

The Great Hall was its usual self on Sunday morning, alive with the kind of noise that only a few hundred students eating simultaneously could produce. Harry arrived midway through breakfast and took his usual seat, accepting the plate Ron slid toward him without comment.

He had just poured himself a goblet of pumpkin juice when he felt it. A slight shift in the energy at the Gryffindor table, nothing dramatic, nothing that anyone else would notice. Just someone's attention trained on him from the side.

He glanced left. Katie was three seats down, talking to Alicia. She had her hair loose today, it fell past her shoulders in dark waves, and she was gesturing with her fork as she made some point about Quidditch practice. Normal. Perfectly normal. Except that when she finished her thought, her eyes cut briefly toward Harry, just a fraction of a second, and then away. A small smile settled on her lips, the kind that wasn't meant for the person she was actually talking to.

Harry stifled a smirk as he looked back at his plate, reaching for the toast.

Nobody at the table had noticed. Ron was arguing with Seamus about whether Krum's technique was learnable or simply genetic. Neville was focused on his porridge, trying to ignore the noise around him. And Hermione was reading, her book propped against the orange juice jug, which was her usual Sunday morning state.

He watched her turn a page. She had a way of reading, utterly still except for her eyes moving down the page and that one finger ready to turn. Completely absorbed. It was, objectively, a fairly unremarkable thing to observe. Harry found himself watching anyway.

Hermione reached for her tea without looking away from her book, her fingers closing around the mug. Then she stilled. Not obviously, not in a way that stopped the page-turning or changed her posture. But something in her shifted, a slight tension in her shoulders, as though she'd become aware of being watched.

She turned the page.

Harry looked away.

"Pass the marmalade?" Ron asked.

Harry passed it.

Ginny appeared a few minutes later, dropping onto the bench across from Hermione. She grabbed a bread roll, tore it in half, and glanced up at Harry with that same heat in her eyes that he'd long become accustomed to.

"Good morning," she said, her grin entirely filthy as she licked her lips and ogled him openly, quite literally undressing him with her eyes just as he usually did with her. The exchange went unnoticed by everyone around them.

"Morning," Harry replied, his lips quirked upwards slightly.

Ginny's catlike gaze moved between him and Hermione. She stifled a chuckle as she picked up the butter and said nothing else.

Hermione turned another page.

"That Transfiguration essay isn't going to be as straightforward as it looks," she said, not looking up, and it took a moment to register that she was talking to Harry. "McGonagall specifically asked for a discussion of the theoretical limits, and most of the references recommended here barely touch on them."

"I haven't started it," Harry said.

"I know." She did look up then, briefly, and he caught the small crinkle around her eyes that indicated mild exasperation. "I was suggesting you start soon. The library's reference section has two books that actually address it properly. I've already got one of them in my dorm."

"Are you offering to share?"

They stared at each other. Not for long, but enough for a lot to happen. A flush rose in her cheeks but Hermione covered it neatly by looking back at her book. "If you need it, obviously," she muttered.

"I might take you up on that."

Hermione's finger moved to the next page. Ginny was eating her bread roll and seemingly looking at nothing in particular, which meant she was watching everything.

"Hermione," she said after a little while, perfectly casually. "You have that look again."

Hermione's brow creased. "What look?"

"The one where you're reading but you're not reading." Ginny popped a piece of her bread roll into her mouth. "You've been on that page for four minutes."

Hermione snapped her book shut. "I was thinking."

"Were you?" Ginny finally looked up, and her eyes moved briefly, barely perceptibly, to Harry and then back. Her expression was perfectly innocent, which was a state Ginny Weasley maintained remarkably when she was being anything but. "About the essay?"

"Yes," Hermione said firmly.

"Right." Ginny picked up her glass of juice. "That makes sense. Essays are very absorbing."

Harry ate his eggs. He did not say anything because there was nothing that needed saying. Ginny was doing perfectly well without any contribution from him.

Hermione opened her book again. She was back on the same page she'd been on before, and this time she was very pointedly reading it, silently making it clear she was

not going to be drawn into any further conversation. She was sitting slightly straighter than usual.

Harry refilled his goblet and continued his breakfast without hurrying, thoroughly enjoying himself.

"There's a study session in the library this afternoon," Hermione said eventually, which was directed at Ron and therefore at the general table, except that her eyes moved once, briefly, to Harry as she said it. "For anyone who wants to make a start on the backlog."

"I'll think about it," Harry said.

"It's not obligatory," Hermione said, a touch quickly. Then, in a more measured tone, she continued, "I just thought I'd mention it."

"I appreciate the thought."

Hermione pressed her lips together, looked at her book, and said nothing else.

Harry simply stared at her, amused. She really thought she was a very clever person. Little did she know that he knew exactly what she'd done that night with his wand, had said nothing about it, and appeared to find the entire situation deeply satisfying.

He finished his breakfast at a comfortable pace, and by the time he stood up, Katie was already gone from her spot down the table. He caught sight of her near the doors to the Entrance Hall, deep in conversation with Angelina. As if sensing his gaze, Katie glanced back. Brown eyes met green for just a moment. She didn't smile this time, just held the look for a second before turning back to Angelina.

Harry tucked his hands into his pockets and headed for the doors.

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It was a comparatively brighter day outside, and by mid-afternoon most students had found their way out onto the grounds. Harry spent a couple of hours with Ron and Neville near the lake, and then peeled off on his own when the former became absorbed in a Gobstones game with a group of third years and the latter discovered a plant growing near the bank.

He walked without particular direction for a while, letting his mind settle.

The message had been delivered through the usual means, a small square of parchment that had appeared in his robe pocket at breakfast, placed there by means he recognized without needing to investigate. It had said only a time and a place: the disused classroom on the fourth floor, the one that hadn't seen regular use in years.

Half six. He had forty minutes.

He made his way back to the castle.

The fourth-floor corridor was quiet at this hour. His footsteps were the only sound as he approached the old classroom. The door was shut. He put his hand on the handle, felt the faint trace of a ward on the other side, noted it was hers, and pushed the door open.

Pansy was standing near the far end of the room, her back to the windows. She had changed out of her school robes into a dark fitted jumper and trousers that suited her considerably better, and she had clearly spent some care on her hair, which fell smooth and dark around her face. She had also, Harry noticed with some amusement, positioned herself in the best light the room had to offer.

She noticed him notice, and her chin lifted slightly.

"You're on time," she said.

"I usually am." Harry let the door swing shut behind him and crossed the room at a relaxed pace, hands still in his pockets. "Good ward. Subtle."

"I've had practice." Her voice softened at the small praise, though she kept her expression composed. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

"You sent the note. I said I'd be available." Harry tilted his head. "Did you think that was a conditional offer?"

"I didn't know what to think." Pansy met his eyes. She was working at projecting calm and doing a reasonable job of it, but Harry could see the effort underneath it. "Things have been rather complicated this week."

"Have they?"

"Malfoy made a scene in the common room on Thursday night. Nothing physical," she added quickly before he could speak. "Just words. But he made sure everyone was listening."

"What did he say?"

"The usual." A flicker of emotion crossed her face, carefully suppressed. "That I'm a pathetic blood traitor. That no one of any standing will have anything to do with me by Christmas." She said it flatly, as though reciting something she had already processed and filed away. "It was mostly performance. He wanted an audience and he got one."

Harry looked at her steadily. "And how did you respond?"

"I didn't." The ghost of a smile touched her lips. "I finished my tea and went to bed."

"Good."

"It wasn't satisfying."

"No," Harry agreed. "But it was right." He moved to one of the desks and leaned against it, crossing his arms. "He's looking for a reaction, Pansy. Every time you refuse

to give him one, it costs him more than any words you could throw back. People notice who has control of themselves."

She absorbed his words before asking quietly, "Is that actually working? Do people notice?"

"A few. Give it time." He watched her face. "Is that all that happened this week?"

The pause was small. But it was there.

"No," Pansy said. She moved away from the window, to one of the old classroom chairs that she had clearly arranged for herself, and sat in it with carefully maintained composure. "Something else happened. Someone approached me."

"Tell me."

"Daphne Greengrass." Pansy's eyes came to his. "She pulled me into a classroom after dinner on Wednesday. Offered me an alliance. Protection within Slytherin, possible restoration of some standing, in exchange for information and cooperation on her terms."

Harry was quiet for a moment. "And you said?"

"No."

"Why?"

Pansy's brow furrowed slightly. "Because it was the same as being controlled by Draco, just with a more pleasant face on it. I'm not interested in trading one leash for another."

"That's true," Harry said. "What else did she want, do you think? Not what she said. What else?"

A longer pause. Pansy was thinking properly now rather than simply recounting, which was what he wanted.

"She wanted access," Pansy said slowly. "She said information and cooperation but what she meant was, she wanted a way into conversations and situations that she doesn't currently have. She's not Draco's friend, she never plays that game, but she's also never been on the outside of things. If I became her asset, she'd gain a perspective she doesn't have."

"Good. You're thinking clearly." Harry pushed off the desk and began moving toward her, unconcerned. "What do you know about Greengrass?"

"Personally?" Pansy considered. "She's clever. Not loud about it, she doesn't need to be. She comes from solid money, not the Malfoy level but solid, and she doesn't have any obvious agenda with the Death Eater circle the way half of Slytherin does. Her family's always played neutral. She reads people well and she doesn't waste effort on things that won't pay off."

"Ambitions?"

"I've never known her to want anything obvious. That's part of what makes her unsettling." Pansy glanced up at him as he came closer, something shifting in her expression. "She's not interested in the usual things. Social standing, house politics. She operates on a different level. I've never been able to work out what she actually wants."

Harry had reached her chair now. He stopped just in front of her, and the air in the room changed.

"What's she like?" he asked, his voice easy, conversational. "Not politically. Just as a person."

Pansy looked up at him with dark eyes. Some color had come into her cheeks, not from embarrassment, but something else. "Why?"

"Because you know her and I don't." He reached out and brushed a strand of hair back from her face, just his fingers, light and slow. He felt her go very still under the touch. "Indulge me."

Pansy exhaled slowly through her nose, collecting herself. "She's cold," she said. "Not unkind, exactly. She just doesn't particularly care about most people. She can be civil. She can be charming when she decides it's worth the effort. But she doesn't warm to people." A slight pause. "She doesn't look cold. That's the confusing thing. She looks like the kind of person who would be warm. But she's not."

"And what does she look like?" Harry's hand had settled at the side of her neck, his thumb tracing a slow line along her jaw. Pansy's breathing had become more ragged.

"You've seen her," Pansy said, her voice slightly lower than before.

"Remind me."

Pansy knew what was happening and she was doing her best to keep her thoughts together under it. Harry watched the effort and was patient with it. "She's blonde. Blue eyes. Objectively she's," Pansy paused, "very beautiful. And she has veela blood in her ancestry. If you like that sort of thing."

"And do you think I would?"

"I think," Pansy said carefully, "that any man with functional eyes would." She tilted her head slightly into the hand at her neck, a small involuntary movement that she didn't quite catch before it happened. Her voice had gone quieter. "She's the sort of girl people look at and then look at again."

"Interesting." Harry's thumb continued its slow path. He watched Pansy's eyes darken. "And she came to you with an offer, and you turned her down, and you filed the whole thing away and didn't tell me."

A beat.

"I was going to tell you," Pansy said. Not defensively. Just honestly.

"When?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Yes. Now. When I asked." Harry's hand stilled against her jaw. "Not when it happened."

Pansy's chin dropped slightly. "I should have told you sooner."

"You should have told me the same day." His voice was not unkind, but it was direct. "Not because I need to know everything. Because you were sitting on information about someone's attempt to acquire you as an asset, and you let several days pass before mentioning it." He let the observation sit for a moment. "I need you thinking more quickly than that."

"I know," Pansy said quietly.

He tilted her chin up with two fingers, bringing her eyes back to his. She let him, and the look in her face now was vulnerable in a way that she would never have allowed with anyone else. "More importantly," Harry said, "you missed something."

Pansy's brow creased. "What?"

He straightened slightly and moved to sit on the edge of the desk nearest to her, close enough that they nearly touched. Close enough that she had to look up at him. Her hands rested in her lap and she was very still, acutely aware of every inch between them.

"Greengrass approached you," Harry said. "She wanted information and access. She thought you were vulnerable and without resources, which means she didn't know about our arrangement. She pulled you into a private room and made you an offer in confidence." He watched Pansy's face. "Think about what she just handed you."

Pansy stared at him. Then, slowly, her expression changed.

"She showed me her hand," Pansy said.

"She showed you her interest." Harry's voice was still patient, instructive. "She wants an asset. She wants access to things she doesn't currently have. She was willing to offer protection and support, which means she has resources she'd spend on the right investment. And she considers you a viable one." He paused. "She came to you, Pansy. Of her own accord, in private, with an offer she wouldn't have made to someone she thought was genuinely without value."

Pansy was quiet for a moment, genuinely thinking. He let her.

"If I'd accepted," she said slowly, "I'd have been in her pocket. But also inside her confidence."

"And you'd have had access to whatever she's actually working toward, which she wasn't going to advertise in a first meeting. You'd have had proximity. And given that you don't actually need what she's offering, because you already have protection,"

Harry's eyes held hers, "you'd have had leverage. The kind that builds quietly over time."

"She'd have thought she had me," Pansy said, her voice picking up something, the beginning of real understanding. "While actually I'd have been the one with the advantage, because I'd know she wanted something and she wouldn't know I already had something better."

"Yes." Harry tilted his head. "You declined instead."

Pansy closed her eyes briefly. "I was shortsighted."

"You were protecting yourself from an obvious trap without looking to see if the trap had something useful in it." He said it simply, not cruelly. "The instinct was right. The analysis was incomplete."

"I know." She opened her eyes. There was no sulking in her expression, just the clear-eyed look of someone taking stock. "Can it be fixed?"

"Of course it can. Greengrass isn't done paying attention to you. She noted that you had something she couldn't see. That makes you more interesting, not less." Harry's mouth curved. "Her offer was rejected but her curiosity wasn't satisfied. She'll be watching. That gives you an opening."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing yet." He leaned forward slightly, his elbows on his knees, and Pansy's breath caught at the reduced distance. "First, I want you to understand the principle. Recognizing an opportunity isn't only about knowing when to take the obvious road. It's about seeing what the situation gives you that you weren't looking for." He held her gaze. "You walked away from that room thinking you'd made the smart choice. And in one sense you had. But smart isn't the same as shrewd."

"I understand," Pansy said. Her voice had gone a little unsteady, and it wasn't entirely because of the lesson.

"Good." Harry reached out and took her chin in his hand again, properly this time, and the touch made her go very still. His thumb brushed the corner of her mouth. "Now. You knew you were supposed to come to me with anything that concerns your situation here."

"Yes." Her voice had dropped considerably.

"Which means you had three days to tell me about this and you chose not to." He tilted his head. "That's not clever."

Pansy's pulse was doing something she was doing her best not to show. "No," she agreed, her voice quiet.

"I think," Harry said conversationally, "that needs addressing."

He moved before she registered it properly, and then her world shifted sideways quite literally as she found herself guided over his knee with a swiftness that left her breathless. Her hands caught against his shin for balance. The room was very quiet.

The first sharp smack to her backside pulled a sound from her that she would have been mortified by if she'd been paying attention to anything other than the warmth spreading through her and the particular quality of her own response to it. The second and third followed in slow sequence, and by the fourth Pansy had given up entirely on maintaining any pretense of composure.

It wasn't purely the sting, though the sting was very present. It was the combination of the sting and his hand resting there between, and the awareness of her own position, and the fact that she was bent over Harry Potter's knee in an empty classroom being corrected like she belonged there, which was, she was discovering, quite precisely how she felt.

When he helped her back up, she was flushed and her breathing was entirely disordered and she was also, inescapably, wanting things she had quite a lot of experience wanting these days.

"Lesson one," Harry said, his voice still perfectly calm, his eyes interested as they moved over her face. "When something happens, you tell me."

"Yes," Pansy said. Her voice came out steadier than she deserved credit for.

"And lesson two?" He raised an eyebrow.

Pansy felt the smile tug at the corner of her mouth before she caught it. "Look harder at what I'm being handed before I decide I don't want it."

"There you go." He reached out and smoothed her hair back from her face, a gesture that was almost gentle, and Pansy had the distinct experience of all her remaining composure setting itself quietly on fire. "So. Now that you've been adequately chided," the mild amusement in his eyes did nothing to help her equilibrium, "is there anything else you want to tell me about Greengrass? Whatever you observed in that conversation. Her manner. What she did and didn't say."

Pansy gathered herself, because she was going to be useful even if it killed her. "She was composed. Very. The kind of composed that means she'd prepared for different outcomes. When I said no, she wasn't thrown, but she was surprised. She tried to read me after that. Spent a few seconds just looking before she moved to the door." Pansy paused. "She said I was either brave or stupid. She seemed genuinely undecided."

"What else?"

"She was curious about what I had. She asked directly what I thought was going to protect me. I didn't answer."

"Good. What was her read of you before the end of the conversation?"

Pansy considered. "That I had something. She didn't know what. I could see her thinking it over. And," a slight pause, "I think she found it more interesting that I said no than she would have if I'd said yes."

Harry nodded slowly. "That tracks." His expression was one she was coming to recognize, not cold, but calculating in a way that was also interested. Curious. He was, she knew, moving pieces around in his mind in a way she couldn't fully see. "All right. I'm going to tell you what you're going to do about Daphne Greengrass. But first." He looked at her levelly. "I believe you owe me something."

Pansy's breath left her in a slow exhale. Her heart was doing something embarrassing. "Have I?" she said, though she knew perfectly well.

"You've been rather economical with information this week. I'd say you owe me several things." He tilted his head. "But let's start with one."

The look in his eyes was not demanding. It never was with him. It was far more effective than demanding; it was patient and certain, and it looked at her like she was exactly where he expected her to be.

Pansy had thought about this. She'd thought about it more than she was prepared to admit, in the spare quiet moments of the last several days when the dormitory was sleeping and she was not. She'd thought about what their arrangement would eventually include and she'd thought about the particular way Harry Potter looked at her and she'd thought about the fact that she had, over the course of the last week, arrived at a place where what she'd once found unimaginable now felt not only imaginable but almost urgently necessary.

Slowly, she slid off the desk to her knees.

The cold of the stone floor barely registered. She looked up at him, and what she found in his expression was not triumph, but that same certainty and warmth, and she felt steadier for seeing it.

"You're going to tell me what I'm doing right," she said, "and what I'm doing wrong."

"Yes." His voice had changed, lower, quieter. "I'm going to be completely honest with you."

"Good." Pansy reached for his trousers, her fingers working quickly. "I want to be good at this."

She'd thought about that too. Not only in the abstract. She'd thought about the specifics. She'd thought about what she knew and what she didn't and the clear-eyed fact that she wanted to be someone Harry kept, not someone he stopped finding useful. And this, she understood, was part of what made him keep someone.

She settled on her knees and got both hands on him properly, one wrapped around the base and one higher up the shaft, and took a moment to simply look at what she was working with before she started. He was already mostly hard from the buildup,

warm and heavy in her grip, and she felt his cock twitch against her palm when she applied the first squeeze.

She started with a straightforward stroke, getting the measure of him. Grip, drag, release. She watched his face the whole time, not his cock, because his face was where the information was. His jaw was set, his expression controlled, the way it always was, but she was looking for what moved underneath that and she had patience.

She adjusted her top hand so her thumb pressed firmly along the underside on each upstroke, dragging over the vein that ran the length of him, and that produced a small but definite tightening around his eyes. She noted it and repeated the motion. Same response, slightly less contained. She did it a third time and he exhaled through his nose in a way that wasn't quite a sound but was close.

Good. She had something to build on.

She kept that motion and added pressure, her grip tightening on the upstroke and easing slightly on the down, and his stomach contracted visibly.

"That," Harry said, his voice slightly rough at the edges, "is good. Pressure. More pressure."

She obliged, her grip tightening further, and felt the way his cock swelled fractionally harder in her hands at the increased friction. His exhale was audible this time.

"Less speed for a moment." His hand came to her hair, not gripping, just resting, fingers curling loosely through the dark strands. The weight of it there affected her in a way she hadn't accounted for. "Slower. Make it mean something."

She slowed to a long pull, all the way from the base to the head, her thumb still working that underside ridge on every upstroke. Tip to base, base to tip. Slow enough that he felt every inch of it. His head dropped back slightly, his throat exposed, his jaw going loose, and she watched it happen and kept going at exactly that pace.

She tried the variation she'd been considering. She leaned in, keeping one hand moving, and ran her tongue flat up the underside of his shaft, tracing that same vein her thumb had been pressing, from base all the way to the head. His hips shifted forward a fraction involuntarily, and the sound he made this time was short and clipped and very much not controlled.

She did it again. Same result, less restrained.

She filed that away as a tool she now owned and turned her attention to the head. She leaned forward and wrapped her lips around just the crown, sealing them below the ridge, and worked her tongue in slow firm circles, pressing hardest right at the underside where the ridge met the shaft because that was clearly the spot. Harry's stomach went rigid. His thigh under her free hand tensed hard.

"Yes," he said, stripped of any pretense of instruction now, just saying it. "Like that. Keep it exactly like that."

She kept it. She held that position and worked him with her tongue in tight, wet circles while her hand stroked the length below, matching the rhythm of her mouth. The sounds she was drawing from him had changed. Less controlled breath, more genuine response. A low exhale that broke slightly at the end. A short bitten sound when she pressed harder with her tongue. The soft hiss of air through his teeth when her hand twisted slightly on the upstroke.

She catalogued every one of them and fed them back to him in the technique, learning in real time what combination of pressure and movement produced the most reaction and refining toward it with each pass.

His hand tightened in her hair. Not pushing, just gripping, fingers curling through the strands.

She took him deeper. She let him slide past her lips and into her mouth proper, taking as much as she comfortably could, her lips stretched around him, and she heard the sound that produced, a low rough groan that he didn't entirely manage to keep down. She felt his whole body tighten in response, and she held him there for a moment, working her tongue against the underside while her throat relaxed. She pulled back slowly, dragging her lips, keeping the suction.

Then she did it again.

He said something that wasn't a word.

She built a rhythm from that, taking him deep and pulling back, her hand working in tandem with her mouth, stroking what she couldn't fit, and the sounds he was making now had stopped being restrained in any meaningful sense. She could feel his thighs trembling slightly under her hands, the effort he was spending on staying still, and knowing she was responsible for that sent a thrill of pleasure through her that felt very much like power.

She worked him deep and slow for another long minute, varying the pressure of her lips and the angle of her tongue, learning which combinations produced the roughest sounds from him, and once she had that mapped she stopped varying and committed. Consistent pressure. Consistent rhythm. Deep enough to feel her throat around him on each pass, tight enough that the drag on the way back made his jaw lock.

His hand in her hair had stopped being still.

"Look at me," he said, his voice low and rough.

She looked up at him with her lips still stretched around his cock and found his eyes on her. His whole face changed the instant she made eye contact. The last controlled layer of his expression came apart, his jaw tightening.

She held his gaze and increased the pace, her head moving faster, her hand working the base in rhythm, and she watched his composure dismantle piece by piece with utter satisfaction, knowing she was the cause. She could feel his cock getting harder in her mouth, the change in weight and heat that meant he was close, and she

pressed her tongue firmer against the underside on every stroke and watched the effect register on his face in real time.

He said her name. Low. Almost involuntary. Just the one syllable, rough enough that she felt it in her chest.

Then his thighs locked. His stomach went completely rigid. His grip in her hair tightened properly, fingers clenching, and she felt his cock pulse once, hard, against her tongue. She took him as deep as she could manage, her throat opening around him, and felt him come apart. He made a sound that was not quiet, a rough bitten groan that he cut off halfway, his hips pressing forward once with the kind of involuntary force that meant he had stopped having any say in it as he spilled down her throat in long hot pulses while she held him there and swallowed and did not stop moving and did not look away from his face for a single second.

She held his gaze through all of it, intent on proving herself.

When the last of his release had worked through him, she stayed where she was, drawing back slowly, keeping her lips firm and her tongue moving until he made a small sharp sound that told her it was sensitive now and she eased off. She pulled back fully, her hand still wrapped loosely around the base, and she could feel the shuddering in his thighs, the slow release of all that tension, his chest heaving as he breathed raggedly.

His grip in her hair had gone from clenching to a slow, absent stroke, fingers moving through the dark strands without apparent intention. She let herself notice it. Let herself stay there a moment in the warm quiet of it before she sat back on her heels.

Harry's hand moved through her hair once more, slower.

"Come up," he said.

She rose. He silently conjured a handkerchief and offered it, which she appreciated in a way she didn't say out loud, not even bothering to comment on the silent, wandless conjuration. Nothing would surprise her when it came to this man; she'd accepted as much a while ago, and she dealt with herself as efficiently as she could as she straightened her hair.

"Assessment," he said. "Honestly."

Pansy met his eyes. "You want it or you want to give it?"

"Both."

"I started with too much variation," Pansy said. "I was experimenting when I should have identified what worked and committed to it from the beginning."

"Yes." His expression was level and honest. "The beginning was scattered. You were performing rather than paying attention." He paused. "The middle was considerably better. When you stopped planning and started responding to what you were getting, that was very good. Genuinely." His eyes stayed on hers when he said it,

and she felt it land differently than standard praise usually did. "The eye contact at the end was," a slight pause, "noted."

"I'll work on the beginning," Pansy said.

"You'll have opportunity to." He straightened his robes and she stepped forward without being asked and helped, adjusting the front with careful hands. He let her do it. "Lesson," he said, while she worked. "In everything, Pansy. Not only this. Start with what's in front of you. Don't plan so far ahead that you stop seeing what's actually happening."

"Like with Greengrass," she said, smoothing his collar.

"Like with Greengrass. Yes."

She stepped back. He looked entirely himself again, which was both impressive and, she admitted privately, slightly annoying.

"All right," Harry said, sitting back against the desk. "Daphne Greengrass. You're going to find a reason to speak with her this week. Not about her offer. Something else. An academic pretext would be simplest."

Pansy nodded, listening.

"You're not going to bring up her offer and neither is she. You're just going to establish a small, ordinary interaction. Nothing that would attract comment." Harry's tone was measured, the way it got when he was laying something out properly. "What you're doing is indirectly giving her a way in. You declined her offer but you're not hostile and you're not afraid of her. That changes her read of you slightly. It opens space."

"And then?"

"And then you wait." His eyes moved over her face. "She'll come back to you. Not with the same offer, something more oblique. A question, a favor, something small. When she does, you'll tell me before you respond. And we'll decide together what the response is."

"You want me to eventually work her," Pansy said.

"I want you to eventually have her working me," Harry said, "while she thinks you're working for her. There's a difference."

Pansy felt the precision of that settle into her mind. She turned it over.

"What do you want from her?" she asked. "In the end."

"Information, principally. Daphne Greengrass plays neutral and she's been doing it long enough to have access to all sides. Her family has ties that she's careful never to advertise. She knows things." Harry tilted his head. "What those things are specifically, I won't know until we get further in. But proximity to her is worth building."

"And I'm the way in."

"You're a way in. You don't need to be the only one."

Pansy nodded slowly. "All right," she said.

"Good." Harry's gaze was steady on her. "You're thinking more clearly than you were a week ago."

"I have better reason to," Pansy said.

Something moved through his expression, brief and warm. "You do."

She gathered herself, smoothing her jumper and checking that her hair was in order, which it was. The room had darkened slightly while they'd been talking, the windows now showing a deep blue evening sky.

"Same time next Sunday?" she asked.

"Unless something changes." Harry pushed off the desk. "If you have anything time-sensitive before then, the note. You remember how."

"I remember." She moved to the door. "Harry." She paused with her hand on the handle and looked back at him.

He was standing where she'd left him, entirely relaxed, his hands in his pockets and an expression on his face that she could only describe as quietly pleased. The way a person looks when they're exactly where they intended to be.

"Thank you," Pansy said. "For the instruction. Both kinds."

Harry's mouth curved. "You're welcome."

She opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, and the door clicked shut behind her.

The air was slightly cool and the corridor was blessedly empty. Pansy stood still for a moment, just breathing, feeling the warmth still in her face and the clear cold air around her and the particular, excellent sensation of someone who has done something difficult and done it well.

She was, she realized, pleased with herself. Not in the shallow way of the girl she'd been three months ago, who had been pleased with herself for petty cruelties and social victories that hadn't amounted to anything. This was different. Substantive. She had walked into that room with incomplete information and a mistake on her record, and she had walked out with a lesson, a plan, and proof that Harry thought she was worth the investment of both.

That was not nothing.

She straightened her collar and began walking toward the stairs, her pace even and relaxed. The dungeon would be its usual hostile state. Draco would have some audience performing for and some snide remark at the ready. She found, at this precise moment, that she could regard that prospect with what felt almost like amusement.

Let him have his audience. She had rather better things to think about.

Behind her, in the old classroom on the fourth floor, Harry Potter sat back against the desk for a moment longer, turning things over in his mind with satisfaction. The long game was developing exactly as anticipated. Pansy was sharper than she gave herself credit for and would be sharper still in another month. Daphne Greengrass was an unknown quantity worth mapping. And the particular way Pansy had looked at him at the end of that lesson, clear-eyed and earnest and genuinely trying, was something he filed away with appreciation.

He pushed off the desk, straightened his robes, and moved toward the door.

There was still half the evening ahead of him, and several other pieces of his mind were occupied with more pleasant things than Slytherin politics.

To be continued...