

## Turning Words Into Action

Hermione caught her head from dipping onto the book with a quick blink.

"Hey, wake up," said Harry, as he walked in from the kitchen, two glasses of iced pumpkin juice in hand. "We've still got a couple of hours before I need to go cook dinner for the Dursleys."

As he grabbed a seat at the table, Hermione morphed the single blink into a rapid-fire succession of flutters.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Har-Har" she replied, in a sickly-sweet voice. "It's just that...it is so hard to stay awake when all I want to do dream of you."

Harry returned the volley. "No excuse. Being the smartest witch in our generation means you should be able to think and lust at the same time."

"Need two heads for that trick. You should know."

"Did you just say something? Sorry, but all the blood's gone to the head without ears."

"Well whip it out, and maybe it'd hear better!"

Hermione smiled as a bit of pumpkin juice sprayed out of Harry's mouth.

"I win," she said, as she wiped down the juice-laden books and parchment with a cloth.

They called it *The Game*. They had been playing *The Game* for the past month.

*The Game* had few rules and ever fewer boundaries. Every time that Hermione or Harry hurled a *double entendre*, ribald comment or flirtatious come-on the other person had to respond in kind. A successful rejoinder had to be itself responded to, going back-and-forth until the loser missed the beat (or hurled their juice).

Hermione couldn't say exactly when *The Game* began, but she did have several working hypotheses on why she and Harry had been acting so out of character lately.

*Blame the Dursleys.*

Odds that the Dursleys would live to see September had dropped sharply when Hermione made her first visit to Number 4, Privet Drive. Within the first ten minutes, Vernon had called her a weirdo, Petunia had called her a tart, and Dudley had tried to cop a feel. Two *Silencios* and a pig snout later, an uneasy truce had been brokered; the Dursleys would let Harry out of the house to do research and Hermione would let them live.

Hermione and Harry could never have played *The Game* at the Dursleys house...too much supervision, too much gossiping, and too much Dudley. But because the Dursleys were...well, frankly, the Dursleys...Hermione was forced to find shelter elsewhere.

*Blame Mr. Tibbles.*

Arabella Figg's sixteen year deployment to Little Whinging would end when Harry turned seventeen, and she had no desire to stay any longer than needed. Her real estate agent had smiled when he pulled up to her curb; it was structurally sound, within a desirable community (real estate wise, at least), and looked smart from the street. But then the homeowner welcomed him inside, and introduced him to Mr. Tibbles and his thirteen pals... and their cat boxes...and their fur balls.

The agent had begged Arabella to find someplace else for the cats to stay until the home sold, but she had refused; they were not only her best friends, they were the eyes and ears that kept tabs on the Dursley's house. Hermione's arrival in Little Whinging created a nifty solution to this problem; she needed a place to stay, and she could protect Harry better than any squib could. So Mrs. Figg and her cats got to move out to her sister's farm in Devon, the real estate agent got to perform cat-free showings, and Hermione Harry got some chaperone-free space.

*Blame Ron.*

Ron had promised to stay with Harry and Hermione over the summer, but had found it difficult to keep that promise. Mrs. Weasley had taken a dim view her son not living at the Burrow, despite the fact that he was seventeen and an adult in the wizarding community. The guilt was hard and heavy; there were wedding preparations to be made, and dress robes to have fitted, gardens to de-gnome, and any number of other chores to perform.

Ron could have just said no, but truth be told, the thought of spending all day and night reading and researching while away from his mum's kitchen and within a Muggle house wasn't all that appealing. Hermione's cooking alone was enough reason to quell the jealousy that he'd normally feel about Harry and Hermione being alone.

They would have never dared play *The Game* had Ron been with them. Looking back, Hermione saw that *The Game* might have developed exactly because Ron was *not* with them. As much as Hermione complained about their friend's study habits, and his propensity to crack jokes, whine and/or otherwise disrupt their library sessions, she had to admit that they served a purpose. Ron's interruptions provided stress relief and study breaks that actually increased their overall efficiency. In Ron's absence, Harry and Hermione had to create their own mischief as substitute.

### *Blame the Dementors .*

The Dementors were on holiday, and taken the cold misty weather that had shrouded England with them. A heat wave was left behind, and Arabella's house lacked central air conditioning. Hermione was of age and could have easily used cooling spells inside the house, but they were trying to keep her presence in Little Whinging a secret. Since there was no telling whether Voldemort had insiders at the Ministry's magical surveillance agencies, they couldn't risk using magic in a house owned by a known squib.

Each passing day of thirty plus degree weather found them wearing less and less clothing. Harry's daily attire had been spared down to a pair of cutoffs; Hermione wore cutoffs and a bikini top. The fact that they were best friends didn't make them blind; each found themselves distracted by what was previously hidden under uniforms and robes.

### *Blame Snape .*

The first few days at Arabella's had been rough. A mixture of grief, fear and post-traumatic stress arising from Dumbledore's death had gripped each of them more than either cared to admit. Hermione wanted to talk her way through it; Harry just wanted to withdraw, as he'd done after the deaths of Cedric and Sirius. It wasn't a good combination. All of the helium in the world couldn't have lightened their mood those first days.

The break in this mood came quite accidentally. Hermione had been fighting a losing battle against a frying pan, and thought she was alone when she screamed "*Bollocks!*" at the sight of another pair of burnt eggs. She discovered she wasn't, though, when the intended recipient of those eggs bolted into the kitchen to see what was wrong. At the sight of Hermione wearing an apron and tears of frustration, Harry broke out in giggles, which really didn't help the situation. He tried to convince Hermione that it was her coarse language that was funny, rather than her cooking. She wasn't persuaded, however...until later that day, when she accidentally on purpose cursed when a broken quill sprayed ink across her notepad. Harry had smirked, and his eyes had brightened in a way that gave her hope that all could be right in the world again.

While Hermione had been reading up on grief counseling, she hadn't seen salty language mentioned as an effective therapy. But for some reason, it worked for them. She theorized that by acting out of character, she might be distancing themselves a bit from the time and place where they were always acting in character – the time and place where Dumbledore was dead.

The fact that she could get a rise or a chuckle out of Harry by using colorful language presented a challenge for Hermione; she had never been one to use such words, and rarely even heard them. She had found the answer to this dilemma in the same place that she always looked for answers: in her local library.

For as stuffy and pretentious as Little Whinging tried to be, the community library proved to be an excellent source of invective. Hermione found dictionaries of slang, encyclopedias of insults, and research librarians that were as intrigued as they were helpful. Suggesting that she should not only see her expanded vocabulary on the page, but also see it put to use, they sent her back to Mrs. Figg's with several videos and DVDs.

As she had hoped, the stack of movies sitting next to the telly didn't escape Harry's eyes during his next visit, and he had insisted that they watch the movies together. It didn't take long for some of the observed dialogues to work their way into Harry and Hermione's conversations, and the more they did the happier the household seemed to be.

### *Blame Each Other .*

It was the romantic comedies that Harry and Hermione enjoyed watching the most, particularly when the romantic leads bantered and bickered back and forth before finally realizing at the end that they loved each other. Hermione's favorite was the black-and-white classic *Woman of the Year*; Harry's favorite was somewhere amongst the first two seasons of the 1980's-ere American television series *Moonlighting* (that they took in during a marathon weekend watch.) They never discussed the fact that the banter they employed while playing *The Game* mirrored so closely the give-and-take of Tracy and Hepburn, or Dave and Maddie. Had they done so, Hermione thought, they might have had to deal with the fact that the happy endings for these characters involved them getting, well, involved.

Hermione had realized that there was more to playing *The Game* than stress relief about five days in. By that point, Harry and she had gotten so into character that the banter had become second nature for them. It was a game, and they both were very competitive, so it hadn't taken long for "can you top this one" to turn into shameless flirtations and expressions of unrequited lust.

They embraced the freedom to say anything (and suggest anything) because it was supposed to be a game...it was supposed to be a kind of therapy and not really representative of how each thought of their best friend. The problem for Hermione, though, was that playing *The Game* forced her to think about Harry in a way she never dared think before...consciously, at least. And she had reached the point where she had troubles separating out what her character should say from what she really felt.

Hermione mulled over the latest exchange. Did she really tell Harry to whip it out? She had indeed. But what if he had taken the dare? Hermione now had to face the fact that no small part of her wished that he had done so. She hadn't been playing a role when she told Harry that he was in her dreams...and in those dreams he wore far less than the cutoffs worn during the day.

Hermione not only loved Harry...she lusted for him, and come to accept these feelings. She had loved him for a long time; it had taken *The Game* for her to look back and see that. She thought Harry might be in the same situation. At least she prayed that he was. But the one way to be sure was to convert words into action, and that ran the risk of disaster if her feelings weren't reciprocated.

Hermione hadn't been willing to risk losing her best friend. She hadn't been willing to risk losing the intimacy that they shared within *The Game*, even if it was play-acting.

Until now.

She had reached the point where all of her thoughts were focused on either playing *The Game*, or imaging how they'd act on their words if it wasn't a game at all. Hunting for horcruxes had been completely subsumed by her desire to hunt for Harry Jr.

Calling for an end to *The Game* might put them right back to where they had been at the start of the summer, and they had shared too much to just turn back the clock. No, Hermione decided, if *The Game* had put them in this predicament, then it would have to be *The Game* that provided a solution.

*Words into action....Gryffindor courage. Words into action....Gryffindor courage. Words into action....*

"Hey!"

"Erm, yes Harry?"

"Care to share your thoughts, or are they too smutty to verbalize?"

Hermione looked down at her reading and smiled. "Half-smut and half-business," she replied. "I was just reading up on polyjuice."

"What's so smutty about polyjuice?" Harry asked.

"Oh, nothing, unless I fancied Crabb and still had some of his hair...bet he's hung like a horse."

"I didn't take the time to look when I had the chance."

"Well.....well, I did, and let me just say....Meow!"

"Yuck," said Harry, "and I win, by the way. You hesitated."

"Oh, alright," said Hermione. "But seriously, how can you tell that I am not really a Death Eater that got hold of a bit of my hair?"

"Is that all you're worrying about Hermione? Shall I set your mind at ease?"

"Oh, by all means, please do Professor Potter."

"Okay," said Harry, "watch and learn."

"First, we've spent so much time together these past six years that I now know every single hair on your head, and would surely notice if one went missing. But that aside, the effects of polyjuice potion only last for an hour, right? Well, we've been here three hours straight, without so much as a trip to the loo on your part. And that's with three glasses of iced pumpkin juice under your belt...by the way, have I ever told you I'm impressed by the strength of your bladder?"

"Oh, Harry, I bet you use that line on all the girls."

"Oh yeah, nothing like a little urinary tract talk to get them in the mood."

"But," asked Hermione, "what if Snape invented a new and improved polyjuice potion that lasts for an entire day? What then, O Wise One?"

"Hmmm...then I could ask a question that only the true Hermione would know...like where and when you first met a troll."

"Oh, you'll need to do better than that....Draco or Pansy would probably remember that one."

"Ooooooooooh, Draco Malfoy in Hermione Granger's body? Talk about never being quite so fanciable..." Harry snarked.

Hermione replied with a rough push and a snort of disgust.

"Ouch!, Okay, so I deserved that," Harry admitted. "Let me think...oh, here's one: What color are my favorite pair of boxer shorts?"

"Crimson, of course, with a cute little golden snitch darting around out in front.... or so Ron's told me."

"Oh, well done....splendid recovery...ten points for Gryffindor. Although I don't know what'd be worse...you checking out my undies, or Ron thinking that the front of my boxers were cute."

"Oh, go with Ron's fancying your knickers, Potter. Most definitely."

Harry replied with some tickling and a snort of disgust.

"Stop!" Hermione whined, as she tried to squim away from Harry's fingers. "Okay, okay...But isn't this...Harry, I said stop!...isn't this whole "use a password/security question" idea right out of some Ministry leaflet? Since when have you started to rely upon anything they've come up with to fight Voldemort?"

"Ooof, you're right," Harry replied. "Better find something completely different. Erm, by the way, Hermione, why am I the one doing all the thinking here?"

"Nice change of pace, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now you've forced me to go all analytical."

"Oooh, baby...show me that big brain of yours!"

"Alright," said Harry, "Polyjuice potion requires a little bit of the person to be copied, right? The spell probably works off of the genetic bits. So I could always look for something that you didn't happen to inherit from your mummy and daddy, like a cute little tattoo, or something."

"No, I don't think so," replied Hermione, "there's got to be more going on than that. Your genetic bits don't change over time; if that was the only thing that determined the potion's effects you could have just as easily morphed into a baby-sized version of Crabb back in Second Year. But from the little I remember amidst the shock of turning part-cat, your version of Crabb got not only age and size right, but the little temporal things as well - like the distribution of pimples on his face."

"Umm, good point. Too bad for you, though - you could've proven I was me by demanding me to drop my trousers and check for a certain scar - hey, what if we got matching nipple piercings?"

Hermione punched his arm.

"Ouch! Okay, so I deserved that one as well...fine, okay. Enough fun. Here's my serious face...Hermione, no matter how many piercings or cute little tattoos in cute little hiding places they got right, there's absolutely no way anyone could fool me into thinking that they were you."

"And just why is that?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked at her straight on, with green eyes that were dancing with life.

"Because nobody would be able to match the instantly recognizable intensity that you throw at any task placed before you."

"Because nobody would be smart enough to give me the sweet scent of lilac and myrtle that I catch a whiff of every time you toss your hair back, or tuck a bang behind your ear."

"And because nobody, and I mean nobody, could bottle even a bit of the sparkle I see every time I look in your eyes. I mean really, Hermione...your animagi form could be a slug and I'd still be able to sort you out with a glance."

"Harry James Potter!" exclaimed Hermione. "That is absolutely the nicest thing you have ever said to me. Even the slug part."

"I meant every word."

*Words into action....Gryffindor courage. Words into action....Gryffindor courage. Words into action....*

Hermione took the plunge.

"But you know," she replied, "there is no harm in being redundant. Perhaps we should have a secret signal... Maybe I ought just grab hold of your bollocks?"

"Hermione Jane Granger! That is absolutely the naughtiest thing you have ever said to me. Especially the bollocks part."

"I meant every word."

"Tough to pull off gracefully in mixed company, though, don't you think?"

Hermione smiled. "You answered a question with a question, silly boy."

"So I did. Points from Gryffindor?"

"No," replied Hermione, "I think you need a punishment that's a little more painful. Tell you what...close that book and let's go...I'm going to find a place that will turn our words into action."

"And what kind of place would that be, Miss Granger?"

"Are you going to let me answer that question with another question?"

"Sure," said Harry.

*Words into action....Gryffindor courage....*

Hermione deftly removed her swimsuit top.

"One nipple piercing...or two?"

Harry's jaw dropped. Hermione shut it for him by grabbing his lower lip with her teeth.

And somewhere within the ensuing thirty seconds of chest-to-chest lip lock, Harry's shock was transmuted into epiphany, and Hermione's fears transmuted into elation.

"I win," Hermione said, when they finally surfaced for air.

Harry leaned his forehead up against hers and smiled.

"Me too."