

## Chapter 18

The corridor was more crowded than Harry had anticipated, with students milling about and catching up after the summer break. He navigated through the throng, nodding at a few familiar faces as he made his way toward the front of the train where the trolley usually started its rounds.

He found it near the third carriage, and as expected, he found a certain Ravenclaw beauty there.

"I don't know," Cho was saying. "The Pumpkin Pasties are good, but maybe something lighter?"

She was wearing a light pink jumper over a white top and denim jeans, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail that swayed as she tilted her head. Harry wondered how it would feel to be pulling at them from behind as he bent her over.

"The Cauldron Cakes?" Marietta suggested.

"Too heavy," the third girl chimed in. "What about Bertie Bott's?"

"Too risky," Cho laughed. "I'm not brave enough for those today."

Harry moved closer, carefully positioning himself directly behind Cho. He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping to a low, intimate murmur.

"I'd recommend the Fizzing Whizzbees."

Cho jumped, spinning around so quickly she nearly collided with him. Her eyes went wide, one hand pressed to her chest.

Harry chuckled, raising both hands in mock surrender. "Easy there. Did I startle you?"

"A little bit," Cho admitted, her cheeks flushing pink as she took a small step back. Behind her, Marietta and her friend had dissolved into giggles.

"Sorry about that," Harry said with a grin, not sorry at all. He lowered his hands, casually sliding them into his pockets. "But seriously – Fizzing Whizzbees. They're light, sweet, and they literally make you float. Perfect for a rainy day like this."

Cho's flush deepened at his grin, but she managed a smile. "Is that so? And you're an expert on sweets now?"

"Among other things," Harry said smoothly, his green eyes twinkling with mischief. "But yeah, I've done my research. Trust me on this one."

"He does have a point," Marietta interjected, still giggling. "They are good."

"See? Independent verification," Harry said, gesturing toward Marietta without breaking eye contact with Cho. "Can't argue with that."

Cho bit her lip, and Harry found himself staring at it. She noticed, and her breath hitched.

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"I do put it that way," he said softly. "So? Are you going to take my recommendation, or are you going to leave me standing here wondering if my expertise is appreciated?"

"Your expertise," Cho repeated, her voice slightly breathless. "Right."

"Merlin, Cho, just buy the sweets already," the third girl said, though she was grinning widely. "Before you combust."

Cho shot her friend a mortified look before turning back to Harry. "Fine. You've convinced me. Fizzing Whizzbees it is."

"Excellent choice," Harry said approvingly. He stepped slightly to the side as Cho turned to the trolley witch to make her purchase, but he didn't move away entirely. When Cho had her sweets in hand and turned back around, he was still there, waiting.

"So," he said casually. "Looking forward to the new term?"

"I am," Cho said, clutching her candy. "But after everything that happened at the World Cup, I'm a bit nervous about what this year might bring."

Harry's expression sobered slightly. "Yeah, I can understand that. But hey – we're at Hogwarts. Safest place in Britain, right?"

"Right," Cho agreed, though she didn't sound entirely convinced. Then, seeming to shake off the darker thoughts, she smiled again. "Thanks for the recommendation. I'll let you know if it lives up to the hype."

"Oh, it will," Harry said confidently. He reached out, and for a moment Cho thought he was going to touch her arm, but instead he tapped the package of Fizzing Whizzbees in her hand. "And when it does, you'll owe me another chat. Deal?"

Cho's breath caught at the implication. "Deal," she managed.

"Good." Harry's grin was absolutely wicked. "I'll hold you to that, Cho."

He gave her a small wave, nodded to her still-giggling friends, and stepped past them to approach the trolley witch. Behind him, he could hear the urgent whispered conversation that erupted between the three Ravenclaws, and smirked.

"Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, and a couple of those orange ice pops," Harry said to the trolley witch, pulling out some coins. As she gathered his items, he glanced back once to find Cho still watching him. She looked away quickly when their eyes met, her friends practically dragging her down the corridor.

Harry paid for his purchases, shrinking them with a quick wandless spell before tucking them into his pocket. The corridor had cleared somewhat, and he took a moment to focus on the magic he'd woven into the platform earlier that morning.

The rune had been simple – barely more than a tracking charm, really – carved into the platform entrance where it would go unnoticed. He'd keyed it specifically to two magical signatures: Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. And now, reaching out with his senses, he could see them. Not physically, but as two threads of magic, silver-white and shimmering in his mind's eye.

They were converging.

A sharp, predatory smile emerged on his face as he focused on the location, visualizing it in his mind. Fifth carriage, toward the rear. A compartment. He extended his awareness further, checking for any other presences nearby.

The coast was clear.

With a twist on the spot, Harry apparated, emerging in the narrow corridor outside a compartment door. The movement of the train didn't affect him; he'd timed the apparition perfectly.

He could immediately sense the wards on the door. Locking charms and a silencing charm.

Child's play.

Harry didn't bother to draw his wand. He merely flicked his finger at the door. He didn't take down the silencing charm entirely – that would alert little Draco immediately. Instead, he carefully carved a hole through it, a small gap in the magical barrier that would allow only him to hear what was being said inside.

He listened for a while, and finally deciding he'd heard enough, Harry moved. The locking charm dissolved. The silencing charm collapsed. And before anyone inside could register what was happening, Harry pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The blond Slytherin collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, his body going limp and tumbling sideways.

Pansy's head snapped up and her terrified eyes met the amused ones of one Harry Potter who stood in the previously locked compartment, his hands casually in his pockets as he stared at Draco's unconscious form. His green eyes were filled with amusement. He looked calculating and interested in what he had witnessed.

"Potter." Her voice came out shakier than she would have liked. She touched her split lip, her fingers coming away bloody. "How did you – the door was locked – "

"Yeah, funny thing about locks." His hands in his pockets, Harry stepped over Draco like the Slytherin heir was a piece of luggage someone had left in an inconvenient spot. "Malfoy's locking charm's not worth shit. Didn't even need my wand."

"What are you even doing here?" She asked, her eyes wide.

"Well, I was standing out there for a while actually. Wanted to see how this little drama played out."

"W-What? You were listening? And you heard everything and just —"

"Waited to see if you'd need help or if you'd handle it yourself?" Harry finished. "Yep. You made quite an impression in the Ministry, Parkinson. I made it clear back then. Right now though? Wanted to see if you had fight left in you or if Malfoy would break you in five minutes."

He moved closer, and Pansy instinctively pressed herself against the window, her pulse still hammering. Harry noticed the reaction and stopped, an eyebrow raised. He held a hand up to reassure her.

"Easy, Parkinson. I'm not going to hurt you." His eyes flicked to her bleeding lip, and to the red mark on her cheek that was probably going to bruise even more spectacularly. "Someone else already took care of that, eh? Got a good hit, looks like. How's the face?"

Pansy's hand moved to her face automatically. "Cut the bullshit, Potter. What do you really want?"

"Right now? I want to know if you're as smart as I think you are." Harry flicked his finger and lifted Draco's body onto the opposite seat. The Slytherin flopped there like a rag doll, his pale hair falling across his face. Pansy's eyes bugged out at the casual display of wandless magic. "He'll be out for a while. Long enough for us to have a conversation, at least."

"You're going to get in trouble," Pansy said. Her tongue explored her split lip, probing the damage. "He'll report you. His mother will complain to the school. You'll —"

"I'll what?" Harry's smile was sharp. "Get detention? Lose house points? Please. First off, the prick didn't even see me. Second, he just assaulted another student on the Hogwarts Express. He locked the door, closed the curtains, disarmed you, and hit you hard enough to split your lip. There are rules against that sort of thing, turns out."

"Nobody will believe me over him."

"Maybe not. But they'll believe me." Harry leaned back, looking entirely too comfortable given the situation. "And I'm happy to tell anyone who asks exactly what I saw when I opened this door. Malfoy standing over you, fist raised, you bleeding

and defenseless. Somehow I don't think that's going to play well for him, Slytherin prince or not."

Pansy stared at him, trying to process what was happening. Harry Potter had just saved her, stopping Draco from... what? How far would Draco have gone if Potter hadn't interrupted?

She didn't want to think about that.

"Why?" The question slipped out before she could stop it. "Why do you care what happens to me?"

"You told the Malfoys to fuck off," he said bluntly. "You called out Lucius as a Death Eater in front of the entire Ministry. You burned every bridge you had, destroyed your family's social standing, and walked away from everything you'd ever known. All because you refused to keep pretending that the people who got your father killed were somehow the good guys. Even though your father was not a good guy either. Don't make that face. You know I'm telling the truth."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Doesn't it?" Harry tilted his head. "You made a choice, Parkinson. A real one. Most people don't have the guts to do that, especially when the cost is so high. I waited outside because I needed some sort of confirmation, I guess. Confirmation that you were worth it. If, after everything that has happened so far, you'd crumbled, begged him for forgiveness, promised to be his good little pet – I'd have walked away. Let you two work out your drama without me. But you didn't. You fought back. Told him his father was a coward and a murderer even after he'd disarmed you and hit you. That's interesting."

"Interesting..."

"Very. It tells me you've got spine. You've got balls. Not literally, but yeah. Tells me you're not just lashing out but actually committed to this new path you've chosen. And that makes you potentially useful."

"Useful." Pansy murmured, feeling something cold settle in her chest. "That's what this is about? You want to use me? You're just like the others then."

"Don't act so offended." Harry chided gently, his smile sharp. "Everyone uses everyone, Parkinson. The only question is whether you get something worthwhile out of it. The Malfoys used you. Your mother used you. Do I want to use you? Absolutely. At least I'm being honest about it."

He had a point, much as Pansy hated to admit it.

She'd realized this wasn't the rescue she'd initially thought it to be, and she had a foreboding feeling about what he would want from her.

She recalled what he'd told her outside the Ministry. The offer she'd thought about throughout the summer.

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

And truth be told, she had no answer.

"What could you possibly want from me?" She asked in as firm a voice as she could muster, hating herself when it came out wavered.

Harry's expression shifted, and his eyes roamed over her possessively. He smirked as he slowly got to his feet and took a step closer, staring her down. Wide-eyed, Pansy gazed back into his emerald orbs and felt a chill run down her spine as he smirked at her like a predator.

"I want your complete obedience to myself."

Pansy blinked, momentarily thrown off balance. Of all the things she'd expected him to say, that wasn't it. "My what?"

"Your obedience. Your loyalty. Your commitment." Harry said it like he was discussing the weather. "I want you to be mine, Pansy Parkinson. Fully and completely."

"Yours." The word felt strange in her mouth. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means what it sounds like. You follow my lead. You take my direction. You trust my judgment over your own when it matters." Harry moved closer, and his gaze traveled over her in a way that made Pansy's pulse race. "And yes, before you ask—I want you to become one of my lovers."

Heat flooded Pansy's face, shock momentarily overriding every other emotion. "Y-You can't be serious!"

"Why not?" Harry's tone was maddeningly casual. "You're beautiful, obviously. Anyone with eyes can see that. And I've had my eyes on you for a while now. Come on, with an arse like that, there's no way you haven't caught me staring at least once. But most importantly, you've proven you've got enough spine to tell the Malfoys to fuck off even when it costs you everything. That's worth something in my eyes."

He said it all so matter-of-factly, like he was listing the qualities of a broom he was considering purchasing.

And she wasn't sure if that wasn't his exact approach here as well.

"You're insane," she whispered.

"I'm practical." Harry corrected. "Let's see. You need protection from Malfoy and others. You need resources. Pretty sure it must've been a struggle living on your own after everything. You need a place in a world that's just cast you out. I can provide all

of that. In return, I want you. I want your unconditional loyalty. Seems pretty straightforward to me."

Pansy's mind was racing. This was indeed no noble rescue. This wasn't even just cold political calculation. Potter was looking at her like she was something he wanted to possess, and he wasn't even bothering to hide it.

"You're talking about –" she couldn't quite make herself finish the sentence.

"I'm talking about wanting you in every way," Harry said bluntly. "As an ally. As a source of information. As someone in my inner circle. And yes, in my bed, if we're being honest about intentions here. I don't see the point in pretending otherwise."

The sheer audacity of it left Pansy speechless for a moment. She'd expected manipulation, certainly. Expected him to want something from her. But this level of directness, this casual acknowledgment of wanting her physically as well as strategically – it was completely outside her experience.

"You don't even know me," she managed.

"I know enough. I know you're ambitious – you'd have to be to have survived this long in the Slytherin social hierarchy. I know you're willing to take risks when you see an opportunity. I know you're not squeamish about morally gray areas, given your background." His eyes met hers, calm and self-assured. "And I know you're in a position where you need what I can offer more than you need to worry about conventional morality or propriety."

It was true. All of it was true, and they both knew it. Pansy wanted to be offended, wanted to slap him and storm out. But she was also pragmatic enough to recognize her situation.

"This is blackmail," she said, but her voice lacked real conviction.

"This is an offer," Harry corrected. "A very generous one, considering your alternatives. I'm not forcing anything, Parkinson. You're free to walk away right now. Take your chances on your own. See how far you get."

"What if I refuse?"

Harry's expression didn't change. "Then I leave you here with Malfoy. Wake him up, let him finish what he started. You can try your luck surviving Hogwarts on your own with the Malfoy heir out for your blood and no one to watch your back. Maybe you'll manage it. Maybe you won't."

He moved toward the door, and Pansy felt a spike of panic.

"Here's how I see it playing out," Harry continued. "You can go back to trying to survive alone – and you might survive, probably. You're resourceful enough. But it'll

be hard. Lonely. Dangerous. Malfoy will make sure of that. Every day will be a fight just to maintain your dignity and safety."

He paused, looking back at her with those calculating green eyes.

"Or you can accept what I'm offering. Protection. Resources. A place with people who'll actually have your back when things get ugly. Power, eventually, when I have it to share. And yes, a place at my side in more ways than one. All it costs is your loyalty and your trust. Seems like a fair trade to me."

"Fair." Pansy's laugh was bitter. "You want me to belong to you. You want me to be your whore."

"No need to be so crass. I want you, yes. But I want you to choose to belong to me," Harry corrected. "There's a difference. You've spent your whole life being told who you belonged to. Your father. The Malfoys. Your mother's ambitions. I'm offering you a choice. You can choose me. Choose the protection and opportunity I'm offering. Or you can choose to keep struggling on your own."

"That's not really a choice."

"It's more of a choice than Malfoy was offering you." Harry gestured at Draco's unconscious form. "He wanted you to be his bitch. To grovel and submit and accept whatever abuse he felt like doling out. I'm offering you partnership. Admittedly on my terms, but partnership nonetheless. I protect my people, Parkinson. I reward loyalty. And I make sure that anyone who comes after them regrets it."

He wasn't wrong about the comparison. Everything Harry was saying was manipulative and self-serving, but it was still better than what Draco had been threatening her with.

"You really want this," Pansy said slowly, studying his face. "You actually want me."

"Yes." No hesitation. "I want you. For all the reasons I've outlined. You're useful, you're beautiful, and you've just proven you're brave enough to be interesting. Why wouldn't I want that?"

The honesty was almost more disturbing than if he'd tried to dress it up in prettier words. At least she knew exactly where she stood.

"And if I agree?" Her voice was steadier now. "What exactly would that mean?"

"It means you're under my protection starting now. Anyone who comes after you answers to me. It means you share information when I ask for it—nothing that would endanger your life, but enough to be useful. It means you trust my judgment and follow my lead when it matters." Harry's smile was sharp. "And it means that you'll become my lover as well. Fully on mutually agreeable terms."

Pansy's mind was spinning. This was insane. Agreeing to this would be trading one form of control for another. But at least Potter was being honest about what he wanted. At least he was offering her something tangible in return. At least he wouldn't abuse her. It wasn't much, but it was more than anything else she could hope to get.

And honestly? The thought of belonging to someone who actually wanted her – not just as a political pawn or a status symbol, but as herself – wasn't entirely unappealing. Even if his methods were manipulative as hell.

"I need time to think about this."

"No, you don't." Harry's voice was firm, and he took her by surprise. "You need to make a choice right now, before Malfoy wakes up. Because if you're not with me when he does, you're on your own. And we both know how that ends."

Damn him. Damn his calculating green eyes that saw right through her. He was right, and she didn't like it at all.

Her options were basically nonexistent. On one side, a lonely, terrifying road of fending for herself against the full might and fury of the Malfoy family, a fight she knew, deep down, she would eventually lose. On the other... Potter.

Her mind began to whirl, moving past the initial shock as she began to think critically. This wasn't a surrender. It couldn't be. It had to be a tactical retreat. He had laid his cards on the table, and while most of them were high, he'd revealed one crucial thing.

*I've had my eyes on you for a while now. Come on, with an arse like that...*

He was attracted to her. He wanted her. Not just as an asset, but physically. The thought, which had initially been shocking, made her think.

Men, even powerful ones like Potter definitely was, were idiots when it came to sex and desire. It made them careless. It created blind spots. He thought he was being brutally honest and direct, but he'd unknowingly just handed her a key. He thought he was acquiring a loyal subordinate and a warm body for his bed. He didn't know any better.

She was a snake from the viper's pit, not some foolhardy lion.

She could play the part. She could be obedient, loyal, and committed to him. She would warm his bed, pleasure him to the best of her abilities, and whisper in his ear, establishing herself with him.

She would learn his weaknesses, his desires, and his fears. She would make herself indispensable, not just useful. She would leverage his attraction, turning his desire for her into a shield and then, perhaps, into a leash.

He was offering her protection, but if she played this right, she could gain something far more valuable: influence over the one person who had the potential to

shape their entire world. This wasn't about belonging to him. This was about making him believe she did, while she carved out her own power from within his.

And if the power he wielded was anything to go by, she would never lack in satisfaction if she was with him. Pleasure was a certainty if her hunch about him was correct. Magic would ensure as much.

Now that she thought clearly, she realized she could have everything to gain from this arrangement. The choice became blindingly clear. It wasn't a choice between freedom and submission. It was a choice between a slow, certain demise and a dangerous, glittering opportunity.

And Pansy Parkinson had never been one to shy away from a risk.

She lifted her chin, her dark eyes meeting his. The fear was still there, but it was now overcome with a steely resolve.

"Alright, Potter," she said, her voice surprisingly steady. "You have a deal. You hold your end of the bargain, keep me safe and satisfied, and you will have my loyalty and whatever else you want from me."

A slow smirk spread across Harry's face, a predator's smile that held no real warmth. It was a look of pure satisfaction and triumph. "I thought you might see it my way."

And then he moved. Before she could so much as blink, he closed the remaining distance between them in two long strides. She startled, and her back hit the cold glass of the compartment window with a soft thud. He didn't touch her, not yet, but he was so close she could feel the heat radiating from his body, trapping her completely.

His scent was fresh, uniquely masculine and wild, and it filled her senses. Her breath hitched in her throat and her eyes widened as she stared up at him.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, then to the faint, purpling bruise on her cheek.

"First rule," he said, his voice a low murmur that made her shudder. "I don't like my things damaged."

Things...

He looked her directly in the eyes, and the sheer intensity of his stare pinned her in place.

"You're mine now, Pansy. And I take care of what's mine."

He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a husky whisper that brushed against her ear, sending a cascade of shivers down her spine.

"You will never want for anything again. As long as you remember who you belong to."

His words were possessive, objectifying, everything she should have hated. But coming after Draco's crude threats, they felt less like an insult and more like a promise. A dark, binding promise. Her body reacted before her mind could properly process it. A strange warmth bloomed in her chest, spreading through her limbs.

He raised a hand, and she flinched instinctively. He paused for a fraction of a second before continuing, slower this time, silently telling her he meant no harm. His fingers were long and calloused, yet they were impossibly gentle as his thumb came to rest on her lower lip, right over the small, stinging cut from Draco's ring.

She held her breath, her heart hammering against her ribs. His thumb brushed over the broken skin, once, twice. It should have hurt, but it didn't. Instead, a strange, tingling sensation emanated from his touch, seeping into her skin.

She watched, mesmerized, as a faint golden light flickered at the tip of his finger. The sting vanished. The tenderness receded. When he finally drew his thumb away, she unconsciously ran her tongue over the spot. It was smooth. Healed.

He had healed her, wandlessly and without a single word. The displays of casual, powerful magic were more intimidating than any threat he could have uttered.

His eyes had darkened, the emerald turning into a stormy forest green. He kept his hand cupped around her jaw, his thumb now stroking softly along her cheekbone.

"Like my touch?" he whispered, his voice a silken rasp that made her knees feel weak.

She couldn't find her voice. All her clever plans, all her schemes of manipulation, seemed to evaporate in the face of this overwhelming physical presence. Her mind was screaming at her to be careful, to stay in control, to remember the plans she'd made not even two minutes ago, but her body was a traitor, melting under his gentle caress. She could only manage a small, jerky nod, a shuddering breath escaping her lips as she did.

A satisfied hum rumbled in his chest. "Good."

His attention moved to the bruise on her cheek. His fingers traced its outline, and again, that cool, tingling sensation of magic washed over her skin. It felt like cool water on a sunburn, soothing the ache and chasing away the discoloration. He took his time, his fingers making slow, sensual circles, and with every pass, the tenderness faded until it was gone completely.

The contrast was dizzying. The cool, healing magic on her face and the hot, coiling fire low in her belly. She shivered again, a full-body tremor this time, and to her absolute shock and mortification, she felt a dampness bloom between her legs. Her toes curled, and she clenched her pelvis, desperately trying to maintain any semblance of control.

Her body was responding to him, eagerly and unquestionably. This wasn't part of the plan! She was supposed to be the one using seduction as a tool, not the one being so easily seduced by a simple touch and a display of power. She felt a flush of heat crawl up her neck, hoping the dim light would hide her blush.

His gaze dropped to her lips again, and his head tilted, slowly closing the last inch of space between them. His breath was hot against her skin, smelling faintly of mint, and she shivered.

This was it. This was the sealing of their bargain, the first payment on her debt. She squeezed her eyes shut, her hands clenching into fists at her sides as she braced herself for his kiss, for the claiming, and as much as she wanted to deny it, she knew, deep down, that in that moment, she truly wanted it more than anything.

And then... nothing.

The warmth was gone. The pressure at her back vanished. A cool draft of air hit her, and her eyes snapped open in surprise.

Harry had taken a step back. He stood near the middle of the compartment, that infuriating, knowing smirk plastered back on his face, showing that he knew exactly what he'd just done to her. He had brought her to the edge, made her want it, and then knowingly pulled away. He was playing with her!

"You should get some rest," he said, his tone utterly casual, as if they'd just been discussing the weather. "It's been a long day for you."

Pansy could only stare at him, a glare forming in her eyes. The arousal curdled into a mix of frustration and anger. He was a bastard. An arrogant, manipulative bastard. And he was in complete control. He looked the very picture of innocence, but his eyes danced with triumphant amusement as he glanced down to the spot between her legs and then back at her face.

The bastard knew!

His gaze flickered over to the corner where Draco still lay in an undignified heap. "Don't worry about him," Harry said, his voice losing its playful edge and becoming cold and dismissive. "I'll take out the trash."

He made a small, almost imperceptible gesture with his hand. Malfoy's body lifted from the floor, floating silently in the air beside him, held aloft by the same wandless magic that seemed to come to him effortlessly. Harry turned and began to walk towards the compartment door, Malfoy's unconscious form trailing behind him.

He slid the door open but paused in the doorway, looking back at her over his shoulder. The smirk was gone, replaced by a look of cool possession, a final, meaningful glance that sent another shiver through her.

"You should look forward to the school year, Pansy," he said softly. "It's going to be quite different from what you might have expected."

With that, he stepped out into the corridor, pulling the door shut behind him.

For a long moment, Pansy didn't move. She stood frozen, her back still pressed against the window, and her mind a chaotic whirlwind of emotions. The lingering tingle of his magic on her, the feeling of his touch, the sting of his dismissal, and the terrifying reality of the deal she had just made – all crashed over her at once.

Finally, she released the breath she didn't even realize she'd been holding. Her legs gave out, and she dropped onto the velvet seat with a distinct thud. She stared at the closed door, at the swaying curtain, and at the empty space where the Boy-Who-Lived had just turned her entire world on its head.

She had wanted to manipulate him, to use his desire against him. But he had not given her even an opportunity or moment to believe she had a chance. As if he'd read her thoughts, he'd driven home the point that she was a novice playing checkers against a grandmaster of a game she didn't even understand.

She leaned her head back against the seat, closing her eyes.

What in Salazar's name had she just gotten herself into?

To be continued...