

Chapter 17

Harry swirled the juice around as he drummed his fingers on the table, watching as Percy adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses for the third time in as many minutes. The git had been sitting at the breakfast table for twenty minutes now, and Harry could practically see the pompous lecture building behind those beady eyes.

"Pass the pancakes, would you?" Ginny asked sweetly, her foot finding Harry's under the table, her toes caressing him. She must've seen the derisive look he'd been giving Percy, and this was a way of her asking him very nicely that he shouldn't hex her brother at breakfast, no matter how big of a douche he was.

"Here," Harry said, sliding the plate across. His hand lingered on hers for longer than necessary, and Ginny smirked. He caught the look Hermione gave them and the flush creeping up her neck, and stifled a chuckle.

She muttered something from behind her copy of the Daily Prophet. After three weeks of relentless teasing from Ginny about her perpetual third-wheel status, she'd taken to hiding behind newspapers at meals.

The poor girl had practically stopped being alone with them after Ginny had started making increasingly suggestive comments about "expanding their study sessions."

Ginny caressed his hand some more before she pressed the ends of two of her fingers together, pushing his middle finger through the gap that formed between them. Hermione's newspaper crinkled as she gripped it tighter, her ears turning pink.

"Still can't believe he gave us all that!" Harry heard Fred whisper to George who frantically nodded.

"Who gave you what?" Ron asked.

"None of your business, Ronnekins," George grinned, sitting straight.

Ron didn't seem happy with the response, and as a back and forth started, Harry stifled a smirk as he exchanged a glance with Ginny.

Bagman had conned the twins badly during the World Cup betting, and there was no way she was letting that slide. A little intervention was all it took, and the twins were the happy recipients of the 420 galleons, as promised.

"I find such juvenile behavior highly inappropriate," Percy announced suddenly. He set down his teacup with a soft clink. "Especially given the current climate at the Ministry. Propriety and decorum are more important than ever."

"Oh, here we go," Ron groaned from across the table, reaching for his fourth piece of bacon.

"The Ministry," Percy continued, undeterred, "is facing unprecedented scrutiny following the World Cup incident. Minister Fudge has been working tirelessly – absolutely tirelessly – to restore confidence in our institutions. Why, just yesterday, I stayed until eleven helping draft responses to the Wizengamot inquiries."

Harry exchanged a look with Ginny. Arthur had mentioned that Fudge was catching hell from all sides, especially with Lucius Malfoy no longer around to grease the wheels and cover the Minister's considerable backside. Harry wondered idly who the plump bastard would whore himself out to now that his generous Death Eater benefactor had kicked the bucket.

"How noble of you," Ginny said dryly. "Sacrificing your beauty sleep for the greater good."

"Mock if you will, Ginevra, but some of us understand the importance of public service."

"Some of us also understand the importance of not being an insufferable prat," Ron muttered into his pumpkin juice.

"Ronald!"

"Boys," Mrs. Weasley said sharply from the stove, waving her wand to send more sausages floating to the table. "Enough. Percy, dear, shouldn't you be leaving soon? You did say you had that early meeting."

"In a moment, Mother. I was merely trying to impress upon –"

"Speaking of leaving," Ginny interrupted, desperate to change the subject before Percy launched into a full lecture, "has anyone heard from Bill or Charlie?"

"Charlie sent an owl yesterday," Mrs. Weasley said, brightening immediately. "Says he's doing well. Romania's been quite warm this summer, apparently. And Bill wrote from Egypt earlier this week."

The two oldest brothers had departed a few days after the World Cup, and both had left with knowing grins and comments about how they might be seeing everyone "sooner than they thought." The others still had no clue what that was about, and predictably, speculation followed.

"Probably going to jump out at the Hogwarts Express and surprise us," Ron said hopefully. "That'd be brilliant."

"Don't be ridiculous," Percy sniffed. "They have jobs, Ronald. Important positions. They can't simply abandon their posts for sentimental reunions."

"Unlike some people who never leave their posts," Ginny murmured, just loud enough for Harry to hear. "Even when everyone wishes they would."

Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing. The past few weeks had been relatively uneventful – remarkably so after the chaos of the World Cup. With Arthur leaving before dawn each morning and Percy returning well after dinner most nights, the Burrow had been blissfully quiet. Well, quiet except for the time he and Ginny had spent enthusiastically exploring the possibilities of empty rooms and unlocked doors.

And then there were his visits to Hogsmeade.

Alisia and Irina had settled into their new home beautifully, and Harry had made several trips to help them "settle in." They'd certainly christened nearly every surface in that house. The kitchen counter. The living room sofa. That one particularly memorable afternoon in the upstairs bedroom with the view of the mountains...

The Bulgarian Quidditch Team had released them from their contracts given the circumstances, and the two women were now exploring employment opportunities closer to home. Opportunities that apparently involved a great deal of afternoon availability.

"And Dad should've cleared it with his Head of Department before making a public statement like that –"

"Don't you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!"

Harry stifled another sigh as Mrs. Weasley fumed at Percy and resolved to enjoy the delicious pancakes she'd made for them, even when Hermione joined in on the arguing when the topic of house elves came up. Like seriously? Couldn't she read a book and look at facts instead of looking at things from her activism-tinted glasses? He liked the girl, but she could be a bit much sometimes.

'Maybe a proper stick up her arse would loosen her up a bit,' Harry thought to himself, shaking his head mirthfully as he eyed her.

Percy cleared his throat self-importantly. "As I was saying, the current situation at the Ministry demands that we all conduct ourselves with the utmost –"

"Percy," Mrs. Weasley interrupted with a tired sigh, glancing at the kitchen clock where his hand pointed to "home" but was teetering dangerously toward "late." "Your meeting, dear."

Percy's eyes widened. "Oh! Oh, yes, quite right." He stood abruptly, gathering his briefcase and papers quickly. "Do remember what I said about propriety. It reflects on the entire family."

The moment he disappeared into the fireplace with a flash of green flames, Ron let out an exaggerated sigh of relief.

"Thank Merlin. Another five minutes and I was going to hex him."

"You'd have to get in line," Ginny said, finally removing her foot from Harry's leg. She grinned at him wickedly. "Though I'm sure Harry could think of more creative solutions."

Hermione muttered something under her breath again, raising the newspaper like a shield.

Harry caught Ginny's eye and smirked. Three more weeks of this had been absolute torture for poor Hermione, but he had to admit – watching her squirm was almost as entertaining as the activities that prompted the teasing in the first place.

Almost.

"Right then," Mrs. Weasley said, surveying the table with a critical eye. "Finish up, all of you. We need to leave for King's Cross in an hour, and I won't have you lot making us late because you couldn't stop bickering long enough to pack properly."

Their departure was marked by the usual Weasley family chaos, but finally, they managed to leave in time. Some taxis were arranged for them, and although Harry wanted to simply apparate over, he allowed Mrs. Weasley to usher him in alongside the rest of her brood.

Well, at least he could have some fun at Hermione's expense on the way over, he thought as he sat with her and Ginny pressed against him.

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A red-faced Hermione hastily got out of the taxi as they came to a stop at King's Cross, and she briskly walked over to retrieve her trunk and cat-cage. She pointedly avoided either Harry or Ginny who were frankly having too much fun at her expense over the past few weeks.

They knew it was only a matter of time before she cracked, and both were looking forward to see that side of her emerge.

Harry had already let Hedwig fly away to Hogwarts, and he walked with his shrunken trunk in his pocket. They reached the platform entrance in no time. The women went first, followed by the twins and then Ron. Harry stood there waiting for a moment before looking around. He cast a wandless Notice-me-not charm before pulling his wand out and tracing a little rune right at the base of the pillar. The rune glowed green for a second before fizzing away.

Straightening back up, he put his wand away and walked through the pillar, whistling a jolly tune.

The gleaming red engine of the Hogwarts Express was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it. The noise was expectedly high, and there was no hint of the attack in the atmosphere.

Harry found Ron and Ginny waiting by the pillar and he looked around.

“Hermione went ahead. Said she’d find us a compartment.”

Harry nodded at Ron and together, they set off to board the train. They found Hermione in a compartment about halfway along. The brunette had claimed the spot by the window, and she merely glanced over when they entered. Her eyes met Harry’s for a mere second before she buried her face in her book once again.

Hermione shivered slightly when Harry took a seat beside her, and she pointedly stared at the book in her hand. Ginny sat right opposite her, with Ron sitting with her after closing the door.

“Blimey, shut up already!” He said grumpily, throwing his dress robes over Pigwidgeon’s cage.

“The weather’s a bummer today,” Ginny remarked, and everyone looked outside. It was raining heavily, and they could barely make out anything outside.

“What’s that you’re reading?” Harry asked softly as he leaned closer to take a look, and Hermione froze for a moment before relaxing against him. She glanced at him sideways, silently telling him to scoot over slightly. Harry merely smiled and shifted, a little bit away but their bodies still touching.

“Rune crafting,” she said softly. Her body felt hotter than before, and she cursed herself for reacting in this manner. But what could she really expect after everything that had been going on throughout the summer?

“Interesting,” Harry murmured, reaching out and taking her hand, turning the book slightly towards himself. The moment he touched her, Hermione gasped softly. A sharp spark shot from her hand straight through her, and her heartbeat rose. “Something wrong?”

“N-No,” she shook her head. “Nothing.”

Harry gave her a smile and read alongside her, but Hermione’s mind had blanked. This was the first time he’d touched her since that day, and Merlin did it felt different. They’d touched before, but something had changed between them. Fundamentally.

She tried to focus on her reading even as he pulled his hand away from hers, but failed miserably. Something was seriously wrong with her, and she knew she needed to fix it. She could not go on like this.

A little while later, Harry got to his feet and asked, “Going to find the trolley. Anything?”

Hermione shook her head and pointedly buried her face in the book while Ron asked him to get him some Chocolate Frogs.

“A popsicle for me,” Ginny said with a dirty smirk. “Preferably a long and thick one.”

Hermione eyed the redhead for a moment who was staring at Harry with that sultry look. Her lips pursed and she looked away.

“Be back in a bit,” Harry winked, and left the compartment.

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The rhythmic clacking of the train wheels against the tracks had become something like background noise. Pansy Parkinson sat alone in the compartment, watching the thick rain splattering the window as the Hogwarts Express carried her back to school. Her trunk sat on the rack above her head, noticeably lighter than it had been when she'd left Parkinson Manor the day after the Quidditch World Cup final. She'd had to sell some things. The nice things. The things that screamed old money and pureblood privilege.

Turned out freedom had a price tag, and hers was paid in jewelry and designer robes.

The small room she'd rented above a shop in Knockturn Alley wasn't much. The wallpaper was peeling, the floorboards creaked, and she was pretty sure something lived in the walls. But it was hers. Nobody told her what to think there. Nobody demanded she smile and curtsy and play the perfect pureblood daughter.

Worth it.

She'd spent most of those weeks alone, learning what it meant to fend for herself. Buying her own food. Washing her own clothes by herself because she couldn't afford the expensive laundering service her remaining clothes demanded. Figuring out how to brew a decent cup of tea without house-elves to do it for her.

The Daily Prophet had been brutal. She'd seen the articles, read the gossip columns. The Parkinsons' dirty laundry aired for all of magical Britain to see. Her mother had done her best damage control, naturally. Painted Pansy as an unstable girl, grief-stricken and irrational after her father's death. Cordelia had even managed to score some sympathy from her social circle, playing the role of a mother abandoned by an ungrateful daughter.

Pansy had expected as much. What she hadn't expected was how little she cared.

The Slytherin common room would be interesting this year. Most of her former friends had already made their positions clear through their silence. No letters. No visits. No owls asking if she was alright or where she'd gone. Just nothing, which told her everything she needed to know about where their loyalties lay.

She was alone. Well and truly alone. Or... not.

She'd thought about Harry Potter exactly once since that day at the Ministry.

That was a lie.

She'd thought about him more than once. She'd thought about him quite a bit, actually. About the way he'd looked at her like he could see past all the bullshit. About his words that had circled through her head like a spell she couldn't shake.

The question is whether you get to choose who you belong to now.

But she hadn't done anything about it. What was she supposed to do? Show up at his door like some pathetic charity case? She'd made her choice to walk away from everything, and that included whatever cryptic offer Potter might have been making. She'd figure out her own path, thank you very much.

Besides, Potter was a blood traitor. A mudblood lover. Just because she'd walked away from her family and the Malfoys didn't mean she'd suddenly become one herself. It just meant she was done being their little puppet.

She still believed mudbloods were stealing magic that didn't belong to them. Still believed in the natural order of things, in blood purity and the importance of maintaining proper magical lineage. She'd just stopped believing that groveling to the Malfoys was the way to preserve that order.

If anything, the Malfoys had proven themselves weak. Lucius had gotten himself killed by his own stupidity, taking her father down with him. Draco was a spoiled brat who'd inherited power he hadn't earned and didn't know how to properly wield. And Narcissa was a widow whose time would soon be over, and in no time, she would be scrambling to maintain relevance in her pathetic high society.

The real purebloods, the strong ones, wouldn't need to threaten and intimidate to maintain their position. They'd simply be powerful enough that others fell in line naturally.

Potter, for all his blood traitor tendencies, at least had real power. She could at least acknowledge that much. He was a powerful wizard, and if the rumors were true, he was tremendously powerful. That was worth something. Maybe even worth swallowing her pride about his choice of company.

But she hadn't reached out. Wouldn't reach out. If Potter wanted something from her, he could come find her himself. She wasn't about to go begging a blood traitor for scraps.

As for Draco... her fists clenched at the thought of him.

She hoped he choked on his own tongue. Hoped his precious family name became mud. Hoped he suffered every day knowing that his father had died because he was arrogant and stupid.

The Malfoys had taken everything from her. Not just her father, but her entire life. Every choice she'd ever made had been filtered through the question of what the Malfoys would think, what they would approve of, how it would reflect on their alliance.

Well, fuck them. Fuck Draco and his superiority complex. Fuck Narcissa and her scheming. And fuck Lucius's memory most of all.

She'd burn their world down if she could. Watch them scramble and panic as everything they'd built crumbled. See how they liked being the ones with nothing.

Her poisonous inner ramblings were interrupted as the compartment door slammed open with enough force to rattle the windows.

Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway, his face twisted with a mix of fury and satisfaction. He stepped inside, drew his wand, and locked the door behind him. Another flick closed the curtains on both sides, blocking anyone in the corridor from seeing inside.

Pansy scrambled, her hand flying to her wand as instinct took over.

"Stup – "

"Expelliarmus!"

Her wand flew from her grip and into Draco's waiting hand. He pocketed both wands, his grey eyes gleaming dangerously.

"Going to curse me, Pansy?" He said, his voice silky but she could detect the poison underneath. "Seriously? You thought you could get a spell off before I did? That's cute. Really. Almost as cute as watching you try to play the rebel at the Ministry."

Pansy's heart hammered against her ribs, but she forced herself to stay still, to meet his gaze without flinching. She'd known this confrontation was coming. Had been dreading it since the moment she'd walked out of her mother's house.

"What do you want, Draco?"

"What do I want?" He moved further into the compartment, and Pansy noticed he was alone. No Crabbe, no Goyle, and no Zabini. He'd come for this himself. "I think we need to have a conversation about respect. About knowing your place. About what happens when trash like you forgets where it belongs."

"Trash?" Pansy's voice was ice. "That's rich coming from you."

"Is it?" Draco's smile was razor-sharp. "Let's talk about the facts, shall we? Your father was a lackey. A useful idiot who did what he was told and got paid in scraps. My father was the one giving orders. My father was the one with real power."

"Your father's dead."

Draco's expression darkened as Pansy glared at him.

"So is yours," he said softly. "The difference is, mine died for something that mattered. Yours died because he was too stupid to say no. Like the loyal dog he was."

Pansy's nails dug into her palms. "Your father got mine killed."

"Your father got himself killed by being incompetent. Don't blame my family because yours couldn't handle the work." Draco leaned against the opposite seat, staring at her like she was a particularly interesting insect. "You know what the real tragedy is? My mother actually liked you once. Thought you'd make an acceptable daughter-in-law. Keep the bloodlines pure, give me heirs, manage the household. Simple things even you couldn't fuck up."

"How generous."

"It was generous," Draco snapped. "Do you have any idea how many families would have killed for that opportunity? To marry into the Malfoy line? And you threw it away because you couldn't keep your mouth shut for five fucking minutes."

"I threw it away because I'm not interested in spending my life as your broodmare."

Draco laughed. "Broodmare. That's funny. Like you had any other prospects. What did you think was going to happen, Pansy? You'd marry some other pureblood heir? News flash—they all saw you the same way I did. A pretty face with adequate curves attached to a mediocre family name. You weren't special. You were convenient."

Each word was meant to hurt, and they did. But Pansy had spent all this time alone with her thoughts, and she'd built up thicker skin than Draco realized.

"If I was so mediocre, why are you here?"

"Because you embarrassed me." His voice dropped to something dangerous. "Because you made me look weak in front of people who matter. Because you stood up in the Ministry and called my father—my father—a Death Eater. You accused him of murder. You made it sound like our family was responsible for your pathetic excuse for a bloodline losing its patriarch."

"You are responsible!"

"We gave your father purpose!" Draco's composure cracked, fury bleeding through. "We gave him something to fight for, something to believe in! If he was too weak to survive the fight, that's on him, not us!"

"He believed in you. In your family. And you got him killed for it."

"He died because he wasn't strong enough. Survival of the fittest, Pansy. It's how the world works. The strong thrive, the weak die off. Your father was weak. End of story."

Pansy wanted to curse him. Wanted to claw that smug expression off his face. But she forced herself to stay still, to keep her voice level.

"Is that what you tell yourself at night? That those who died at the Cup were just weak?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation. "They were soldiers who fell in battle. It happens. The strong survive and move forward. The weak... well, you're looking at what happens to their families."

"Your father didn't survive either."

Draco's hand twitched toward his wand. "Don't push me, Pansy."

"Or what? You'll kill me like your father killed mine?"

"My father was a great man," Draco said through gritted teeth. "He was working toward something bigger than himself. Something that would have secured our world for generations. The fact that people like you can't see that just proves how limited your thinking is."

"Your father was a coward. Nothing else."

Draco's face went red, a snarl escaping his lips.

"You want to talk about cowardice?" His voice shook with rage. "Let's talk about your bitch mother. Let's talk about how fast she threw you away to try and save her own reputation. Let's talk about how she's been spreading rumors about you being mentally unstable. Telling everyone who'll listen that you're damaged, broken, not worth anyone's time."

"I know what she's been saying."

"Do you know what else she's been doing?" Draco's smile returned, cruel and satisfied. "She's been begging. Actually begging my mother for forgiveness. Sending letters, showing up at the Manor, prostrating herself like a common servant. It's pathetic. Your mother is on her knees trying to salvage any scrap of connection to our family, and my mother is letting her grovel because it's amusing."

The image made Pansy's stomach turn. "You're enjoying this," she said quietly.

"Of course I'm enjoying this." Draco pushed off from the door and moved closer. "Your mother spent years kissing my mother's arse, and for what? Your family never had any real power. You were always just... hangers-on. Parasites feeding off the Malfoy name. At least your father was useful sometimes, running errands, doing the

dirty work nobody else wanted. But your mother? She was always just taking up space at parties, desperately trying to pretend she belonged."

Rage flared hot in Pansy's chest. Whatever her mother's faults, hearing Draco talk about her like that made something violent wake up inside her.

"Don't you dare — "

"Don't I dare what?" Draco's voice dropped to a dangerous purr. "Say what everyone's been thinking for years? Your family was nothing special, Pansy."

He was right in front of her now, close enough that she could smell his expensive cologne.

"Cordelia Parkinson is finished. She's a joke. A cautionary tale about what happens when you don't keep your family in line. And the best part? It's all your fault."

"I'm not responsible for her choices."

"Aren't you? You're the one who made that scene. You're the one who couldn't just sit down and shut up like you were supposed to. One conversation, Pansy. One funeral. All you had to do was keep your mouth closed for one afternoon, and instead you decided to blow up your entire life."

"It was worth it."

"Was it?" Draco grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. His grip was bruising. "Is it worth being nobody? Having nothing? Your mother's begging for scraps. Your family name is mud. Everyone knows you're a traitor. Everyone knows you turned on your own kind."

Pansy jerked her chin free. "Let go of me."

"Or what? You'll curse me? With what wand?" He pulled both wands from his pocket, dangling them tauntingly. "You're helpless, Pansy. You've always been helpless. The only reason anyone ever paid attention to you was because of me. Because they thought you were going to be my wife. Now? You're nothing."

"I'm not nothing."

"You are a traitor." He leaned in closer. "A blood traitor who chose to side against her own kind. Do you know what happens to blood traitors, Pansy?"

"I didn't side with anyone."

"You sided against us. That's the same thing. There are only two sides in this war, and you picked wrong." His voice dropped to a whisper. "And now you're going to pay for it."

"There is no war."

"There's always a war. Between the strong and the weak. Between those who understand the natural order and those who try to fight it. My father understood that. Your father tried to understand it but failed. And you?" He laughed. "You don't understand anything at all."

Pansy shoved him back, her anger finally overwhelming all caution. "Your father was a murderer and a coward, and he died like one. Without any dignity, like a commoner."

The defiance came automatically, words spilling out before Pansy could think better of them. She saw Draco's eyes flash, saw his hand move, but she wasn't fast enough to dodge.

The backhand caught her across the face with enough force to send her sprawling onto the seat. Her head bounced off the compartment wall, stars exploding across her vision. She tasted copper – her lip had split, blood filling her mouth.

Shocked, she pressed her hand to her burning cheek, her thumb pressing against the bleeding cut as she stared up at Draco with wide eyes. He'd never hit her before. They'd argued, sure. He'd been cruel with his words plenty of times. But he'd never actually raised a hand to her.

Draco stood over her, calmly pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped the blood from his ring slowly, his expression almost bored.

"You're nobody now," he said softly, and somehow that quiet tone was more terrifying than his earlier anger. "Nobody cares what happens to you. Nobody's going to come running if you scream. You have no allies at Hogwarts. You have no allies anywhere. That bitchy attitude of yours? It's made sure of that. Everyone knows you're a traitor. And traitors don't get protection. They don't get sympathy. They get what they deserve."

He leaned down, his face mere inches from hers. Pansy wanted to spit in his face, wanted to claw at him, wanted to do anything except sit there frozen while he loomed over her like a predator over prey.

"You better realize what your position is in the world now," Draco continued in the same soft voice. "Because if you don't learn it on your own, I'm going to teach you. And my lessons? They're not gentle."

Fury replaced shock. Pansy glared up at him, every muscle in her body tensing. She might not have her wand. She might be bleeding. But she'd be damned if she was going to cower anymore.

The look on her face must have triggered him because Draco's expression shifted. His hand shot out, fingers tangling viciously in her hair. He yanked her head back, forcing a cry of pain from her throat.

"I don't like that look," he hissed. "That look says you still think you have choices. That you still think you're somebody. Let me make this very clear, Pansy. I'm going to break you so thoroughly that by the time I'm done, you'll be nothing but my little bitch. You'll beg for my approval. You'll thank me for the privilege of breathing the same air. Do you understand?"

Pansy bit down on her split lip, refusing to answer. The pain in her scalp was intense – he was gripping hard enough that she could feel strands tearing.

"I asked you a question." Draco's voice was still quiet, still controlled, and that made it worse somehow. "Do. You. Under –"

In that instant, everything changed.

Draco's eyes rolled back in his head. His grip on her hair loosened, then released entirely. He slumped forward, and Pansy yelped, shoving frantically at his dead weight as he collapsed half on top of her. She scrambled to the side, her heart racing and her breath coming in sharp gasps.

What the hell just happened?

"Well," a male voice said from near the door, equal parts cocky and darkly amused. "That was quite the show."

She recognized that voice. She'd been thinking of him all summer long, ever since she'd left her family home.

Pansy's head snapped up, and her terrified eyes met the amused ones of one Harry Potter.

To be continued...