario out in minute detail, including a series of arguments if he needed convincing. She allowed her face to show a trace of disappointment. "Sure. I thought it would be fun."

That was all it took, since Harry didn't really have any objection. If it made Hermione happy he was perfectly willing to go along with it. "Oh, all right," he sighed in mock resignation. Hermione beamed at him in response, but Harry missed the mischievous gleam in her eye that accompanied her reaction.

"*Evanescio* ." With a jab of Hermione's wand the opaque layer of foam vanished, leaving Harry chest deep in crystal clear water. With a yelp of surprise he immediately moved his hands to cover himself and slid down to bring the water up to his chin.

"Hermione!" he gasped. Any further objection on his part was cut off as he noted her press her lips together in a disappointed pout.

"Oh honestly, Harry, it won't be much of a picture if all I can see is your head," she complained. "Don't worry, the index of refraction of water is such that any part of your body below the surface is distorted. It's too blurry for me to really see much, and the picture won't show anything except that you're in the tub and don't appear to be wearing anything."

Harry would have been more accepting of this argument if she hadn't been focusing her gaze so intently on the part of his anatomy just south of his navel, but he took a deep breath and relented, rising back up into his normal sitting position. It helped that a portion of his mind was picturing a scene in which their roles were reversed, and he was trying to convince her of the same thing.

"Now, stretch out your arms across the top edge of the tub like you're inviting me to join you," Hermione instructed as she focused the camera. Harry's eyes narrowed.

"Hermione, just who exactly is going to see ...?" But Hermione cut him off before he could finish the question.

"Trust me, Harry, this view is for my eyes only," she assured him with a smile of smug satisfaction. "What do you do with your picture of me? How many people have you shown it to?"

Harry grinned sheepishly. "You're right. I've never let anyone else see it. But I do pull it out occasionally and look at it. It always makes me smile."

Hermione's own smile broadened. "I imagine I'll use this photo for the same purpose, then."

The camera flashed, and Hermione took a second for good measure, then put the camera aside. Harry cocked his head questioningly as she made no move to leave the bathroom. Instead she moved closer to the tub and tugged nervously on the sash of her dressing gown.

"So, what do you think of that idea?" she asked shyly.

"What idea?" he wondered in some confusion. Then his eyes went wide as a possible interpretation occurred to him.

"Me joining you in the tub," she answered in a small voice, confirming his thought.

Harry's mouth went dry as he tried to choke out a reply, and he could only nod dumbly.

Calling upon her Gryffindor nature, Hermione untied the sash and removed her dressing gown, revealing nothing beneath it but a small bikini swimsuit bottom. "I hope it's OK with you if I keep these on," she explained nervously, gesturing at her remaining covering. "Just to be on the safe side, I mean." Harry maintained his open-mouthed gape as she slowly climbed in. Her anxious expression alerted him that she was expecting a response.

"No! No, that's fine," he blurted out. "This is amazing as it is!" With some relief she settled down into the water and unintentionally mimicked his earlier action by sinking down to her neck, her face bright red.

"Hermione, you look incredible!" Harry couldn't help himself. This was so far beyond his expectations that he had to make an effort to keep

from babbling.

“Don’t exaggerate, Harry,” Hermione chided, but with a pleased tone in her voice. “I know I don’t have a curvy body like Daphne. Or Susan. Or Lavender. Or ...”

“Hermione, stop,” he cut her off. “I’m not interested in any of them. And I’m very, very happy with what I’m seeing in front of me right now.” Her courage bolstered by this reassurance, Hermione sat up straighter, uncovering her torso.

Harry swallowed hard, unable to stop staring. “Wow,” he breathed softly. “Perfect.”

“Harry ...” she began to object.

“Hermione, as far as I’m concerned they are,” he declared. “They’re exactly right for your body.” He grinned at her. “That’s my opinion and I’m sticking with it.” Hermione shook her head gently, but with a smile of satisfaction. She decided that he needed to be rewarded for being so sweet, and crossed the short distance between them to sit on his lap and kiss him soundly. It was just like that day at the lake, only with considerably less fabric between them.

Neither of them wanted things to get out of hand, so they pulled apart after a few seconds and then simply embraced, both enjoying the feeling of their bare chests pressed together for the first time. A minute later Hermione smiled and leaned back (noticing Harry’s gaze drop to follow her progress) and gestured for him to turn around so that she could scrub his back.

Harry moaned in ecstasy under her ministrations, especially when she leaned close and let the tips of her breasts graze across his shoulders. Then she turned around and asked him to return the favor. Harry took his time savoring the feeling of her warm, wet skin under his hands, which seemed to please Hermione as well, judging by the sounds she was making. Finally she leaned back against him and pressed her back to his chest, while he wrapped his arms around her to pull her close.

She had one final adjustment to make. Reaching down, she took his hands and brought them up to where she most wanted them to be, cupping her breasts. This elicited one final moan of pleasure from him as he gently but firmly held her like a precious treasure. With a joint pair of sighs the two of them closed their eyes in perfect contentment.

“You planned this whole thing,” Harry stated, half questioningly, half accusingly. But there was no disapproval in his voice.

“Mmm hmm.”

“Brilliant!”

-oooOOOooo-

Harry fidgeted anxiously while waiting for Hermione to gather the presents from under the Christmas tree. It was apparently a Granger family tradition that the presents would be placed haphazardly under the tree until Christmas morning, at which time Hermione would meticulously sort them into piles for each member of the family. This year, for the first time, there were four piles, including one for him.

He had been nervous about coming to spend the holidays with the Grangers, but there was really no question that he would do so, being Hermione’s boyfriend now. He wondered why it had never occurred to him to come here in previous years, since Hermione was as much his friend as Ron was, but that was in the past now. He had met Hermione’s parents before, during the celebration after the final battle, and had got on well with them. To his relief they were just as welcoming of him now as they had been then, if not more so. He truly felt like part of the family now.

But at this point in time his anxiety was because of the present that Hermione was going to open in a few minutes. And after unwrapping several books and a new dress from her parents, she finally got to his. Having been alerted to what was coming, both her parents paused in examining their own gifts as their daughter tore the paper from the small box. Her eyes widened as it occurred to her what sort of item came in that size package and she shot a startled look at Harry. He gave her an encouraging smile while trying not to let his expression divulge the answer to her silent question.

Four different people held their breath as Hermione fumbled with the lid of the jewelry box, which opened to reveal a sparkling gem set in a simple gold band.

“Harry!” came the high-pitched squeal. “It’s beautiful!” Before he could blink she was in his arms, hugging the stuffing out of him. Beyond the bushy hair that filled most of his vision he spotted tears in the eyes of his future in-laws as they squeezed each other’s hands.

When both of the teens were able to breathe normally again Hermione leaned back, although she kept her arms wrapped around his neck. With a slightly puzzled expression she pointed out, “But the three months aren’t up yet.”

“I decided I didn’t need any more time,” Harry explained. “I know without a doubt that I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. It was a pretty easy decision, really. And this way we have your parents here, and it’s a special occasion and all.” A look of consternation flashed across his face. “Erm ... that is, if you say yes.”

Before she could open her mouth to assure him on that score, Harry was down on one knee in front of her. “Hermione Granger, will you marry me?”

After a breathless but emphatic ‘Yes!’ from Hermione the scene dissolved into a round of hugs and congratulations, and a rather sound kiss (considering it was in front of her parents). Through it all Hermione wore the biggest smile her parents had ever seen, and Harry’s own threatened to split his face apart.

When asked about a wedding date, Harry responded that it didn’t matter to him, except that they needed to perform a wizarding bonding ceremony prior to his next birthday. (It wasn’t necessary for him to explain the urgency, as Hermione had already informed her parents about the marriage contracts.) He was perfectly open to whatever Hermione wanted otherwise, and after she and her mother put their heads together

they decided to plan for an August wedding.

A silent observer stood in the doorway to her kitchen and watched the young couple sitting together on the sofa in the living room. Harry was leaning back against one end, with Hermione snuggled up in front of him, wrapped up in his arms, under an afghan, reading a book. For his part, Harry kept busy, watching the telly occasionally, glancing out the window, looking over Hermione's shoulder, or nuzzling her shoulder or the back of her neck. He wasn't restless, though, just happy and content. Sometimes he'd even lean back and close his eyes, clearly enjoying the moment.

Hermione evidently wasn't as wrapped up in her reading as she'd normally be, since Harry's constant interruptions weren't annoying her. To the contrary, she would also pause occasionally and whisper something back to him, or rub her head against his chest, or lean back and close her eyes and sigh. Again, she was the perfect picture of contentment.

The watching woman smirked as it occurred to her to wonder just what Harry's hands might be doing at the moment, out of sight under the blanket. She certainly knew where her husband's would be if the two of them were similarly situated. She recalled that when they had returned home from the church service that morning Hermione had changed out of her new dress (which had made her look so grown up that it nearly brought tears to her mother's eyes) and was now attired in jeans and a loose, comfortable sweatshirt. She was also willing to bet that her daughter had discarded her bra along with the dress. Her eyes twinkled with satisfaction at how she had cleverly deduced what they were up to. But she would never embarrass them by letting them know that she was on to them.

A pair of strong hands wrapped themselves around her waist, and she felt herself being pulled back into her husband's chest, and she leaned her head back next to his.

"Spying on the kids, dear?" he whispered into her ear.

"I'm just enjoying watching them together," she murmured back, so as not to disturb the loving young couple in the other room. "It's so wonderful seeing them like this. You can tell how happy they are just looking at them."

"I know what you mean," he replied softly. "We've missed so much of her life, with her being away so much of the year. I'm glad we were able to see this much, at least. It was nice of Harry to think of including us." He paused, taking the time to observe the casual intimacy of the newly engaged pair.

"I can't help but wonder if, when they come back home over Easter holidays, we'll only have to prepare one bedroom for them," he groaned. His wife twisted her head to look at him, her lips curled up in a smirk.

"Playing your role of overprotective father now, dear?" she teased.

He shook his head. "How? What could I possibly do to threaten a boy who would give up his life for her without a moment's hesitation? When he came to talk to me yesterday I could see how much he loved her. It was written all over his face." His spouse nodded in agreement.

"Hermione certainly made a very good choice," she sighed.

"Not to mention how fortunate he was to choose her," he added.

"Well, that goes without saying," she smiled. "She's our daughter, after all."

"Of course, but remember that he had quite a few others after him," he pointed out. "And to hear her tell it, it was a very near thing. But with all of that, he still chose her."

"Well, let's just celebrate the fact that they both made excellent choices then," she decided. "And that this will be only the first of many good choices they make in their lives."

He nodded and tightened his grip around her waist, and the Granger family continued their celebration of what had turned out to be a truly blessed Christmas.

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