

Where Credit is Due

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Hermione tries to convince Harry to accept his Order of Merlin, but he refuses.

Oneshot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: All my love to my betas kazfeist and Krystle Lynne for working on this within the tight timeframe! Written for a fest~~ages~~ ago.

The green flame of the Floo made Harry's eyes almost eerily bright, and Hermione found herself lost in them for a moment before his chiding tone brought her back.

"Hermione! Are you even listening?"

She coughed delicately. "Of course, Harry. I do think you're being unreasonable."

"Well, that doesn't really shock me, you know."

She rolled her eyes, and his laugh indicated that he saw her. "Harry, being awarded an Order or Merlin is a great honour, but it's more than that. It's not about *you*... it's about the wizarding world saying thank-you. It's about them expressing gratitude for everything you've done. You don't exactly let them show their appreciation, now, do you?" Harry was practically a shut-in these days, and time spent with Ron and Hermione was practically the only way to get him out. Hermione understood the impulse, but she still felt he had a responsibility to the public for certain things.

"It's hardly my problem that their owls get returned. Honestly, it's been two years...don't they get it by now?"

Hermione knew Harry was frustrated, and she almost reached into the flames to touch the soft stubble of his cheek. "They *don't* get it, which is why they invite you to all these balls and soirees, and it's why they want to give you the Order."

"I don't *want* to be awarded!"

"I know, Harry..."

"Do you, Hermione? I don't want to be special; I don't want to be different. *I hate* it, I always have. I just want to be normal."

Hermione settled cross-legged on the floor. She had a feeling this would be one of their longer Floo calls. Harry didn't really like coming over to her flat, and Hermione wasn't big on Grimmauld Place. She wished Harry would move...the place gave her the creeps. It was as though the house itself despised her.

"I honestly think that if you accept the award, let them make a big deal out of you for the evening, that people will back off. They need closure...the awarding of the hero is like the final act in the play."

Harry sighed heavily, and flickers of green flame licked toward her. "Kingsley said they'd be awarding it whether I'm there or not."

"Yeah, but don't you think..."

"Hey, Hermione?" Harry's voice was suddenly lighter.

"Yes?" she asked warily.

"You could accept it for me! Oh, that'd be so great... you could write an acceptance speech and everything, say it's from me, take the award. No one would know you wrote it. And then they'd leave me alone!"

"But it's your responsi..."

"No!" Harry said suddenly, cutting her off. "It's *not*. I've done my duty. It's over. If they don't like it, if they want to make me some celebrity or false idol, that's their problem, not mine!"

Already knowing she'd give in to what he wanted...because really, it was better than what she'd expected at the beginning of the conversation...Hermione tried one more time.

"If you do this for them and then asked them to leave you alone, I'm sure they would!"

"Yeah," Harry scoffed, chuckling darkly. "Like they did after they mobbed us at Fortescue's? Or when you were ordering those books at Flourish and Blott's? Don't be naïve, Hermione. It'll never stop."

And he was absolutely right. Hermione and Ron were followed and pestered, but it was nothing like what happened to Harry whenever he went out.

"All right, Harry, I'll write the speech and accept your award. But I *won't* like it, and I think you're wrong."

Harry's relieved sigh made Hermione's heart feel full.

"That's my girl."

Folding and refolding Harry's...her...speech, Hermione looked around the hall. It was absolutely packed with people. There were at least forty round tables, seating ten people apiece, but beyond that, half the hall...on what looked like the dance floor...was stuffed with standing people, cordoned off and reinforced with MLE officers. Another small roped-off section belonged to the press, and Hermione could just *feel* Skeeter's eyes on their table.

Ron smiled reassuringly at her, and she touched his arm gratefully. They'd given it a go, being together, but after the excitement and devastation of the war had dwindled, they found themselves wondering exactly what the point was. Hermione loved Ron...he was an amazing friend and a good man. But she wasn't *in* love with him and never would be. She was sure he felt the same.

Harry had acted upset at their split a year ago, but Hermione'd sensed he was almost grateful. It was probably more comfortable for him to not be the third wheel.

Luna Lovegood was folding her napkin into various shapes and then eyeing them thoughtfully. Hermione tried not to smile. Luna was Luna.

Ginny and Dean were sitting absurdly close together, chairs practically touching. They weren't doing anything inappropriate, but the night was still young. Ron was alternating between averting his eyes from them completely and shooting them both glares. It was hard to convince Ron that Ginny had grown up.

Neville also sat with them, and he was throwing soft glances at Luna, who was utterly oblivious in that perfectly Luna way. Neville was going to have to be a lot more straightforward if he wanted her to notice him.

The chair on Hermione's left was empty. Noticeably so, and not only to her.

Hermione had the strange thought that if Harry was actually in the chair, their arms would be touching. More and more lately she'd been thinking random and unexpected things like that.

"Did you talk to Harry before you left?" Ron asked in a whisper. Kingsley had just stepped up to the podium and was talking about those they'd lost. Hermione was grateful for Ron's distracting comment...it still hurt to think of those gone.

"No. I Floo'd him, but he didn't answer."

"Me, too." Ron sighed and then nudged her. "Nobody can make Harry do anything he doesn't want to. Don't know why you're taking this so personally."

Truthfully, she didn't know either. Harry had never made a mystery of why he hated the press and the public's opinion of him. She shouldn't have expected him to come just because she'd asked...he never had before.

But to her, it almost felt as though not accepting the Order of Merlin was like denying his part on the war, and that just felt wrong to her. Without Harry, no one in this room would be enjoying the lives they were leading. It wasn't a bad thing to want to thank him for that!

She was about to answer Ron when Kingsley's words reached her. "And now, accepting the Order of Merlin, First Class, on behalf of..."

But his words were drowned out by a commotion behind them. Twisting in her seat, Hermione saw Harry hurrying toward them, a grin on his face. Totally oblivious to the furor around him, Harry hunched down between Hermione and Ron.

"Sorry I'm late!" he whispered, the susurration of murmurs throughout the hall not affecting him in the least.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You came!"

"Can't hide forever, right?" he asked, winking at her.

Hermione decided there was no reason for that wink to be so... winsome. She blushed and Harry's grin widened.

"I think Kingsley's waiting for you," Ron said, jerking his head toward the dais where Kingsley stood, seeming amused but patient.

Harry sighed. "All right, better get this over with. Where's the speech, then?"

Handing it to him, Hermione impulsively reached forward and hugged him. "Thank you, Harry, for doing this. I know you didn't want to..."

"No," he agreed, hugging her back tightly. "But it was important to you."

Harry jogged up to the podium and with a bright smile, he gestured for Kingsley to go on.

Hermione tried to quell the tightness in her stomach when Harry's green eyes fell unerringly on her as he accepted the proffered award.

After the speech, which Harry liberally edited as he spoke, and the dinner, the hall was cleared of the standing audience for the dance floor to be opened.

Harry, Hermione, and Ron stood at the bar, each denying request after request for dances. Eventually...or so they hoped...word would get around that the trio wasn't interested in dancing, and people would stop asking.

"So what made you come, mate?" Ron asked, sipping his Firewhisky and pausing in his glaring at Ginny and Dean on the dance floor to eye Harry curiously.

Harry shrugged. "The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it mattered less to *me* to come than it mattered to everyone else that I did."

Hermione wondered how much she factored into that 'everyone else' category. She did feel a little guilty for pressuring him, but even being here at the bar wasn't as bad as she'd expected. People were giving Harry his space; no one even asked for his autograph, and that was a first.

"Any luck finding a new place, Harry?" Ron asked some time later.

Hermione looked quickly at Harry. "I didn't know you were thinking of moving!"

Harry looked sheepish, and to her consternation, he glared at Ron. "I've been wanting to get out of Grimmauld for a while. I only live there because..."

"I know," she said softly. "Because it was Sirius'." "So where are you looking?"

"All over, really. I've been checking out around Diagon Alley, but that's a little close to... everything. Just been looking around London, really."

"Hermione lives in a nice area, don't you, 'Mione?" Ron asked helpfully, ordering them another round.

"I do, though it can be a hassle when I want to get anywhere the Muggle way." Living on the outskirts of London was brilliant as a witch, but getting groceries and seeing her parents was a bit of a hassle. She'd thought about getting a car, but she didn't have a driver's licence...she'd never even driven before.

"I just want to get away from the crowds, you know? Now that Grimmauld Place isn't secret-kept any longer, people have no qualms camping out in front just to get a glimpse of the great Harry Potter."

Harry's bitter voice always made Hermione so sad for him. "There's a lot of land for sale in my area. I bet you could make some of it Unplottable and build a house there, if you wanted."

"That's a brilliant idea!" Ron said excitedly. "Then you two would be neighbours!"

Harry shot Ron another strange look, and Hermione looked at them both concernedly. It wasn't like Harry to keep such a big decision as moving from her, and now there was something going on between the men that they didn't want her to know.

"Ron, look, there's George. Didn't know he was coming," Harry said quietly. They all turned. George always looked somehow smaller after the war, and Hermione knew it was because they were so used to seeing him as part of a pair. Now he seemed like half his former size.

Ron put his drink down. "See you two in a bit." He left to go talk to his brother.

"Should we say hullo?" Hermione asked.

Harry bit his lip. "Better let him come to us if he wants. You know he likes crowds less than I do."

But eventually George came over to say his congratulations, which Harry accepted with surprising graciousness. But everyone was gentle and kind toward George, which he probably hated.

People began to leave the party, offering congratulations to Harry before they did. Hermione was surprised that he'd stayed as long as he had; any time they'd gone out somewhere, Harry was almost always the first to leave and certainly to first to want to. She didn't say anything, though, for fear of making him realise he *did* want to. It was nice to spend time with him...they spoke through the Floo so often that his light olive features almost seemed strange to her when not cast in a green glow.

Only a few people remained. Ron was dancing with a witch Hermione didn't recognise, but who obviously knew Ron. As the most susceptible to the cloying masses, Ron was often the victim of women who wanted nothing more than the fame attached to being near him...though he probably wouldn't describe himself as a victim at all. He was still learning to tell the genuine from the false.

Ginny and Dean were staring dreamily into one another's eyes as they navigated the sparsely occupied dance floor. Harry watched them disinterestedly for a moment before rolling his eyes to Hermione, who laughed.

Luna and Neville were dancing, Luna trying to slow his stilted steps as he moved them quite off the beat.

"Hermione," Harry said suddenly, breaking a comfortable moment of silence.

"Hmm?" she said, smiling as Luna swatted Neville's thigh in time to the music.

"Do you want..." Harry cleared his throat. A waiter passed them with a tray of champagne, and Harry grabbed two glasses. "Another drink?" he finished.

"Thanks," she said, taking the flute and sipping the tart drink. She shifted a little, trying to keep the weight off the sore balls of her feet. The shoes were stunning and matched her black dress perfectly, but they were agonising. That was what she got, though, for letting Ginny dress her.

"Hermione," Harry said again in a determined tone. He took both their drinks and placed them on the bar.

He seemed so formal that Hermione knew not to laugh, though a bemused smile did touch her lips.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked, eyes sincere. "Er, with me?"

"Oh!" Hermione said, surprised. Harry had never wanted to dance at one of these things, let alone with her. "Sure."

Harry took her hand almost shyly and led her to the dance floor just as Ron and his partner were leaving. Ron winked lasciviously at Harry, saying goodnight to both of them as he left with the witch.

"He's going to get himself into trouble if he keeps doing that," Hermione said, shaking her head. Harry positioned them at the far end of the dance floor, which fell a little in shadow. His hand on her waist felt very warm, and his other hand was rough and gripped hers almost too tightly.

"He's just having fun," Harry said, shrugging.

"I suppose. But you know the *Prophet* will find out, and then Molly'll tear into him with that speech of hers."

Harry laughed slowly and drew her closer. They were dancing more slowly than the music warranted, but Hermione figured it was just because Harry wasn't the most

confident dancer.

"He'll get bored of it eventually."

They danced in silence for a while. Harry wasn't that poor of a dancer, which was surprising to Hermione, because she'd never really seen him dance after the Yule Ball... and even then, what he'd done couldn't really be called dancing outside the strictest of definitions.

"D'you ever wish..." Hermione began, closing her mouth as she realised what she'd been about to say. She'd apparently drunk enough to loosen her tongue.

"What?" Harry was smiling and he pulled her even closer, so their bodies were pressed together lightly.

"Do you ever wish you'd done that? Gone around with women like Ron does sometimes?" Hermione blushed. She didn't know why she wanted to know so badly... but suddenly his answer seemed very important.

"No," he responded easily. He let go of her hand to slide his other arm around her waist, and Hermione had no choice...really...but to encircle his neck with her arms. The position wasn't as awkward as she might have expected. Harry smelled so good: familiar and yet wholly unexplored. It was heady. "No, I never wanted that... They don't really like him. And he knows that; it doesn't bother him. But it would bother me."

Hermione's fingers found their way into the soft hairs at the nape of Harry's neck. She realised this with a start, but she didn't move them. Harry's cheek rested against her temple as they swayed together.

"It would bother me, too," she whispered, though she wasn't sure she meant it would bother her to have anonymous sex, or that it would bother her ~~Harry~~ did.

His hand reached up to cup her cheek, tilting her face upward to his. His green eyes were almost glowing, and she realised it wasn't the Floo flames that made them so bright. It was just him. "I know," he whispered.

And then his mouth touched hers, so softly, a brush of lips that was almost a dream, gone before she'd realised what had happened.

"Harry?" she asked, blinking quickly as she looked up at him.

"Was that okay?" he whispered, his voice quiet but unsure.

She licked her lips unconsciously as she thought about it. She'd be lying if she said she hadn't wondered... but this was ~~Harry~~...

That was when she realised... this was Harry. Her Harry.

"Yes," she said, offering her softly parted lips.

The second kiss was harder, greedier, and Hermione lost herself in it. She'd never kissed anyone like this. Ron's kisses were sweet and loving, but Harry kissed like he *meant* it with every fibre of his being.

His tongue just touched her lower lip, and she met it with her own. Both of them made soft sounds as their tongue slid together, Harry's hand cupping her head and directing the kiss.

A shout and flashes of light pulled Hermione away from the kiss. She watched with dismay as the press struggled closer to get shots of the two of them.

Harry glared at them, frowning. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I never meant..."

"Please don't tell me you're sorry," she demanded, angry at the interruption and the implication that he regretted the kiss.

He brushed a wayward curl away from her face, fingers grazing her cheek with painful tenderness. "I'm not sorry for kissing you."

"Good," she said firmly.

"But I should go."

Hermione could only nod as he made his way out of the building, reporters trying desperately to follow but being held back by the MLE officers.

Touching her fingers to her lip, Hermione couldn't help but feel that everything was changing. Again.

There were many times when Hermione hated her bleeding little heart.

After being seen at the Ministry ball for the Order of Merlin presentation, Hermione had found herself invited to an obscene amount of charities and fundraisers, almost all taking place in the form of balls.

It was easy enough to convince Ron to come with her, though Harry was another story. She was sure he was avoiding her after their kiss.

Hermione had never been so shocked in her life. She'd practically been brought to her knees by the realisation that she wanted Harry. He'd been a constant in her life for so long now that she'd failed to see that her feelings for him had changed. It wasn't like how it had been with Ron; she and Ron had slowly been drawn together by proximity and fear and the knowledge that it seemed like the right thing.

There was none of that with Harry. He was a good man, an amazing friend, but she was afraid that their friendship would suffer because of that ill-advised snog. Apparently, she'd been right to worry, as he was steadfastly avoiding her Floo calls.

And *that* hurt. Their Floo calls had come to be the highlight of her day. She could...and did...tell him everything. Without him there to offer perspective and the occasional wry or sarcastic comment, she wondered how she'd be able to make it through another day.

That realisation had been the catalyst for asking Ron to come with her to the Potions convention fundraiser for Wolfsbane. It was a cause she believed in, but better yet, it would cater to a different crowd than the Ministry bashes. She'd be able to enjoy a little more anonymity... or at least less unbridled attention. She'd found Ron easy to convince...any chance to see what the wizarding world had to offer of young, grateful woman was eagerly taken.

Hermione didn't even bother lecturing him about settling down with a nice witch...she was too grateful to get out of the house.

Or at least she *had* been grateful. Now she'd do anything to be back inside her house, her cosy little abode with the warm fire that always reminded her of Harry. Maybe a nice glass of red to go along with her favourite book...

"Miss Granger!" cried the hostess of the party, a stout, florid-faced witch with good intentions but poor connections. "Thank you so much for coming. Having you attached to this event has brought in more donations than we'd ever thought possible!"

"It's my pleasure," Hermione said quietly, withdrawing her pre-written cheque and handing it over covertly.

The witch's eyes widened and she gushed predictably, despite Hermione's attempt to be discreet.

When Hermione finally managed to escape to the loo, she came out and immediately spotted Ron chatting up a pretty black-haired witch at the bar. His expressive hand gestures gave away the topic of their conversation. She loved Ron, but she couldn't wait for the day when he grew weary of telling the Great Gringott's Escape story to every witch with working ears.

Seeing no one else she recognised, Hermione caught a glimpse of wide French doors beyond which appeared to be a balcony. Perfect.

She made her way casually toward it, knowing that if she seemed too eager, people would immediately begin to attempt to waylay her. She may not know many people here, but everyone seemed to know her.

Once on the balcony, Hermione took a deep breath, feeling finally able to breathe clearly. She stood with her back against the wall, looking out over the grounds. They were beautiful, the white snow bright and gleaming despite the darkness of the sky. The stars were visible and sharp in the infinite space.

Letting her head fall against the brick wall behind her, Hermione breathed in the crisp winter air, wishing the heating charm on the balcony wasn't quite so effective. The frigid air might have served to calm her raging thoughts.

She was falling for her best friend.

She'd always known Harry was an impressive wizard. All right, the best wizard. His power was unparalleled, and that was without even trying to harness his true potential. If he had more discipline, he could be truly formidable, possibly even undefeatable.

But part of her was glad that he wouldn't take it that far. His temper could be scary enough at times...adding more power might change him. After all, people weren't *born* evil, they were shaped. But Hermione knew that *no matter what*, Harry would always have her on his side. And that knowledge frightened her a little... but not enough to want to do anything about it.

"Well, if it isn't the belle of the ball."

Hermione turned sharply, laughing when she saw it was only Harry. *If only* was a word that could ever be applied to Harry Potter.

"Harry, what on Earth are you doing here?" she asked. He looked amazing, as he usually did. But when he made the effort, he was something truly spectacular, and tonight was no exception. He was wearing a black pinstriped suit with a rich blue shirt and no tie. Hermione noticed that his shirt matched her dress almost perfectly, though that must have been a coincidence because he'd never even seen her dress.

He shrugged. "Figured you could use the company."

Hermione sighed softly. "You're not wrong. I'm happy to help for a good cause, but these things can be..."

"Exhausting?" Harry supplied. He stood beside her and bumped her hip with his. "I've missed you."

She nudged him with her own hip. "D'you forget how to work your Floo?"

"I wasn't sure if you'd want to talk," Harry said, his voice serious. He wasn't quite looking at her.

"I always want to talk to you, Harry." Hermione lightly touched his cheek and turned his face. She was always a little surprised at the brightness of his eyes, even after all this time. "I know we made a mistake, but..."

Harry cut her off with a bark of laughter. He always sounded like Sirius when he did that. "You think that kiss was a mistake, then?"

No! "I don't know. I don't want anything to change between us."

The scent of winter air and citrus teased her senses, and she realised that Harry was closer than she'd thought.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, one hand on her neck and the other gripping her hip.

She only had time to give her head half a shake before his lips crashed onto hers, bruising in their eagerness, but then that was what Harry was, eager and familiar and safe and *scary*. His lips were dry and hard against hers, his tongue not even waiting for obligatory permission before delving inside, teasing her tongue into following him.

"This is good, right?" he asked breathlessly, pushing her back against the stone wall of the building and moulding his body to hers.

"This is good," she confirmed, licking her lips.

Then Harry's mouth moved to her neck, and when he sucked that spot just below her ear, her hips jerked forward instinctively, and she realised that she actually wanted to have sex with Harry, her best friend. It shouldn't be... it was strange and a little awkward; she felt like laughing and crying because it was so *good*, and Harry shouldn't be so good, he should just be *Harry*... but he somehow still was.

His thigh pressed firmly between her legs, making her dress tight and restricting her movements. Harry kissed and nipped at her cleavage, the low neckline making his intimate kisses easy.

When Harry pulled away, Hermione followed, trying to get more of those amazing, confusing kisses. She made an embarrassing noise in her throat, and Harry chuckled.

"Lift your skirt," he whispered hoarsely, his eyes dark in a way she'd never seen before.

Hermione glanced to the side where the glass door barely separated them from the rest of the party. They could be exposed at any moment.

Harry laughed. "Do you think they'd see us if I didn't want them to?" he asked quietly.

"Are you sure?" Her hands were already clenching on her dress, ready to lift the skirt so he could touch her. She felt wild, beautiful and desired.

"Trust me."

Of course. She would always trust Harry. With her life, and certainly with her reputation. She slowly rucked up her skirt, stopping when the material was gathered around her upper thighs. A flush was suffusing her face and chest; she felt unbearably hot under his intense scrutiny.

"I wish I'd known," he said, reverently trailing one blunt finger up the inside of her thigh, starting from her knee. "I wish I'd known years ago..."

His finger teasingly brushed the trim of her knickers, and Hermione gasped softly, staring at him, unable to break his gaze.

"You want me to touch you here?" he asked, his finger passing lightly over her slit. She could feel the dampness of her underwear, but she wasn't embarrassed. There was something easy and natural about the reactions he was coaxing from her.

"Please, Harry." Her hands tightened on her dress. She looked down and almost cried at the sight of his hand disappearing beneath her dress, between her legs. She could see his arousal, and she wanted to reach out, but she didn't think she could manage even that simple movement.

Harry dropped to one knee and slowly slid her knickers down, watching her face the entire time. He prompted her to lift first one foot, then the other, until he held the piece of cloth and tucked it into his jacket pocket. Hermione bit her lip to keep from moaning. After placing a light kiss on her inner thigh, Harry rose and kissed her again.

When she was distracted by his mouth, Harry began caressing her between her thighs. His finger slid easily over her clit, and she gasped into his mouth.

"It takes me a while to come like this," she confessed, wincing. She didn't mind that she usually had to help herself during sex, but she wished that her body was a little easier to manage. Harry's hand felt so good...

"I have a while," he said, smiling. For a moment she was taken out of the moment and transported back to the time when they were just friends. He was always giving her that easy smile, that private smile, the one no one but she and Ron were given. But then the smile changed only a little, just enough, making her bold enough to reach out and trace the outline of his cock through his trousers.

He hissed through his teeth and sank two fingers inside her in retaliation. From there it was almost a race, though Hermione could see it was an effort for him to hold back, even though she was just rubbing him through his clothing.

But faster than she ever would have thought, her body began to issue signals, warning her that the time was near. Her head fell back and her hand was moving always frantically against his swollen cock. His fingers danced around her clit, never pausing, almost painfully intense.

"Harry!" she gasped, hips thrusting forward as she came.

Harry slammed his body against hers, dragged her hands above her head and ground against her hip, his breath heavy and warm against her neck. He cried out softly a moment later, and her hands escaped his hold to embrace him.

Hermione's dress slowly fell back down to maintain her modesty. Harry's arms wrapped around her, holding her body flush against his as they caught their breath.

"That wasn't what I'd planned to do when I saw you tonight," Harry said, laughing softly.

"You sure about that?" she quipped. It had rather seemed as though he'd had a mission. Not that she minded, of course.

"Pretty sure." Harry kissed her cheek warmly. "I wanted to ask you if you'd like to be my date to the Ministry Christmas gala next week."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "You want to go to that? *You?*"

Pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, Harry nuzzled her neck. She happily accepted the gesture; Harry's need for physical affection always made sense to her, knowing what she did about his childhood.

"I think I'd like go *with you*," he said. There was vulnerability in his eyes, and Hermione was honoured that he'd asked.

"I'd like that very much."

Harry kissed her swiftly before stepping back a foot. She immediately felt bereft.

"Good," he said. "I'll pick you up at eight. Wear red." He grinned wickedly, and Hermione reached out to smack his arm, but he'd Disapparated...a feat that would have been made impossible by the wards, had Harry been anyone else.

"So, Harry, eh?" Ron asked cryptically as he awkwardly manoeuvred them across the crowded dance floor.

Hermione gathered her skirt in her hand, blushing at the memory that gesture inspired. In this case, however, it was to save the delicate red silk from Ron's well-meaning feet.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, already knowing denial was futile.

"He's my best mate, 'Mione. Well, him and you. So obviously I want you both to be happy. Just... if anything happens and it doesn't work out, don't let it ruin your friendship, yeah?"

Hermione caught Harry's eyes over Ginny's shoulder. They were standing on the edge of the dance floor. Last Hermione knew, Ginny'd been trying to convince Harry to dance, but Harry had refused. From Ginny's extravagant hand movements, it seemed as though they were talking about Quidditch now.

"We're not really..." she began, but trailed off, uncertain. She didn't know *what* they were. She wanted him; he seemed to want her. He hadn't avoided her again, but their Floo conversations had been heated and heavy with tension. "And you're okay with it, then?" she asked in an effort to avoid putting a name to what she had with Harry.

Ron shrugged, stepping forward when he should have stepped back, but Hermione quickly corrected the move with some fancy footwork. Dancing with Ron was like a sport.

"I'm happy as long as you're both happy. Merlin knows I never really could figure either of you out. Maybe you'll have a better time of it together."

Hermione laughed and squeezed his shoulder. He gave her a sheepish grin in return. Hermione suspected that Ron knew her and Harry better than anyone, even if he couldn't really 'figure them out.'

"May I cut in?"

Ron laughed. "We were just talking about you," he said, suavely transferring Hermione's hand into Harry's and stepping away.

"Good things, I hope," Harry whispered in her ear, making her catch her breath at the sheer power of Harry's closeness.

"True things," she said lightly, falling easily into Harry's lead.

"It was good of me to give him a dance, wasn't it?" Harry asked with mischief in his voice.

"Yes, very magnanimous," she said sarcastically, though she smiled.

Harry laughed. "I deserve a reward then, don't I?"

Hermione blushed. "What did you have in mind?"

As he pretended to think about his answer, Harry's eyes twinkled as they had been all night. "I want you to come home with me."

Her stomach clenched pleurably. "Are you sure? We've only been here a few hours."

"More than enough time to make our presence known."

"All right, then, Harry. Take me home."

Her words were barely passed her lips when she felt the uncomfortable tenseness of Apparition...right out of the Ministry's atrium, a supposedly impossible feat.

"Harry!" she cried as they touched down in the living room of Grimmauld Place. Boxes were stacked all over, and she was reminded that he'd mentioned moving. She hadn't thought it would be so soon. "You shouldn't show off like that."

Harry chuckled, not letting her out of his arms. "I wasn't showing off. I just couldn't wait."

Hermione forced herself to relax in his embrace. "Does this feel... strange to you?" she asked quietly, fervently hoping that he said so, even though she wasn't sure she could answer that way herself.

"A little," he admitted quietly, his hand travelling up the length of her back. His rough fingers caught a little on the fine material of her dress, and she shivered. "But not enough to want to stop."

"Me, either," she said, letting her head drop back for another of his devastating kisses. She didn't want to think all the time she'd spent waiting on Ron had been a waste, but if she'd known being with Harry like this would have felt so amazing, she probably wouldn't have bothered with anyone else.

Harry's lips touched hers only for a moment before he pulled away and led her up the stairs. Though she'd been in his bedroom countless times, it was different now, obviously so. Everything between them was changing, and she found she didn't mind.

Only...

"Harry," she said as he led her into his bedroom, closing the door behind them. "If this..." She wavered between the two of them. "If this doesn't work out, we'll always be friends, right?"

Faster than she could even think, Hermione found herself in Harry's arms again, but instead of the embrace of a lover, this was the embrace of a friend. His hold was firm and true and completely recognisable from the years' worth of such hugs.

"Always, Hermione," Harry said solemnly, pressing his lips to her temple. "No matter what happens, you'll always be my Hermione."

Hermione sighed happily and curled into the embrace. Something shifted, and suddenly Harry's grip was no longer reassuring and platonic, but needy and heartfelt. One hand tilted her face up, and when he kissed her, there was no longer a disconnect between Harry her friend and Harry the man who'd made her come at a Ministry ball. There was only *Harry*, and there was only her.

He led her to the bed, slowly divesting her clothing and allowing her to do the same. It wasn't forbidden any longer; everything about the act of unbuttoning his trousers was right.

"I've imagined you," Harry said as her red-as-requested dress was lifted over her head. His hands were hot and greedy on her body, and she arched into his touches. "Even before that kiss, you know."

Hermione flushed a little, both at the comment and the way he was undressing her, slowly and with sure, steady fingers. "It's only natural, especially with us having been in such close quarters over so long," she said distractedly, her fingers racing to match his state of undress to hers.

"I think it was more than that," Harry whispered, pushing her back onto the bed. She was naked. In bed. With Harry Potter. And it ~~was~~ perfect. "I think it was my subconscious trying to tell me that you were more than just a friend. But for so long I was scared to admit it, even to myself. You were always Ron's girl. And when you weren't any more, I didn't think I'd have anything worth offering you. I don't want you to regret this."

"There's no way I could," she said. "Even if... whatever this is doesn't work out, we'll still be us. I'll always love you, Harry."

"I'll always love you, too," he whispered. His fingertips trailed up the inside of her thigh, and she let her legs fall open.

Harry settled between them, his mouth on her neck, her lips, her collarbones. She reached a hand between them and guided his cock to her entrance, no longer willing to wait for the perfect moment; it was now.

Harry hissed as he entered her, and her mouth fell open at the stretch of accommodating him. When he was inside her, they both paused to watch each other's faces. There was awe in Harry's features, and she was sure hers matched.

And then her eyes fell closed and she rocked her hips, encouraging movement. "Please," she whispered, wrapping her arms around Harry's neck.

He began to move, though his body was still pressed against hers, and she'd never felt so connected to another person. He was learning her every response, encouraging her to do the same.

When he grabbed her legs to hold on to his waist, the new depth and pressure made her keen, and he held her fast as he continued to fuck her, hard at first, then slow and sweet, and then back again. Even though this same position with any other man would have had her out of reach of orgasm, with Harry, everything was connected, falling into place, and the pleasure was incomparable.

Her breath came in stuttering gasps as she came, clenching around him, making his thrusts more stilted as he seemed to finally let go.

Harry muffled his climax with his face against her neck, his hot breath branding her skin. She never wanted it to stop, which was all the more devastating because it had already ended.

"Harry," she whispered, her hand brushing his hair back, smiling with the familiar way it sprang back under her fingers.

Tiredly lifting his head, Harry shifted off of her and smiled. "If you knew it was going to be that good, you should have told me," he mock-scolded her.

"If I'd had any idea, you better believe I wouldn't have waited this long to test my theory."

Harry gathered her into his arms, and she gratefully wrapped herself around him, holding onto him with her arms and legs in a way she never would have dared with any other man. But Harry was equally entangled with her, and she knew that, even if they didn't make it as a couple, they would always be Harry and Hermione, and that was something no one could take away...not even themselves.

One year later...

Ron watched with amusement as Harry spun Hermione around the dance floor. They were both decent dancers...usually...but tonight their attention was elsewhere.

Their sudden and well-documented passion for parties had created a backlash; people used any excuse to throw a ball, knowing that Harry and Hermione were sure to come.

Only, they never stayed very long. This phenomenon sometimes sparked conjecture and confused the hosts and hostesses of the parties, but after enough times, people realised that this wasn't the couple's way of denigrating the party.

No, Harry and Hermione just couldn't keep their hands off one another long enough to keep from making a scene.

When they'd come to Ron to admit their feelings for each other, blushing and trepidacious, he'd been jealous for all of a minute, and not because he wanted Hermione to himself. No, Harry was welcome to her...Ron didn't have the energy for a witch like Hermione. The jealousy had been because he wanted something like what they had for himself. Those sidelong glances and clandestine touches were enough to make any self-proclaimed bachelor want to choose china patterns.

Ron chuckled softly as Hermione gave Harry those darkened eyes, and Harry responded with a clenching of his hands at her waist. Anyone close enough could see the signs easily enough.

When the loud crack of Disapparition came, Ron waited out the now-familiar sighs of disappointment from the other partygoers, and then approached the pretty blonde witch he'd had his eye on all evening.

With Harry and Hermione gone, Ron was the most famous wizard at the party. And while he might be *ditlle* envious of their obvious love, Ron still had a few wild oats to sow before he settled down like his friends.

"That's a lovely dress," he murmured, smiling at the pretty flush of her pink cheeks.

Harry Potter wasn't the only wizard getting lucky that night.

Fin.