

Falling Slowly

by SS Lupin

Draco was lying in a pool of his own blood in the last car of the Hogwarts Express. A short retelling of Half Blood Prince. Written for the Animagus Exchange at hd_inspired.

One-shot.

Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros. Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended. Title taken from the song "Falling Slowly" by Glen Hansard & Markéta Irglová.

Draco was lying in a pool of his own blood in the last car of the Hogwarts Express, thinking he had too much of it, especially since it all came from his nose. He wondered if, without the *Petrificus Totalus* locking his body up, he would have bothered to heal himself and get out.

A rustle of fabric sounded behind him and suddenly warm hands were on his face.

"Are you all right?" Lips moved in front of his eyes. Draco couldn't respond, but the person above him figured out the curse quickly enough.

The effects of a fifteen-minute beating and its aftermath caught up with him, and Draco turned his head to one side and vomited.

"Watch the shoes, they're new." A woman's face topped with pink-streaked brown hair appeared next to him. "Let's get you fixed up."

The woman muttered a few spells, and the pressure-pain in Draco's nose faded in a burst of heat spreading through the rest of his bruised body.

Draco sat up. His vision swam, and he fought the urge to stay on the floor.

"Come on, Malfoy." She held out a hand to Draco, but he ignored it and got to his feet.

As he shuffled to the sliding door, the woman asked him, "Who did this to you?"

Draco remained silent.

"I am an Auror. Though it's not strictly in my department, I can make sure that whoever did this to you will be brought to justice."

Draco recognized the woman now. She was Andromeda Black's daughter, the half-blood his mother did not talk about.

"Brought to justice," Draco repeated.

"You bet," the woman Tonks said brightly. Draco blocked Crabbe's violent grin out of his mind and looked at Tonks' forehead.

"I didn't see anyone," Draco said.

Tonks sighed. "Slytherins. Come on, to Hogwarts with you."

Draco left the car and wondered who had noticed he was missing.

He got his answer when he saw Potter at the end of the corridor, eyes wide behind his glasses before he ran out of the train.

~*~

The letter arrived the next morning, pale yellow parchment headed with the Malfoy family crest. Draco tore the wax seal and read the curved, slanted handwriting. It was his mother, urging him not to fail, to ask Professor Snape for help with his project, to escape if he must.

He responded with a brief note thanking her for the surprise box of toffees he found folded in with his school robes, asked how his mother's garden was faring, and that he hoped she would visit Father soon.

On his way out of the Slytherin common room, he thought about a good place to work on the cabinets.

~*~

Draco was making the final payment to Borgin and Burkes when he first spotted the bird.

It looked like it shouldn't be in Hogwarts no *England*, and other students noticed the bright body of red and blue feathers flying from tree to tree.

Pansy had given up trying to read over his shoulder and was now staring up at the bird. "What an ugly creature," she said, scrunching up her nose.

"Where d'you think it came from?" Goyle bothered to ask.

Crabbe was nowhere in sight.

"Certainly not from that big oaf," Draco said with a nasty glare toward Hagrid's hut, where the Weasel and Granger had just come out. "He wouldn't try to bring in something with a zero chance of maiming us."

Goyle laughed gruffly, and Pansy's twittering giggle echoed noisily in Draco's ear.

Still, as he folded the invoice and tucked it into his robes to send later, he wondered why the strange bird was flying over him.

~*~

He spotted the bird several times during the autumn months. On the pitch during Quidditch practice, while he was studying magical repair manuals in the library, red feathers whizzing past the window next to him even once after he'd filched Boomslang skin from the Potions storeroom, a squawk echoing down from the high dungeon windows.

Draco wondered if it was a spy checking on him, but he figured his Head of House was reporting on his progress anyway.

Or lack of it.

~*~

Draco stayed at the castle over the Christmas holidays, afraid of a Dark visit at the Manor to see how he was coming along with the plan.

Though the dungeons were well heated, Draco always felt cold, nose red and running and hands stuffed in his robe pockets.

On Christmas morning he snuck past a sleeping Crabbe in the boys' dorm and climbed the many staircases that would lead him to the Room.

He had almost reached Barnabas the Barmy's tapestry when he saw Potter, clad in mismatching pajamas, at the other end of the corridor.

"What are you doing here?"

"This is my floor," Potter said. "I should be asking you that question."

But he didn't, and they both stood there, staring at each other. Draco took a step forward, itching to *do something* when the Weasel's voice echoed down the corridor.

"Harry? You didn't finish unwrapping your presents!"

Potter ran the way he'd come from, and once the echo of his footsteps died, Draco went to the piece of wall that would help him.

He held his breath as he passed the wall three times, thinking *space to work, survive, vanishing cabinets, cold*

The door appeared, dark unpolished wood with a tarnished handle, and Draco entered the Room of Requirement.

He found the cabinet, a chair, relevant books and tools, and a wide window overlooking the lake.

Some hours later, when he had finished rereading two of the books and opened the toolbox, Draco heard a tap at the window.

The bird was on the other side, blue and red feathers hovering behind the clear glass.

"I suppose you want to come in." Draco flipped open the window latch.

Cold winter air blasted against his face as the bird sailed in, flying a lap around the room and perching on the cabinet.

"No! Shoo! Get off that!" Draco waved his hands, and the bird flew in and settled on the chair, shiny black eyes focused on the cabinet.

Draco studied the bird. The throat and wings were a spectrum of blue pointing down to long, thin tail feathers. The rest of its body was a shade above spilled blood, and the curve of its yellow beak clued Draco into why he had found the bird so strange.

"You're a parrot," Draco said, walking slowly toward the chair. "A bloody parrot flying about in Hogwarts."

The bird's head turned sharply, and Draco found himself laughing.

"I've been worrying about a parrot," he said, his index finger inching toward the bird. "Polly want a Christmas cracker? Ow!"

Draco snatched his hand away from the bird and inspected his finger. It was fine save for the torn and bleeding skin at its tip. He pulled out his wand, and the bird was suddenly in flight.

"Get down," Draco said, healing the wound with a short spell and putting the wand in his robes. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The bird tilted its head to the side, as if in thought, and fluttered down to rest on his shoulder.

"Well," Draco said. "That was unexpected."

He inspected the cabinet and took notes, the parrot a warm weight on his shoulder.

~*~

One evening while Draco had his Astronomy homework beside him on the floor with the cabinet a determined presence in the corner of the Room, he thought about the bird. He was perched on Draco's shoulder, periodically flying around the room or eating from a small bowl of seeds Draco had brought for him.

Draco felt the bird take off from his shoulder and entertained the thought once more. One wing was all it took, and Draco would make sure his owl would get used to the idea of sharing his cage with another bird...

He rummaged for the right tool in his kit, the kit he hadn't touched since Christmas, and stopped, his fingers hovering over the bent metal and wood.

He'd rather the bird fly to him.

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay."

The bird squawked in reply.

~*~

Draco didn't know what was more annoying. Crabbe and company's grammatically incorrect threats, Professor Snape's questions about the mission and his Sphinx riddles of advice, or Moaning Myrtle's discovering him close to tears in the boys' bathroom and inviting him to her toilet after the Dark Lord finished him off.

He decided the worst of all these things was Potter's never-ending presence. Watching him eat breakfast in the Great Hall. Standing behind him in the Honeydukes line the one time Pansy convinced him to go to Hogsmeade. Casting him a strange look every time Draco trekked up to the seventh floor.

After one such incident, which left Draco with goosebumps lining his arms from Potter's heated stare, Draco told the bird, "It's depressing to know you probably have a longer life expectancy than me right now."

The bird didn't make any noise, pecking at the stale bread in Draco's hand.

~*~

June was approaching and Draco hadn't finished the cabinet. He had nightmares of the Dark Lord storming into Hogwarts without Draco's help, sealing the Mark into his arm until the skin cracked and blistered and bled, black and red running down his arms and out of his eyes, his father laughing

Draco woke up screaming. He tore the twisted bed sheet from him and pushed up the sleeve of his nightshirt.

The skin was sweaty and pale.

Draco waited for his breathing to slow, then pulled on his robes before going to his classes.

~*~

Draco left Pansy and Goyle during lunch and ran up to the Room of Requirement. When he opened the door, he found the room as it was, the window wide and letting in the sunlight, the cabinet standing in the corner.

He sighed in relief and resignation.

~*~

The bird joined him as he whispered the final spell. The cabinet didn't look any different, but Draco felt more apprehensive toward it than he had before.

"It's finished."

The bird flew around the cabinet, flapping its wings madly before speeding past Draco and out of the window.

Draco watched the bird go, a twist in his gut bringing him to sneer at the blur of feathers.

He thought of washing away the dirt off his face and hands, and a sink appeared in front of him.

While he was toweling his head dry, he thought of a quill and sheet of parchment to write to his mother.

He knew he couldn't delay any longer, with the seal on the parchment dry, and left for the Owlery.

Only once he opened the door, he found himself pressed up against the wall.

"Get off me," he said, pushing against the boy holding him.

"No." Potter's glasses flashed as he faced Draco.

"You have a choice," Potter said.

"What are you on about?"

"What you've been doing in there. You don't have to go through with it."

"You don't know anything about me." Draco felt Potter loosen his grip and pushed the smaller boy away.

Potter didn't stop, grabbing Draco's arm before he could leave.

"Please."

Draco was so surprised by the word that he didn't realize Potter had kissed him, a soft press of lips.

"We could go to Dumbledore he could help, and "

But Draco didn't care just then, bending toward Potter and kissing him back. He wasn't sure if he was doing it right until Potter wrapped his arms around Draco's waist and pulled, and Draco opened his mouth and Potter opened his and they were sharing spit and touches and air.

Draco lifted his hand to Potter's nest of hair and found it to be coarse and tangled, except for one spot where it was as soft as down...

His fingers kept seeking that spot as their kisses heated, running his tongue along and past Potter's lips, Potter's hair falling into his hand.

Draco broke away. "Potter, are you aware of your premature bald"

In his hand lay three red feathers.

"Malfoy"

"No," Draco said.

"I was only curious, at first, but then"

"Just stay out of my life!" Draco yelled, bolting down the staircase, relieved when it moved to another landing, away from him.

~*~

Draco kept away from windows and the grounds, and if Pansy noticed any change in him, she didn't say anything. He hadn't sent the letter, though he still had nightmares. The Dark Lord was always there, but now they ended with Potter's big eyes focused on Draco's bleeding ones, telling him it didn't have to be like this, that he could be free...

Draco woke from another one of these dreams, moonlight spilling through the gap in his bed curtains.

He edged past the other beds, seeking out his favorite chair in the common room to brood and worry.

His wand was out and his fist clenched when he saw the bird perched on the back of his chair.

"How did you get here?" Draco said, training the wand on a transformed Potter.

"One of the first-year girls brought me in here. Thought I was cute," Potter said, blushing.

"I'm sure," Draco drawled, then catching himself. "That's not what I meant."

"Right," Potter said. "I just wanted to apologize."

Draco's wand arm trembled. "You had no right."

"And you did? Trying to destroy the school?"

"I think I should turn you in *tohim* personally. Then your precious Hogwarts will be safe. You don't even have your wand, do you?"

Potter's face reddened, but he didn't back down. "You have a choice," he repeated.

"And what?" Draco snapped. "Let my mother die?"

"We can protect her, too. Just..." Potter held out his hand.

He had to choose.

He wanted to choose.

Draco lowered his wand slowly and took Potter's hand.

The heat from their hands shot up Draco's arm, but he stood where he was.

"So," Potter said, taking a step closer. "Do we?"

"We still have time," Draco said, already in flight.

- end.