

The Practical Art of Kissing 1: The Volunteer

Chapter One – The Volunteer

The war was over. Voldemort was gone forever and Harry Potter was a newly-minted Auror, fresh from his eighteen-month stint at the Auror Academy. Ron Weasley, his best friend had also just finished and was second in their class next to a very surprised Neville Longbottom. Harry had been ranked somewhere in the teens, despite every one's expectations, and explained this occurrence with a noncommittal shrug when asked. The real reason had been a closely-guarded secret and he wasn't about to mope at their finishing party – which was where he was, presently trying to ignore the other Weasley in his life.

Ginny was flirting outrageously with Neville in the Burrow's back garden. It had been festooned with various decorations that Harry was sure were stunning and should have imbued everyone with a sense of accomplishment and pride. Harry felt none of these things as he watched his recently ex-girlfriend chatting up the number one Rookie Auror. The only reason Harry hadn't beaten his good friends in their class standings happened to be the short redhead that had captured Neville's attention. Apparently, Harry just wasn't a good enough kisser for her.

"Cheer up, mate," Ron said from beside him and thrust a frosty Butterbeer into his hand. "There's other fish in the sea and Merlin knows they'll be happy to take the bait you're offering." He waggled his eyebrows for effect and Harry let out a morbid sigh.

"Whatever you say," Harry replied and took an obligatory sip from his beverage. Being honest with himself, Harry had to wonder... if his kissing prowess with Ginny had been so abysmal, and even *he* could admit his experience with Cho before her was horrible... he wondered if he wasn't doomed to being alone for the rest of his life. Who knew that being a terrible kisser could cause such misery?

"Well," Ron said, breaking through Harry's train of depressing thoughts. "I'm off to sample the female population myself." He rubbed his hands vigorously and eyed the crowd of witches that had turned out for the party. Eighteen months of solitude during their training period with no break longer than a weekend had built up a hearty appetite in all of them, but Ron most of all. It was too bad Ron's relationship with Hermione had never taken off past their jealousy and Bludger-like flirting. He had a feeling they would have ended up killing each other anyway.

Suddenly, Ron's eyes went wide. "Oh, no," he said and ducked behind Harry. "I didn't know *she'd* be here."

Harry had been about to ask 'who', when the object of his fright appeared from behind a knot of recently-former seventh-year Hufflepuffs. Luna Lovegood was walking serenely in Harry's direction, her ever-present radish earrings dangling from her lobes and her periwinkle dress robes bedecked with several dozen Drooble's wrappers that were tied in knots along the hem and sleeves.

"Hello, Harry," she said dreamily. "Would you mind if I had a word with Ronald?"

Smirking despite himself, Harry stepped to the right and revealed his best friend, ducking in a low crouch.

"Hey!" Ron said with mock indignance as he stood. "Some friend you are."

"Don't be a coward, Ron," Harry said and took another swig of Butterbeer. Something about witnessing Ron's plight made his own fade a little. "Just remember to be a gentleman."

Ron's ears went pink as Harry grinned and backed away from the couple. Luna moved in and started to say something that Harry was glad to have not heard. Judging by the fact that Ron's face turned the same colour as his ears, Harry was sure that Luna was typically getting right to the point.

Not wanting to return to the party, where he was sure Ginny and Neville were either snogging or about to (and thus bringing up the very thing Harry wanted to forget), Harry decided to check on Molly. The Burrow was his home away from Hogwarts, and now that he was both finished with school and a full-fledged Auror, Harry was a bit out of sorts as to what he was going to do with himself. Get a flat? Find a roommate? Ron was the obvious choice, but he knew that with both of them being Aurors, it would be rare if they would ever be there at the same time. Wherever he lived, being alone was not going to be part of the package. He'd had enough of that growing up with the Dursleys.

As Harry walked into the kitchen, he nearly ran into a familiar brown-haired witch, carrying a tray of treacle tart. "Oh!" she said and flashed a patient smile. "Didn't see you there, Harry."

He didn't move, but Hermione edged a foot around his leg and nudged him out of the way. "Can't talk now. I've got to deliver these. Catch me up later? We'll talk then."

Not knowing what else to do, he nodded and watched her walk toward the crowded refreshment table. He hadn't seen her in a year, since they'd had a common weekend off last September – the weekend she'd broken things off with Ron and they'd agreed to just be friends. Her work as an Unspeakable was classified, so he didn't really know what took up her time, but he knew she'd never looked happier. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he turned and walked into the kitchen.

Molly was in her element. Puddings, sandwiches, sweets, and various finger foods were being made and eaten in almost equal proportions. Harry had always associated happiness with Molly's cooking, and watching her whip up a batch of cucumber sandwiches pushed the loneliness even further away from him.

"Need a hand?" he asked as a pot zoomed from its rack on the wall, over his head, and onto the stove.

"Sorry, dear," she said and a creamy, white liquid poured from her wand into the pot. "Didn't see you there." She flicked her wand at the hob and it ignited. Then, she summoned more ingredients, and set them in the pot, humming all the while.

He watched her work, thinking she hadn't heard his question, when she pointed to a tray full of sandwiches. "Take those out to the party for me?"

Grateful to be of some use, Harry pulled his hands out of his pockets and grabbed the tray. "I'd love to."

He made it to the door, the tray balanced on one hand held slightly above his head, when he almost ran into Hermione once again. "Sorry," he said as she ducked around him. They brushed against each other in a very innocent manner, much like they'd done a thousand times in the corridors of Hogwarts, but there was something about the way she smiled at him as they caught each other's eye that made him think twice about it.

"Sorry," she echoed and slipped back into the kitchen.

The next hour consisted of many of these moments as they both ferried food and drinks to the party-goers. If Molly was upset that he, a guest, was serving the others, she made no indication of it. Instead, she seemed delighted with the help, and Harry was more than willing to be busy with something that didn't involve brooding.

During their doorstep interludes, Harry made it a point to really look at Hermione. She looked very much the same, but her hair was somehow more tame than he remembered. Her eyes were just as bright and inquisitive, but they seemed a bit more... wise was the only word that came to mind. Even that seemed inadequate to describe everything that was there, however and he found himself wanting very much to know what those things were.

Just as the last dessert tray was carried out by Molly, who had finished cleaning the kitchen with a few well-placed charms, Hermione stepped back into the Burrow. Her face was flushed and she was slightly out of breath. "Now, what did you want to talk about?"

Harry motioned for them to take a seat at the table and held out one of the chairs for her. She gave him an odd smirk, but took the proffered seat nonetheless.

"It's been ages," he began, sitting in the chair next to her. "Since I've seen you, I mean."

"Has it been ages?" she asked, her eyes surveying him carefully. "It seems like last month. Things have been so busy at the Ministry..." Her face was arranged in a contemplative look. "I guess it has been a while. Almost a year?"

"Yeah," said Harry, who felt suddenly nervous.

She continued to stare at him. "You look good. Auror training has been good to you."

Harry snorted and looked at his hands, which were folded on the table. "I wish I could say I felt good."

There was a subtle change in Hermione. She touched his hand and when he looked up, the careful gaze had been replaced with concern. "What's happened? Is it Ginny?"

He nodded. "We broke up."

She squeezed his hands and cradled them with hers. "I'm so sorry. I know you were close at school."

He shrugged. "I thought so, but I guess she's been holding back telling me I was a horrible kisser all this time."

Harry could tell that she was restraining a smirk, but he could only tell because he'd seen her do it a hundred times. "It's not funny, Hermione," he said, though a grin crept into the corners of his mouth as he said it.

"No," she agreed. "It's not. It's horrible, as a matter of fact." Then she withdrew her hands and sat back in her chair. "Though I can completely understand her dilemma."

"You can?" asked a very surprised Harry. He had no idea about Hermione's kissing ability, but he was certain that it far outstripped his own. From what he understood, she'd had a fair number of boyfriends after Ron.

"Oh, yes. Kissing isn't everything, mind you, but it's certainly important that both parties enjoy doing it. Otherwise..." She trailed off, and Harry knew exactly what the consequences could be. "But Harry... she never said anything about you being... well, bad. And both of you were so happy. How did you find out?"

Harry hung his head. "You remember the first time we kissed, right?"

"After the last Quidditch game?"

He nodded. The last Quidditch game played while they were at Hogwarts. Ginny had caught the Snitch and in a fit of pent up attraction, mixed with the excitement of winning, Harry had snogged Ron's sister. He'd thought it was one of the most amazing experiences up until that point in his life.

Too bad she hadn't felt the same way.

"Well, we left to take a walk around the grounds. I just wanted to kiss her some more, but she had it in her mind to talk instead." He shook his head at the memory. "I should have known then that it was doomed."

Hermione snorted and he was surprised to see a smirk on her face. "I'm so sorry, Harry. But you'll have to forgive me if I don't indulge in a small bit of joy from your predicament."

"But..." Harry began in confusion. "I thought you wanted Ginny and I to get together?"

"Oh, when you first kissed I was quite happy for both of you. I could tell you'd fancied her for a while and if kissing Ginny Weasley was what you needed, then I was all for it."

Harry thought he detected a hint of bitterness in her voice, but it could just have been a tired edge instead. They had just been on their feet for the better part of two hours and he was feeling a bit weary himself. "So then why are you thrilled with my being ditched by Ginny?"

She smirked again. "Because this is just the opportunity I've been waiting for, Harry. You are an abominable kisser, but it's only because of lack of proper training. Ginny couldn't be bothered with teaching you and Merlin knows Cho was still too weepy over Cedric to fuss with kissing techniques."

Harry's head was spinning. Not since she had quoted his speech to the D.A. in sixth year had he realised just how closely Hermione paid attention to him. It was extremely disorienting to have his best female friend be so observant about his personal life. "If it's just lack of training, then..." he said as a very sudden, very foreign thought occurred to him. "Who do you think has the time and the inclination to train me?"

Hermione leaned across the table and patted his shoulder. "Meet me at my flat tomorrow night and we'll talk about it some more." She stood, ran her hands over her hair and walked out of the kitchen.

Staring at the empty seat where Hermione had been just a moment before, he blinked a few times and wondered exactly what they'd be discussing the following evening.

The Practical Art of Kissing 2: Lessons

Chapter Two – Lessons

The next day was spent searching for a flat. Harry shared with Ron his hesitance to get one with him because they'd almost never be there at the same time. This didn't dissuade Ron, however. "Kingsley'll go easy on us our first rotation," he explained. "After that..." But what it was, Ron didn't say because Luna was waiting for them outside the Leaky Cauldron. Ron's face had turned oddly strained, but he didn't say anything. She politely insisted that she should help them find their flat and Ron's almost complete non-reaction to her request made Harry wonder just what had happened between them the previous evening.

Shopping for a flat with Luna was an entertaining experience. She insisted that they be on the third floor to remain a proper distance from the ground. "Nargles infest everything below twenty feet," but below the sixth floor "Flying Snorcacks" was all she said when asked why. When Harry pointed out that it would be a good thing to be seen by one (as he could then prove that they existed), she very calmly replied that "Being seen by a Flying Snorcack is more dangerous than the Rotfang conspiracy." Harry wasn't about to argue the differences between non-existent creatures and the imagined threat of periodontal disease. The only things that concerned him were that work was relatively close by and that he be able to cast an Unplottable Charm on it. The *Daily Prophet* had been somewhat indifferent with him since he had killed Voldemort, so he wasn't worried about the likes of Rita Skeeter. It was the throngs of single witches in the country that seemed to have quadrupled overnight. It was a headache he was all too happy to avoid during Auror training.

"Oh look, Ronald," said Luna in the twelfth flat they'd seen since breakfast. "The curtains match your hair." She was fingering a set of garish orange drapes that hung pathetically from a bent rod over a grimy window.

Ron scratched his head. He seemed to tolerate Luna much more than he did the previous night, and Harry was curious as to how he went from actively avoiding her to allowing her to have input into where they were going to live. "Who cares about the curtains?" he asked with a scrunched nose. "We can charm them to be whatever colour we like, but this place isn't fit for *Malfoy*."

"Oh, yes," replied Luna, who had turned her dreamy gaze back to Ron. "I suppose that would work, too."

They left the dirty orange curtains and looked at one final flat. This one was much cleaner than the rest, but the price was outrageous in Harry's opinion. "How much?" he said, goggling at the flyer on the wall.

"A thousand a month?" Ron echoed. "That's... that's extortion!"

Harry could tell his friend wanted the flat quite a lot. Not only did it satisfy all of Luna's demands, but it was fully furnished, in a clean building with normal-looking tenants and it had a fireplace that could easily be hooked into the Floo network.

Luna was lounging on the settee, casually examining the ceiling. "I don't see any Wrackspurts," which seemed to be her way of approving.

"Well," Harry said, after the initial shock had worn off. "Between the two of us, we should be able to afford five hundred each."

Ron seemed to consider this and, like Harry, was performing some quick mental arithmetic. He sat next to Luna and rubbed a hand on the pillowed arm of the settee. "Yeah, all right."

The papers were signed and Harry made the deposit because he was the only one with Muggle money. "I'll pay you back," whispered Ron as they took the keys from the landlord. Luna bid them goodbye, off to help her father with the printing of this month's *Quibbler*. Harry and Ron were in a cheerful mood and Ron suggested that they head to the closest Muggle pub to celebrate their newly won freedom.

The pub was crowded for a Thursday night, but Ron and Harry squeezed into a booth near the back. Being the more experienced pub-goer, Ron ordered them a couple baskets of fish and chips and two watery beers.

"To freedom," Ron said as he held up his mug. Harry gave it a hearty clink and took a great swig from the glass. He much preferred Butterbeer to the Muggle version.

"So," Ron said as he tucked into his fish. "What were you and Hermione doing at the party last night? You were supposed to be relaxing and you let Mum put you to work." He shook his head at his basket of food.

"I didn't mind," Harry said. "It was better than watching your sister suck Neville's face off."

Ron seemed to sober at this information. "Yeah. About that... I'm sorry you and Ginny..."

Harry waved his comment aside. "Don't worry about it, mate. I'm mostly over it now." But even as he said it, Harry remembered that he was supposed to be meeting Hermione that evening and two things became very clear in his mind. He didn't even know where Hermione lived and

more importantly, he didn't know exactly what he supposed to be doing. These thoughts spurred more questions. Was she going to be referring him to a good kissing instructor? Was *she* going to be volunteering to teach him the fine art of snogging? Did that mean she fancied him? What did that mean for their friendship? He couldn't bear the thought of damaging almost ten years with one of his best friends over the little problem that he couldn't kiss his self out of a wet paper bag.

"Harry? Are you all right?" asked Ron suddenly, causing Harry to look at his watch.

"Blimey, is that the time?" He shovelled the last piece of fish into his mouth and gave it a vigorous chew. "You know where Hermione's flat is?"

"Yeah." replied Ron, whose expression became suddenly suspicious. "You going there right now?"

"I, er..." Harry faltered and covered it by taking another swig of beer. "I was just going to catch up on stuff. You know..." He made a pathetic face, hoping that Ron wouldn't press the issue.

"Oh. All right. You know where Demelza Robins lives?"

"The one you punched in sixth year?" asked Harry for confirmation.

Ron winced a little at the memory. "That's the one. She just got out of Hogwarts and is Hermione's flatmate."

"Why would I know where Demelza lives?"

"Well, don't you get the GQ newsletter?" Ron shot back.

Harry squirmed a little in his seat. The GQ, as the Muggle-borns liked to call it was a weekly letter sent out by Katie Bell to all the Gryffindor Quidditch players. Harry skimmed through the first few, but never really had the time to delve much deeper. "I get it, but I haven't actually... you know, *read* it."

Ron rolled his eyes, something Hermione would have done before she and Ron split up. Now, it seemed that Ron had taken up her impatience and combined it with his usual portion of thick-headedness. "Well, Demelza got an offer from the Canons and she's starting Chaser this season."

Scratching his head, Harry plunked a few pounds on the table to cover his half of the meal. "What's that got to do with where Hermione lives?"

"Demelza is living with Hermione because it's across the street from the Pitch the Canons train at."

"Oh," said Harry, as he slid out from the booth and took one last swig of his drink. "I reckon I can find that, then."

Ron smirked. "It's number four. Good luck."

Harry waved and made his way through the crowded room, wondering what Ron meant by 'good luck'.

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Hermione glanced at the clock and silently cursed, a habit that had crept into being since she had been working with a dozen males that prided themselves on creative ways to swear. Her wand was out and the space that her new flatmate, Demelza usually occupied was being cleared of clutter. Clothes, empty take-away containers, hair clips, balled-up parchment, and several things that she didn't want to identify were banished to the younger girl's room. She ignored the indignant muttering that barely reached her ears and transfigured the sofa from a three seat version to a much cosier two seat one. A charm to freshen the air was the last thing to be done before she approached Demelza's room.

"About ready to leave?" she asked with a cheerful smile.

Demelza looked decidedly ruffled. "I would have been, had you not dumped a week's worth of clothes on my head."

"No time for that now," Hermione said as Demelza untied her pony-tail and picked up a brush. Hermione's wand was quick, straightening Demelza's hair and then setting it into a complicated twist that looked much better than simply hanging down her back. There were advantages to rooming with Parvati and Lavender for six years. "I wouldn't have had to banish your clothes had you done it yourself three hours ago like I asked."

Demelza looked properly abashed. "How'd you do my hair like this?" she asked, gently touching her head with her hands.

"I'll show you *after* my meeting."

The younger girl nearly choked from holding in a laugh. "A *meeting* is it? Is that what you call a date?" Demelza leaned casually against the door frame. "Who is it this time? Roger Davies? Terry Boot?" Then she cast an impatient look at Hermione. "Victor Krum isn't back in town is he?"

Hermione grasped Demelza's arm and pulled her toward the front door. "No to all three," she said without addressing her first question. "Remember not to come back until after midnight?"

"Midnight," she repeated.

There was a knock at the door and a wicked grin crossed Demelza's face. "I'll get it."

Hermione made a half-hearted attempt to stop her, but didn't even resort to the first ten spells that popped into her head. Harry might not like to help her fix a splinching, unfreeze or otherwise re-animate her flatmate.

“Harry Potter?” came the unbelieving cry from the door. “You’re dating *Harry Potter*?”

The door creaked open to reveal a slightly dishevelled Harry. “Hullo. You must be Demelza.”

Hermione watched Harry shake the girls hand and give Hermione a tentative glance. A smile formed on her lips as she realised that the first part of her plan was working perfectly. He began to shift from foot to foot as Demelza asked questions and made small talk. Harry was nervous.

“Well,” said Harry, after reliving his last Quidditch match at Hogwarts with the smaller girl. “It was good catching up with you. Maybe we can do it again some time?”

It was a polite brush-off that he’d obviously gotten better at doing since she’d last seen him, but Hermione didn’t think that Demelza noticed.

“All right. See you later!” she said brightly and gave an obvious wink at Hermione. Harry seemed to swallow a little more forcefully than normal.

“Bye,” Harry and Hermione chorused together.

The door closed and Harry shoved his hands in his trouser pockets, avoiding her eyes by staring at the floor. “You have a nice flat.”

“Thanks. I heard from Luna that you have one, too.”

This seemed to catch Harry by surprise. “Y – Yeah. Did Luna come here right after she left us, then?”

“I guess so,” Hermione replied. “Care to sit, or would you rather stand in the entryway?”

“Er, sit.”

Hermione sat first and crossed her legs in a way that caused her skirt to ride slowly up until it exposes the tip of her knees. The small sofa seemed to create a great deal of consternation for Harry, who made several attempts at sitting as far away from Hermione as possible. In the end, he gave up the effort and sat with his back ramrod straight facing the shaded window.

“So…” he said after a second. “What did you have in mind, exactly?”

“About your kissing?”

He nodded.

She leaned in so that their faces were close. “Practical, proper, persistent instruction.”

Harry swallowed again, and then a smile broke across his face. “You sound like Twycross.”

Hermione leaned back and wrinkled her nose. “The Ministry Apparition instructor?”

He turned to face her, fully smiling. “Destination…”

“Determination…” continued Hermione, feeling a smile curve her own lips.

“Deliberation. Of course, you could also use Ron’s favourite substitutes for the three D’s.”

Hermione laughed. “I’d rather not.”

The smile on Harry’s face fell as he stared at her. “You’re going to teach me how to kiss aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she answered honestly. “I should have done it ages ago. Maybe you wouldn’t have lost Ginny…”

Much to her surprise, Harry snorted. “It’s funny, but I would have agreed with you a hundred percent had you said that just two weeks ago.” He let out a weary breath. “Now that I’m away from the situation with her, I can tell that she wasn’t emotionally committed enough. Not for me, anyway.”

Watching the thoughts race across his face, Hermione decided to approach to her friend’s emotional trauma with a bit more sensitivity. She placed her hand on his. “I want to help, Harry.”

He smiled again, but it was lined with sadness. “I know, Hermione. You were always there for me.”

“Well, then,” she said, straightening up in the sofa. “Let’s see how bad it is. Kiss me.”

Harry froze for a moment. “Just like that? Just… kiss you?”

“It’s not that complicated,” she replied with a touch of humour behind the words. “I have to know where to start.”

He seemed to contemplate this and shrugged. “All right.” With the skill of a wounded Erumpent, he fell on her face and began to move his mouth on hers. Even knowing that it was going to happen, she hadn’t been prepared. Her lips were dry, her hands were pinned between them, and she couldn’t quite get into a good rhythm. The most positive thing she could say about her first kiss with Harry was that it was short.

“That was a good first effort,” she said as he backed away to his side of the sofa. She congratulated herself that she only needed to use a tiny bit of false cheerfulness. “But there is room for improvement.”

He pursed his lips. "I'd think that was obvious, given that you look like you just kissed the Giant Squid."

"Never mind that," said Hermione as she produced a notebook and flipped to a chart she had made that afternoon. "The point is we know where we stand and we know where we need to be."

"We do?" he asked, trying to look at her notebook.

She tilted it away from him and nodded, scratching in a note on the line marked 'First Kiss'. "Yes."

"Oh." He didn't sound a bit convinced, but there wasn't time to waste on explanations about where their relationship was and where it was headed. Hermione was a very smart witch, but sussing out matters of the heart was never her strong suit. Perhaps in teaching Harry to kiss, she would be able to win one in this most miserable area of her life.

After filling in the entire first line and adding a bit on a separate page, she put the notebook away and faced Harry again. "Let's try it again. This time, you need to give me some indication that you are about to kiss me."

"But you *asked* me to kiss you. It doesn't get any better than that," he protested.

Hermione made an impatient noise. "Trust me, Harry. You've got to give a girl some warning that you are about to kiss her, otherwise, she really will think she'd kissed the Giant Squid."

"Oh."

She reached out a hand and placed it on the front part of his shoulder. "Partially-intimate physical contact is a great way to declare your intentions without words." She caught his eye and let her lids relax. "You can use eye contact, too," she said in a sultry voice, walking her fingers up his shoulder and around his neck. She pursed her lips and positioned them right in front of his. Then, she let her lashes flutter close and gently moved her lips forward.

It wasn't as bad as the first kiss – by far – but only because Harry sat there like a dead fish while Hermione explored his lips with strict restraint. Kissing Ron for the first time had been strange, too, as kissing a best friend can only be. Her experience with Harry, while definitely lacking in passion and technique, was far different. It was like kissing a different man always was, exciting and new, yet it was also somehow familiar, like sleeping on her favourite pillow. When she pulled away from Harry and saw the dazed expression on his face, she knew that their lessons were going to be a little risky and yet held the potential for a very large reward. She needed time alone with her notebook.

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Harry Apparated to his new flat thirty minutes after Hermione kissed him. He knew this because she had marked the time in her notebook and then proceeded to ask him several questions about how he felt while she'd kissed him, how he thought he could improve the experience, and how she should change her kissing style to better accommodate his needs. His needs? He hadn't had the heart to tell her that a bloke was generally satisfied just to be kissing a pretty girl, let alone to have his *needs* accommodated.

Ron was sitting on the sofa, listening to a Quidditch match on the Wizarding Wireless, wearing a distinctly smug expression. Harry plopped absently onto the loveseat opposite. "Have a good time?" Ron asked with an innocent voice.

"Yeah," Harry said distractedly. "We got all caught up."

"I can tell," Ron replied cryptically. "I'd say you and her will have some more catching up to do in the near future, eh?"

Harry propped his feet on the coffee table and narrowed his eyes at Ron. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ron stood and knocked Harry's feet onto the floor. "Feet off the table." He jabbed a finger at Harry's lips. "Hermione only wears 'Classic Berry' lipstick. I should know."

He walked down the hall, waving his wand at the wireless which clicked off, and into his bedroom. Harry wiped the offending lipstick with the back of his hand, remembering the way Hermione's lips moved on his and wondering how he could do the same with her when they had their next lesson.

Staring at the spot Ron had recently occupied, Harry resolved that no matter what happened with his lessons with Hermione, he would be sure to master the art of kissing, or die a lonely, miserable hermit in the middle of a Giant colony. Death by Giants had to be better than being the worst kisser on the planet.

The Practical Art of Kissing 3: Tripping Over the Light Fantastic

Chapter Three – Tripping Over the Light Fantastic

Harry awoke to the sound of a series of small explosions from the room next door. It took him a full minute to process the odd sounds that rattled the walls and sent dust floating down from the bookshelves across the room and into the morning sunlight. The small explosions weren't explosions at all, but were, in fact, Ron's snores. Harry had almost forgotten about his friend's sleeping disorder since they'd been in different bivouacs at Auror training. Apparently, the rumours were true; Ron's snores had gotten worse since Hogwarts and could almost wake the dead.

Harry rubbed his eyes with the points of his fists and turned over to reach for his wand. He muttered a Silencing Spell at the wall separating him from his best friend and breathed a sigh of relief when the sound abated. He'd have to remember to do that every night Ron was there, or he'd have to enlist the help of the only person he knew who could cast a permanent ward – Hermione.

Thinking about Hermione made him think about the previous night and their lesson. As thick as he was with girls, he couldn't help but wonder if there was more to her offer than simply to cure him of his baneful kissing ability. Every time he asked himself if she might fancy him, however, his brain seemed to recall all sorts of reasons why that wouldn't be true. She'd been chasing Ron until their seventh year at Hogwarts, had loads of boyfriends since, and hadn't made a single romantic gesture toward him in all that time. *That's not technically true*, said a different part of his brain that sounded very much like Hermione's voice. *There was that time she kissed you at King's Cross – and all the times she hugged you, and that time when Nagini almost killed her...*

Pushing both voices out of his mind, Harry grabbed a fresh change of clothes and headed for the shower. He just needed to get his day started and all thoughts of Hermione would disappear by themselves.

Breakfast consisted of bitter coffee from the automatic maker that came with the flat and a piece of dry toast. The *Prophet* had several pictures on the front page of him at the party. Pictures of him looking at Ginny, pictures of him talking with Daphne Greengrass, pictures of him carrying a tray of snacks and drinks, smiling at Hermione.... He wadded the paper into a tight ball and chucked it into the bin beneath the sink.

Ron dragged himself out of his room and stifled a yawn with his hand, looking half-asleep and not at all like the deadly Auror he knew he was.

"Ready for your first day?" Harry asked as he pushed a piece of toast in his direction.

Ron nodded and blindly pointed his wand at his hair, muttering a Combing Charm that mostly worked. Harry helped his friend adjust his uniform. Ron thought that Kingsley would go easy on them their first day, but Harry had no such illusions. They stood and prepared to Apparate to the Atrium of the Ministry when Harry's eyes caught the only picture they'd had in their flat. Hermione waved to him from near the Hogwarts Lake as Ron and Harry laughed beside her. "Let's get to work," he said with a frustrated groan and turned in a near circle, disappearing with a *pop*.

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Unfortunately for Harry, his mind did not work itself free of Hermione. In fact, he found himself thinking more and more about her as the day wore on. Despite having her face, her voice, and her scent ever-present in his mind, it wasn't until he was in an orientation meeting with all the senior Aurors and several Ministry officials present that it became a problem.

Weary of having such an all-consuming distraction, Harry decided that his mind needed help to shake the silly notion of Hermione fancying him. So he did exactly what she would do: he made a list. Well, it was actually two lists, side by side on a piece of parchment, but that was what the problem required. He gave each list equal time, as the warring sides of his mind demanded it. On one side, he had written a heading, entitled: *Why Hermione fancies me*, and on the other: *Why Hermione doesn't fancy me*.

Both lists were rather long, when his distracted brain began to hear snips of the very boring meeting going on around him. Kingsley was rambling about sharp decreases in Death Eater activity, escaped convicts from Bulgaria, constant vigilance, and other things that didn't concern Harry as much as getting Hermione out of his head.

He bent lower over his list and scratched out another line in the 'does not fancy' column when he felt Ron's sharp elbow in his ribs. Looking up, the looming presence of Kingsley Shacklebolt dominated his vision, and he did not look happy.

"Attention Potter!" he barked and Harry jumped to his feet, his hands fisted respectfully at his side, one holding the self-inking quill, the other his half-completed and partially-crumpled list. "I'm flattered that you enjoy my presentation so much that you feel the need to take notes, Potter. Had you been paying more closer attention, you'd remember that I've already said an outline will be made available to all new Aurors at the end of the meeting." Without moving his eyes a millimetre, Harry saw the older man's face and he knew from experience that he wasn't going to get away with his inattentiveness with just a warning.

"Your undivided attention should be on the speaker," Kingsley continued. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Harry barked back in the customary response to a superior officer.

"Good. You won't need your notes, then," he said, holding out a hand.

For a split second, Harry considered refusing, but knew that with every eye in the auditorium on them, it would be better for him to give in and get the worst over with. He handed the list to Kingsley.

"Have a seat and pay attention," Kingsley said with a fierce whisper, and stepped away. For a brief, elated moment, Harry thought he would just crumple the parchment and throw it away, but as the man walked back to the front of the hall, he smoothed it out and bent his head to read it. When Kingsley halted in mid-stride and shot a half-amused, half-livid face at Harry, Harry let out a groan and buried his face in his hands. It was going to be a long day.

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"This is exactly the kind of thing that kept you from being top of your class, Potter!" roared Kingsley an hour later. Harry was in his superior's office, with the door open to the main hall that fed the Auror Headquarters from the rest of the Ministry. "Hermione Granger's a pretty enough witch, dead useful in a fight..." He trailed off, apparently thinking about the final battle, where Hermione had made it possible for Harry to get his shot at Voldemort. Then, his steely gaze returned and his voice returned to its former volume. "But if you can't get your head and your heart to work together, you're either going to end up dead, or get someone *else* killed. An Auror has to be *focused*, Potter!"

There were a few seconds of silence while Kingsley rifled through some papers on his desk and Harry stared a hole through the back wall of his office.

"I'm assigning you to the Hopkirk case," he said at length and produced a sheaf of papers shoved haphazardly into a manila folder. "Tonks is your senior. Report to her immediately after you leave here, understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Harry bellowed and took the papers. He knew he was being dismissed, but his eyes lingered on a familiar-looking, crumpled parchment on Kingsley's desk.

"Is there something else I can do for you, Potter?" Kingsley asked, obviously keen to what Harry wanted.

"Yes, sir. May I have my list back, please?" Harry risked a glance at Kingsley and saw the briefest flicker of something pass across his face before it disappeared. He tossed the parchment at Harry, who caught it with one hand.

"Get out of my office and keep your head on the job, Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry said and slid into the hall. He turned the corner, avoiding a smirking Neville, and ran smack into a phalanx of grinning wizards and witches from his finishing class.

"Hermione Granger?" taunted Kevin Bundy, a former Ravenclaw from Fred and George's year, who had obviously been listening in on Harry's dressing down. "What were you doing, writing her a love note?"

The others tittered at the joke and Harry felt his face turn red. "No, it wasn't a love note, Bundy." He tried to push through the crowd, shoving the list deeper into his pocket so they wouldn't be tempted by its presence.

"So what was it, then?" asked Sally-Ann Perks, whose dark eyes were watching him with curiosity.

Harry muttered something about nose pricks before finally breaking through to the cubicle-strewn main floor of the Auror Headquarters. Spotting Ron chatting with Tonks near the back of the office, he quickly left the still-laughing gaggle of people by the hall and made a bee-line for his friends.

... that's why Harry was so..." Tonks was saying but must have heard Harry's arrival because she turned and pointed at the folder in his hand. "Hi, Harry? Is that our assignment?"

Harry hesitated, momentarily confused by the question. "Er, yeah," he said and handed over the files. Ron wore a small frown and did not meet Harry's eyes as Tonks reviewed the papers.

"Oh bugger," she said and slammed the file closed. "They always give me an easy job when I'm coddling a youngster along."

Feeling a little guilty that Tonks had to be stuck with him and that they had a simple assignment, Harry thought briefly that he should do something to make it up to her. Then, with a twinkle in her eye, Tonks said, "Still, I suppose it's for the best, seeing as how my partner won't be able to think properly if I so much as mention Hermione's name."

"Cheeky," Harry muttered and saw that the frown on Ron's face had been replaced with a slight grin.

Tonks morphed her hair so that it was bushy-brown and her face into an exact match of his best friend. "Let's get going then," she said in a very Hermione-ish voice. "So much to do."

Harry decided then that Tonks wasn't going to get any sort of sympathy from him.

Following her to the Atrium, he spotted a flash of red and saw Neville dip low to plant a kiss on Ginny's cheek. Something hot bubbled in his belly and he pressed his lips together, ignoring both of them as he passed.

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Demelza was leaving as Harry approached Hermione's flat that evening. She gave him a bright smile and winked at him as she left, her broom in hand, dressed in her practice uniform. There was a muffled series of shouts from the stadium across the street and Harry could pick out several of the players zooming in and out of the magical lights that fought against the setting sun.

He knocked on the door and Hermione answered an instant later. "Good," she said, snapping her purse closed and stepping onto the landing of her flat. He thought he saw the edge of the notebook she'd used from their last lesson disappear into one of the pockets. "Let's get going, then."

"Er," Harry began as she walked briskly away and he had to double-time to catch up to her. She was wearing a fitted dress that covered her from neck to knee and was decorated in blue and red sequins that coursed around her body in artistic patterns. "Where..."

She pulled and twisted her hair as they walked, clipping it into place even as she pinched her purse with her left elbow. "Dancing," she said without looking at him. "There's a great little place just up the street."

Harry stopped dead and it took her a second before she noticed he wasn't beside her and turned around. "Dancing?" he asked dubiously. "I don't dance, Hermione."

She rolled her eyes and grabbed his hand, pulling him along. "Of course you do."

He pulled his hand free of hers. "No, really, Hermione. I don't."

Whirling on him, she placed her hands on her hips and let her eyes bore into him. "You do tonight, Harry. So stop acting like a child and take me dancing."

It was difficult to refuse her, seeing as how he'd been thinking about her all day and now she was standing in front of him angry and pretty and altogether irresistible. All he had to do was dance for a bit, try not to act like a complete fool and if his lips didn't get in the way, maybe he'd actually have a good time. "Fine," he finally managed to say. "But I can't guarantee I won't step on your toes."

A smile curved her lips and she nodded. "It's a risk I'm willing to take." She took his hand again and led him down the street.

They turned a corner and were faced with a throng of people his age queuing outside a dilapidated building that might have once been a warehouse. Harry was instantly intimidated by the scene and slowed his pace, forcing Hermione to slow as well.

"What is it?" she asked sincerely, squeezing his hand in a show of support.

"Do we have to?" he whinged. "What's dancing got to do with kissing, anyway?"

Hermione smiled again and held his hand with both of hers. "Trust me, Harry. I know what I'm doing." Her voice had dropped a pitch as she regarded him and something unknown flashed in her eyes. Reluctantly, he let her lead him into the queue and before he realised it, they were inside the club.

Loud Latin music pulsed around them as they wound through the crowd toward the dance floor. It was so loud that even yelling proved fruitless. As soon as they were on the edge of the dance floor, Hermione began to gyrate her body in time with the music. He watched her with detached fascination as her hair bobbed on top of her head as she swung her arms, bent her knees, and looked thoroughly pleased that she was in the middle of a few hundred strangers. Harry was mortified.

Sensing his fear, she reached out and grabbed his hands, making a motion that he should do what she was doing. Feeling intensely foolish, he tried to copy her movements. After a few tense minutes and a song change, he began to relax and let the fear of acting stupid melt away.

Half an hour later, Harry was shocked to realise that he was enjoying himself and that Hermione's smile had grown wider and wider as they danced. The song changed again and Hermione indicated that he should follow her.

They walked through the throngs of people to the back of the club and Harry noticed that in the chairs and against the walls there were pairs of people attached to each other at the lips. Before he could say anything to her, she sat in a squashy chair and pulled him onto her lap. In the moment before she pulled his face down to hers, he knew what was going to happen. Fifteen minutes later, as she was leading him through the streets back to her flat, he understood why she'd been so insistent that they dance together that night.

"Thanks," he said. Their footsteps echoed off the closed businesses lining both sides of the street as they walked.

"For what?" she asked with a quizzical glance. They held hands, contradicting the idea that they were only having kissing lessons together, and that there wasn't anything else between them.

Harry hesitated as they arrived at Hermione's front door. "For... for everything."

She smiled and gave his hand a squeeze before dropping it in favour of looking through her purse for her keys. "I had a nice time, Harry. See you tomorrow?"

Having known Hermione for almost ten years, Harry understood that she *had* enjoyed their 'date'. Despite the warring thoughts and feelings inside him, he realised that he'd enjoyed it, too. "Yeah," he replied. "See you then."

"Night," she said and slipped into her flat.

As he prepared to Apparate back to his own flat, he knew that the moment Hermione was in her room, the notebook would be out and Harry's

performance would be evaluated against a dozen criteria. Removing his wand, he wondered just how well he'd done.

*

His flat was dark, which wasn't unusual for a weekday night and as Harry appeared in the entryway, the air turned a light blue. There was an almost noiseless click and the light disappeared – he had been approved entry. He walked into the front room and made a mental note to minimize the light and noise that the security wards made, as a clever intruder with good reflexes could disarm them before they were done scanning. There was a murmur from one of the sofas and his head snapped up to see Luna sitting in Ron's lap; they were kissing, but Luna's eyes were wide open. She noticed Harry immediately and disengaged from Ron.

"Hello, Harry," she said even more dreamily than usual. "Did you enjoy Hermione's cinnamon lip gloss?"

Ron shot off the sofa and began to reflexively smooth out his robes. "Harry? You're home early." He was eyeing Harry's collar warily.

Harry waved at them both and ignored Luna's question. "It's almost eleven. I don't know about you, but I'm not going to give Kingsley any chance to tear me a new one. Night." Ron nodded and Harry made a hasty retreat to his room. Just before he closed his door, Luna's voice drifted down the hall.

"I think he liked it. Should I wear cinnamon lip gloss?"

Smirking to himself, Harry closed the door and collapsed on his bed.