

The Redemption of Draco Malfoy

by floorcoaster

Draco discovers an injured Hermione and is faced with a life-changing decision.

The Other Side - Prequel

Chapter 1 of 3

Draco discovers an injured Hermione and is faced with a life-changing decision.

Author's Note: This story is a thank-you gift for the lovely moonjameskitten, who made the header for my fic journal.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

The Other Side

I know it would be outrageous, To come on all courageous

And offer you my hand, To pull you up on to dry land

When all I got is sinking sand, The trick ain't worth the time it buys

I'm sick of hearing my own lies, And loves a raven when it flies

~ **David Gray, "The Other Side"**

ooo

Hermione sighed as she walked through the corridor on the fifth floor. She had just caught a couple trying to sneak into the Prefects' bathroom and had taken off the appropriate House points. She checked her watch; it read half-past nine. Half an hour remained in her bi-weekly patrol, and she would spend the time thinking of how she would call in her favor from Ernie, who had backed out of patrolling with her at the last minute.

Please, Hermione, I'll owe you! There's a big test tomorrow in Astronomy that I've got to study for ...

If his reason hadn't been for a school assignment, she never would have agreed. She didn't like patrolling the corridors by herself. The old castle held many mysteries, and every creak of the floor or stairs, every wavering shadow had her on edge. She couldn't walk past the boy's bathroom on the sixth floor without seeing images of Harry, white as a sheet with blood all over his T-shirt. From the way Harry had described it, Malfoy had been hurt very badly and was probably lucky to be alive.

Though she didn't let Harry know, not wanting to encourage his near-obsession, Hermione *did* think Malfoy was up to something. His behavior had been too strange to discount him completely; however, she didn't think him capable of anything too devious or complex. He was always brooding now, in class, in the library, in the hallways,

during meals...if he even showed up.

Hermione had noticed that he still gave an effort in Potions, but got easily frustrated and then gave up altogether if he couldn't do something. In years prior, he had at least completed his work. Or else Snape did it for him, which wouldn't have surprised her in the least. She thought he was smart enough, as he had managed to attain the required O.W.L. for advancing to N.E.W.T. level in Potions and a few other subjects. He had never struck her as particularly bright, relying on his name and his father's money to move him along in school. She had always thought he could apply himself more.

Though, she had to admit, she saw him in the library quite often, always bent over a book with a stack beside him, scribbling furiously on parchment. One time she had been forced to sit near him when there were no other empty tables and had been so distracted by the near-constant scratching of his quill, and his occasional muttering, that she left before she completed her first assignment.

She sighed again and checked the time as she made one final lap around the fifth floor. She had twenty minutes remaining. Hermione headed for the stairs that would take her to the fourth floor when suddenly she was grabbed from behind and pulled into a dark classroom.

The hand that was clamped over her mouth was large and rough, and the arm around her waist held her tightly. She'd been so surprised at the attack that she'd dropped her wand in the hallway and was now mentally screaming at herself for being so careless.

"*Silencio!*"

The hand over her mouth disappeared and she tried to scream, even though she knew it was useless. Another large arm wound under her left arm and across her neck.

"Well, well, look what we have here?" a boy said, his voice a drawl.

Hermione glanced around frantically; they were in the Charms classroom. She could just make out a few large shapes around her, moving slightly, but staying in place.

"It's the Mudblood," said another boy.

"Of course it's the Mudblood," the first boy hissed. "We knew she'd be here, you idiot."

It had to be Malfoy and his goons. The thought made Hermione's blood run cold, and she struggled, but to no avail. Her captor's grasp only tightened, pressing against her lungs. Malfoy was a Prefect; he knew the patrol schedule, even if he never followed it. He would know the area to which she'd been assigned that night. She had checked this classroom, hadn't she?

"You know what Mudbloods deserve, don't you, filth?"

Hermione's eyes were slowly adjusting, and she could see for certain that one of the boys in front of her was Crabbe. That meant Goyle was probably holding her, and the one talking to her could only be Malfoy.

A ray of moonlight broke through the clouds at that moment, and Hermione silently gasped at what she saw. Blaise Zabini stood over her with a knife in his hand, a sneer on his face, and a maniacal glint in his almost black eyes.

"Mudbloods don't deserve to live, Granger," he sneered, twisting the knife in his hand.

Hermione tried not to panic and then brought her heel down as hard as she could on Goyle's foot. He grunted, shifted, but his hold on her remained firm.

"Stupid witch!" Zabini cried, his face now a deranged snarl.

She had never seen him act this way, had thought that he didn't have strong opinions when it came to the traditional pureblood propaganda that the House of Slytherin perpetuated. He had always seemed very mild and soft-spoken.

"Just for that, we're going to do this the fun way." He sneered once again, nodded to Goyle, and then plunged the knife into Hermione's chest.

ooo

Draco was trying to get from the seventh floor, where he had been working in the Hiding Room, to the dungeons without getting caught. He had taken all the precautions he could ... Silencing his footsteps and casting a charm that would cause anyone approaching to find the opposite side of the hallway fascinating. Granger and that brown-nosing MacMillan were on patrol duty, and he had a snowball's chance in hell of making it all the way without earning himself a detention.

When he reached the sixth floor without seeing Granger's massive hair or even hearing MacMillan's pompous brogue, he thought perhaps he'd gotten lucky and they had both, on the same night, decided to neglect their duties. That wasn't likely, for either of them ... maybe they were off snogging. He shuddered at the thought. He had heard from Pansy, who had heard from Millicent, who had overheard some Hufflepuff girls in the bathroom discussing the fact that Ernie had warts on his tongue.

Not that Granger deserves any better.

Draco crept through as many shadows as he could, listening at every classroom door for the telltale sounds of a good snog. Once he was past them, he could go about his way, worrying only about Filch and his bloody cat.

Merlin, he hadn't thought about snogging since ... well, far too long. He was too stressed to be able to concentrate, and besides that, he was still healing from Potter's nasty curse. The deep cuts Draco had sustained, though two weeks old, still hadn't properly healed yet. Snape had told him that it was going slowly because the curse was very Dark, and that Dark curses didn't fully heal. He would likely have a scar, though he would be able to hide it beneath his clothes. He would be disfigured for the rest of his life, which, at this point, wasn't shaping up to last much longer.

He was doing the best he could, but he was nearing desperation. If he couldn't fix the cabinet, which he'd been working on all year, he had no plan for completing his task. He felt like such a fool to have thought he would be useful to the Dark Lord. When his mother and aunt had approached him about offering himself in Lucius's place, it hadn't been real. When the Dark Lord had branded him, given him his first task, it hadn't been real. Planting the necklace on Rosmerta, using the Imperius to control her, poisoning the wine meant for Dumbledore ... none of that had felt real. It had been as though he was far removed from his normal existence, watching himself do all of those things.

Now, though, it was staring-him-in-the-face-and-breathing-on-him *real*. He only had a few more weeks until the end of the term, and after that, he would lose his chance and would go home empty and a failure. He did his best not to think of the consequences of failure, as he had no doubt that the Dark Lord would follow through with his threat. Failure was not an option. His best plan was still a long-shot, and it depended on him fixing the bloody cabinet and gaining some kind of advantage over Dumbledore. Then he would find the old man, train his wand on him, and ... Draco swallowed hard, his throat going dry at the thought of speaking those words aloud.

He had practiced in the mirror, but could only ever whisper them.

Draco cursed when he took a hard step onto the fifth floor corridor, his shoe tapping loudly against the stones beneath. He froze, his eyes darting around him, waiting for someone to spot him. When several long moments passed with no sign of anyone, he breathed a sigh of relief. Again, he was cautious as he neared the steps to the fourth floor.

Moonlight shone through a window behind him, falling on a wand lying on the floor outside the Charms classroom. He paused, thinking it might be a trick. As he stared at the wand, he noticed moonlight coming from the classroom, wavering in such a way that indicated there were people inside.

Had he found Granger and MacMillan after all? If so, whose wand was he staring at, and why would its owner have left it there?

Draco approached the room and found the door was slightly ajar. He could hear shuffling inside and the scrape of furniture against the floor.

"You know what Mudbloods deserve, don't you, filth?"

He froze at the sound of his housemate's voice. Zabini was in the room, with a Mudblood, and he probably wasn't alone. No wonder Crabbe and Goyle never showed up to guard the room for him.

For a moment, he considered leaving, giving the classroom a wide berth. He could probably slip by unnoticed, trying his best not to imagine what was happening behind him. He was no hero; he wasn't Potter, for bleeding sake.

Draco had nearly decided to move on when he heard Blaise speak again.

"Mudbloods don't deserve to live, Granger."

Merlin's beard. They had Granger! What were they thinking, the thick lug heads? Her? Did they want to invite the wrath of every single Professor in the school plus the Headmaster, Potter and the Weasley brood?

Draco heard shuffling and a grunt of pain.

"Stupid witch!"

Granger must have tried to get away. Draco's heart was pounding in his chest, his blood rushing in his ears. It wasn't that he particularly wanted to save her, but in the seconds that had passed since hearing her name from Zabini's mouth, he found that he didn't want anything to happen to her, either.

"Just for that, we're going to do this the fun way."

Draco snatched up her wand and pushed the door open, stepping into the room in time to see Blaise stick a knife into Granger's chest.

A hundred different thoughts raced through Draco's mind, images from his past. Her bushy head bobbing down the corridor of the train before her first year at school. The defiant way she stuck out her chin when he'd called her a Mudblood for the first time. The angry glint in her eye just before she slapped him in third year. The way she stole the breath of every bloke in the Great Hall at the Yule Ball, and the angry look on her face at something Weasley had said to her. The mischievous smile she wore during most of fifth year, as though she had just heard a really good secret. The scathing looks she had been sending in Weasley's direction most of that year.

She wasn't just a Mudblood; she was also a girl, with thoughts, feelings, goals and ambition. He had never cared for her, but as he stared at her bleeding form, he realized that he did not want her to die.

The look on her face at that moment was one of shock and pain. Crabbe was laughing; Goyle looked as though he was trying to decide if he would faint or join him. Zabini had turned to the intruder, only to relax when he saw who it was.

"Malfoy, just in time."

Granger looked at him then, a drop of blood trailing from the corner of her mouth to her chin, her breath coming in gasps. She remained silent, her eyes wide, scared and hopeful. For some reason, she was looking at him as though he was her last hope. Blood was oozing from the wound, flowing around the knife still embedded in her chest, staining her clothes.

The hilt ... Draco recognized it. Zabini had been carrying it around all year, bragging about how he'd bought it off a street vendor in Tandoori the summer before fifth year, how it was reputed to have deep, Dark magical powers.

Now ... the blood around Granger's wound was turning black.

She wasn't just a Mudblood ...

She was also a girl.

Draco felt as though he'd been staring at Granger, eyes locked, for an eternity. Her life was slowly fading, the poison from the knife making its way to her heart. She would die if he did nothing, and he would be no better than Zabini or the others. An image of the old man flashed through his mind in place of Granger. He would die at Draco's hand so that his mother might live. He would have two black scars on his soul. Maybe ... if he helped Granger, he could cancel out the blot he would be left with upon completion of his task. At the least, he would have a white spot next to the black one.

"Want to finish her?" Blaise said.

To Draco, Blaise's voice sounded as though it were coming from underwater. The question spurred Draco to action. He spun on Zabini and used Granger's wand to disarm him.

"What the..." Zabini began.

Draco Silenced him, then bound his legs and arms, and Stupefied him. Crabbe had only started reacting when Draco Disarmed him, sending him flying across the room, hitting the wall hard. Draco Stupefied him, then turned to Goyle, who had allowed Granger to sink to her knees.

"Draco," he said. "What are you doing?"

"I ... I don't know." With a quick flick of his wrist, Draco Stupefied Goyle.

Hermione slumped onto the floor, gasping for breath. Draco rushed to her and laid her flat on the ground. He looked at her, met her gaze, and saw confusion.

"This will hurt," he said, closing his hand around the shaft of the knife.

She barely moved her head and closed her eyes.

Draco pulled with all his might and the knife came free. Hermione's mouth opened and her face contorted in pain, but she still made no sound. He frowned and removed the Silencing Spell.

She was gasping then, watching him with her huge, brown eyes.

Draco examined the knife for some clue as to its origins and saw ancient Norse runes inscribed along the blade. The etchings were fairly recent, not dating to Norse periods; only the language was antiquated. He recognized the phrase, a popular one among Death Eaters.

From Hell's heart, I stab at thee. For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee.

It was a very powerful chant. When intoned during certain rituals, with the appropriate incantations and environment, it resulted in a thick cloud of deadly, red smoke. The smoke could then be captured, bottled, and used in poisons, or, in this case, forged into the metal itself.

To unbind the Dark magic from the knife was impossible; however, he could attempt to draw the poison from Granger's blood and then hope to heal her wound. He crouched low over her, noticing how pale her face was from loss of blood.

He carefully began unbuttoning her shirt. She struggled against him weakly. "Relax," he said. "I'm trying to help you." She stilled. Draco finished the last button and examined the damage. The puncture had gone in just below the ribcage and, from the way she was breathing, had probably punctured a lung. He cleaned the excess blood away. "This is going to hurt more," he told her, positioning his wand over the wound.

Granger looked at him and he thought she would tell him no. He took a deep breath, counted to three, and stuck the tip of his wand into the hole left by the knife.

She cried out, her face contorting into a grimace, and reached for his free hand. When she caught it, she wrapped her thin digits around his and squeezed so hard he nearly jerked away, yanking his wand from her flesh. He thought she might break his fingers. Gradually the pain lessened and her grip weakened.

Draco mumbled the words that would draw the poison, which had leached from the knife, out of her system. *Symphodio veneficus*," he muttered repeatedly. Each time his wand would tingle with magic and then finally, it gave a sharp hitch when it had pulled as much of the evil substance that it could. That hitch sent Granger into a pained fit, and she passed out.

After withdrawing all the poison, Draco set to healing her wounds. He had never practiced it, but Snape had told him what to do. *Maldirarum percuro* was a spell for curing wounds of a Dark nature. Snape had used it on Draco after Potter cursed him, and Draco had wanted to know what it was so that he could use it in the future. He couldn't have known he would use it so soon.

Fortunately, she had only been stabbed once, though it was a deep wound. Draco methodically repaired her lungs, blood vessels, and the layers of skin until the puncture hole closed, leaving behind whole, pink skin. He noted with satisfaction that there would be minimal scarring.

He sat down on the floor, exhausted. He's been hunched over Granger's form for nearly half an hour, expending his energy on a specific, targeted area of her body. He smirked at the unwitting innuendo and then glanced at her still form beside him, thinking he should probably cover her up.

Draco sighed and returned to a bent position over her and began buttoning her shirt. She would probably need a few Blood Replenishing potions, but he loathed both the idea of telling anyone about what had happened and of people learning what he had done. He didn't regret saving her, but he was supposed to be working for the creature intent on eradicating people like her. He didn't think it would go over well as a conversation piece among his friends and family.

Just when he finished the last button, Hermione reached up and grabbed his hand. Startled, he froze and then met her gaze. She was looking at him through groggy, bleary eyes.

"Does anything hurt?" he asked, withdrawing his hand and then sitting down beside her.

She shook her head. "I ... I don't feel ... so good."

"I expect not. You lost a lot of blood."

Hermione blinked a few times, and when their eyes met again, her eyes were still bleary, but they were also determined. "Why?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "Sod if I know."

"Malfoy..."

"Listen," he said sternly. "This ... never happened, all right? You can't go running off to Potter and Dumbledore about this."

"You're joking, right?" she said, her voice stronger. "Zabini ... he sodding stabbed me! I'm not supposed to tell anyone? I won't let him get away with it!"

He winced and ran a hand through his hair. It was an unreasonable request, when he thought about it. "I'm bugged as it is," he said, the full weight of his looming task returning to rest heavily on his shoulders, heavier now with the ramifications of what he had just done. "They ... When they tell what happened ..." He glanced out the window at the bright, full moon.

"Of course," she said bitterly. "Mummy and Daddy won't be happy with you saving someone like me."

Draco was too tired to argue or think of any snarky comeback. "You don't know even half of it," he said.

The lack of venom in his voice surprised Hermione. He still looked awful...thin, too pale, even for him, and his robes hung loosely on his broad shoulders. His eyes were blood-shot with grey circles under them. It occurred to her that the consequences for his actions in helping her could be far more severe than wagging tongues. Painful curses and physical violence were more likely. Though she couldn't imagine keeping the attack a secret, he *had* saved her life. Perhaps she could keep quiet for awhile, so that he wouldn't be hurt ... or worse.

"Maybe you're right," she said softly. "You could tell me. Half of it, if you want."

He cast her a weary look, then chuckled morosely. "If there was even the slightest chance that talking about it would matter ... maybe, but only because I'm so infernally tired of it all. But it won't, so no. I won't be opening up to you or anyone else tonight." He glanced at the three prone forms of his classmates. "I've got to fix this." Draco wasn't sure he could do it, the exhaustion and dread threatening to overwhelm him. He had been planning and scheming all year for an approaching deadline, to no avail. Now the situation was dire, and when he needed to think quickly, to solve an immediate problem, he couldn't. His shoulders slumped; he had failed again.

"Oblivate them," Hermione said. "Let them think they waited here for me but I never came."

Draco glanced at her skeptically. "Right, I know all about Advanced Memory Charms. Studied it last year, in fact," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

She narrowed her eyes. "Good, then you can perform it on Zabini while I work on Crabbe and Goyle." She got the anticipated reaction from him when his eyes widened in surprise.

"You ... you've done it?"

"I've been studying," she said. "Help me sit up."

He gently but firmly pushed her back to the floor. "No, no, this won't work. You need blood before you can cast any complex spells. You'll just faint, and then you're no good to me. Keep talking." His voice held a distinct tone of exhaustion.

"Fine, you Oblivate them. I'll show you how, it shouldn't be too difficult. I couldn't care less if something went a little wrong, truth be told. Then you take them back into the dungeons...don't forget the knife...and while you're there, break into Snape's stores for the blood potions. If anyone asks why you're out past curfew, tell them Ernie offered to do your Potions homework for a week and give you a bottle of Old Ogden's to work his patrol tonight. Bring the potions to me and then leave." She paused, looking at him intently. "I won't tell anyone what you did. At least, not until it's safe to."

He stared at her, disbelief evident on his face. Why would she keep this a secret for him? He hadn't begged, bribed, whined ... or even asked! Perhaps his desperation was so apparent that she had read through his eyes and seen the blackness of despair that threatened to drown him. For some reason, he wasn't incensed by her concern. It swelled something inside him, a pleasant feeling he had never experienced before.

"Will you be all right?" he asked. "I'm not sure I should just leave you ..."

"Yeah," she said, giving him a weak smile. "I'll be fine once I drink the potions. I'll have to wait a while before I'll be confident to walk, but as long as this room is locked against anyone coming in, I'll be fine."

"You ... you really won't tell?" he asked hesitantly, half expecting her to laugh at him for thinking she had been serious.

"I really won't tell, Malfoy. You did save my life, after all."

Draco exhaled in relief. For some reason, he believed her, and when he took his next breath, his lungs filled completely with air for the first time in months. He wouldn't have to worry about his parents or, worse, the Dark Lord finding out. There was no possible way he could thank her. No amount of money, gifts, or gratitude from him could adequately express the relief he felt, nor repay the debt he felt he owed her.

He was free ... Draco's chest tightened again. Free to continue working on a mission that seemed doomed and would, if successful, leave his soul forever black, despite this one good mark he had earned. If he thought about it for too long, he often came to the conclusion that it had been doomed from the start.

"Okay," he said, picking her wand off the floor and handing it to her. Then he drew his own. "Are you sure we should do this?" he asked. It was probably the closest he'd ever come to admitting that there was something he wasn't sure he could do.

She smiled, catching his implication but not mentioning it. "You'll do fine. Luckily, the short-term version of the spell is rather uncomplicated." She lifted her wand and showed him the proper movement. "*Obliviatum hora* should do the trick. We haven't been in this room that long."

He nodded and stood. "I'll do it before I revive them. In the hallway, so they don't see you." Draco cleaned the blood off his hands and then Levitated the bodies of his mates into the hallway. "I ... I'll be back," he said. "I'm going to ward this classroom so only I can come back in."

Hermione nodded from her position on the floor. The door shut and only then did she allow the tears to fall. She'd been frightened during the attack, and the cursed wound had hurt unlike anything she'd ever experienced, and then she was rescued by the least likely person imaginable. What was more, she had promised not to tell anyone, and what better evidence did she need to prove to Harry that Malfoy wasn't up to something? He had saved her from his housemates and friends, and she believed that he would return with the much-needed potions. That behavior did not fall in line with a Death Eater up to nefarious plotting. Hermione felt slightly bad for suspecting him, despite his nasty behavior toward them all through that year and those before.

She tried to sit up but felt herself begin to swoon and resigned herself to waiting on the floor.

ooo

When Draco returned with the potions, he saw Hermione's eyes closed and panicked. He rushed to her and took her face roughly in his hands.

"Granger? Granger, wake up!" he said frantically, his brow furrowed in consternation.

She moaned and her eyes fluttered open, then she cringed. "Ow," she said. Her chest was beginning to feel very stiff.

Draco exhaled in relief. "You scared me! I would have been very put out with you if you had gone and died on me. Would've broken into Snape's office for no reason."

"Merlin forbid I be the cause of wasted effort on your part," she said sleepily, trying to focus on his face. She thought she caught him smile before turning his face away from her.

"Here, drink up. Judging by how much blood is all over you, the floor, and what I already cleaned off me, I'd say you need three vials."

Hermione nodded and downed the first one. She immediately felt the potion take effect. Draco's concerned expression and furrowed brow came into focus. She shook her head, not having realized how groggy she had felt until some of it was relieved.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, accepting the second vial. When she'd finished all three, Draco helped her to sit up and lean against the teacher's desk. She could feel her strength returning and her thoughts clearing.

"I, er, brought you a shirt to change into. Thought you could Transfigure it to look like the one you're wearing. I imagine Potter and Weasley would go barmy if they saw you covered in blood. They'd start asking questions."

"Uh-huh," she said, accepting the battered T-shirt from him.

"It was the best I could do in a pinch," he said, as though apologizing. He didn't tell her that he had simply grabbed the first thing he put his hands on in his room and that the shirt happened to be his favorite. It was a deep scarlet color and had a faded logo of the Caerphilly Catapults on the front.

"It's fine," she whispered. "Would you mind? I'd rather save my strength."

"Oh, right." He hesitated, having never Transfigured anything into an article of woman's clothing before. When he handed the result to Hermione, she seemed satisfied.

Draco watched, wanting to make sure she could manage.

She fumbled with the top button and then looked up at him. "Would you, um, look away?" Her cheeks flushed at her question.

"Yeah, of course." He walked to the far corner of the classroom, forcing his thoughts onto the set of Charms texts on the shelves in the back. It wouldn't do to think too much about what she was doing.

"Finished," she said after what felt to him like an age.

He went to her and stared at the bloody shirt, now in a heap next to her. "Reckon I should clean up a bit." He siphoned the blood off the floor, put the furniture back in order and went back to staring at her shirt. "What do you want me to do with it?" he asked.

"Burn it. Get rid of the evidence." She picked it up, touching a part that hadn't been stained, and held it toward him. "Go on. Just ... aim away from me."

Her trust in him was astonishing, but he found that, had their situation been reversed, he would have felt the same trust in her. The ordeal had bonded them, at least for as long as they were in that classroom.

He wondered if it would extend afterwards, but knew that it shouldn't, it couldn't. She would never speak to him in public, because if he was seen having anything to do with her, the information would get back to his parents and then he would risk not only himself and everyone he loved, but her as well. Beside there was no point in wishing for a temporary friendship. If he was successful in his task, he knew she would never look at him with anything but pure hate in her eyes.

Draco nodded, swallowing hard at the thought. *"Incendio!"*

Fire consumed the shirt, and Hermione was careful to drop it just before it reached her fingers.

"Thank you," she said, gratitude welling in her voice.

"It was ... You're welcome." He gave her a tentative smile. He had never done anything so heroic or outright contrary to his upbringing in his life, and he marveled at the inherently good feelings his actions evoked.

"I'll just wait a few more minutes," Hermione said, smiling back. "You can go now."

Draco shifted his weight and then sat on the floor beside her, leaning against the desk. "Nah. Might as well make sure you can walk back to your tower. Wouldn't want to leave just to have you pass out in the hallway. Someone would find you, questions would be raised, and they'd be looking for someone to blame."

Hermione smiled to herself, thankful for the company and amused by the excuses he made.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"My chest hurts, and it's a little painful to take deep breaths."

"I've never really done that spell before, so I'm not surprised it wasn't a perfect job."

"I think it'll go away. Bodies aren't used to such abuse, and they tend to protest whenever they aren't treated well. I'm sure it's just bruising and scarring. I checked the wound when I changed, and you did a good job sealing it."

"Thanks," he muttered, reddening slightly at her praise. He wasn't used to it, especially not from people who were supposed to hate him, and he them.

"What spell did you use, anyway? And how did you know what to do?"

Draco stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned his head against the desk. "I've seen Blaise with that knife for two years. He left it hidden in his room after last year, under a few loose boards we reckon Filch doesn't know about. There's no way he could've gotten it in this year with all the security precautions. The inscription on it ... I've seen it before. Dark Magic, a type of poison bonded with the metal until it breaks magical flesh. I had to pull the poison out of you before it reached your heart. Snape taught me the healing spell I used; it's designed for Dark curses."

She shook her head. "I can't believe ... I almost died tonight. They were waiting for me; they'd planned it."

"I won't let them bother you again. I had heard Zabini talking big in the common room a few times, but didn't imagine he would do anything with it." Draco realized Blaise had probably been trying to show him up. Draco had bragged about a task, given by the Dark Lord, for the better part of the beginning of the year. Zabini had expressed interest in helping, but Draco hadn't trusted him.

"How can you stop them?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'll lie, tell them something. You shouldn't go wandering the corridors alone, that goes without saying."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the sensation of comfort and ease between them. Neither had ever imagined it was possible, nor did they expect it to continue. As soon as they set foot outside the door, it would evaporate. Twice, Draco's arm brushed Hermione's and he felt something akin to life flowing through him, a sensation he hadn't experienced in well over a year.

"I think I'm ready to go now," Hermione said eventually.

Draco repositioned himself to crouch beside her, snaking his arm under her left and around her back, holding her tightly. "Let's get you up," he said. He helped her to stand and then to walk.

When she was confident in her strength, she removed herself from his arms, an odd feeling of loss washing through her, and took a few steps on her own. She pocketed her wand and looked at him. "All right. All better."

He nodded once, keeping her gaze.

"Thank you again, Malfoy. Guess we're even."

"I assure you, my motives were purely selfish," he said, a strained smile on his face. He couldn't tell her that, in fact, he was still in her debt. She would ask questions he couldn't answer.

Hermione shyly returned the smile and then slowly made her way to the door and turned the handle. She looked back over her shoulder. "I hope ..." She paused, considering her words carefully. "I hope we both get to see the other side of this." She didn't wait for his response and softly clicked the door shut behind her.

Draco stared at the handle for a long while, contemplating her words. The other side of what? The war? Did she suspect ... did she know what he was doing? How could she possibly ... But what could she have meant? He felt a ridiculous urge to follow her and ask, but that would jeopardize everything he'd done in the last hour.

He waited for fifteen minutes before leaving the room, careful to make sure no one saw him. It wouldn't do to have people whispering about him and Granger leaving the Charms classroom in close succession after curfew.

As he lay in bed that night, Draco decided two things. He was still determined to complete his task. Nothing had happened to change that, but he would return Hermione's kindness if the opportunity presented itself. He couldn't imagine a situation in which he would be able to help her, or repay her, but he would take it if he stumbled upon one.

And if he ever got the chance, he would ask her what she had meant. If it was in his power at all, he would see to it that they both made it to the other side.

ooo

End Notes: Thank you for reading! A wonderful team of betas looked this over for me. Many thanks to drcsnider, manda, eilonwy, and mister_otter!

The curse on the knife comes from *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville.

Spells: I made these up, using an English-to-Latin translation site.

Syphodio veneficus "sypho" means to siphon; "odio" means hate; "veneficus" means magical poison. Draco siphoned the magical poison that had been created through hate.

Maldirarum percuro "mal" means bad; "dirae arum" means curse; "percuro" means to heal thoroughly. This is a healing spell designed for Dark curses.

Obliviatum hora "obliviatum" derived from Obliviate; "hora" means one hour.

1 - Nothing But Pictures

Chapter 2 of 3

Can Draco Be Saved From His DH Fate of Being a Sniveling Coward? Written in response to a challenge issued by drcjsnider.

A/N: This story is told in two timelines: present and past, separated by a pair of bars. It doesn't skip around, and there is only one division per chapter, save the last one. Many thanks to my betas, Shug, pokeystar, and elyaeru, for the excellent input and help.

Written in answer to a challenge presented by drcjsnider: Can Draco Be Saved From His DH Fate of Being a Sniveling Coward? This story has a prequel, a one-shot I wrote a couple of months ago called [The Other Side](#). It's not necessary to read it, but there are things from it mentioned in this story.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

The Redemption of Draco Malfoy

Chapter 1 Nothing But Pictures

Hogwarts was the center of activity in the days following the end of the war. In the Great Hall, funeral arrangements were made; friends and family reunited, and plans for the future were discussed with great alacrity. The dungeons of the castle were once again used for their original purpose; all of the remaining Death Eaters and those who had been captured from the Dark side were herded up and locked away until their arrests could be processed and the prisoners sent to Azkaban.

Hermione had done her part in the aftermath, and she was exhausted, mentally and physically. Neither she, Ron, nor Harry had slept much since the great battle, sleeping in short shifts to let the others continue assisting in the work that everyone was doing.

That night, after dinner and most people had gone to bed, Hermione sought a bit of quiet solitude. She slowly climbed the steps to the Astronomy Tower, thinking about everything that had happened. Ron had been the most outspoken when it came to future plans; he had his life already mapped out from that moment onward. He, Harry, and Hermione would enter Auror training. Harry would marry Ginny, and though he didn't say it, she suspected he thought the two of them would also marry. Both couples would have large families, live next door to each other, and live happily ever after.

Hermione was beginning to regret the kiss she had given him. It had been done in a moment of haste, so thrilled had she been that Ron had finally *finally*, understood where she was coming from. She didn't think he fully embraced her passion for the rights of all magical creatures, but at least he had been thinking about it. Still, it was impulsive and borne from years of fancying him.

Her feelings for him had started to fade after he abandoned Harry and her in the woods, though it had taken her time to recognize what was happening. When she needed him the most, he left without a care and returned for Harry, only Harry. She really shouldn't have kissed him. Although, perhaps it was for the better. She could now say without a doubt that the feelings she had once felt for Ron were gone.

Hermione reached the door to the tower and pushed it open. After climbing out, she glanced around and saw that she hadn't found a place of solitude; someone else was there.

"Malfoy!" she said, letting go of the door and backing away from him.

He stood on the opposite side of the tower, leaning against the crenellations. His black robes billowed behind him in the wind, and his pale, scarred face was drawn as he watched her.

With a great sigh, he turned around. "Granger."

Instinctively, Hermione's hand flew to the scar on her chest that he had healed. So much had happened since that night, when she had thought him truly incapable of harm. The truth had been a bitter pill to swallow.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she asked, her other hand itching for her wand.

"What are *you* doing here?" he mimicked, his voice utterly flat and devoid of emotion.

"I ... That's none of your business," she replied haughtily.

He shook his head. "No. I meant that whatever reason brought you here, it probably brought me here as well."

"I needed a place to think," she said automatically.

"See?" he said hollowly.

Hermione stared at Draco's back, frowning. He seemed so ... lost, resigned, empty. So different from the young man who had risked everything to save her life just one year ago. She crossed the tower to stand a few feet from him. Despite everything she had heard about him, despite the one time she had seen him since that fateful night on this same tower, she did not fear him.

There was so much between them that hadn't been said; she didn't know where to start. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"The end of my life," he replied flatly.

Hermione's eyes widened as she considered where they were...the place Dumbledore had been killed...how high off the ground they were, and the way Malfoy was peering over the side. Without another thought, she rushed across the tower to his side, putting her hand on his arm. "Don't, don't jump, Malfoy."

He stared at her hand, so pale against his dark cloak, and then met her frightened eyes. "Why not?" he asked. "What do I have to live for?"

"Plenty," she said without thinking.

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow skeptically.

This time she thought about his question. Of course, he had the Dark Mark, had been responsible for Dumbledore's death, had used Unforgivables on at least two people, and she had no idea what else he had done since leaving the school with Snape. His future seemed set; he would go to Azkaban.

"Still, I don't think you should end your life," she protested, removing her hand.

He sighed. "I'm not going to jump off this tower, Granger. Too much a coward for such theatrics. But ..." Did he really want to talk to her about all of this? "I turn eighteen in a few weeks. Eighteen and my life is over."

"You don't know that," Hermione said, not entirely sure of what she was trying to convince him. "I'll tell them what you did for me. They might be lenient."

Draco shook his head. "I don't want a reduced sentence; I want *no* sentence. Besides, what I did for you would be nothing compared to what else I've done, what I'm responsible for."

"That's not true," she continued. "Without me, Harry would have had a much harder go of things. There's no way to know the impact of your decision that night."

"It doesn't matter. Once, I thought it might, but now ... the only person who can help me is dead."

Hermione frowned. "Who?"

"Doesn't matter," Draco replied. "No one would believe him anyway."

"You don't know that," Hermione said. "Snape ... was many things but he was on our side. Harry just found out, maybe..."

Draco peered at her intensely, trying to discern if she was telling the truth. Then he said, angrily, "Wonderful. Even if that's true, there's absolutely no proof. All I have is my word, and I don't think it's worth much of anything to your lot. Just forget it."

"Tell me," she said.

"I said, forget it!" he snarled, anger flashing through his eyes for an instant. Then it was gone, and his eyes took on a lifeless, haunted look, dull and grey. His voice matched his dead eyes when he quietly asked, "Does it hurt, ever?"

Hermione knew he was referring to the cursed stab wound on her chest. "Sometimes. When I'm tired or have been expending a lot of magic." It occurred to her that she was standing there, having a conversation with Draco Malfoy. She had so many questions for him that she had thought up over the last year that she didn't know where to start. She didn't even know if she wanted to know the answers. Malfoy had done more to send her emotions in spirals than any other person alive.

"Thank you," he said, his voice nearly a whisper. "For not saying anything."

"I told you I wouldn't," she said.

"I know. I didn't really believe you." Draco gave her an apologetic smile.

"I don't understand you," Hermione said, shaking her head and turning away from him.

"Why do you want to?" he asked.

The question struck her like a bucket of cold water to the face. In the year since he had healed her, saved her life, she had tried to figure him out. After she had learned of the circumstances surrounding his task to kill Dumbledore, she had hoped he would turn himself over to the Order, that maybe he had experienced a change of heart on that tower that would carry over into the rest of his life.

When months passed and that didn't happen, she tried to understand why. None of her theories were consistent with what she would later learn about him; he never did what she expected him to do. She had enjoyed her little mystery, which she had spent many lonely nights puzzling out, but now it wasn't so amusing. He really would be sent to Azkaban and was likely to stay there the rest of his life. Hermione had no conclusions, and she probably would never know the answers to her questions. This might be her one chance, yet she couldn't bring herself to press him.

"I don't know," she whispered.

After a few minutes passed in strangely comfortable silence, Draco sighed and stood up. "Shouldn't you be off celebrating or something?"

"I've had enough of celebrating for the evening," she said with a chuckle.

"I'm going. My mother will wonder where I am. She gets herself in fits if I'm gone for too long." He rolled his eyes, but Hermione suspected he didn't mind all that much.

"All right."

"Look, there's a cream I know of that you could use for that wound. It's called 'Delphine's' and it's for cursed wounds and scars. The recipe can be found in books for healing Dark magic."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you." She turned to face him without knowing what, if anything, she should say. This would probably be the last time she saw him. "I ... I would like some answers," she said, trying to be assertive but failing in light of the scrutinizing look in his eyes.

"Wouldn't we all?" Draco reached his hand up and hesitantly tucked a stray lock of curls behind her ear. As he withdrew his hand, his eyes full of confusion and pain, he lightly traced the line of her jaw, pausing at her chin before dropping his arm.

Hermione stopped breathing at the sudden tender display. Malfoy stirred yet another emotion in her when she hoped, briefly, that he would kiss her. The desire surprised her, but before she could blink, he had moved toward the door.

"Malfoy," she called without thinking. He paused just before opening the hatch and looked at her expectantly. There were many things she wanted to say, but nothing would stay on her lips. It wouldn't matter, anyway. She settled on, "Good luck."

Draco nodded. "Take care, Granger."

Then he disappeared into the castle, leaving Hermione alone with her restless thoughts.

Draco ran.

He ran as fast as he possibly could, faster than he had ever run before. He didn't need the encouragement of his professor to keep him going, nor the sounds of spells

being fired behind him.

Just get past the gates!

Once he was through, Draco doubled over in pain, his side aching. No one was with him. The large blond Death Eater had pulled up to help Snape. Draco had a few moments to think, and all he knew was that he wanted to keep running, until he couldn't move or until he was somewhere else, anywhere else.

He hobbled behind a large tree to catch his breath and heard Snape shouting at Potter. Only a few seconds were granted him to think, and he couldn't decide, just as he couldn't kill the old man.

Soon the others were running past: the blond, the brother and sister, Greyback, and finally Snape. Four loud pops of Disapparation were heard and Draco waited, holding his breath, for the fifth.

"Draco?" called Snape in a harsh whisper. "Where are you? I'm not leaving without you, and I know you can't Apparate."

In that moment, Draco's future flashed before his eyes. Kneeling before the Dark Lord, taking the punishment for failing his task, and if he survived, cementing his pledge of a lifetime of support. He'd barely meant it when he made it, his thoughts bent on revenge against Potter and his friends for getting his father sent to prison. Now ... the thought of living his life in terrified service was unthinkable.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he shouted, jumping out from behind the tree, his wand aimed squarely at Snape's chest.

Snape hadn't been prepared for this, and the spell struck him hard, sending him flying backward into a bush and his wand into Draco's hand. Snape didn't move, so Draco approached him, wand trained on the dark space where he had disappeared, his hand shaking so badly he would never hit his target.

"Get up!" Draco whispered desperately. He couldn't have killed the man, not with a simple Disarming spell! "Up!"

Slowly, Snape rose, a deep scowl on his face. "You fool! What are you doing? They'll be here any moment!"

"I-I'm not going with you. I can't go with you, I can't ..." Draco's voice trailed off, silenced by sheer panic.

Snape breathed deeply and took a cautionary step toward Draco, keeping his hands visible. "You must, Draco. There is no choice."

"Don't say that!" Draco could hardly breathe he was so scared. "I-I do have a choice!"

"I'm afraid you've already made it," Snape said sternly, stepping closer.

Draco hitched his wand up threateningly.

"Think of your mother," Snape continued. "She will surely be killed for your desertion. Where would you go that you could hide from the Dark Lord? Running now would be futile. The only way to protect your mother now is to come with me."

Draco's hand was shaking violently. "I don't want to do this," he moaned. "I can't do it! You saw me, I-I don't belong *with*him."

"Draco, the only choice for you now is to return with me, and quickly. I assure you, I will do everything in my power to protect you, both immediately and in the future." Snape reached up and took the wand from the boy's hand.

Draco let his arm fall limply to his side, overcome with shame and fear.

"Come," commanded Snape. "We must go at once."

Snape grabbed his arm and pulled, but Draco resisted. The Professor rounded on him.

"Haven't I made myself clear?" he spat. "The longer we delay, the worse your punishment will be. You have no choice. I will help you, but you must trust me."

Draco felt his knees threaten to give way, and he nodded, feeling utterly defeated. Even if he wasn't killed, he would still be forced into a servitude he did not want, while his parents, whom he had been trying to save, continued to slave away for their master.

ooo

The celebration was already in motion when Snape and Draco arrived at the Dark Lord's hideout. No doubt the other Death Eaters were eager to be the one to impart the news. Snape stopped just outside the door and turned Draco to face him.

"Listen to me carefully. Be honest...he will know if you are otherwise. Admit your fear, your hesitation. If he wants to see your thoughts, you must not fight. Allow me to bear the brunt of his wrath, as it was I who ultimately removed the decision from you. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded blearily, his entire body numb. There would be no more freedom, no more sun, no more simple days of lounging about with his friends. From this moment on, he was just another insignificant soldier in the darkest army ever conceived.

Snape pushed open the door, and Draco followed, nearly running to keep up. The room quieted as Snape strode commandingly, unfrightened, into the room and to the place where the Dark Lord sat like a king. He dropped one knee to the ground, and Draco followed his lead a few feet behind him. Nagini hissed, and then the sound of Parseltongue could be heard as the Dark Lord calmed his pet.

"There, there, Nagini," he said finally, petting the snake on the head. "Why should you greet the hero of the hour with such ... contempt?" His voice was dangerously smooth, and Draco could feel the bright feral red eyes burning the top of his head; he dared not look up.

"So," said Voldemort, rising fluidly from his chair to pace the length of the short stage on which he had been sitting. "So, the deed is done but not as planned."

Draco sensed him stop in front of him, though he dared not move his head to be certain. Then his mind was being invaded, and Draco cringed at the strange pain that accompanied the forced Legilimancy. It was as though his thoughts and memories were being torn apart. Soon the Dark Lord arrived at the tower and watched the scene unfold along with Draco. When he had seen enough, Voldemort pulled out of Draco's mind, sending a jolt of sharp pain through his head.

"Incompetent whelp," the Dark Lord spat, then he moved on.

Only then did Draco dare to glance up, and he saw the Dark Lord scanning the crowd. "Narcissa!" he bellowed.

"My Lord," said Draco's mother, bowing reverently before his master. Draco's heart leapt at seeing his mother alive and well, but then he panicked, pleading silently with the maniac that she would not be harmed.

"See that he is properly punished for his failings."

"Yes, my Lord." Narcissa bowed again.

"Bellatrix," purred the Dark Lord. "Assist your sister."

She cackled gleefully and nodded, anxious to carry out her master's orders. Draco's stomach dropped.

Then a sinister grin appeared on Voldemort's face, and he laughed, a sick, twisted shadow of joy. "The deed is done!" he shouted to the room. A cheer went up. "And Severus," he said, moving to stand before the professor, who hadn't so much as twitched. "Dear, loyal, Severus. Perhaps you can explain why you did not give the boy a chance to fulfill his duty."

"My Lord, there was simply no time. The Order was in the castle, and many students as well as teachers were fighting with them. The need for haste was imperative, if we were to make it out unscathed."

"I see," drawled the Dark Lord, his eyes drifting from Snape to Draco and back. Then he grinned again. "I am much too elated to want to punish you, Severus. However, you still disobeyed me, and I'm afraid that, despite the most excellent circumstances, that cannot be overlooked."

Draco saw Snape tense in preparation for the curse he knew would come at any second. Then Snape was writhing on the ground, his face contorted in agony. He only cried out a few times, and then the Dark Lord released him.

"This is a night of celebration!" he cried, and again the crowd cheered. "Narcissa! In return for your son's scheme which led to an invasion of the school, and then to the ... untimely death of its Headmaster, I will have your husband released."

Narcissa gasped, and Bellatrix snapped her teeth. Draco's eyes widened; he wasn't sure if this was good news or bad.

"And from now on, my headquarters will be located in your welcoming, expansive home, Narcissa."

Draco saw his mother swallow hard, her face going from impassive to grateful.

"My Lord," she said. "It would be an honor."

Voldemort chuckled and leered at Bellatrix, who stood beside her sister and her husband. "Indeed. It is my desire that all of your family remains in the house."

"It will be as you wish," Narcissa replied, bowing.

"Excellent. It will begin tonight." The Dark Lord waited for no response and strode from the room, Bellatrix quick at his heels with her husband and brother-in-law.

The crowd emptied until only Draco, Snape, and Narcissa remained. Snape had not yet regained consciousness.

"Oh, Draco!" cried Narcissa, rushing across the room and flinging her arms around her son. She sobbed against his shoulder, clutching at his robes as though if she relaxed for one instant, he would be gone.

"Mother," he said, his voice cracking. He returned the hug, amazed at his fortune. The deed had been done, and not by him, his mother was perfectly well, and he hadn't even been punished for his failure. "Snape," he choked out.

"Yes," said Narcissa, finally releasing her son. "I will tend to him."

"You should go, he ... he won't want to be kept waiting."

Narcissa hesitated, clearly unwilling to let Draco out of her sight now that she had him back safe and unharmed.

"Go, Mother," Draco insisted. "The chance has not passed for his anger to turn on us again."

She nodded, her beautiful face contorted with pain, and Disapparated.

Draco knelt beside his Professor's unconscious body, finally able to breathe deeply. He had survived one more day. "Professor," he said, gently shaking him. "Sir."

After a few moments, Snape stirred. Groggily, he opened his eyes, wincing at the dim light. When his vision focused on Draco, he nodded. "Good. You're all right." Slowly he moved into a sitting position, then pulled out his wand and cast a strengthening spell on himself.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked.

"I will be fine," Snape replied. "What has happened?"

"H-He told my mum that he would release my father, and that he'll be using my home for his headquarters from now on. They've gone there now, to celebrate."

"Ah." Snape stood, pausing a moment to be sure his legs would support him. "Did you receive any punishment at the Dark Lord's hands?"

"No," replied Draco. "My mother is to do it." At Snape's raised eyebrow, Draco added, "With my aunt."

"Ah. We shouldn't delay."

"Sir," said Draco, his voice surprisingly commanding. He waited until Snape had given him his full attention. "You said that you would help me."

Snape sighed impatiently. "And I will. However, the less you know, the better for you. I will contact you when I have something useful to share."

Draco nodded, numbness creeping into his mind. There was no plan. "What should I do until then? Sir?"

"Keep your head down, mouth shut, and ears open...wide open, Draco. I mean that above all. Any conversation you come upon, memorize it. Write down what you learn if you must, and keep it hidden. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Draco responded, feeling slightly better. Now he had something to do. "Should I seek out these conversations?"

"Only if you can do so without raising suspicion." Snape looked him over critically. "I believe you can manage well enough. Come, we must be going."

Draco stared as his Professor...former Professor, now...spun on his heel and strode through the room, his robes billowing in his wake.

"Let's go," Snape snapped.

Draco finally followed, not sure what he felt. His world had been turned on its end and then somehow, incredibly, righted again with his family still intact and no harm to him...yet. He knew he didn't deserve such luck, but for some reason, the fates had given it to him.

He didn't think about Hermione until much later, when he was finally tucked into his warm bed, after hugging his mother goodnight.

The celebration had nearly gone all night, and the sun would be rising in less than an hour. Despite being completely exhausted, Draco's mind wouldn't slow down to allow him sleep, and his thoughts turned to her. His chest tightened inexplicably, and he realized that he felt as though he had let her down. She didn't know a thing about his

task, but she had hoped...the last thing she had said to him that night confirmed it...that he would turn out good, in the end.

He wished he could have told her that the world wasn't so black and white, that there was something between those who carried the Mark and those who didn't. Even more, not all those who had been branded wanted to remain that way. He was living proof of that. He had been given the chance to taste that life, the life he had grown up hearing about, which had been glorified and bemoaned for its absence. It simply didn't fit him; there was something that made him different from most of his family, and he only hoped Snape would be able to help sort him out.

As he looked out of his window, at the sky that was slowly turning to lighter shades of blue, Draco wondered what Hermione was doing right then. Probably sleeping, he thought. Had she cursed him? Hated him after learning what he had done ... what he had *almost* done? Was she regretting, even for one moment, letting him into her life, as she had done the night he had saved her? He hadn't regretted it for an instant and would have gladly done so again. She had looked at him a few times since that night with respect, almost admiration in her eyes, and it had made his chest swell with pride.

Draco brought to mind the last time it had happened, just a few days before, in Potions. It had been quick, and he'd nearly missed it as he returned from the ingredients cabinet. Weasley had dropped something, making a loud noise, and he'd turned in their direction, a biting remark forming on his tongue. His eyes had met hers for an instant, and the words had died in his mouth.

Draco yawned and felt his eyelids fighting to close. He drifted to sleep with the last words she had spoken to him replaying in his mind, whispered from her lips.

"I hope we both get to see the other side of this."

ooo

End Notes: Thanks for reading! Chapter title taken from Lewis Carroll's, "Alice in Wonderland."

2 - Down the Rabbit Hole

Chapter 3 of 3

Hermione comes across something that makes her think about Draco's words on the tower.

After a fall such as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling downstairs!

~ Alice, "Alice in Wonderland"

A/N: Remember: First part is present, second part is past.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and his world belong to JK Rowling. I write to learn. No money is being made.

Chapter 2 Down the Rabbit Hole

The task of sorting through Severus Snape's personal effects fell to Harry. Snape's will was discovered in the Headmaster's office two weeks after the final battle, and for some reason, he had left everything to Harry for one week following the reading of his will; after that, ownership transferred to Draco. There was no explanation, and no one who had known Snape could offer any enlightenment.

Snape's portrait had not yet been activated, and it wouldn't be until after the transfer of ownership had taken place.

One thing Hermione knew, however, was that Snape had wanted Harry to find something among his belongings. She was convinced of this, and so she persuaded her friend to turn oversight of the task over to her, so that she could keep proper records of everything and lay eyes on every single item Snape had owned.

Harry had easily agreed, wanting to be quite out of sight from anyone, and so Hermione was at Hogwarts, in Snape's quarters, with Ron, Ginny, and Neville. She had a system in place, and everything was going according to plan.

As she watched her friends go through Snape's things, Hermione couldn't help but feel slightly ill at ease. The things in this room and his classroom had meant something to their former Potions professor, and they were now being treated with the respect one gave to something they didn't care about. She sighed; it was to be expected, she realized. There was no way they could care for Snape's things the way he had. She only wished they hadn't needed to be caring for them at all and that Snape had somehow lived through the war. The more she learned about him, the true tragedy of his life was laid open before her, and she wished that she had taken the time to see through his cold, hard exterior when she had the chance.

"Look at this," said Ron, pulling a small, wooden box from one of the desk drawers. He brought it to Hermione excitedly, clearly hoping for some kind of recognition from her. They still hadn't been able to talk about the kiss, and Hermione kept putting it off.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, peering into the box. Set into the box was a thin strip with six holes. Three of them were empty, but the other three contained vials in which a pale blue, silvery liquid floated and swirled of its own accord.

"Memories," said Ron, pulling one of the vials out. "Two of them have Malfoy's name on them."

Hermione frowned. "Malfoy? Let me see."

Ron handed her the one he was holding.

Sure enough, there was a label on it, Malfoy's name written in abrupt scrawl. Her thoughts dashed back to the night on the tower when she'd come across Malfoy. He had said that Snape was the only one could help him ... What had he meant? Could these vials have something to do with it?

"Thanks, Ron," she said, giving him a hurried smile and taking the box from him.

He stood there for a moment longer before returning to his task, and Hermione felt awful. She had been the one to kiss him, and she had barely paid him any attention since. Granted, it had been a tumultuous week for everyone. No one really had much time for anyone, with everything that had to be done. There had already been so many funerals that Hermione had been grateful for the opportunity to do something worthwhile that would take her mind off things. Ron and Ginny were with her now for the same reason: something to do to take their minds off their grief.

Hermione added the box of vials to her inventory and looked at all three. Only two were labeled "Draco," which made her even more curious about the third. She set the box to the side so she wouldn't get it mixed in with everything else.

ooo

Hermione tapped her foot impatiently, her arms folded across her chest and a look of annoyance on her face. This lift was too bloody slow.

"You know, Miss, the lift won't move any faster just because you wish it."

She looked at the man beside her, a tall wizard in the traditional garb of a warden of Azkaban prison, and fought the urge to scowl at him. When she turned away, she stopped tapping her foot, but that did not make her any more patient.

Finally, the lift stopped, and Hermione followed the man down a long hallway and through a door with the number twenty-three written on the outside in red.

"Here you are, Miss Granger, as requested. Prisoner number fifty-seven forty-two. Please knock on the door when you are finished." Without a second glance, the man returned through the door, shutting it behind him.

Slowly, Hermione turned her gaze to the center of the room, where prisoner fifty-seven forty-two sat at a wide table. He wore grey prison robes and his hands were magically bound, like handcuffs, keeping them together. The color complimented his pale complexion and his eyes, but she was disturbed to see that his hair had been shorn.

Bald was not a good look on Draco Malfoy.

When her eyes finally found his, he quirked an eyebrow. "Granger."

His voice broke whatever spell she'd been under, and she crossed to the chair opposite his, sat down, and then pulled the vials from her purse, setting them on the table.

Draco frowned as he watched her.

"Do you know what these are?" she asked.

"No," he said simply, looking back at her.

"Allow me to enlighten you. The substance inside each of these vials is called *Memoriola liquoris*. They are memories, Malfoy." His expression still showed no sign of recognition. "We found them in Snape's things," she added quietly.

Then his eyes widened, and he turned interested eyes back on the vials. "What do they have to do with me?"

"Two of them have your name on them, and the other, though unlabeled, is also about you."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I take it you've viewed them, then?"

"I have," she replied, averting her eyes from his piercing gaze. "They were given to Harry, through Snape's will, but they will become your property tomorrow night at midnight." She took the vials in her hand. "I think Snape wanted us to find these. That he knew you'd be sent to prison, and so someone would have to search his things to uncover these. He left everything at first to Harry because he knew that I would take care with his things and successfully recover the memories."

"I've known ..." Draco paused, pain flashing briefly through his eyes. "I *knew* Snape all of my life. Those memories could be about anything."

Hermione sighed. "They aren't simply random memories, Malfoy." She started absently fidgeting with one of the vials. "What I want to know is ... why?"

Their eyes met, and Draco stared at her, hard. "Why what?" he asked finally.

"Why didn't you tell ... anyone?" she asked, not wanting to say what she was thinking *Why didn't you tell me?*

"I couldn't," he replied. "Snape forbade it. Besides, who could I tell? None of my friends, none of the teachers; I certainly couldn't tell my parents."

She looked at him with a slight frown. How could *he* not have thought of her? After what he had done, saving her life ... They had formed a bond that night, or so she had thought. Surely he knew he could trust her!

"What?" he said.

"Well," she started, not sure if she wanted to say what she'd been thinking. "You might have considered possibly telling me."

Draco frowned. "You?"

"Forget it," she said quickly, rummaging through her purse so she wouldn't have to look at him. "Here. The wizard representing you before the Wizengamot wants you to go over this list of questions and prepared answers."

Draco took the scroll from Hermione and looked at it warily. "When is it? The trial, I mean."

"It starts in two weeks," she replied softly.

"Did you look into that cream I told you about?" he asked suddenly.

Hermione blinked, surprised at the change in conversation. "I did, yes. It works very well. The longer I use it, the more it's supposed to help."

"I'm glad," Draco said with a lopsided smile. "I, um, researched the curse Blaise used, and the lasting effects of the poison. Most sufferers recommended that cream."

She stared at him in surprise. He had spent time looking up a remedy that would alleviate her symptoms. She was rather flattered, which only added to the confusion she had been feeling for over a year.

"Thanks," she mumbled, looking at her hands.

"So, these memories," Draco said, picking up one of the vials and turning it in his fingers. "What are they, exactly? I'm guessing you wouldn't have brought them unless you thought they could be useful."

Hermione nodded, slipping into information-mode. "If these are accurate...we've got an appointment to have them verified tomorrow...they could go a long way toward ensuring that you get little to no prison time. Considering the circumstances behind your actions, I think we can get the Wizengamot to sympathize with your predicament. Harry can attest as well that Dumbledore knew of your task and wanted Snape to complete it. He's got his own set of memories, already authenticated, and..."

Draco held up a hand, his bonds forcing him to lift both. "Wait," he said. "What's all of this 'we' business? I have a court-appointed representative."

"I know," Hermione said. "I thought, seeing as I ... well, Ron, really, found these memories, that I would help."

"Help the court-appointed representative, who has been doing this for probably fifty years by the look of him?" Draco asked amusedly. "What exactly are you going to do? And, more importantly, why? Why would you help me?"

She frowned. "You saved my life. Isn't that enough?"

Draco let out an exasperated sigh and stood up. "After everything?" he said finally, leaning against the wall. "You want to help me?"

"Would you rather I not?" she asked defensively.

"No, I ... okay. Please continue. The memories."

Hermione didn't continue right away. "They contain evidence that you provided Snape with information for the Order. As I said, they need to be authenticated and checked against the timeline, but Snape was careful to always say the date in these. Once that's done, two of these would seem to indicate that your data was used by the Order, to good results. That, combined with everything else ... I think you've got a shot at avoiding a prison sentence."

September the first was a day Draco usually looked forward to. It meant the beginning of a new school term and seeing his friends again. This year, however, the last place on earth he wanted to be was Hogwarts. Well, scratch that. Hogwarts was second to last, just before anywhere the Dark Lord happened to be.

Narcissa stood with him, tall and proud, fussing over his robes.

Draco attempted to shrug her off, but she wouldn't be dissuaded.

"Head Boy," she said, a beautiful smile on her lips. "I'm so proud. You should be as well...you've earned it."

"Snape made me Head Boy to make Father happy," he replied dully.

Narcissa tutted. "Your grades speak for themselves."

There was no point in arguing with her, so Draco kept quiet. The platform was greatly subdued as compared with years past. None of the students were running around, greeting their friends, or laughing, or smiling. He spotted Longbottom with the youngest Weasley, saying goodbye to her parents in hushed voices, with suspicious eyes.

This year would certainly be different, Draco thought, looking around for Potter, Weasley, and ... Granger. He had thought of her more often than he would ever admit, usually under the pretense of thinking about her scar. Was it hurting her? Had she told anyone? Did she hate him now?

"There you are," said a new voice, one he recognized as belonging to his friend, Crabbe. "Let's get on the train and find a compartment. Maybe we can toss some first-years out of theirs." He chuckled to himself.

Draco fought the urge to roll his eyes. He doubted he would be doing much bullying this year. His heart simply wasn't in it anymore.

"Hello, Vincent. Yes, Draco, hurry on," said Narcissa, adjusting Draco's tie one last time. "Do write to let me know how you are."

Draco didn't miss the anxious look in her eyes. "I will, Mum," he said and then left with Crabbe.

He couldn't remain too melancholy, or his friends would pick up on it and question him. So he joined in the conversation and echoed the sentiment that the year would be infinitely better without the old coot, despite the fact that he felt slightly nauseous at any mention of their former Headmaster.

Pansy was just as clingy, Crabbe and Goyle as dense, and Zabini as indifferent and aloof as ever. All Draco had to do was act pompous and he could get through without attracting any unwanted attention.

Halfway through the trip, Draco was summoned by a Prefect and told that he was required in McGonagall's cabin to discuss Head duties. He dreaded the thought of being faced with the woman, knowing she probably wanted to dismember him slowly and painfully and then torture him in pieces.

When he arrived, he saw Daphne Greengrass already inside, talking with McGonagall.

"Oh, good, Mr. Malfoy, you're here," said the older woman without looking at him. "I have just finished discussing your duties with Miss Greengrass. She can fill you in." With that, McGonagall left them alone in the compartment.

He looked at Daphne, who shrugged. "Can't really blame her, can you?" she said.

Draco scowled and mumbled, "Whatever."

Daphne sat across from him and started rattling off things McGonagall had told her. Draco barely paid her any attention, staring out the window, grateful for a moment where he didn't have to pretend that he was miserable.

"Draco? Did you hear me?"

He turned to look at the girl, and she huffed in annoyance. "I can't do all of this by myself, you know. I never imagined I'd be Head Girl, not with Granger in our year. I didn't want this either."

Granger? It only just occurred to him that she wasn't the one sitting across from him. Daphne was Head Girl, which meant that Snape had kept the Head positions in his own house. Interesting.

"You won't," Draco assured her. "Will you start over?"

ooo

The opening feast was vastly different without Dumbledore leading it. Snape was short, curt, and to the point, introducing the new teachers and laying down the new rules. Draco cringed when he learned that the Carrows, Amycus and Alecto, would be joining the staff. He had known that Snape had been given the position of Headmaster, but only now did he fully grasp that the Dark Lord had total control over the school.

About halfway through the meal, Draco received a slip of parchment from a small boy who could only have been a first-year. Puzzled, he opened it discreetly.

Draco

Come to my office immediately following dinner. The password is leirion.

S.S.

He frowned, stuffed the note into an inner pocket, and continued his meal. Since promising Draco that he would help him, Snape hadn't spoken to him once. Granted, Draco only saw him when he came around for meetings, but even then, he didn't spare Draco a glance. It was terribly frustrating, as Draco had kept up his end. He sought the company of his parents, his father in particular, as often as possible in order to pick up any scraps of information he thought Snape might want. He had ten sections of parchment, two feet each, full of detailed notes. Perhaps Snape would want them tonight?

After dinner, Draco shrugged Pansy off and solemnly made his way to the Headmaster's office. He had only been there a couple of times before and always when he had gotten in trouble. Dumbledore had only ever been understanding and fair. Draco's stomach threatened to return his meal if he continued to think about the old man.

"Leirion," Draco muttered to the gargoyle.

He knocked on the door, and Snape admitted him.

"Please, take a seat," Snape instructed, pouring two cups of tea. He set one of them before Draco and began sipping from his own. "What do you think of the changes?" Snape asked.

Draco added a lump of sugar to his tea and took a swallow. "Interesting," he said, his thoughts turning to Professor Burbage, the former ... ~~the~~ Professor of Muggle Studies. Draco took another large drink, hoping to quash the image that had been burned into his brain that awful night. Then his head felt thick and foggy, and ...

Then Draco yawned and opened his eyes, squinting in the light. A glance out the window told him the sun had set, but just a second ago, it had been light. "Did I ... did I fall asleep?" Draco asked.

"No," said Snape, who was standing by the window now, where moments earlier he had been sitting at his desk. "I used Veritaserum on you."

Draco looked at his tea cup, now sitting on Snape's desk, half-consumed. "You ... why?"

"I knew that you could trust me, but you did not," Snape stated, returning to sit at his desk. "I had to be sure that I could trust you, and this was the most expedient way."

"Trust me?" Draco repeated. "About what?"

Snape didn't answer, only put his wand to his head and whispered a spell. When he removed his wand, a thin wisp of silvery-fluid followed, attached to the tip of his wand. Snape then pulled the wisp fully from his head and deposited it into a basin that shimmered with a blue light.

"Would you like to see what we discussed?" Snape asked, putting his wand away.

"Uh ... sure." Draco had no idea what he was agreeing to.

"Good," said Snape. "Just touch the liquid in the Pensieve, and I will follow you through."

Draco hesitantly reached his hand out, pausing to glance at his professor and long-time mentor before dipping a single finger into the substance. Instantly, he was pulled in and then dropped into the same room, a few feet from Snape's desk. He looked around and then started when he saw himself sitting in the seat opposite Snape. Neither his other self nor Snape paid him any attention.

"This is my memory of our conversation," said Snape's voice behind him. "They ... well, we cannot hear or see us."

Draco jumped. "You startled me."

"Just watch," said Snape, moving to look around the room.

Draco turned his attention to the memory, already in progress.

"What is your name?" Snape asked.

"Draco Abraxas Malfoy."

Draco moved closer to his memory-self and saw that his eyes were glazed over and he stared unseeingly ahead, not at Snape, not at anything.

"How old are you, and when is your birthday?"

"Seventeen. June 5."

"Where is your birthmark located?" Snape continued.

"My inner right thigh."

Draco glanced at Snape, slightly embarrassed that he had been asked that question, and more so that Snape knew the answer.

"Did you know that your mother and I took an Unbreakable Vow before you began school last year?"

Draco's eyes widened as his memory-self gave a monotone negative response. "What?"

"Just watch," Snape drawled.

"Did you willingly take the Mark?" the memory-Snape asked.

"Yes."

"Do you still wish to be a Death Eater?"

Draco gaped at the memory, anxious for what he would answer. The memory-Draco didn't even hesitate, if such a thing was possible under the Truth Serum.

"No."

Draco glanced at Snape, who was still perusing the office. Snape was one of the Dark Lord's most trusted and revered followers. If he shared this conversation with anyone, it could get Draco in a lot of trouble. Or killed. No one expressed any other sentiment than that they wanted to follow the Dark Lord above all else.

"Are you interested in taking action against the Dark Lord?"

Draco's eyes widened, and the blood drained from his face. Snape was trying to get him to say something that would amount to treason against the Dark Lord. He would be killed for sure! Why? Why would he...

"Yes. I don't know," said memory-Draco.

"I take it you haven't given this course much thought."

"No."

"Why is that?" Snape asked.

"There is no other course," his memory-self replied. "I'm in now, and everyone knows that no one gets out."

"I wasn't suggesting that you would ... leave his services," memory-Snape replied slowly. "Have you been collecting information this summer, as I instructed?"

"Yes, sir."

The memory-Snape nodded, pleased. "That is good, Draco. How do you feel about continuing this task through the school year and reporting to me on a regular basis?"

"That would be fine."

"That is enough," said Snape, taking Draco's arm firmly in hand.

As the vision swirled, Draco saw the memory-Snape tap his memory-self with his wand. Then they were back in Snape's office, the windows once again dark. Draco sank heavily into his chair and put his head in his hands.

"Are you going to turn me in?" he asked dejectedly.

He heard the sound of Snape's robes rustling as the older man spun around to look at him. "What gives you the idea I would do such a thing?"

"You ... those questions!" Draco replied, feeling as though the room were shrinking around him. "What else would you want to do with that information?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "You are forgetting everything that led up to that conversation, Draco." Then, in a lower voice, he added, "You and Potter are not so dissimilar." Louder, "Neither of you *listen*."

Draco frowned, trying to recall what they had said before. "You wanted to know if you could trust me."

"Exactly. If I had asked you those same questions without the Truth Serum, you would have been afraid to give me the truthful answer. I could have sensed your dishonesty through Legilimency, but our time would still have been wasted. Now I know that you are at least somewhat willing to work against him."

"Sir," said Draco, shifting in his seat, unable to get comfortable. "Why ... why would you want me to do that?"

Snape peered down at him for a moment and then sat down, folding his hands on the desk. "Draco. I understand the position you were in last year. I know that you do not wish to be where you are right now...in the Dark Lord's service. Not only are you too young for such a terrible burden, but clearly you aren't cut out for the job."

Draco opened his mouth to protest and then shut it again. At one time, he would have vehemently argued that he did, in fact, want to work for the Dark Lord and that he had what was necessary to be an efficient soldier in the Dark army. Now, however, he knew that it wasn't so, and for some reason didn't mind Snape knowing the truth.

"You've been forced to grow up early," Snape said. "And you have a maturity now that few of your schoolmates share. To them, it's still a glorious concept to be one of the Dark Lord's chosen." He looked intently at Draco. "You have a choice. You may either work against the Dark Lord or for him; there is truly no in between. If you are not actively resisting, then you are allowing his reign of terror to continue."

Draco's jaw dropped, and once again, he quickly shut it, staring in amazement at the newest Headmaster. "Sir?" he began. "I ... I don't understand." What Snape had just said would get him killed, no questions asked, if Draco repeated it to anyone.

I knew that you could trust me, but you did not. I had to be sure that I could trust you.

Snape waited patiently, watching Draco while his mind spun in a hundred different directions. No matter which path he took, they all led to the same conclusion. "You really are a spy?"

"Yes," Snape said simply.

Draco felt as though he might lose his dinner after all. How? ... Why? ... What ... what about ... "Dumbledore?" Draco gasped.

Snape sighed. "He knew about your duty as well. I was entrusted with the task of making sure you did not complete yours. He wanted you to have the chance to decide your future without the impossible circumstances laid on you."

The room suddenly felt oppressively hot, and Draco looked frantically for something to do about it. Upon spotting a bin in the corner, he bolted from his seat and retched until there was nothing left inside him. When he'd finished, Snape handed him a wet rag and a glass of water.

Draco accepted both and wiped his mouth, then downed the water, feeling his body begin to cool after being sick. He knew he would soon be shivering, and he remained seated on the floor, moving away from the bin and pulling his knees to his chest.

The old man had known. Well, he had said as much that night on the tower, but he truly had wanted Draco to have another chance, a different future than the one that had kept him up night after night.

Draco ... you are not a killer ...

He had a choice now, just as he had on the tower that night. He had almost made the right one then, but it would have been too late even if he had. Now ...

"What must I do?"

ooo

End Notes: Okay, okay, the last line is totally from "Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring." I even picture Draco closing his hand around a solid gold ring. Well, maybe not. :D

Many thanks to Shug, Pokeystar, and elyaeru for the excellent betas!