

## **The Object Lessons Trilogy**

### **Going For A Glass Of Water**

“I'm going for a glass of water,” Harry said abruptly. “I really can't listen to you two argue anymore.”

He turned, ignoring the stunned silence behind him, and climbed through the portrait. He paused and turned his head. “Might I suggest that you either kiss, or stop being friends? You both spend all your time fighting and I can't tell if you're going through the most ridiculous case of unresolved sexual tension, or if you really don't like each other.

“If you're staying friends because of me, don't. If, however, this fighting is some sort of weird flirting, just get to the kissing point, and then we can all be happy.”

Harry let the portrait shut behind him, and took a deep breath. He'd wanted to say that to his friends for longer than he could remember, and hopefully now Ginny and Seamus would either date, or stop the arguing that was driving him insane.

It didn't help that Hermione was 'studying' with Blaise Zabini, although exactly how much studying you could do in a cupboard he wasn't quite sure. He sighed; thinking of Hermione like that always depressed him a little. He'd been convinced that Ron and Hermione would be perfect for each other. Well, they were - perfectly awful.

They had gotten together, spent two days snogging the life out of each other, had a massive argument over Ron's inattention during the build up to a Quidditch match, and Hermione's, as Ron had so delicately put it, “Having her head stuck so far up her arse, you could see her hair by looking down her throat.”

Based on that comment, Ron's career as a diplomat for the Ministry of Magic seemed assured.

It had been the most spectacular break-up seen for many years at Hogwarts. It had also been the end of the Golden Trio, as their classmates occasionally referred to them, as neither Ron nor Hermione could stand to be close to each other for several weeks.

Hermione had found solace in the library, and it hadn't taken long for her to find that, despite him being a Slytherin, she had a lot in common with Blaise, and they'd started dating. He was pretty sure now that they'd end up married. They had this goofy look on their faces when they were together and just seemed to fit.

He still spent some time with the two of them, just as he did with Ron and Luna.

Now, that was a pairing \*that\* still freaked him out slightly. Sure, Luna was a nice person, but she was still as nutty as a fruitcake. On the other hand, she was dynamite in bed. A fact he had absolutely no wish to know, but Ron had insisted on telling him anyway. He'd asked if he thought that Luna would mind him boasting, and he'd said, "No, of course not. She'd find it curious, and invite you to watch anyway."

That offer had been the subject of quite a few nightmares for him. Seeing Ron and Luna 'doing it,' was only slightly more attractive than the idea of seeing Draco and Voldemort go for it.

Harry's mind immediately shuddered to a halt. He really, really, \*really\* needed therapy if the idea of Draco and Voldemort even percolated into his mind.

Actually, both Ron and Hermione were now better friends than they had been at any other time. Hermione didn't care what Ron did with home or schoolwork, and so didn't nag him, and because of that Ron didn't try and irritate her so much.

He, of course, was spectacularly single. Gloriously single. Beautifully single. He'd come close to dating Ginny, simply because she was there, but he'd come to his senses when she'd dumped Dean and tried Neville for a bit. He thought of her as a really close friend...but not one he'd ever like to date.

Having seen Ron and Hermione self-destruct with such amazing ineptitude, there was no way in Hell he was ever going through anything similar.

Because of the splitting up of the trio and Hermione and Ron finding different partners, he'd had more time, and had become a little closer to Neville, Dean, and Seamus. Nice guys, all of them, and while they'd never be as close as he was to Ron and Hermione, they made for good evenings sitting around talking.

Dean was currently dating Susan, having dated Lavender just after Ginny.

From what he could tell, Hogwarts had some sort of curse - so that as soon as people hit sixteen - or fifteen in Ginny's case - they went opposite sex crazy and started to live real life soap operas. For some reason, he'd thought that the wizarding world would be free of that sort of thing, but alas, it was just as chock full of teenage hormones as the Muggle world.

Of course, having a war going on at the same time added just that extra dash of dynamite to a flammable situation. He was willing to bet galleons to gobstones that the war had been used as a convenient excuse for illicit activities by half his year.

Without realising where he was going, he found himself outside his favourite retreat, and knocked on the door.

"Come," the stern voice echoed through the stone statue.

Harry tapped the statue's nose, and waited as it rolled to one side. "That's a really ostentatious door," he noted as he walked in.

"You think it's too much?"

"Yep. It would ruin your reputation if the rest of the school knew."

"Oh pish, Harry. Drink?"

"Water would be nice."

"Water?"

"Yeah. Strange, I know."

"So what brings you to my room this evening?"

"Too many rampaging teenage hormones. How have you stood it for all these years?"

"Practice Harry. And the knowledge that birth control is readily available helps a great deal, too."

"It is?"

"Yes. We tried banning sex in your parents' time. That was a disaster; we had five pregnancies in short order. As soon as you ban something, perfectly normal students jump on it like it's the Philosopher's stone."

"Interesting analogy."

"Would you prefer it if I said, 'like it's the key to defeat Voldemort.'"

"Probably, yes."

"Here, drink your water."

"Thanks. So, am I the only person who thinks that Ron and Luna are going to get expelled?"

"No. We have a bet going on. Well, everyone but Professor Snape, obviously. My personal feeling is some time in the New Year."

"That long? I expect them to be caught in flagrante' delecto before Christmas. Of course, that's because they've already borrowed my invisibility cloak once. And that's the last time, I can assure you. It took me an age to get the smell out! And you know what Snape's nose is like. I was standing very still, as he walked past, and it was a close thing. I could see his beak twitch."

"Harry!"

"Oh please. You know how I feel about him. And don't start with that 'try getting to know him'

nonsense - I tried that, he acted like he was twelve, and I no longer care.”

“Anyway, Ron's already hinted that Luna wants somewhere more public to announce her love of searching for one-eyed trouser snakes, so I reckon they'll be discovered doing it on Snape's desk before the end of term.”

“Hold on one second, Harry.” The professor opened a large book and scanned down the pages. “That's not taken; do you want to put some money on it? The pot's at two hundred galleons at the moment.”

“Sure, how much is the entry?”

“Five galleons.”

“You've got forty people in there?”

“All the teachers, and most of the adults in Hogsmeade.”

“I'd have never thought that Hogwarts had such a seedy underbelly.”

“You think the Professors spend their nights marking exams and drinking tea?”

“Well, yes. Apart from Snape, obviously. I always pictured him drinking blood and engaging in masochistic acts of perversion.”

The professor laughed. “Just remember Harry, just because I've told you, doesn't mean that you can tell anyone else.”

“I know,” Harry smiled reassuringly. “I appreciate being given a bolt hole like this. This has been the weirdest year of my life so far. And I've faced Voldemort.”

“You know, you need a girlfriend.”

“Oh don't you start. I don't see a Mr McGonagall lying around in wait.”

“Be that as it may, Harry. I do still remember what it was like when I was young.”

“If you're going to tell me you had a crush on Dumbledore, I really don't want to hear it.”

“In his hey-day, Albus was voted Most Eligible Wizard six years running. A record that even Lockhart couldn't beat.”

“Now why didn't I know this several years ago when it would have been useful?”

“For many very good reasons,” McGonagall replied calmly. “Not least of which was the bottle of fire whiskey Albus gave me for keeping silent.”

“Now you see, there's another thing that would have been nice to know. Anyway, having a girlfriend seems like a lot of hassle for very little reward.”

“Much as I hate to encourage you, you might find it relaxing to get rid of certain tensions.”

“I thought that's what copies of PlayWizard and the shower were for.”

“Harry! There are some things that even I don't want to know.”

“What, you thought I didn't? I might be a girlfriend-less loser, but even I understand the pleasure of a little release every now and again.

“But let's move on, because I've just realised where this conversation could go, and I'd never be able to sit in your class again.”

“Quite.”

“Okay, Draco is planning on adding something to your food on Friday. He wants to get back at you for that detention you gave him. I had a quiet word with Dobby, and he's going to switch the plates so that Snape has it. I'd appreciate it if you stop Snape from accusing me, and point out that Draco will probably have the antidote in his pocket.”

“You could have just stopped it altogether,” McGonagall said with a sigh.

“Of course I could. But as I saw absolutely no reason to do so, I have no regrets.”

“You're as bad as your father.”

“Why thank you; that's the nicest thing anyone's said to me in a long time.”

“Get out of here, you young whipper-snapper.”

“Certainly, old crone.”

“Crone? Crone? Why, I can still take you to task for that young man.”

“Excellent, so you'll help out at the DA Meeting tomorrow?”

“I'll duel you, yes. Show you there's life in these old bones yet.”

“See you tomorrow. And thanks.”

“Anytime, Harry.”

Harry crept out of the room silently, and ghosted his way down the hall. As soon as he was in a more public part of Hogwarts he walked normally again. His friendship with Professor McGonagall was probably the biggest shock of the year. After Ron and Hermione's big fight, he'd

fled, and ended up alone on the Astronomy Tower roof. The Professor had joined him, not explaining how she knew he was up there, and for the first time, he'd really opened up to her.

In a way, it had been the start of him growing up. McGonagall had treated him as an adult, and he'd responded in kind. Finding out that the professor had a sense of humour, that was completely corruptible when it came to gossip, and was fun to talk to, too, had shook his world almost as much as realising that Ron and Luna had screwed under his cloak. And he still needed to have a word with Ron about that.

He walked into the Room of Requirement, deciding to practice a bit more. Voldemort was in one of his silent phases. This meant that he was either coming up with new plans to torture Harry, or he really was into boys, and the Death Eaters were being good Death Kneelers.

Perhaps McGonagall was right, that he needed to get a girlfriend after all. He seemed to have sex on his brain at the moment.

He absently swayed back as a hand shot towards his face, and acting on instinct; he caught it, twisted it hard in the opposite direction, and introduced his assailant into the wall, hard.

“Ouch!” a female voice cried. “I'm sorry.”

Harry sighed audibly and released the girl. “Exactly why were you trying to hit me?”

The longhaired girl looked at him and mumbled, “Scientific tests have proven that one of the best ways to get a reaction out of someone who's a little depressed is to slap them.”

“And you thought you'd practice this on me, why?”

“Well, I've noticed you've been depressed for a long time. And your friends don't seem to be worried about it, so I thought I'd do something to try and help.”

“And exactly why are you so interested in me being slightly depressed?”

“Well, obviously you've got to defeat Voldemort.”

“And?”

“Well, that's it.”

Harry sighed audibly. “Did it ever occur to you that I might not actually be depressed, that I might just have a lot on my mind?”

“You never smile anymore.”

“I never smile in public, you mean?”

“Well, yes.”

“I don't suppose you know that I'm taking Advanced Occlumency, do you?”

“Oh.”

“Indeed.”

“Part of Occlumency is learning to control your emotions, so that you may appear stern and unyielding at times,” she reflected aloud.

“Excellent. Ten house points to Ravenclaw.”

“Wait a second, how do you know I'm not Parvati?”

“You're a different colour to her. She's more red than you are.”

“That's possibly the most bizarre thing I've ever heard anyone say.”

Harry sighed again. “Your aura. Yours is mainly blue, with hints of red. Parvati's is red with hints of blue.”

“You can see auras?”

“Evidently.”

“You don't have to be so sarcastic.”

“I think you'll find that I do. All heroes are either sarcastic or taciturn.”

“Taciturn huh? That's a big word for a Gryffindor.”

“I'm a Gryffindor who's best friends with Hermione. Some of it rubbed off. And teasing the Gryffindor Golden Boy? That's mighty brave for a Ravenclaw.”

“Not really, you're Harry the Hero.”

“So you think I'm harmless?”

“To innocent Ravenclaws, yes, you are. To Voldemort, I hope not.”

“I'm a little impressed that you can say his name.”

“It took a lot of practice, but you don't respect anyone who can't say it.”

“True,” Harry admitted. He looked at her, and flipped back to his earlier thoughts about having a girlfriend. “But you're wrong.”

“About what?” she asked, looking confused.

“Innocent Ravenclaws aren't safe from me.”

“What?” she squeaked.

Harry grabbed her arms, and raised them above her head. He was several inches taller than her, and it was child's play for him to lock her hands together and against the wall and above her head with one hand.

“I can be quite dangerous,” he informed her, allowing his eyes to twinkle. Eye twinkling had actually been a lesson he'd taken with Dumbledore. He'd always thought that it was natural, but it turned out that it was a part of Occlumency, and he'd enjoyed learning how to do it.

“You can?”

“Yes,” he growled. With his free hand, he caught her chin, raising it to force her to look into his eyes. “I can be.”

“Now what?” she asked, a slight smile on her face.

Harry paused.

“You see, you're a hero. I'm an innocent maiden. You're defenceless against my charms.”

“You read too many novels.”

“Don't you think that I'm pretty?”

“You're the most beautiful girl in the school,” he said simply. It was true, most of the seventh years were average, and while there were other pretty girls in the school, no one matched the Patil twins.

“I'm a twin.”

“I know, but I don't like red, remember?”

“Then thank you.”

The door to the Room of Requirement opened, and Neville walked in.

“Neville,” Harry said calmly, not taking his eyes of Padma.

“Yes, Harry?”

“Leave.”

Neville snickered.

“If I hear anything about this,” Harry said calmly, “you're going to be my demonstration puppet in

class tomorrow. And I've got some particularly nasty curses I was saving just for Draco, but I'm willing to pass on that.”

Neville's gulp was audible across the room. “I've not seen a thing,” he assured them.

“Excellent. Lock the door behind you.”

“Yes, Harry.”

“See,” Padma smirked. “Gryffindors you can handle. But give you a maiden and you're putty.”

“Why are you pushing me?”

“Because I don't want you to stop.”

“What?”

“Oh please, you think that Luna is the only Ravenclaw with an adventurous streak?”

“What?”

“Is this more of that famous Gryffindor wit you were talking about earlier?”

“Wench.”

“That's more like it; you're even talking like a hero now.”

“Exactly what did you mean by that Luna comment?”

“Well, where do you think that Luna got all her ideas from?”

“I shudder to think.”

“Good point. Actually, it's down to a study session we all had at the start of term. While you and the Gryffindors were doing heroic things, we broke into the restricted section of the library.”

“If you open the red book on the second shelf to page 16, and say, 'I promise to use the information I find for pranks,' the alarms turn off.”

“And exactly how do you know that?”

“You Ravenclaws don't know everything. It was part of me being heroic. All heroes know the secret combination.”

“Anyway, after a lot of work – and you will never tell anyone that secret by the way, it would devalue our work.”

“That's pretty convoluted logic.”

“Shh. Anyway we picked up every book on sex in there and had a study session. Did you know that there's a spell to remove some bones so that you can get into some really strange positions?”

“No. And I'd rather not. I'd be thinking of Ron and Luna doing it.”

“She's a determined girl, that one. Ron had no chance.”

“Do I want to know?”

“I thought Ron told you everything.”

“I finally had to cast a silencing spell on him.”

“Really? Do you use magic for everything?”

“If I need to, yes.”

“No wonder you're so good at it. Anyway, she sent Ron a message, walked in naked, and told him they were going to search for Narbuckles.”

“What are Narbuckles?”

“I have no idea at all. Ron agreed, and according to Luna, swore that he could see them an hour later.”

“Stop!” Harry groaned. “Why is everyone in this school sex mad?”

“They're not, actually. It just seems that way. Ron and Luna are the only couple having sex. Everyone else just talks about it a lot.”

“How do you know that?”

“You know, you should be a Ravenclaw - you're very inquisitive.”

With a loud bang, the door flew open as it was magically unlocked, and Draco Malfoy, accompanied by Crabbe and Goyle, stormed in, wands at the ready.

“I told you you'd pay,” Draco snarled.

“Excuse me one minute,” Harry said to Padma politely. He turned, and without hesitation threw two fireballs at the bodyguards. They both jumped out of the way, straight into the two Stunning spells he'd sent after them.

“Didn't anyone tell you it's rude not to knock?”

Draco looked at his two fallen bodyguards and gulped.

“You didn't use your wand,” he whined.

“I know,” Harry agreed. “It's a talent. And now I'm afraid I'm going to have to kick your arse.”

Draco gulped once more, and raised his wand. “*Stupefy* !” he chanted.

Harry rolled his eyes and let the spell hit him. “That tingles,” he muttered.

“About the paying,” Draco said, a nervous smile appearing on his face. “I was only joking, of course. And I am sorry for interrupting.”

“Your problem, Draco, is that you're a coward on top of being incompetent. If you were merely one or the other, I could accept it. But not both.” He closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye, without and further formalities, introduced his fist to Draco's jaw. Draco's jaw protested at the introduction in the most strenuous way it could - by breaking into several pieces.

Harry sighed, pulled out his wand, and healed the jaw.

“You can do wandless magic?” Padma gasped.

“Indubitably, my dear Padma.”

“And you've read Conan-Doyle.”

“Reading isn't just the prerogative of the Ravenclaws.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Dunno,” Harry sighed. “*Obliviate* them.”

“Well, why not *Obliviate* them, then put them to sleep, strip them, cuddle them up together and let them be discovered somewhere.”

“That's pure evil.”

“It is?”

“And pure genius.”

“Oh. Then, yes, it is.”

Harry casually cast a series of spells without bothering to say the incantation.

“I didn't quite realise just how good you are,” Padma said quietly, after watching that demonstration of power and ability.

Harry shrugged. “Where were we?”

Padma grinned and undid her robes, letting them fall to the floor. “I think you had me against the wall,” she said, raising her hands above her head again.

“And I think you had your robe on.”

“The school uniform is perfectly decent.”

“When it's not a few sizes too small.”

“So I might have accidentally put on an old shirt.”

“Accidentally?”

“Mmmm hmm.”

“You were going to tell me how you knew that people were just talking about sex.”

“Oh, Ravenclaw spy network.”

“The Ravenclaws have a spy network?”

“Of course. The Hufflepuffs don't care. The Gryffindors are too noble, and the Slytherins are too clumsy. Ravenclaws know that knowledge is power, and knowing what is going on keeps us going.”

“Oh,” Harry said, as he reached up to hold her hands in place again. “I haven't heard any rumours about you dating.”

“True. It's hard being a twin.”

“Why?”

“The first thing a boy asks is if Parvati and I share everything.”

“Why would they want to know that?”

“Are you serious?”

“Shouldn't I be?”

“They were asking if Parvati and I would share a boy.”

“Ewww.”

“What?”

“I said, ewww. I like your sister from a distance, but have no wish to get close to her. And besides, wouldn't that be incest?”

“Most boys seems to think that it's not, if we're identical.”

“And people wonder why I'm standoffish.”

“Now would be a good time for you to kiss me.”

“It would?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry. I'm not going to kiss someone I'm not dating.”

“Then bloody ask me out.”

“Have patience.”

“Screw patience.”

“I thought you Ravenclaws were patient?”

“You try being patient with a boy with intensely green eyes, who's just knocked out three goons without trying, who doesn't think that a threesome with my sister is a good idea, and who is holding you against the wall where you're defenceless and completely open to molestation.”

“That sounded like a hint.”

“It was.”

“Same thing with the kissing. Not till we're dating.”

“Bloody hell, Harry.”

“Voldemort, remember him? He's got this grudge against me. Something about us wanting to kill each other. Anyway, if you're with me, you become a target.”

“We're already against him, Harry. Me dating you isn't going to change that.”

“You'll have to come to DA meetings more often, probably all the time, as you're going to have to learn to defend yourself.”

“I've dropped one of my subjects to give myself time.”

“Exactly how long have you been planning this?”

“Ever since I realised you weren't going to date Ginny. There's a bit of a race on to see who can get to you first.”

“There is?”

“Yeah. Quite a few girls from all the houses. Fortunately, I'm smarter than they are, and they've

been distracted.”

“Modest, aren't you?”

“Who's the one who's going to get kissed pretty soon?”

“If we start dating.”

“Yes, yes. I know. Now, I've answered the Voldemort question. We've established that I'm good-looking. I think I've made it pretty clear that I want you. Exactly why aren't we kissing?”

“Because we're still not dating.”

“Bloody ask me then.”

“You know, you swear a lot.”

“Perhaps if you'd engage my mouth in some other activity it wouldn't be a problem.”

“What do you think of Madam Puddifoot's?”

“It looks like a teddy bear vomited inside it. And before you ask, yes, I like Butterbeer. As long as your homework is done, I'm happy to help with pranks. I like to fly, but I've not got the competitive edge for Quidditch. I like Hagrid, apart from his cakes, and what I want is to be a part of your life, and for you to be a part of mine.”

“How did you know what I was going to ask?”

“I told you, I've been planning this for a long time. I'm methodical Harry. Step one, check that we're compatible. Step two, eliminate the competition. Step three, come up with a unique introduction to get noticed.”

“So that slap was a fake?”

“Of course. I recognised the training, but it got you talking. Admittedly, there was a lot I didn't know, and how well you can fight is definitely one of them. And you're more intelligent than I thought, which was the one thing I was worried about.”

“What were you going to do if I hadn't been?”

“In the words of a famous newspaper: make my excuses and leave.”

“Do you fancy coming to Hogsmeade with me tomorrow?”

“It's not a Hogsmeade weekend.”

“That's something you'll have to get used to if we start dating. I don't pay much attention to the

rules.”

He let his hands drop, and stared hard into her eyes.

“Look, joking aside, dating me isn't going to be easy. I can be as moody as hell, I do have a psychopath after me, and I have some very unusual friends, which include an Acromantula, a Hippogriff, a house-elf, a werewolf, and a Professor. I can get into a fight for my life just by coughing at the wrong time, and there will be times I can't look after you.”

“None of this is news to me, Harry. First off, I refuse to believe that you can be moody through a kiss. Second, I'm a Ravenclaw - I'm going to be excited to meet your interesting friends. Sure, I may be a little nervous, but I know you wouldn't let anything happen to your girlfriend.

“And finally, let's duel. Now.”

“Duel?”

“Yes. It's simple, if I last for two minutes against you, you ask me out, and I get my kiss. If not, we put this on hold while I practice some more, and then we try it again.”

“And I'm supposed to wait for you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Padma smiled and pulled out her wand. She walked across to the other end of the Room of Requirement, although her route did somehow allow her to step on Draco's hand as she passed.

“Ready?”

Harry nodded, and watched closely, not making any move. “Aren't you going to put your robes back on?”

“First rule of life, Harry: Use what ever natural advantage you have.”

Harry smiled slightly and nodded. “Good advice. Start when you're ready.”

Padma nodded, and launched *Expelliarmus* at him.

“I've not got a wand, that spell doesn't...” The end of his sentence never actually came, as he twisted violently to avoid a stunning spell. He quickly raised his shield, mocking himself for underestimating her. She was obviously a very determined girl.

He launched a fireball at her, curious to see what she would do. She took the easy option and dodged it, firing a curse straight back at him. He swayed casually to one side, and launched a series of low-level curses.

Padma cast her own shield spell, which managed to absorb his spells. He then shoved both his hands forward, throwing a full strength curse at her. Her shield shattered, and she stumbled backwards but didn't fall.

Instead, she threw some of her own curses back, growling a little as she did so.

He smiled and diverted the spells with a wave of his hand. He then pushed forward, as two balls of light exploded from his hands, travelling almost faster than he could see. The spheres picked her up and carried her back to the wall, pinning her there.

He stalked over, and noticed a slight sheen of tears in her eyes.

“Only one minute, fifteen seconds,” she mumbled, a tremble in her voice.

“Padma?”

“What?”

He almost smiled at the disappointment he could hear in her voice. “Will you go to Hogsmeade with me tomorrow as my girlfriend?”

“What about the two minutes?”

“Only Dumbledore and Voldemort would be able to last two minutes against me.”

“Oh, then yes. Please, yes.”

He smiled at her, moving closer to her, deliberately invading her personal space.

“So you're not going to mind if I kiss you now.”

She shook her head and smiled encouragingly.

He leaned in and touched his lips to hers, gently moving against her.

“That wasn't what I expected,” she whispered against his lips.

“Good, or bad?”

“Very good. Gentle, tender, caring. I just forgot for a second that you're not normal.”

“Not normal?”

“A normal boy who had a girl tied to the wall like this would be forceful, demanding.”

“You seem to know a lot about boys, considering you haven't dated.”

“I have a sister with extensive experience, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Would you like to try a passionate kiss?”

“I don't think a girl has ever been asked that before, in quite that fashion.”

“As you said, I'm not normal.” He released her hands from the spell, and watched as she wrapped them around him, and pulled him in for a much longer kiss.

“How was that?” he asked, as they slowly parted. He took a breath at the radiant smile she sent him.

“Perfect,” she exhaled. “Just so you know, I kept the best sex book, and the best way forward is to start at page one and do it step by step.”

He laughed softly, “We've only just kissed for the first time.”

“Close your eyes, Harry.”

“Okay.”

“Was it only a kiss?”

He opened his mouth, and then shut it again. Was it only a kiss? No, it was more than that; it was a promise, and a commitment.

“No.”

“Exactly.”

“Why don't you come back to the Gryffindor Common Room with me? I've got a sudden urge to show off my new girlfriend to the world.”

“Okay,” she smiled. “Do you mind if I put my robes back on? What you get to see and what I'm comfortable with everyone else seeing is a little different.”

“Don't ever be something you're not with me,” he said quietly. “Just be honest, and we'll be fine.”

“I will be, but there's a different side to that as well.”

“There is?”

“I need to grow as well, and I'll need pushing and helping to do so. You're a lot more grown up than any other student here; it's one of the reasons I was attracted to you in the first place. I saw that you can help me overcome some of the inhibitions that are standing in my way. So sometimes, you're going to have to make sure I take the hard decision, wear the dress that's a little racier than normal, and walk with you down the dark alley, not the light one.

“And I'll make sure you don't forget what you are fighting for, that you have someone to lean on

when you need it, and that you get good grades.”

He laughed softly, and then pulled her close and kissed her lingeringly. “You know, when I said I was going for a drink of water, the last thing I expected was to end up dating the most beautiful girl in school.”

She smiled, “If it hadn't been today, it would have been later. And if the worst came to worst, I was prepared to do a Luna.”

He laughed again. “I think I'm disappointed.”

“I wouldn't be,” she said as she nuzzled into his face. “You'll enjoy it a lot more when we start going through the book. The first chapter is how to strip.”

“I think I'm going to enjoy studying with you.”

“Damn right you are. And when you get start getting A's, we start getting into the second chapter.” She leant up and whispered into his ear, and laughed as he blushed bright red.

He wrapped an arm around her, “Come on, girlfriend, let's go face the others.”

“Kay.”

**The Object Lessons Trilogy**  
**Watching Paint Dry**

“What are you doing?”

“Watching paint dry.”

“That's not really a conversation opener - more of a closer.”

“Do I want to know how you got in here?”

“Terry let me in. He owed me a favour.”

“kay. What can I do for you?”

“There was a time when you wouldn't have asked that.”

“True. Four months ago, really.”

“Before Ron and I dated.”

“And exploded.”

“I am sorry about that.”

“That it happened, or that we kind of went our separate ways afterwards?”

“The latter.”

“I am as well. I miss it just being the three of us, but you know, this was going to happen sooner or later. It's called growing up. Friendships change; we just have to make sure that we keep what's important - that we are friends.”

“I guess. It's just that sometimes, I want it back the way it was.”

“Do you want to give up Blaise?”

“No.”

“Then you don't want it how it was, Hermione. We've all moved on now. You're dating a

Slytherin, I'm dating a Ravenclaw, and Ron's dating a nutcase.”

“She's not that bad.”

“They had sex under my invisibility cloak.”

“Okay, maybe she is that bad. How could you tell?”

“It reeked. Or would you like me to go into more detail?”

“Err, no. That's more than enough. You know that you've changed?”

“It's part of growing up. Happens despite our best efforts to remain young and free.”

“You were never young and free.”

“Sadly.”

“You're a little more open, and a lot more reflective now. And you're getting great grades.”

“You always equated effort with intelligence, Hermione. Because you worked so hard, you thought that everyone who didn't work like you was stupid.”

“I didn't...”

“Didn't you? Really?”

“Well... Maybe a little.”

“Exactly. You were always badgering me to do things I didn't want to do, and you had a knack for taking the fun out of it, and making it so that I often had to make a choice between something I really wanted to do and studying. Studying was always going to take second place.”

“So how has Padma managed to get you to work?”

“By working with me. She understands that the DA comes first for me, my personal advanced training comes second, Quidditch comes third, and schoolwork comes in last.”

“You didn't mention her.”

“Of course not. I was talking about activities, and she isn't an activity; she's a part of my life.”

“Isn't that the same thing?”

“Not at all. Padma is involved in everything that I do, and any spare time I have, I spend with her anyway.”

“But how did she help you get your grades higher, when you're still not dedicated to studying?”

“I'm a lot smarter than you ever gave me credit for, Hermione. Padma accepts me for who I am, and knows how to handle me. She can read my moods. Some times she'll make homework fun, and other times she'll simply sit with me, cuddling me, while I work on what she puts in front of me.

“And her incentive scheme really can't be topped.”

“Good grades should be their own benefit.”

“I hate to say this, but I'm rich, and I'm a good Quidditch player - the best in the school. I'm also one of the best fighters in the country, and the only thing that really matters to me is meeting and killing Voldemort. Grades are largely irrelevant because either I die, in which case they really don't matter, or I live, and I'll never be able to have a normal life, anyway.”

“You would have never said anything like that, before.”

“You're right, I wouldn't have. Padma's been teaching me that there is a difference between stating a fact and boasting, and that it's okay to have pride in your abilities. She's happy to say that she's the second cleverest girl in school. And that her plan to get me worked to perfection.”

“Doesn't that bother you?”

“Why should it? She wanted me, she couldn't have got me if I hadn't wanted her to, and I admire her determination and intelligence in figuring out how to get what she wanted, and then doing it.”

“You still haven't explained why if grades are irrelevant to you - and they shouldn't be – then why are you working on them?”

“Well, ostensibly, it's because when I get good grades, Padma is willing to turn the page in our book. But really, it's because I like her being proud of me.”

“What book?”

“It's an in-depth guide to making love.”

“Oh.”

“Wish you hadn't asked?”

“Slightly. So, you and Padma are serious and are... you know... doing it?”

“Doing it? What are we, Hermione, twelve? You mean making love?”

“Yeah.”

“Nope. We're taking it slowly. I told you - I don't work hard for the grades, but so she'd be proud of me.”

“I would have been proud of you working hard.”

“Would you have, really? Or would you have been worried that I was taking away what made you special in your eyes?”

“What?”

“You've always defined yourself by your intelligence. It's what made you, you. If I had become a straight ‘O’ student with you, would people have paid attention to you, or would they have talked about the Boy Who's Name Must Be Capitalised.”

“Probably you.”

“I know. Sad isn't it, that people are so myopic that only one reality can intrude on their consciousness at one time?”

“So far, you've used the words ‘myopic’ and ‘ostensibly’ in context in this conversation. It's a little strange.”

“I thought you preferred intelligent conversation.”

“I do. I just don't expect it from you.”

“Ouch.”

“Oh, shush.”

“You’ve mortally wounded me; I'll have to get Padma in to defend my honour.”

“I really do find it hard to believe that you're sitting in the Ravenclaw Common Room watching paint dry.”

“She's worked really hard on this painting. I don't want anyone touching it while it dries, and she's practising her duelling with Moony right now.”

“I find it hard to believe that a Ravenclaw is becoming so good at Duelling. That's normally a Gryffindor or Slytherin thing.”

“Now who's being myopic?”

“Is this where I say, ‘ouch’?”

“Probably. Who's Padma's sister?”

“Parvati.”

“And which house is Parvati in?”

“Gryffindor.”

“Do you really think that identical twins would be that different? Our actions define us, Hermione. Padma decided to go into Ravenclaw because she felt she would get the best education there. You chose to be a Gryffindor because of the excitement, and possibly, because you felt it would be more of a challenge to be the top of the school there.”

“That's not fair.”

“Can you honestly tell me that the idea of being the smartest in the school, and beating the smart-people house didn't cross your mind at all?”

“No, I guess not.”

“There's nothing wrong with that, Hermione. You've always had ambition, but you've always been caring, brave, and a little bit sneaky when you needed to be. You've been Harry Potter's best friend, and you've been my best friend as well.”

“Do you think of yourself as two different people?”

“I am two different people, Hermione. I'm Harry to you, Ron, Padma, Ginny, and a few others. Everyone else, they can't see past *Harry Potter* to get to me.

“And I kind of like it that way. It gives me a degree of anonymity in the midst of my infamy.”

“I'd not really looked at it that way. You've always been Harry to me.”

“I know, Hermione, and it's one of the reasons why I think of you as family.”

“You do?”

“Absolutely. You and Ron, and Ginny too I guess, are my family. We might fight, maybe even break up, but we'll always return to what brought us together in the first place. The only difference now is that you're bringing along Blaise, Ron's bringing Luna, and Ginny's bringing... actually, who is Ginny bringing these days?”

“No one. And that was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?”

“You know she's still carrying a candle for you?”

“No, I didn't. I thought you said she was over me?”

“I said she'd given up on you. It's a different thing.”

“It is?”

“You'd have to be a girl to understand.”

“Kay.”

“So.”

“So?”

“What are you going to do about Ginny?”

“Nothing at all. I'm pretty sure it hasn't slipped your mind that I'm dating Padma.”

“Why didn't you ask Ginny out when you had the chance? Everyone thought you were going to.”

“I did think about it, but having seen you and Ron come close to hating each other, I didn't want to go through that with Ginny. And besides, she went from Dean to Neville.”

“She was trying to make you jealous.”

“Well, that kinda points to me being right about risking our friendship on our relationship.”

“That's a little obtuse for me.”

“See, it's fun, isn't it?”

“What?”

“Being able to utilise your complete vocabulary in a conversation.”

“Well, maybe a little, but you're dodging my question.”

“Not dodging, merely postponing. Do you think that I would feel jealous of Ginny dating somebody else, or do you think I would feel pleased that she's found someone a little more stable and less prone to life-threatening fights than I am?”

“I hate to say this, but probably the second one.”

“Exactly. Neville's a good man. He's smart, hard working, brave when he needs to be, and would be a good partner for anyone. I saw Ginny having fun with him, and thought it was a good idea.”

“Neville might be all that, but he's also a little boring, and Ginny's anything but. They're not really compatible.”

“Maybe if Ginny had approached me, it would have been different.”

“She's still a little in awe of you - you did save her life, remember?”

“I do. I still have an occasional nightmare about it. But don't you see, that's part of the problem.”

Padma knows that she is my equal. Sure, I'm a better fighter, but she's more intelligent. We balance each other on a lot of things. But it doesn't really matter; what are you expecting to achieve by telling me this?"

"I don't know. I just felt that I owed it to both of you to get some things cleared up."

"Well, I guess I should say thank you. But it's not changing anything. I'm not going to give up something that is very good for me, for something that may or may not be. Padma's not Ginny, but that's not why I'm dating her. I'm dating her because she is Padma. That's what I like about her. Things could have been different, but we live by the choices we make. Ginny chose to try Neville to make me jealous - I chose to go get a glass of water when she and Seamus were fighting."

"She was devastated when you brought Padma back."

"She didn't show it."

"She's got years of experience in hiding her feelings for you."

"Why do you care so much about me and Ginny?"

"She's my best friend, and I really don't like her being hurt."

"This isn't the past, Hermione. We're all grown up now, even Ginny. I think that I've been a friend to her, and I've certainly not ignored her - neither has Padma."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just had to try."

"I'm not sorry, Hermione. Padma makes me feel something I've not really felt with anyone else before. Contentment. When I'm with her, I've not got the urge to throw myself into dangerous situations, and I find myself looking forward to the future. I find myself actually envisioning a future after I fight Voldemort."

"I'm happy for you, Harry, really."

"And I am for you; Blaise is a nice bloke."

"For a Slytherin?"

"Nope. Just in general."

"Thank you."

"Like I said, it's all part of growing up. We move on, make different friendships, and fall in love with different people. All we have to do is keep hold of that link that joined us in the first place."

"Mature Harry is a bit of a shock."

“Mature? I don't think I've been called that before. I'd better pull off a prank quickly.”

“Oh, shush. You're right, you know. We do grow and change, but we'll never forget what made us such good friends.”

“Tell Blaise that if he doesn't invite me to be Best Man at your wedding, I'll knock out whoever he does choose and do it anyway.”

“What makes you think that we're getting married?”

“The peaceful look on your face when you're together. He grounds you - stops you from getting too flighty and uptight. It was something that neither Ron nor I could ever really do. You need that, and he needs you just as much.”

“You really have changed.”

“Not that much, I've always noticed this sort of thing. It's only recently that I've been given the confidence to say them to people. Well, maybe not all people, but Padma's helping me be more open about what I am thinking and feeling.”

“Harry, you know that I love you, right?”

“I do, Hermione.”

“And I'll make it a part of the deal. I won't say yes unless you're involved as Best Man.”

“Good.”

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. For this. For opening up to me, and for not getting mad at me for bringing up Ginny.”

“You're welcome. I told you, you're family.”

“Now, will you stand up?”

“Why?”

“Because I really need to hug you now.”

“Okay,” Harry said, as he rolled to his feet, and pulled the smaller girl into a hug.

“Did you ever think it was strange that we never felt anything romantic for each other? I mean, you're good looking, I'm okay looking.”

“Not really. I think we both knew from the start that we were better as friends. And of course,

there was the fact that you and Ron were always together, anyway. I had you pegged as Ron's from our second year. And Hermione?"

"What?"

"You're much better than okay looking."

"Thanks, you do know how to make a girl feel special."

"Only the girls that mean something to me. You, Padma."

"And Ginny."

"In a slightly different way, yes."

"If things had been different - if I hadn't been so determined to avoid homework, and if you hadn't been so bossy about pushing me into it, and if we'd not been friends with Ron, we might have been something. But you know, I'm kinda glad that we're not. I like having a female friend that I can talk to about anything without worrying about the usual boy/girl crap."

"I feel the same way." Hermione lightly kissed his cheek. "I'll see you later."

"The DA room is going to be empty tonight. I put a lock on it, so if you want to use it, feel free."

"Thank you. What about you and Padma, I thought you would use it for yourself."

"Do you really think that I would lack resources for quiet time?"

She laughed softly. "No, of course not. You're the great Harry Potter; mere rules and regulations aren't going to stand in your way."

"Exactly. Now run along before Blaise starts getting nervous at the amount of time we've spent together."

"I feel a lot better."

"Good. Now go."

"See you at breakfast."

Harry nodded and stretched, his hands reaching above his head.

*"Petrificus Totalus ."*

He froze in that position, as Padma walked from a side door to face him. She looked around the Common Room, and simply said, "Everyone out."

The students looked at her implacable face, saw that Harry was frozen, and had just seen him

kissed by another girl, and vanished. Some went out the door, others to the bedrooms.

She turned, and stalked towards him.

“Just when I think I have you all figured out, just when I think everything is perfect, you change things. I saw everything, Harry.

“And I heard everything.

Her face changed, and she lost the scowl. “I love you, Harry James Potter. I'm telling you now because I just realised it. Do you have any idea how proud I am right now? Of you, and because of what you said?

“I did think that the reward scheme was what motivated you, but to hear you say that you were working so hard to make me proud of you was possibly the most beautiful thing I've ever heard anyone say. Especially to me.

“I knew Ginny still wanted you, and I was a little worried that one day you'd wake up and turn to her. But not any more. Hearing you talk about why you are happy with me, I was almost in tears back there.

“But don't put yourself down, Harry. You gave me a hell of a lot of credit for what has happened with you, and how you have changed, but I've only been responsible for a part of that. Your growing up has been achieved by you, first and foremost.”

She reached up and lightly kissed him. “I love you, Harry. When I release this spell, I want you to keep my words in your heart, and then kiss me. I don't expect you to say the words back. I won't accept them now. I'll accept them when they're burning a hole in your chest trying to get out.”

She pulled out her wand and cancelled the spell.

Harry reached down and slid his arms around her, pulling her closer as he leant down and kissed her lingeringly.

He stroked his hands down her back slowly, deepening the kiss, before sliding his hands up into her hair.

The door to the Common Room opened, and Ron and Luna walked in.

“You've got atrocious timing,” Padma sighed.

“Sorry,” Ron said. “Can I have a word with Harry, in private?”

“Of course. Come on Luna, let's go upstairs and gossip.”

“Did you know that Ronald has a seven inch penis?” Luna asked, as she walked with Padma up to

their room. "I measured it with my wand."

"Completely bonkers," Ron said, a smile on his face, and a slight blush on his cheek.

"What about us poor souls who have no wish to know that sort of thing? Ron, you're going to have to try and be more discreet."

"Why?"

"Because the rest of the school really doesn't want to know every detail of your sex life. And I really don't want to have to spend an hour trying to wash the smell out of my Invisibility Cloak again."

Ron blushed. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. It was the only way..."

"Please," Harry interrupted. "Just don't."

"Okay, but the others don't seem to mind that much."

"Well, I do mind. You call her bonkers, and you're having a lot of sex with her. Apart from that, what do you see in Luna?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you basing a relationship purely on sex?"

"Well, yeah."

"And don't tell me, you're proud that everyone knows that Ron Weasley is the only person in school who is definitely getting laid on a regular basis?"

"I hadn't really thought of it like that."

"You know people are calling Luna a whore?"

"What? Who is? I'll kill them."

"Calm down and sit down while you're at it. You're too tall to be running around ranting, and I don't want you knocking over Padma's painting, because then I'd have to make her a present of your teeth as an apology."

"Right. Sitting down. It was a lot more fun before I realised that you are quite capable of following up your threats like that."

"No comment."

"So, if you're just using Luna for sex, why are you upset that people are calling her a whore?"

Surely that's what she is.”

“No she's not. She's kind and sweet.”

“I didn't say she wasn't. But at least you do recognise there is a person there, somewhere.”

“Oh.”

“When was the last time you talked to her?”

“A few minutes ago.”

“Out of bed.”

“We...”

“Yes, I know, you rarely do it in bed. When you're not engaged in the act of procreation?”

“Well, never.”

“You've never had a conversation with her?”

“You know what she's like - absolutely nuts.”

“So you like her for her body, but not anything else? You're a nice guy, Ron.”

“Hey! That's not fair.”

“Isn't it? Do you ever think about what Luna is thinking and feeling?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Well, here's an idea for you. What if she feels trapped? What if she perhaps doesn't want to be so open about the intimate side of your relationship, but because she seduced you like she did, and because she knows that sex is all you have, that she's being the way she is because she's terrified of losing you if she doesn't?”

“For better or for worse, she's in love with you, Ron. You can see it in the way she looks at you, and you're treating her no better than a whore.”

“But...”

“You need to make a decision, Ron. You need to think about what you are doing in your relationship, and if it's only sex, then you need to stop. Now. It's not fair to her, and it's not fair to you either, to take this any further. But, if you do feel something for her, then you need to walk up those stairs, and talk to the girl, reassure her, and let her know that it's okay if she doesn't want to do it on Snape's desk.”

“Oh, damn. I never thought of it like that. But she's, you know... weird.”

“She's also a Ravenclaw, so she's obviously intelligent. She's a pretty good fighter as well.”

“Yeah, you're right.”

“And maybe if she feels comfortable around you, she won't be as crazy, and you'll find the person behind the mask.”

“You think she's not really like that?”

“Look at her history, Ron. A nervous, small girl, still grieving over her mother's death, ignored and belittled? Maybe she invented a persona to keep herself safe.”

“Oh god. You're right. Harry, thanks mate! I really appreciate this, but I need to go talk to her, now.”

“Off you go then.”

He watched as Ron bounded towards the stairs, climbing the first two before they changed to a smooth slope, and he tripped and slid back down to the floor.

Harry sighed and walked over to his friend. He grabbed him by the shoulder and lifted him up. Without a word, he cast a spell under his breath, and floated with Ron to the top of the stairs. He knocked on the door, and as it opened he carried Ron into the girls' room.

Luna was in tears on the bed, Padma kneeling on the floor next to her.

Luna shot to her feet, a smile appearing from nowhere. “I was just telling Padma about the death of the Razorbacks, it always makes me sad.”

“Luna,” Ron said softly. “Can we talk?”

“Talk?” The blonde girl look petrified at the idea.

“I've got a very long apology to make to you,” Ron said softly.

“Come on, Padma,” Harry said. “Let's leave them to it.”

They walked out, shutting the door firmly behind them. With a thoughtful look, Harry waved his hand absently, locking the door from the outside, so that while they would be able to get out, no one would be able to get in.

“Harry Potter, what did you just say to Ron?”

“That he was treating Luna like a whore, and that if he felt anything for her at all, he'd get to know her as a person. And that maybe if he looked past her façade, he'd find something else.”

“That's twice today so far that I've been proud of you.”

Harry smiled slightly and created a visible shield around her painting. “Come on. We need to go do something.”

“We do? I thought we'd have the rest of the afternoon together.”

“We will, later,” he said, dragging her out of the corridor and down some steps.

“Isn't this the way to the Professors' rooms?”

“Yes. Now what I'm about to show you, you can't tell anyone else.”

“I promise.”

“You're about to meet one of my closest friends.”

“Oh. Cool.”

He laughed and stopped by a large statue of Godric Gryffindor in full formal regalia. He lightly tapped its nose, and it moved aside after twisting to look at him.

“Mr Potter? Ms Patil?”

Harry rolled his eyes and dragged his girlfriend in quickly, shutting the door behind him.

“Drop the act, Min.”

“Harry James Potter!”

He dropped heavily onto a couch, and patted the seat next to him. As Padma sat down nervously, he said, “Min, meet Padma, the girl who is largely responsible for continuing your work at making me grow up. Padma, meet Min, who, when she's not acting like the snotty Professor we know and love, is one of my closest friends. And before you start, Padma can be trusted, and I'd like two of the most important women in my life to know about each other.”

“Damn it, Harry, I swear that at times you're more like your father than you can believe.”

“Arrogant and forceful?” Padma asked.

“Well, I was going to say charming, but they'd do as well.”

Harry looked from one to the other, and groaned. “Okay, maybe this wasn't such a good idea.”

Padma lightly patted his knee. “It's okay, I've already promised Harry that I wouldn't reveal his secret. I will admit to being curious as to who his mysterious friend was, especially as he's always spoken so highly of you.”

“You do understand why I have to be careful?”

Padma nodded. “If the rest of the school knew that you might have a soft spot, you wouldn't be able to be as effective a Professor as you are.”

McGonagall nodded slowly. “I should have known a Ravenclaw would understand.”

The Professor slowly smiled and walked over to her small kitchen. She returned a moment later with three glasses of wine. “I've been trying to get Harry to appreciate a good wine, but the uncivilised barbarian still prefers Butterbeer.”

Padma reached out and took a glass. “Oh, a Scottish wine,” she sighed happily. “I always miss this when I come to school.”

“Et tu, Padma?” Harry asked dramatically.

“Oh, shush you,” McGonagall said. “Tell me dear, how did you recognise it?”

“It's got a very distinct bouquet. Dad's very much into wine - not so much the Muggle kind, more the Wizarding. He took us on a tour of Scotland's finest Magical Vineyards last summer.”

“Maybe you should try and keep her, Harry. A girl who knows a good wine at her age is a rare find.”

“He's trying,” Padma said fondly. “You've seen his grades?”

“I had heard rumours of a convincing reward scheme,” the Professor replied dryly.

Padma laughed, “Me too. Till I happened to overhear my hero hear telling Hermione that he actually does it to make me proud.”

“And why couldn't he have tried to make people proud all the other years he's been in school?”

The younger girl grinned. “He needed someone like me to bring it out of him.”

“You do realise I'm still in the room, right?”

“Of course, dear,” Padma said, patting his knee again and bestowing a radiant smile on him.

“I'm going to regret introducing you two, aren't I?”

“It depends on your definition of the word *regret*,” Padma said cheerfully. “I'm not going to regret it. I told you I would be happy to meet your friends.”

“Well, before you two really get gossiping, I did come here for a reason.”

“Oh?”

“Has anyone bet on Ron and Luna not to get expelled at all?”

“No.”

“Okay, put Padma down for that,” he said, pulling some money out of his pocket. “And write that if she wins, all the money goes to St Mungo's.”

“Exactly what are you setting me up for?” Padma asked quietly, putting her hands on her hips.

Harry blushed and turned to face her. “There's been a large scale bet going around on when Ron and Luna will be discovered having sex, and be expelled. It's up to three hundred galleons.”

“Four hundred and ten,” McGonagall corrected absently.

Padma blinked, “Three times in one day, Harry.”

“Three times?” McGonagall asked. “I seem to have missed something.”

“Three times that I've been so proud of him, I almost can't stand it. The first time was hearing that Harry was more interested in making me proud than getting my clothes off.” She ignored Harry's blush. “The second was him having a deep talk with Ron, and whatever he said had Ron apologising to Luna in a very sincere manner. And the third, was the large donation he just made to charity.”

“Ahhh,” McGonagall said slowly. “So you now know that they probably won't be expelled, and you had me place the bet in Padma's name, so that people couldn't claim their money back.”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a slightly embarrassed grin. “It serves people right for betting on my friends, anyway.”

“You were involved as well.”

“I know,” Harry admitted. “But I've paid double, so I'm in the clear.”

“I must say, Harry, that when I advised you to get a girlfriend, Padma wasn't who I expected.”

“Me neither,” Harry said with a fond smile, looking at Padma. “But she was very persuasive, and I think she's been good for me.”

“And he's been very good for me as well,” Padma interrupted. “He's shown me things I didn't know existed. I was terrified when he took me to meet the Acromantulas, but it was an amazing learning experience. I was able to spot several things that were wrong in our Care of Magical Creatures book.”

“Really?” McGonagall said, leaning forward eagerly. “Do tell.”

Harry groaned audibly, and then went quiet as Padma hit him lightly on the shoulder. “Ignore

him; he's just trying to keep his reputation intact. He'd hate for you to think that he's actually very intelligent and noticed several things wrong himself.”

McGonagall smiled. “He doesn't hide it very well anymore.”

“Don't you help her, Min.”

“I'll do exactly as I like, Harry.”

“What is it with me and independent women?”

The two females laughed. “No idea. But I'm glad you're the way you are,” Padma said with a smile.

The next hour passed very quickly for the three of them, as they discussed the giant spiders.

“Harry, wait outside,” McGonagall told him. “I want a quiet word with your girlfriend.”

Harry nodded and left the room. “I'll just worry outside.”

McGonagall laughed and turned to Padma.

“I do hope you're not playing with Harry,” she said sternly. “He is very dear to me, and I will not stand by and watch as anyone destroys his confidence.”

Padma gulped. “I'm in love with Harry,” she admitted. “Totally, deeply. He's the first person to ever see me as an individual, not as a twin. And even if I hadn't been in love with him, I would have fallen in love with him today. He's been incredible, and well, I'm hoping that I can get him alone this evening, without everyone interrupting us like they normally do.”

McGonagall tilted her head. “You get interrupted?” she prompted.

“Well, putting Zacharias Smith and Cho Chang as Head Boy and Girl wasn't the best idea.”

“They are both good students,” McGonagall said.

“Sure, they are, and they're also completely wet. No one trusts them with any problems, so the whole school comes to Harry. Half the time we're lucky to get thirty minutes alone, unless it's late at night. Everyone knows that Harry can solve problems, and that he's close friends with Professor Dumbledore.”

McGonagall laughed softly. “I will admit that they were not my choices for Head, but their academic records did mean they were the top candidates.” She took a deep breath and mumbled, “I never thought I'd be doing this for a student.” She looked up at the young girl.

“If you look at Harry's map, there's a suite of rooms on the third floor down the corridor from the Astronomy Tower. They're not used, as they're normally kept for visiting Professors. I shall

allow you to use them till the end of the year. And we'll make some more permanent arrangements next year. I feel it's important that Harry has a place to relax away from the pressures of who he is."

Padma's smile lit up the whole room. "Thank you," she beamed.

McGonagall nodded, "Of course, if either of your grades begin to suffer, I will end this arrangement."

Padma nodded. "Harry's going to pass every course, I promise you."

"It's been nice meeting you, Padma."

"It's been nice meeting you as a person too," Padma replied.

"You can call me Min, when we're in private," she said. "We do both seem to love the same scamp."

Padma nodded, and after receiving the password to the rooms, she hurried out.

"Come on," she said. "Your wonderful friend has just given us a perfect place to relax."

"Really?"

"Yep, have you got your map?"

"I can get it."

"Min said that it's on the third floor, near the Astronomy Tower, and that we should be able to see the place."

Harry stopped, and then started to laugh. "She knows about my map? Damn."

"She doesn't strike me as someone who misses much."

Harry nodded. "You're right." He snapped his fingers, and the Marauders Map appeared in his hand instantly.

"That's a really useful skill," Padma said. "Now come on, before anyone tracks us down."

Giggling, they ran up some stairs and along a hallway.

"Stop," Snape yelled. "No running in the corridors."

"Quick!" Padma yelled, pulling Harry around the corner. "Television!" she said.

A door appeared in the stonework a little further down the hallway. They quickly dashed in, and shut the door just before Snape appeared around the corner.

“Don’t think you’ve escaped!” they heard him yell.

Harry smirked and mumbled under his breath.

“I heard the Latin for pink,” Padma said, looking at him with one eyebrow raised.

“I might have just turned his hair pink,” Harry said. “Although, my Latin's a little rusty, so I might have confused caesaries with callum.”

Padma laughed, and looked around the room.

“Nice. We've got this till the end of term. Min said that you need a place to be private.”

Harry smiled slowly and walked into the middle of the room. With a wave of his hand, a roaring fire appeared, and he sat down comfortably on the couch.

“I'll have to do something nice to thank her later.”

Padma nodded and walked over to him. “For now, I'm tired; Wolfie worked me really hard to day. Why don't we have a nap, my love?”

He smiled at her tenderly, standing again. He walked over to one of the bedrooms, kicking off his shoes along the way.

Padma followed him, and pulled off her robes, and then removed her skirt, leaving her in a long t-shirt and her underwear. She stretched out on the bed and watched as Harry removed his jeans and climbed next to her.

He waved his hand again, and the lights dimmed, so that the flickering fire from the other room was their only illumination, the curtains blocking out the Saturday afternoon sun.

Harry leaned over and kissed her gently.

“Padma?”

“Yes, love?”

“I'm falling in love with you.”

She smiled softly and rolled him on to his back, draping herself over his body.

“I know, Harry. I know.”

**The Object Lessons Trilogy**  
**Watching Grass Grow**

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Of course not. Take a seat.”

“Might I enquire as to what you are doing?”

“Watching the grass grow.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I find it calming. It puts things in perspective. There's a life form here that's going to grow, die, and be reborn, without ever knowing or caring that I exist. It's just following its genetically determined path.”

“And you find that calming?”

“It means that what ever happens, life will go on. People will go on. It might be dark for a while, but it can't rain forever.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but you're sounding rather fatalistic.”

“Really? I don't feel it. This is what I've been aiming for; this is finally it. All the things I have learnt will be put to the test soon, and I will either die in the process, or I will live, get married to my girlfriend, and spend the rest of my life secure in the knowledge that I have fulfilled my destiny.

“And between the two of us, I would prefer the second option.”

“I'm remarkably pleased to hear that, Harry. It's only now, as I look back, that I find myself regretting some of my actions.”

“No offence, Albus, but it's a little late for that now. You've made your decisions, as I have made mine, and now we have to live with them, for better or for worse.”

“I can still apologise.”

“You can, but I'd rather you didn't. It doesn't matter anyway. Good decisions, bad decisions - that's life. We do the best we can with the information available to us, guided by our sense of what is right and wrong. We can't remake the past, so there is little point in worrying about it. The only thing we can do is take the lessons learnt, and use them in the future.”

“It is strange how time changes things, Harry. I thank you for offering advice to an old man who forgot that he was fallible.”

“It's not just me. Some truly remarkable people have helped me over the years:

“Ron and Hermione, who have been everything that friends should ever be, and more. They've stood by me, saved my life, and given themselves whole-heartedly to the defeat of Voldemort.

“Ginny, proof positive that size is no indication of power. Sharp and funny, and someone who fought to make herself a human after experiencing something no one should ever have to go through.

“Padma, the last person I would have expected to fall in love with, but I have. She's as scarily smart as Hermione, but with an in-built understanding of me, amazingly gorgeous, and brave enough to be a Gryffindor.

“Minerva, my favourite Professor, who took the time to become my friend, and showed me the path to adulthood with incredible grace and clarity.

“Hagrid, who has taught me never to judge someone by their appearance but to judge them by their actions.

“And you yourself, Albus. You've been my mentor, my guru, and at times, my protagonist. But through it all, I never doubted that you cared about me. It's been a long journey, and one that will soon be over.”

“Harry, are you saying what I think you are saying?”

“That Voldemort will be here soon? Yes. He will. In a couple of weeks.”

“How do you know? Have you had a vision? Why haven't you told me?”

“Close your eyes, Albus. Take a deep breath, feel the air, and feel the magic flowing around Hogwarts. Describe it for me.”

“It's fast, running around, circling and flowing like I've not felt for some time.”

“Exactly. Voldemort and I are written in prophecy - we are destiny. The castle knows. Voldemort knows. The magic knows. I know.”

“Another sign of my fallibility - that I didn't notice.”

“You noticed last time, didn't you?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you were a servant of prophecy. When you were fighting Grindelwald. You knew then, didn't you?”

“I did.”

“This is not your time, Albus. It is my time, and you are going to have to accept that quickly. When the time comes, I will be leading the students. I will be leading the battle. It is my right, and it is my destiny. You cannot do this; this is not your fight to lead. These are not your lives to be responsible for. They are my people, they are my responsibility, and they are mine to keep alive.”

“I have held onto this torch for so very long that I am almost afraid to let it go. I am afraid of relinquishing control to anyone. I have been the hope for the Light since before your parents were born, Harry. It's a burden I have carried with both joy and despair.”

“You no longer have a choice. If you don't hand over control, you will have become what you hate most. It's time for one last act of heroism from you - to willingly give me what I must have, because if you don't, you will be against me. This is a fight that has been laid down to determine the future. This is a fight for life against death, for freedom against oppression, for what is right over what is wrong.

“Look inside yourself, Albus. Look at your magic, and look at who you are and who you want to be. Look at how you want to be remembered, and look at what you have achieved in your long life.

“You know that you can't defeat Voldemort - that only I can, and you know that it is time. Your next adventure is coming soon, we both know it; you need time to enjoy and prepare without the burden of overwhelming expectation.”

“It is a scary thought, Harry. For so long, I have defined myself by my power, by my skill, and by my leadership. But I am prouder now that I have such a fine young man to pass the torch to. I have never had any intention of keeping the torch; it has been yours for the asking for many years. I have merely been waiting for you to ask.

“I have known since Voldemort marked you, that one day this time would come. That one day I would be passing the torch to you; that you were my natural successor. You will allow me to fight by your side, won't you?”

“I wouldn't have it any other way. I think you should call a meeting of the Order tonight. It will eliminate some questions if we do it in public.”

“Of course. I shall call it for nine o'clock.”

“I will be bringing a few people along with me. This Order is yours, Albus. It always has been. The DA is mine, and in time it will replace the Order, and the game will go on.”

“Indeed it will, Harry. But who knows for how long.”

“As you knew then, I know the same thing now. I know that, if I win, that sometime in the future, I will be in your shoes, and a bright eyed youngster will tell me with certainty that he is the future, and I will know then that my time in charge is over, and I will be feeling the same thing you do. But where you go back to your beloved school, I will go to my beloved wife, and we shall prepare for the next great adventure together.”

“I have a feeling, Harry, that there will be many years before you are in the position I am.”

“I certainly hope so. I'm young and I fear growing old, but at the same time, I am aware that it is preferable to the alternative.”

“Indeed it is, Harry. Indeed it is. Now, may I ask one further question?”

“Of course.”

“Have you told the inestimable Miss Patil that you have such strong feelings for her?”

“I haven't, and I won't say the words to her. She knows that I love her, but I will not give her that final commitment till I can promise her everything for the rest of my natural life. I will tell her when Voldemort lies dead, his dreams of conquest an already fading memory.”

“I wish you both luck.”

“Albus?”

“Yes, Harry.”

“I expect you to live through this as well. Our children are going to need a grandfather, and Padma and I are going to need someone to perform our wedding ceremony.”

“I can honestly say that I have never felt so honoured in my life.”

Harry stood up and offered his hand to the older man. He pulled him up and hugged him.

Without embarrassment, Harry released the Hogwarts Headmaster and smiled. “Now if you'll excuse me, I'm close to being late for a date with my girlfriend.”

“Of course, Harry. Please be so kind as to give her my regards. And you must stop by for tea again soon.”

“I will.”

With a jaunty salute, Harry turned on his heel and jogged toward the entrance, leaving behind an old man who suddenly looked many years younger.

Harry entered the school, to find Padma standing with Ron, Luna, Hermione, and Blaise.

“How did it go?” Padma asked.

Harry smiled slowly. “The game continues. A new player comes to the table.”

“Sometimes Harry, you make about as much sense as Luna used to.”

Luna elbowed Ron firmly in the stomach. “You need to learn to listen to what people don't say, Ronald. It tells you just as much as what they do.”

“Huh?”

Luna sighed. “Make yourself useful and keep Padma company. I want to talk to Harry.”

Ron shrugged and offered his arm to the beautiful girl dressed in Muggle clothing.

“So,” the red haired wizard said to her. “Do you and Parvati share everything?”

Harry laughed softly, and grinned at Hermione and Blaise. “We'll follow you down.”

“Okay. Harry, I do expect more details.”

“You wouldn't be Hermione if you didn't.”

She smiled, wrapped her arm around her boyfriend, and guided him away, leaving only the tall dark-haired wizard and the smaller blonde witch to follow.

“What can I do for you, Luna?”

She looked down and started to walk. “I have to thank you,” she said quietly.

“You don't,” Harry corrected gently. “I didn't do anything. Ron already had it inside him; I just helped him see it.”

“Please, Harry. I know Ron a lot better than that. If you hadn't said anything, he would have never changed, and I would never have been this happy. And you are the only person who bothered to look through the exterior and find out who I was.

“I owe you my life and my happiness.”

“You owe me nothing. I did what I did because you are a friend, and because Ron is my best friend. You are what he needs, just as he is what you need. You both just needed a little hint to see what you could become.”

“You are a great man, Harry. You will never admit it, but it is true. You inspire loyalty in those around you; we will follow you through the gates of Hell, and we will stand with you when Voldemort comes soon.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can see the signs as well as you can. The Thestrals are nervous - the spiders excited. Change is upon us. Big change. And around here, the only big change is the fulfilment of the prophecy. The others suspect as well, because you have changed too much recently for there to be any doubt.

“When you look in the mirror, what do you see?”

“I see me, Harry James Potter. I see unruly hair and green eyes. I see what I have always seen.”

“As you always will. We see the same thing, Harry. We see the man that you have become - secure in his power, secure in his ability to reason. But we also see the imprint of greatness that you cannot. We see the man who will take the weight of the world on his shoulders, and will do so without complaint and without thought of shirking his duty. We see a man who we know will do everything he can, and more, to keep us alive.”

“I'm just me, that's all I have ever been.”

“And that is why you are truly great. You will not stand alone when he comes. We will be with you.”

“I never doubted that for a second.”

Harry paused, and turned to look at the girl. He reached out and lightly brushed her hair back from over her eyes. “You know, Ron's a very lucky man.”

Luna blushed lightly. “Come on, we're falling behind. I bet I can run faster than you.”

“What?”

“If I can outrun the limping Roo tree of Nigeria, I can outrun you.”

Harry shook his head, waited for a second, and watched as Luna bounced down the road towards Hogsmeade, before he took after her. His long legs soon closing the distance, but he kept behind her. Winning wasn't everything. It never was.

“I won!” Luna shouted, jumping straight into Ron's arms.

“Well done,” Ron cheered, spinning around with her.

“Bad luck,” Padma said with a soft smile. She leaned up and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“So, where to, first?” Harry asked, looking around.

“Why don't we separate for an hour, and then meet for lunch?” Hermione said.

“And then we can spend the afternoon together without interruptions,” Blaise finished.

“You do know that it's bad when you complete each other's thoughts, right?” Ron asked.

“Oh shush,” Hermione said with a smile. “We'll see you in an hour.”

“Come on, Ronald. I want to look at the pet shop. They might have an Esquilax.”

“A what?” Ron asked, as they walked off together.

“So, I have you to myself for an hour?”

“You do,” Harry agreed. “What do you want to do first? I'm at your beck and call.”

“First, I want a proper kiss. It seems like it has been forever since we've had one of those.”

Harry smiled and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her waist. He leant down and tenderly touched his lips to hers, hardly using any pressure.

Padma slid her arms up around him. It was almost formalised how they would start a kiss, but neither would change it. She loved being held so close and so strong by him, and he loved the trust she gave him as she allowed him to hold her upright.

Her mouth opened lazily against his, as she tilted her head a little and deepened the kiss. Her tongue slid into his mouth, as they both gave into the feelings that the kiss invoked.

“Thank you,” she whispered as they finally broke the kiss.

“You never have to thank me for kissing you; it's something I want to do for a very long time.”

“That sounds nice. Is there anything you want to do?”

“Not really, I just want to spend time with you.”

“Me too. Why don't we go to the Three Broomsticks and grab a table. We can wait for the others.”

“Okay.” He wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her close, as they walked down the street.

They entered the pub and blinked for a second, as their eyes got accustomed to the dim light inside. It was as full as normal, with a lot of the younger kids sitting around eagerly sipping from tankards of Butterbeer.

“Padma!” a cheery voice called, as a beautiful girl, her long hair tied back, bounced over to them.

“Hey, Parvati.”

“Hi, Harry,” she continued. “You know my boyfriend, Draco?”

“We've met a time or two,” Harry said dryly.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Parvati announced. “Come with?” she asked her sister.

Padma shot a look at Harry, and at his nod she walked off with her sister.

She was a little uncomfortable seeing the smirk on Draco's face and she decided to make this as quick as possible.

“No one else for you to date, so you're dating Draco?”

“You're dating someone rich, good looking, and powerful, and enjoying it, so I thought I'd try it as well. There aren't many people who can successfully stand up to your boyfriend in the school.”

Padma blinked. “When has Draco successfully stood up to Harry?”

“He beat Harry in a duel a few weeks ago.”

“Who told you that?”

“Draco did.”

Padma laughed softly and shook her head. “And you believed him?”

“Huh?”

“Draco's never beaten Harry at anything.”

“You're just jealous that I've got someone like you have. And I bet he's better than Harry is in bed, as well.”

“I wouldn't know,” Padma sighed, shaking her head as she looked at her twin. “We're very different people, aren't we?”

“What do you mean, you don't know?”

“Harry and I are taking things slowly. Neither of us want to rush into something that we're not ready for.”

“But what about the whole Dark Lord thing?”

“If Harry dies in that, I will die as well, and we'll be together in our next great adventure.”

“But...”

“I've never judged you, Parv. I've always been with you, supported you, and been friends with

you. That will never change. You're my sister, my twin, but I think you're making a mistake with Draco. He's a small-minded, petty, arrogant little twerp with delusions of grandeur, and more than a little support for Voldemort.”

“He's spying for Dumbledore, he told me.”

Padma laughed softly and shook her head again.

“No, he's not. Albus would have told Harry.”

“Albus?”

“I'm Harry's girlfriend,” Padma said simply. “Albus and Harry have an incredible relationship, and I'm now part of it. Harry will be the leader when Voldemort attacks, Dumbledore knows that, and he tells Harry everything.”

“No, Draco wouldn't lie to me.”

“And I would?”

“No,” Parvati sighed. “But you're possibly mistaken.” She paused. “Why don't you tie your hair back anymore?”

“Harry likes it loose,” Padma replied, accepting the conversation change. “And I like him playing with it.”

“Don't you think it's a bad thing that you've changed so much for him?”

“With him, Parv; there's a difference.”

“Huh?”

“The changes I have made to myself have been made for me. So I can have what I want, not for Harry. I'm a better dueller now; I can stand with my new friends with confidence, secure that I can look after myself. I've met creatures from my nightmares that I would have never been able to see, before. Harry has given me the space and opportunity to become what I want.”

“Well, what about your clothes?”

“You mean, why aren't I hiding that I'm pretty anymore?”

“Well, yeah. You always said that a boy should love you for your mind, not for how pretty we are.”

“I was younger then,” Padma said with a smile. “As I told Harry, there is nothing wrong with using any natural advantage we have. And I know that he loves me for my mind as much as for my body.”

“Our body,” Parvati corrected.

Padma shook her head softly, “Harry doesn't see us as being identical, Parv. It's to do with his power and who he is, but he sees us as being completely different.”

“No way,” Parvati disagreed.

“Come on,” Padma said, “Let's go back to the boys, and hope that Harry hasn't killed Draco.”

“Draco can handle himself.”

“Last time they met, Harry knocked out Crabbe and Goyle in a few seconds, then broke Draco's jaw in several places. We were going to leave them naked, but we ended up kissing and forgot.”

Parvati just frowned.

They walked back into the bar, and Padma reached out and grabbed her sister, stopping them so they could listen.

“Okay, I'll regret asking this, but why are you smirking at me?” Harry asked Draco, breaking a long silence.

“Doesn't it drive you mad?”

“What?”

“That I know what your girlfriend looks like naked.”

“No, you don't.”

“Oh I do, and Parvati's a right little tart in bed. Really up for it.”

Harry sighed. “You've seen Parvati naked, you've not seen Padma.”

“They're identical twins.”

“You really are a sick, twisted, little boy, Malfoy. You don't even see that they are different people, do you? You see what's on the surface, and think that's all there is. Padma and Parvati are different people. I suppose to people like you they look the same, but when you look at people like I do, they're as different as east and west.

“I pity you, in a way; you're locked in a small, petty mindset that you will never break out of. You have delusions of grandeur you can never live up to, and you will never be happy with your life. There will always be something or somebody that you think has more than you.

“You had everything growing up, and a real chance to make something of yourself, but you fail at everything you do, even at serving Voldemort. You even date a nice girl, just because she looks

like my girlfriend to try and enact some sort of revenge at me.

“I really can't think what would be a worse punishment for you; killing you or allowing you to live your pathetic little life.

“Run away, Draco. Run away now, from Hogwarts - go to Voldemort. Tell him I sent you. Tell him that you're no longer welcome at Hogwarts. Tell him you failed.”

Draco paled dramatically. “What?”

“I told you to go to Voldemort. Did you really think I wouldn't notice the Dark Mark on your arm? Did you think I wouldn't know the very second you entered his service? Go, now.”

“You can't do this,” Draco replied.

“I can, and I have.”

Draco pulled out his wand, pointing it straight at Harry. The rest of the room took a deep breath. Although six other wands trained themselves at Draco, no one interfered.

Harry didn't move, didn't change expression.

Draco suddenly fell to his knees, groaning and clutching his arm.

“Light pierces darkness,” Harry said softly. “It illuminates what is hidden, it makes the dark vanish. You're feeling the power of Light against the power of Voldemort's dark.

“You could have come to me many times over the past few years, and I would have helped you, even after everything you've done and tried to do to me. But you chose to kneel before the evil that is Voldemort. You chose to allow him to brand you, in the hope that you will gain favour in the future. You joined him of your own free will, and I can never accept or forgive that.”

Harry reached out and picked up Draco's wand. With a contemptuous flick of his hands, he snapped it in two, the sound reverberating around the silent pub.

“Run, Draco. Because the next time I see you, I will kill you. You've rolled your final dice, and made your final choice.”

Draco stumbled to his feet, clutching his arm. “You'll pay,” he snarled. “You'll pa...”

His words were interrupted as Parvati took a step forward and punched him as hard as she could.

“I trusted you!” she cried, tears dripping down her face. “You lied to me! You used me!” She took a deep breath and then kicked him between the legs. “And you were absolutely shit in bed!”

Everyone went still as an electric feeling of magic swept through the room. As one, they turned to the source. Harry was standing still, a faint glow emanating from him. His lips moved endlessly,

but no sound came out. The power continued to grow, till some of the younger students had to look away.

“Go,” Harry said softly to Draco, who instantly vanished.

The power level in the room dropped to normal.

“Could I have a drink, please?” Harry asked Madam Rosemerta.

She nodded, and with shaky hands poured a shot of firewhiskey and drowned it quickly. Only after the steam had poured out of her ears, did she pour him a glass of Butterbeer.

“Where did you send him?” Hermione asked, breaking the unnatural silence.

“Malfoy Manor.”

Hermione nodded and looked around the pub.

“The show is over,” she said. “I suggest you continue with your day.”

The younger students nodded, and the volume level picked up again.

“Is there any chance we can use the function room?” Harry asked. “I don't really want to be interrupted this afternoon.”

“I think, Harry,” Madam Rosemerta said slowly, “that you can do what ever you want.”

“Thanks,” Harry said and walked to the side of the bar, opening the door and ushering his friends in.

“Harry,” Parvati called. She walked over to him and hugged him tightly. “I'm really sorry, I don't know what I was thinking. Wait, yes, I do. I was jealous of Padma, and I wanted something similar, and he seemed to be it.”

“It's okay. We all make mistakes, even me. None of us are perfect.”

Parvati nodded and walked over to her sister. “I'm sorry, Padma.”

“You're forgiven, sis.”

“You're incredibly lucky, sis. Don't let him go.”

“I have no intention of doing that, ever.”

“I'll be with you, when Voldemort comes. I'm not losing my sister and future brother-in-law.

“I'll see you later, okay?”

“Okay, Parv.”

Parvati walked out of the pub, her head held high.

“I think that she won't make those mistakes again,” Padma said with a slight smile on her face. “Sometimes growing up has to be painful, but at least all that's damaged is her pride.”

Harry nodded and ushered her into the room, looking around. “Ginny,” he called. “Why don't you join us?”

“Thanks,” she grinned as she left the group of girls she was sitting with.

Harry walked into the room last, shutting the door behind him. He moved to the front of the table, and looked down. Six of his friends sat, three down each side.

“Welcome to the inaugural meeting of the Order of the Phoenix,” he said simply.

“But the Order already exists.” Hermione managed to beat the rest of them by half a second.

Harry nodded slowly. “I know, but this is different. Every time the Light battles the dark, the leader pulls together the people he trusts the most, and he makes them into his Order. Albus did the same when he was ready to face Grindelwald. I am doing it now. My successor will do it in the future.

“You are the people I trust most, the people I am closest to, the people who I know without doubt will stand beside me as we face Voldemort. We are the people charged with keeping the world safe from Voldemort, and we are the people who will succeed or die trying.”

“You won't mind if I hope for the ‘succeed’ part, right?” Ron asked.

Harry laughed. “I'm rather partial to that idea myself.”

“Why now?” Hermione asked.

“Because the time is drawing near. You can all feel it, that sense of incompleteness inside you, the restlessness, the feeling that what you are doing doesn't really matter.”

“Oh thank god,” Hermione said, relaxing back into her chair.

“Hermione!?”

She smiled, “I thought I was losing interest in school work. It's just Voldemort coming.”

Harry blinked repeatedly, and then burst out into laughter. A laughter that the rest of the table joined in on.

Blaise stood and walked around the table, and pulled his girlfriend into a hug.

“Don't ever change, sweetheart,” he said simply.

He regained his seat and looked at Harry. “Actually, I'm kinda surprised to be here,” he said.

Harry grinned at him. “I figured that if I'm going to be Best Man at your wedding, we should probably be closer friends.”

“What wedding?”

“Yours and Hermione's.”

He shook his head, as if trying to clear it. “But I haven't asked her yet.”

Harry smirked. “I know.”

“That's enough, Harry,” Hermione interrupted. She looked across the table. “I'm going to say ‘yes’, but in order to make sure that our hero over there doesn't end up killing half of your friends, my ‘yes’ comes with the proviso that he gets to be Best Man.”

Blaise slowly smiled. “You know, having Harry as Best Man would do wonders for my career.”

“Typical Slytherin,” Ron grinned. “Always looking for a way to gain out of a situation.”

“I'm going to need a groomsman as well,” Blaise replied with a smile.

“Like I said,” Ron replied. “Untypical Slytherin. He's a good man Hermione.”

Hermione groaned. “Untypical? Can you butcher the language any more?”

“If he really tried,” Ginny said dryly.

“But for the sake of our ears, Luna, could you please make sure he doesn't?”

“Of course,” Luna replied, leaning over and whispering in his ear.

“I say,” Ron said, his ears blushing. “I promise that nothing but lucid, eloquent perfection shall pass these lips.”

“*Accio* Thesaurus,” Harry said dryly.

“Okay,” Padma said, as the laughter died. “What next?”

“First,” Harry said. “Do you accept? Do you agree to join the Order, with me as the leader? Hermione?”

Hermione smiled. “I knew from the start that you were destined for greatness. I will be beside you now, as I have every other time.”

Ron spoke up next, out of turn, “And I will be there as well, Harry. When the three of us work together, we will not fail. We never have, and we never will.”

“Blaise?”

“I sat on the fence for many years,” he said, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I watched the two main factions in our year clash time and time again, and I watched you win most, until this year.

“You grew up, Harry. Suddenly, it was like watching a two year old try to attack an Unspeakable. Your ability grew in leaps and bounds. I decided to join the D.A. then, because I felt that you were going to be the winner.

“As I got to know you, and to know Hermione, I realised just how special you are. Just how much of a leader you are. You've had my friendship for some time; I now pledge my life and loyalty to you.”

Harry bowed solemnly to him. “Luna?”

“I joined you earlier,” she said simply. “I've known. I've always known. I owe you more than I can repay in this lifetime. I pledge my life and loyalty to you.”

“Ginny?”

Ginny smiled sadly. “I've watched you for so many years, Harry. You've been a special part of my life for as long as I can remember, and I will never forget that you risked your life to save mine, even after I embarrassed you.

“I always thought that we would be together and wanted it more than anything, especially after you grew into the person you are now.

“I've accepted it's not to be. Seeing you so happy with Padma was the final thing I needed to be able to close that chapter in my life, and start to look at moving on.

“You saved my life Harry. Everything I do for the rest of my life is with thanks to you. I pledge my life and loyalty to you.”

“Padma?”

“Do you really have to ask?” she said gently. She stood and walked around the table, and pulled Ginny into a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered softly.

“Thank you,” Ginny whispered back. “For understanding and allowing me to remain friends with Harry.”

Padma returned to her seat. “I pledge my life, my loyalty,” she paused, and suddenly shot him a grin, “and my body to you.”

Harry blushed furiously, while everyone else laughed loudly.

“Okay,” Harry said, waving his hands at them to stop.

“Wait, Harry,” Ron interrupted. “I’ve been jealous of you, have even turned on you once, and was too stupid to see how bad my actions were, but you’ve always been my friend. And you were the only person to stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life.” He looked at Luna, smiling softly for a second. “I pledge my life and loyalty to you.”

“My turn again,” Hermione said. “My boyfriend does have a lovely way with words. It’s one of the things I love about him the most. Harry, I pledge my life and loyalty to you,” she said formally, using what had become a pledge between them.

Harry stood there, a visible sheen in his eyes. “Thank you,” he said to everyone. He looked around the table. “I, Harry James Potter, hereby pledge my life and loyalty to each of you and to your families. I will always be available to all of you, and will do what ever is needed for you.

“You are true friends, you are my family, and I will never forget that.”

He took a deep breath, “Okay, let’s get on with business.

“Tonight, Albus is going to formally hand over leadership to me. It’s not going to be easy, but we’re all going to be there. Ron, Ginny, you’re going to face your parents and your family. It might not be pleasant, but you are my people now. You answer to me first and foremost.”

The meeting lasted for most of the day, as they ironed out the details.

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Four weeks later

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Harry looked around; next to him was his Order of the Phoenix. The members of Albus' were next to them. Most of the previous group had joined him instantly, each recognising that it was the natural order of things. A couple had chosen to retire instead, something Harry had been more than willing to accept. None of his originals would ever work for anyone else; he knew that with absolute certainty. Remus had been the first to join him, closely followed by Tonks.

Arthur and Molly Weasley had been the last to join, and almost reluctant to see their children so deeply involved in the new Order.

Behind them were the Aurors and D.A. students. Behind them was everyone else they could get hold of.

He walked forwards alone to meet at the centre of the two armies. In front of him was Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

“Morning, Tom,” Harry said with a smile. “Good of you to drop by; I was getting a little worried that you might be late.”

“Don't call me that, arrogant boy.”

Harry smiled casually and sat down on the grass. “Take a seat,” he offered.

Voldemort merely growled.

“If you surrender now, I will let your followers go,” he hissed. A Sonorous spell made sure that everyone heard the conversation.

“I'm afraid I can't offer the same to you,” Harry said regretfully. “All your followers will be tried as criminals after your death. Those that are still alive, obviously.”

“How dare you, you impertinent child!” Voldemort snarled.

“You don't get it, do you?” Harry asked.

“Get what?”

“That I've already won.”

“What!?”

“Despite everything you've done, despite everything you've tried, I'm happy. I've got a life I really enjoy, and you haven't been able to take that away from me.”

“Meaningless nonsense,” Voldemort snarled.

“I'm not afraid of you. None of my people are afraid of you anymore. Everyone here knows that you are Tom Marvolo Riddle, half-blood orphan.” His voice echoed out across the Death Eaters.

“Don't call me that,” Voldemort demanded. His wand appeared in his hand, pointing at Harry.

“Go ahead,” Harry offered.

“*Crucio*,” Voldemort growled.

“Well, that was successful,” Harry noted. “Ouch. Ow. Please stop.”

“What is happening?”

“It's not time yet; our meeting here was pre-ordained. Can't you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

Harry shook his head. “The game of eternity is before you, and you can't even see the pieces. You

failed, Tom. The only way you could beat me would have been to take away the thing I have that you don't. Love. You failed. You never took the time to understand that I am only as strong as the people whose shoulders I am standing on. You are surrounded by Pygmies. Snivelling toadies who follow your every word - who you torture if they dare show signs of independent thought.

"I am standing on the shoulders of giants, people who follow me through love, through trust, through faith. People I will not let down."

"Powerless children," Voldemort interrupted.

"I would take them over every single one of your Death Eaters. I would die for them, and I know they would die for me. Show me a single one of your Death Eaters who will do the same for you, or for whom you would do the same for them."

Voldemort paused.

"Just one. Show me one person you care enough about to die for."

"This is pointless," Voldemort growled.

"No, it's not. It took me a long time to realise this - that I'm not alone, that the choices I make, and the people I make friends with are the people who really count. You are alone - I am surrounded by friends."

Harry climbed to his feet and bowed to Voldemort. "It is time," he said simply.

"Attack!" Ron shouted, his voice reaching everyone. As one, they launched an attack against the Death Eaters, catching many unprepared.

Harry smiled as he started to fight. He threw a few fireballs at Voldemort. His wand was by his bed, there would be no *Priori Incantatem*; this would be a fight to the death.

He ignored the fights going on around him; his friends would take care of that, and he trusted them completely to do their job.

"Join me," Voldemort offered after ten minutes of solid duelling, as he dodged a curse. "We can rule for eternity together."

"Don't you see, Tom," Harry replied, throwing a few more curses. "You've already lost. If you're resorting to that old cliché, it means that you don't think you can win, so you're trying to subvert me. It won't work. It will never work. You are standing in *my* way; you are stopping *me* from having the life *I* want to have."

Voldemort growled and launched a blistering array of curses at Harry. He tried to stop them but some of them got through, spinning him around. Harry spat some blood out of his mouth onto the green grass, and he threw his hands forward, sending a couple of bolts of pure light directly at Voldemort. The Dark Lord managed to block the first, but the second caught him in the stomach,

sending him catapulting through the air.

Harry chased after him, breathing hard, each step causing a sharp pain in his chest, as he discovered the damage the curses had done to him.

On his knees, Voldemort raised his hands in a gesture of supplication.

For a split second, Harry paused, confused.

*"Petrificus Totalus ,"* Draco Malfoy snarled, a new wand in his hand, appearing behind Harry.

Voldemort got to his feet. "Never underestimate the power of hate as a motivator," he sneered. "You will be rewarded for this," he told Draco.

Draco smiled broadly.

"Now," Voldemort said, "You must die."

Harry started to shake, as he tried to break Draco's spell. Normally it would have been easy, but the long duel had taken so much of his power.

"Avada Kedav..."

"No!" Padma screamed, launching herself in front of Voldemort. She twisted in mid air, her foot flying out, knocking Voldemort's wand-hand to one side. The green curse impacted hard into the ground.

Ron dived straight into Draco, and forgoing Magic, he started to punch him in the face, as years of torment were paid back.

Hermione cast a stunning spell at her own opponent, and turned, kicking hard into Voldemort's wrist, dislodging his wand. The phoenix core wand flew into the air, twisting.

"*Accio* Voldemort's wand," Blaise shouted.

*"Rictusempra ,"* Luna cried, her wand pointing straight at Voldemort. As the Dark Lord started to laugh, Blaise ran towards Harry, ignoring the curses that were flying around him.

Harry finally broke through the spell, and collapsed. Ginny appeared next to him, lifting him up, supporting him.

"Here," Blaise said, throwing the wand the last few feet.

Harry caught it, and turned to Voldemort. "*Avada Kedavra !*" he yelled, pouring all his hatred, all his magic, all his fear and despair into the spell.

There was a sudden silence across the field. An eerie pause, as everyone stopped.

Voldemort, his face locked in a smile from the tickling curse, stood stock-still, before he crumpled to the ground, dead.

As one, the Death Eaters screamed, each grabbing their left arm, as the magic that connected them to Voldemort vanished.

A huge volley of stunning charms went out, knocking them out.

Harry collapsed, exhausted. Ginny, with Blaise's help, lowered him to the ground.

He turned and looked at Voldemort's body, and started to crawl towards it.

“Here,” Blaise said, lifting him. Ginny took the other side, helping him up. Padma, Ron, Luna, and Hermione walked over to Voldemort's body, meeting Harry there.

Around them, everyone else who had fought, and who wasn't currently dealing with the stunned Death Eaters joined them.

Harry looked down at the snake-like body before him and bent down, placing Voldemort's wand on his chest.

He stepped back and looked at his friends. “Incinerate the bastard,” he ordered.

Ron, Luna, Ginny, Hermione, Blaise, and Padma pointed their wands at Voldemort. As one, they said, “*Incendio* .”

There was a sudden burst of green flame from Voldemort that rose high into the sky, and lasted for a minute. When it was done, all that was left was a burnt patch of grass.

Harry nodded, and coughed, blood splattering out of his mouth.

“Did anyone see Wormtail?” Harry demanded.

“I got him,” Remus announced.

Harry smiled slightly, “Thanks Wolfie.”

Remus groaned at the nickname.

“What are you going to do with Draco?” Ron asked.

Harry, now being held up by Padma, walked towards the blond Slytherin. Draco's face was coated in blood.

“He looks a little tenderised,” Harry said with a soft laugh. “Feel good?” he asked as he turned to look at Ron.

“Oh yeah,” Ron said, his arm tightly around Luna. “Almost as good as seeing my girlfriend cast a tickling charm on Voldemort.”

“Don't make me laugh,” Harry begged. “Breathing hurts at the moment.”

“We need to get you to the nurse,” Hermione said.

“In a minute,” Harry agreed. “Wake him.”

Ginny casually walked up and kicked Draco hard in the stomach.

“I meant magically,” Harry clarified his request.

“Oh,” Ginny replied. “Whoops.”

“Can you heal him?” Harry asked Padma.

She nodded, and cast a few spells at the fallen boy, the last one waking him.

Draco looked around and went white.

“I warned you what would happen,” Harry said in a low voice. It echoed around the field, so that everyone could hear it. It was implacable.

“No,” Draco dropped to his knees. “Don't kill me.”

“I'm not going to kill you,” Harry continued. “I told you that I couldn't decide what the worst punishment for you would be. I've decided now.”

Harry closed his eyes and pointed at Draco. The blond Slytherin looked confused, and then began to smirk.

Harry cancelled the spell with a weary movement of his hand. He dropped to his knees. “Give him his wand.”

Hermione moved, handing Draco his new wand without hesitation.

Draco smirked even more and pointed his wand at Harry. “I can't believe you'd be so stupid.”

Harry smiled slowly. “Look at Hogwarts, Draco.”

“Why?”

“Just turn around and look behind you.”

Draco turned. “Where's it gone?” he demanded.

“You can't see it,” Harry said, as he got to his feet, a smile appearing on his face. “Good luck with the rest of your life, ferret.”

“What have you done to me?”

“Made you into what you hate most,” Harry answered, turning his back on Draco dismissively. “A Muggle.”

“You can't do this to me,” Draco yelled. “Don't you know who I am – I'm a Malfoy. I'll get you for...”

Harry waved his hand, and the boy vanished, never to be seen again.

There was another strange silence as everyone looked at him.

“I don't kill unless I have to,” he explained simply. “And yes, I did use his magic to heal myself. I really didn't fancy another stay in the Hospital Wing.”

“Harry?” Ron asked.

“Yeah?”

“Don't take this the wrong way, but I love you. That was bloody brilliant.”

There was another second's pause, before people began to laugh, the tension broken.

Harry grinned and met each of his Order's eyes. There were no words needed, not now.

As he reached Padma last, he lost his smile.

“Padma, you said something to me in the Ravenclaw Common Room some time ago.”

“Oh?” she said, a small smile appearing on her face.

Harry dropped down one to one knee in front of her.

“Padma Patil, I love you,” he said clearly, his voice once more echoing around the battlefield. “Will you marry me?”

She squealed in joy, and then jumped on him, pushing him to the ground and kissing him firmly.

“I think that was a yes,” Parvati announced with a grin.

“Damn right it was,” Padma agreed, breaking the kiss. She stood and pulled Harry up.

“Let's go back to Hogwarts.”

Harry and Padma turned to walk, a path appearing through the crowd of Order members, Aurors,

DA members, and everyone else. Some saluted as they passed, others mouthed messages of good luck.

Behind them, Ron and Blaise started to argue over who was going to be Best Man, while Ginny, Luna, and Hermione, with Parvati joining them, started to plan the wedding.

At the end of the path, Minerva stood waiting. She walked forwards and embraced both Harry and Padma. She no longer cared about showing her affection for the two of them. No one would ever question it, not now.

She released them, a suspicious gleam in her eyes.

Finally, Harry faced Albus Dumbledore, his mentor for so many years.

Dumbledore smiled, his blue eyes twinkling. "I believe," he said slowly, "That there is one thing you have forgotten."

Harry laughed softly and nodded. He turned, and grinned facing the large crowd; he kept his arm around Padma, and looked around slowly.

"Voldemort is dead," he shouted. "And you know what that means?"

"That we get an 'O' in our Defence class?" Ron shouted back.

Harry laughed. "No, it means that we won and that if you think they celebrated fifteen years ago, wait till you see the party we're going to have tonight. I want all of you to go home, put on your best robes, and get back here, because tonight is going to be the biggest party ever seen!"

The cheer started somewhere near the back, and soon went through the entire crowd but it faded in Harry's ears as he looked into the eyes of his fiancée and kissed her.

"Let's get to our rooms," he said softly, breaking the kiss.

Padma smiled, "And just think, now that you've defeated Voldemort, you can do something really scary."

"What's that?"

"Meet my parents."

Harry's groan echoed around the field, as his friends burst into laughter one more time.