**What Friends Are For**

Harry stood on the fringe of the crowded common room, eyebrows raised, as he watched his best friend Ron Weasley attempt to devour Lavender Brown's face. Well, it was about time he got around to doing something, anything, with a human of the other sex. But a little bit of… refinement would not be amiss in a situation like this.

Someone slammed into his shoulder, jolting him to the side. Harry turned to glare at the person, then caught a glimpse of the bushy brown hair. Shit. Extracting himself from the crowd, Harry followed Hermione out the portrait hole and into the darkened hallways.

He found her in an empty classroom. She was sitting on one of the desks, eyes fixed on the small yellow birds circling the ceiling, as if they held all the secrets to the world. Harry shook his head. Even when her heart was breaking, Hermione could do spellwork that boggled everyone else.

"Hermione?" Harry asked hesitantly, unsure if he was right to have followed her here. It was entirely possible she just wanted to be alone and he would soon be the victim of those birds' vicious looking claws. He held the door in one hand, ready to slam it shut if the avians suddenly became feathery yellow bullets.

"Oh, hello Harry," she said, looking up at him, her voice high-pitched and strained sounding. "I was just practicing. It's a fun little spell." Her eyes had a wild look to them and were too shiny, but her face was dry. Her entire body was tense, and her hands were shaking. She looked for all the world like a rubber band that had been stretched too thin and was about to snap.

Caution forgotten, Harry stepped into the classroom, pulling the door shut behind him as he walked over to where she sat.

"They're really good," he said, unable to think of anything else to say. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her not to worry, that Ron was an idiot and someday he would wake up and realize how beautiful she was. He wanted to tell her that everything would end happily. He wanted to lie.

But he could not. So they just sat there in silence, Hermione watching the birds and Harry watching Hermione. After a few minutes, a single tear rolled down Hermione's face, glistening in the candlelight like a gem before she dashed it away so forcefully her nails left red streaks on her cheek.

"Hermione," Harry said quietly, reaching out and taking her hands. "Hermione, look at me." She shook her head, blinking her eyes rapidly, cold hands clenched into fists in his grasp. Harry reached out a hand and placed it on her cheek, gently turning her to face him. She looked at him defiantly, eyes swimming with tears and pain, both of which she refused to let out.

"It's okay to cry," Harry murmured gently, running his thumb along her cheekbone, understanding in his eyes. Hermione's eyes welled up and she let out a choked sob, turning away and curling up into a ball.

"Hey, don't turn away from me," Harry said, sliding over a few inches and wrapping himself around her shaking form, resting his cheek on her sweet-smelling hair.

"You don't have to see me like this," Hermione choked out, trying weakly to push him away with one hand. "It's stupid, I'm stupid. He's just some red-haired idiot, who's stubborn, pig-headed, and completely oblivious. And here I am crying over him, because he wants to snog some vapid bimbo instead of… And you're trying to comfort me when you have so much already on your shoulders. You're so strong and you never cry, not over all the unfair burdens that have been placed on you, or all the idiotic things people have said about you, or even about Ginny, even though I see how much it kills you to see her with Dean. There are people out there being murdered and I'm crying over a ginger imbecile, and it's stupid and I have no right and… oh Merlin, I just wish these stupid feelings would go away!"

Harry let her ramble herself out, wrapping his arms even tighter around her. When she had fallen into silence, he stood and knelt in front of her, gently pulling her hands away from her face and looking into her red-rimmed eyes.

"These 'stupid feelings', as you call them, are part of what makes us who we are," Harry said, aware that he was, ironically, sounding a lot like Dumbledore. "The pain your feeling right now proves that you're human, and that you can love. I know it hurts, but it's part of being a living, breathing, functioning person. And there is no pain more potent than one caused by love. Trust me. You have every right to cry."

"No," Hermione muttered thickly, refusing to meet his gaze. "Not when there are children being slaughtered, and, and people are being tortured, and people are saying all kinds of horrible things about you, and, and, and you're being so brave and good and not letting it get to you, and… I won't be the weak link in this chain."

"Can I tell you a secret?" Harry asked. Hermione paused and met his gaze for the first time, then nodded silently. Harry rose slightly and leaned forward so his mouth was right beside her ear.

"Sometimes I cry too," he whispered, before pulling back and looking into Hermione's puffy eyes. "Sometimes, at night, when I'm lying in my bunk, everything just comes crashing down on me and I feel like I'm drowning in the world. I can't do anything but cry and cry."

"But… how come, you know, he never heard you?" Hermione asked, eyes fixed on Harry's face.

"Silencing Charms," Harry replied, looking away, hit by a sudden pang. "But you know what the worst part is? It's that I have to cry alone. There's no one there, no one who I can curl up with and bury my head against, no one who will dry my tears and let me listen to their heartbeat, so I know that I'm not on my own in this miserable world. And I hate it. I hate being isolated, hate being alone, hate…"

Harry broke off, his voice too thick to talk with anymore. This time it was Hermione who reached out to him and turned his face towards hers. He looked at her, a single tear wending its way down his face. Moved by the unexpected beauty of it, Hermione reached forward and gently brushed the tear away with her thumb.

"You don't have to be alone," she said, her voice so low Harry almost didn't hear it. He looked at her, unsure of what she meant.

"I hate being alone too," she continued, unable to maintain his gaze, her eyes shifting away, the tears beginning to fall again. "I hate standing in a crowd of people and knowing no one there gives a damn, that they all think I'm just a teacher's pet. Too smart, too bookish, too ugly… I'm never good enough, not even for the one guy who I thought saw the real me. Instead he'd rather be with the fawning airhead, because she is beautiful and gives him some kind of status. Not because she knows him, or spends every summer at his house, or wakes him up and soothes when he's having a nightmare. No, leave that to Granger the Human Beaver, and then, when he doesn't need me anymore, he just leaves me in the cold, alone and unprotected. And I want to hate him for that… but I just can't. Can't hate him for wanting the pretty girl, the status symbol, because I know I'll never be anything but the plain, bookwormish, pathetic friend that he pities."

The tears were coming fast now. She tried to stop them, brushing them away and apologizing, but Harry placed his hands on either side of her face, drying her tears with his thumbs as he looked at her intently.

"You're so beautiful, Hermione," he said, leaning forward so their faces were only inches apart. "Anyone with eyes could see that. And Ron sees it too. He's just… dense. But you should see the way he looks at you sometimes, when he knows you won't notice. There's so much love there. He's just incredibly thick. And, until he gets his head out of his arse, you don't have to be alone, if you don't want to be. I'm here and I always will be, right beside you, where I belong."

Their eyes met and Hermione smiled, hesitantly reaching out a small hand and brushing it gently along the edge of Harry's unruly hair. Harry smile back, searching her eyes, looking for a sign, a signal, anything to tell him what she was thinking and feeling.

"Harry…" she whispered, and his heart leapt. That one simple word contained so much: love, fear, longing, need, friendship, comfort, permission, uncertainty… He could have spent an eternity analyzing it, forever finding new emotions and meanings in the way she said his name.

But instead he just kissed her.

At first it was chaste, a bare brushing of the lips. But then Harry pulled back just enough to see Hermione's eyes. Her eyes were direct windows into her soul, and she laid everything before him, bare for him to see. He could see the love she felt for him, a pure love built on friendship and trust. But below that lurked something stronger, more primal: the overwhelming need she felt, the longing to be held and kissed and loved, coupled with the crushing fear that she wouldn't be good enough, that he would shove her away and call her an ignorant fool, for this wasn't something you could learn from books.

"So beautiful," Harry whispered, standing, and pulling her with him, pressing her against him as he kissed her again, tilting her head back to deepen the kiss. He felt something in her let go as she relaxed into him, bringing her arms up and winding her fingers through his soft black hair. Harry gently brushed his tongue against her soft lips, and they parted trustingly as she opened herself up to him. Harry buried one hand in her hair and ran the other down her back, pulling her more snuggly against him.

Suddenly something deeper (or perhaps he should say lower) within him surged to the surface. With a muffled groan he picked Hermione up and swung her around, bringing her to the front of the classroom and pressing her up against the larger desk that sat there.

Then, taken aback by his forwardness, Harry made to pull back, but Hermione ground her hips against him, causing him to gasp as she rubbed against a certain part of his anatomy that was making itself very, very apparent.

Leaning against her, Harry began to nuzzle her neck, taking pride in each breathy gasp he was able to draw from her as he kissed, nibbled, licked, and sucked his way from her collarbone to her jaw.

He jumped when he felt her cold hands slide just under the edge of his shirt, drawing back to look at her. Hermione froze, uncertainty blatant on her face. Harry smiled and kissed her again, encouraging her with tongue and lips. Her hands moved slowly, ice cold against his blazing hot skin. He stifled a groan. The sheer sluggishness with which she moved was torture. He wanted to feel her hands all over him, feel her skin against his. Suddenly his shirt was gone. He pulled back and looked Hermione with one eyebrow raised.

"Did you just Vanish my shirt?" he asked, his voice far deeper than he'd ever heard it, almost a purring growl. Hermione just smiled, a light in her eye he had never seen before.

"It was that or rip it," she replied, rolling her hips so she rubbed smoothly and almost languidly against him, running her fingers down his back, and sending shivers along his spine.

Trembling, Harry moved his hands to her shirt, slipping the first button from its hole. He looked at her, eyes asking permission, not sure of how far she was willing to take this. Hermione just smiled and Harry was pretty sure that at that point every drop of blood in his body was pooling in his groin. He had never been this aroused in his life.

Fighting the urge to just rip open her blouse, Harry worked away at the buttons, trying to stop his fingers from trembling, which was extremely difficult to do when Hermione was rubbing her body against him and nibbling on his neck.

Finally, with a growl, he gave up and tore the shirt apart, popping off buttons and sending them flying. Hermione gasped as he pulled her against him, skin to skin. Their lips met again as Harry began fumbling with the clasps that held her bra together.

"Why – the hell – did they – have to make bras – so difficult?" Harry growled as he fumbled at the catches. Hermione laughed and reached back, easily unhooking the snaps with two fingers. Harry rolled his eyes at her and slid the bra away, his eyes tracing the voluptuous curves as Hermione's breasts spilled out. He looked up at her and saw uncertainty in her eyes again. He knew she was afraid he wouldn't find her attractive.

"You have the most beautiful body I have ever seen," he murmured in her ear, running his hands down curve of her figure, fingers stroking the soft skin reverently. "It's probably a good thing you hide it away under those loose shirts of yours, or else no guy would ever be able to concentrate on his spells, and we all know what a calamity that would be."

"I think you exaggerating," Hermione said, a blushing mantling her cheeks, her voice breathy from his ministrations.

"Oh, exaggerating, am I?" Harry replied, an evil smile on his face. Without giving Hermione a chance to answer, he bent down and gathered one small, erect, pink nipple into his mouth and began to suck on it, worrying it ever so slightly with his teeth until she let out a sound that was half-cry and half-moan.

"You are beautiful," Harry murmured as Hermione leaned back on the desk, pulling him with her. "Never let anyone tell you any different." Hermione looked at him and smiled, caressing his face. Harry was amazed to see the amount of sheer love in her eyes, coupled with equal amounts of trust and friendship. She conveyed everything to him in one glance, not even needing to speak.

Harry wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her beautiful mane of strawberry-scented hair. He held her, kissing her shoulder and the side of her neck, while she ran her hands through his hair and over his upper half in reckless abandon, pressing herself tightly against him as they lay on the desk together.

Never for one second was Harry not aware of what Hermione was doing. But he was still slightly surprised when her hands began to wander farther and farther south. Now they were gently brushing against the top of his pants, light as butterflies. He pulled back and looked at her. There were no questions in her eyes this time, just promises that sent thrills of heat coursing through him.

One finger dipped just slightly below the waistband and Harry thought he was going to explode. He gasped and looked down at Hermione, who was grinning up at him wickedly. Now another finger, slightly lower. Her other hand went to the fastenings of his trousers and he thanked Merlin that he was wearing Muggle clothes. This would be so much more difficult in robes.

The button snapped open and the zipper was pulled down. Now she was playing with the elastic band on his boxers. His erection was blatantly obvious, stretching the cloth, but she purposefully ignored it, playing with the thin fabric all around, but never quite touching.

"Hermione…" Harry gasped, unable to take it any longer.

"Yes, Harry?" she asked, looking up at him innocently, eyes gleaming wickedly.

"You're killing me here…" he said in a strained voice, focusing very hard on not thrusting forward against her.

"I'm sorry," she said demurely, pulling her hand away. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No!" Harry said, slightly louder than he had intended, but the thought of her leaving him here like this was inconceivable. Hermione smiled and resumed playing with the fabric of his boxers.

"What do you want, Harry?" she asked, lifting herself up so her breasts barely brushed his chest.

"Touch – me… please," he whispered, not above a little begging. He liked this side of Hermione. She was putting her bossy nature to use.

All thoughts fled as her hand wrapped are him and her magic stripped away his clothes. He was pretty sure that he was going to explode right then and there. Growling ever so slightly, he pinned Hermione to the desk and kissed her passionately while she ran her hand up and down his length.

"Ouch," Harry suddenly grunted as he pressed too hard against her.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked, immediately letting go, that flash of uncertainty back

"More than okay," Harry assured her, kissing her cheek. "Just those damn jeans. The friction is a little too much for my, ah, tender skin."

"Well then," Hermione said, the gleam back in her eye, "we'll just have to remedy that." And then her jeans, and whatever she had been wearing underneath, vanished. Harry gasped as his lower region came into contact with the soft skin of her upper thighs. He wanted nothing more than to rub himself up and down the entire length of her, feel every inch of her skin on his. But he reined himself in and pulled away, looking down at her, naked on the desk.

"What?" Hermione asked, looking at him questioningly.

"I take back what I said. You're not beautiful," Harry replied. Hermione's face fell and she began to curl herself into a ball. Harry laughed and pinned her legs down, laying his body along hers and feeling how they fit together so perfectly.

"You're gorgeous," he said, kissing her as he ran his hands up and down her body. "And perfect. And by far the most amazing girl I know."

Hermione smiled at him so widely he thought her face might split in half. There were tears in her eyes, which he kissed away, and then they laughed as they gloried in each other's bodies, touching, and kissing and grinding and moving.

After a seemingly immeasurable segment of time, Harry hesitantly settled himself between Hermione's strong legs, the end of his leaking member pressed against her moist opening.

"Harry, no, stop," Hermione said. Harry immediately jerked back, flushing with shame.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione, I didn't mean to get so out of control, please forgive –" The rest of his words were cut off as Hermione kissed him, effectively swallowing the rest of his speech.

"I'm not saying stop permanently, silly," she said, smiling at him. "However, I would prefer not to have the responsibility of a child at the tender age of sixteen, so if you procure a condom, that would be fantastic." Harry swore violently.

"The only ones I have are up in my room," he said ruefully. "I didn't exactly come down here planning on seducing you." Hermione swore as well, which caused Harry to raise an eyebrow at her.

"Then looks like we're fucked, and not in the literal sense," Harry said in frustration, cursing himself for not carrying a condom with him like most of the boys his age did.

"Well…" Hermione said slowly, a speculative look crossing her face. "Not necessarily."

"What do you mean, not necessarily?" Harry asked, unsure if he should be excited or alarmed at the mischievous look that was now on Hermione's face.

"I read this book once that had a spell that might be able to help us out. It's basically a condom made of magic. Works better than the Muggle kind anyways, since there's no chance of breaking," Hermione said, getting the far-off look in her eye that she always got when thinking about books. Harry just looked at her incredulously.

"What?" she asked defensively.

"Hermione Jean Granger, what on earth kinds of books have you been reading?" Harry asked, laughing, and shaking his head.

"It's a good book," Hermione replied primly, smiling slyly. "Very informational and… imaginative. And it's a good thing for us I did read it, or we would be in quite the conundrum right now."

"I'm not arguing with that," Harry agreed, still shaking his head. Hermione reached over and grabbed her wand before pointing it at Harry's groin.

"You know, you are the only person on earth I would let point their wand at my, ah, little friend," Harry said, eyeing the wand with some suspicion. Hermione just rolled her eyes at him and murmured something in Latin.

Harry immediately felt himself get very warm and there was a tingling below decks. He looked down and saw himself coated with a thin, white, glowing film.

"I love magic," he said before leaning forward again and settling himself between Hermione's legs. She lay back, smiling at him.

"Are you sure about this?" Harry asked, suddenly nervous. "I mean, we can wait, that's fine with me. I don't want to pressure you."

"I'm sure," Hermione replied, her voice calm and confident. "Are you?" Harry leaned forward and kissed her very gently.

"Always," he assured her. He began to press himself into her, gasping she closed around him. Merlin, she was so tight. And warm. Very, very warm. Hermione hissed, her hands curling into fists at the pain. Immediately Harry stopped.

"Are you okay?" he asked, then wanted to kick himself for asking such an idiotic question.

"Yeah," she said, taking deep breaths, grinning up at him. "Just takes some getting used to. You're so damn big. Maybe I should have cast a Shrinking Charm instead."

"Hey now," Harry said with mock-alarm, smiling at her. "There will no shrinking of any kind. Enlargement Charms fine, but absolutely NO shrinking." Hermione laughed and Harry felt her loosen ever so slightly around him.

"That's right, beautiful," he murmured, taking her hands, and lacing his fingers through hers. "Just relax. I've got you, and I won't hurt you. I promise."

"I know," Hermione replied quietly, smiling at him. Harry gently eased himself a little farther in and was rewarded with a gasp of pleasure. Smiling to himself, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Now, I have one question."

"What?" she asked, shivering as he drew slowly back.

"Do you say your prayers aloud?" Harry asked, grinning as she looked at him in disbelief.

"Did you really just reference Shakespeare?" she said, laughing. Harry's breath caught in his throat as her body rippled around him, shaken by her laughed. With an inarticulate sound he pushed himself forward against, this time going even deeper. Hermione's laughter turned into a moan and she rocked her hips against his, a wild light in her eye.

"Let's find out, shall we?" Harry said, his voice rumbling up from somewhere deep in his chest. With that he began to rock back and forth, thrusting into her yielding flesh.

Hermione gasped and looked up at the man above her. Harry's black hair was in an unruly mess and his green eyes, still tucked behind his glasses, glowed with a primal inner fire. His lips were slightly red and swollen from the kissing and his teeth gleamed as he smiled at her. He was the picture of perfect wild abandon, of taking life and living it to the fullest. She could feel him filling her with every stroke, filling that empty hole inside of her. She had thought that knowledge was the only way to fill that void, the only thing that could comfort her. But now that came in a pale and ghostly second to the warm, seething, unbound joy that filled her soul as surely as he filled her body. He was beautiful and she loved him and his friendship.

Harry loved the way she looked at him. She saw through all the pretenses and excuses and barriers used to keep people at arm's length. Ever since the very first day on the train, she had been the cool voice of logic, the glue that held his world together. He could feel her now, taking him in, anchoring him. All his life he had been the unwanted one, the one with too many responsibilities and sorrows on his shoulders. He had been adrift in the sea of loneliness and pain. Then she had marched right in, with her bushy hair and crooked teeth, and helped lift the burden, helped shoulder the load. She was the strong one of the group. She was the one that worked tirelessly and who had anchored them all when things were at their worst. She always had a plan and she never judged him by what other people said. She was his rock, the one person he could always, always count on to take his side, no matter what. She took everything into her and channeled it, focusing it on the goal. She was the only thing that stopped him from floating off into a miserable, dark sea, and he loved her for it.

They moved together, fitting together like perfect puzzle pieces. They created a tangible energy between them, thrusting it back and forth, letting it grow and grow until it was too much to be contained in mere physical bodies. Their bodies released at the same moment and they screamed each other's names as the power rocketed outwards, bearing their love with it as it winged into the damaged cosmos, a healing force made of pure goodness.

They collapsed, spent, on the desk. Harry pulled out of Hermione and heard her murmur a sleepy Cleaning Charm. No longer sticky, he curled himself around Hermione's back, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. She waved her wand and a blanket fell over them, enveloping them in warmth. Harry looked around sleepily, then threw back his head and began to laugh hysterically.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked tiredly.

"Do you know where we are?" Harry asked, still laughing. Hermione looked around blearily.

"Transfiguration classroom," she said, then sat bolt upright, looking down at Harry, who was still giggling.

"Did I seriously just lose my virginity on Professor McGonagall's desk?" she asked. Harry nodded, trying to calm himself down, but failing and breaking out in laughter again.

"I have the feeling we just broke about fifty school rules," Hermione said, smiling slyly.

"Probably more like a hundred," Harry corrected, pulling on her arm until she lay down beside him again. "And, since we're all about being naughty tonight, might as well make it a hundred and one and stay here for the night. I'll set an alarm that will wake us up in time to get back to the dorms." Hermione just shook her head and cast Cloaking and Silencing Charms on the door.

"Harry," she said, sitting up slightly and looking at him.

"What is it?" he asked, a look of concern crossing his features.

"I just wanted to say… thank you," Hermione said, reaching out and tracing his cheekbone with her finger. "Tonight was… I've never felt this way before tonight. I know it's probably all the hormones, but I have the feeling that if tonight hadn't been with you… Well, I'm just glad it was you. Thank you so much for being here with me tonight."

"It was my pleasure," Harry replied, sitting up and cupping her face in his hands. "After all, what are friends for?" Hermione smiled and leaned forward to kiss him, slowly and lovingly, as if she had all the time in the world.

"Come to bed, love," Harry murmured, laying down and pulling Hermione down with him so she was cradled against his chest. "This night is for us. We'll deal with tomorrow, tomorrow."