

Atonement

by Terra

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Chapter 1 of 1

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They take away his quill after they catch him drawing rivulets of red across his wrists. They confiscate everything else after he tries to hang himself. They steal his only book out of spite.

But he's already finished Snape's journal. Who knew the greasy-haired traitor had a sentimental streak? Years. That's how long Snape hides hate and love and fear behind mercurial eyes and shifting intent, confessing only to thin sheets of parchment.

Death is not the greatest of evils, Snape quotes some ancient Muggle playwright.

Fucking blood traitor.

Snape lied for years. Draco is exhausted smiling for his mother. She sees him every week; he wishes she would forget him. Her pity and his shame clog up his throat until he can't speak a bleeding word. When she's gone, he vomits the things he can't say. His sick tastes and smells acrid, like fear.

He is as arrogant as his git of a father. But his eyes . . . he has Lily's eyes Snape writes.

Disgusting Mudblood lover.

His only other visitor is Mudblood Granger. She comes, spews out rubbish about pardons and hearings in clipped tones, and he sits staring at a point above her head. He thinks about her eyes. They're brown, like mud. Dirty and foul. He imagines what her parents might look like. Just as uninteresting and plain as Granger, he bets. Funny, it's the first time he thinks about where Mudbloods come from, whether they have parents.

"Do you look like your parents?" he asks impulsively.

Her eyes narrow. Still brown. "What?"

"Your parents, do you look like them?"

She purses her lips, squinting in suspicion. "Why do you care?"

"Fuck, Granger. It's just a question. I'm not asking you to draw a bloody picture so I can hire someone to off them."

Her fingers tighten until her knuckles are white but her body is unnaturally still, except her eyes they're not brown anymore. Maybe it's the way sunlight, streaming in from

the crater they call a window, hits her squarely in the face or how she's thrumming with agitation despite her queer artificiality. But they're glowing and her irises are browner than brown. They're some kind of liquid gold and Draco can't help staring in fascination.

"No. My mum's a blonde and my dad has green eyes," she says flatly, standing up, moving out of the light.

And just like that the spell is broken; she's plain, muddy Granger again. Draco nods, satisfied.

Dumbledore lectures me that the son should not be punished for his father's sins. But Potter is a coward, a glutton for attention, insolent Snape scratches furiously.

He and his mother are the last to see Lucius. *Malfoys don't do public spectacles*, she tells him. But he thinks it's because there would be more accusers than well-wishers. A line of victims winding all the way around the cemetery.

Still, his father was a great man. Harsh but principled. Draco learns happiness on his knee at three. He learns fear from the end of his cane at six. He learns shame in his silences at eight.

Draco is a bully, a coward, an ingrate. He learns loathing, slicing inwards like shrapnel from the momentum of an explosion, when he doesn't get the highest marks, make enough of the right friends, impress any pureblood scions. After he can't best Potter in Quidditch, doesn't score higher than Granger on tests, won't beat Weasley in a fair fight. The self-loathing cuts, so he flings it outwards. *Scarhead, Mudblood, Weasel*, he sneers.

Draco is a racist, a bigot, a perpetrator of hate crimes. Seeing Muggle-borns quiver in his presence makes him feel strong. Leaving girls crying makes him feel loved. Clawing at the chinks in the armor of his betters takes the edge off, blunts the jagged truth that he *will never* be good enough.

Draco learns hate after his father is incarcerated at fifteen. He and his mother are defenseless, and she sinks into the quicksand of his aunt's madness. Voldemort returns all rejoice their great liberator. But Draco mustn't exalt in his presence, mustn't feel pride in the association; instead he must cower, prostrate in fear and he does. Because he is the man in the family now and blood is thicker than childhood and sanity.

His obsession with Potter consumes him. There is no accounting for the actions of a madman. He has his eye on young Malfoy Snape scrawls hesitantly.

Draco doesn't experience true fear until he is sixteen. Congratulations, he has something in common with house-elves he's kicked and children he's threatened. Terror doesn't discriminate; it churns even in pure veins. He must kill the Headmaster can't think of him as Dumbledore. He forgets classes, assignments, food; remembers only murder and blood and guilty. He must hand helpless children to black cloaks and white masks, a trade for his family that he refuses to regret.

And it is almost not a lie.

He finds a lock of his mother's hair at breakfast. *Encouragement*, he can almost hear his aunt purring. He dreads the Malfoy seal in every letter and savors the scraps of news his father delivers in code so he can sleep at night. Then he finds a way to not fail. He lives and breathes the Vanishing Cabinet until its every contour is etched onto his skin, beneath his eyelids.

But when it is his chance, *his* word that will finally mean something to a great man, he fails again. With Dumbledore's full attention for the first time, the only time, all he sees is an old man, exhausted and sick and weak. Draco knows what it feels like to crave sleep and succor so badly that even death seems a relief. He falters.

Of all things . . . why must I kill him? Is there no end to his insufferable tasks and secrets? The boy must suspect nothing Snape writes in anguish.

Draco never suspects. Snape is his mentor, his only ally in a madman's prison of lies and deceit and insurmountable power. His betrayal is unforgivable *Never trust anyone who isn't family*, his father said. *Never love anything more than it loves you* his mother said.

At home, Voldemort reigns, his father cowers and his mother cries. Then one night, the three people he dreads most appear. It is Potter, Weasley, Granger, but if he says if he tells the truth then they will die and he will be forced to watch and point and jeer. Like all those people Voldemort slaughtered, executed some call it. But what was their crime?

He mumbles, tries to nod and shake his head at the same time. Aunt Bella's beady black eyes scrape his face; he swallows the rancid taste of fear down with nothing but air. She swishes her wand and Granger screams, limbs flung out, locking as she seizes, fingers gnarled. He squeezes his eyes shut and hates her for screaming.

It is worse to want to die, and not be able to Snape signs his last entry.

This, he understands.

Draco wonders why Granger keeps visiting. It can't be his charm (he never speaks), his good looks (he's a wasteland of bruises, bones, veins), his money (she's incomprehensible like that), or innocence (he isn't). He thinks maybe she's one of those women who writes to convicts because they're lonely and need to be needed and scared of dying alone.

"What?"

He repeats: "I'm sorry."

Her eyes flutter impossibly wide. Still brown. "For what?"

"For for being a bastard. For calling you names. For not saying I didn't recognize you."

Granger nods slowly. "Is that it?"

Draco laughs. He is pouring out his soul, and the unappreciative bint wants to know *if that's it*. "I'm sorry I never thanked you for saving my life or saving the whole goddamned world or for killing that snake bastard."

"And?" she prompts, her eyes keen to tell him something.

He frowns. "Give me something to write with and I'll give you an exhaustive list. Save us both time."

"No," she refuses, clenching her quill. He realizes suddenly that she never leaves anything behind, even after he spends hours staring blankly at her books, her bag, her papers. If she truly hates him then why hasn't she slipped him something with a sharp edge?

"I . . .", he grits his teeth, "I'm sorry that . . . I tried to kill myself to take the easy way out . . . instead of serving the full length of my punishment."

Granger looks astonished. "Malfoy, you think that's why I'm here?"

"Well, isn't it?" he snaps.

"I came to teach myself how to forgive. Because I'm still living it and I can't it won't let me move on."

"What won't?"

"You. Voldemort. Death Eaters."

"Fear," he breathes. This, he understands. The way terror carves into someone, death by a thousand cuts; his body is a map of scars engraved by fear.

"When I heard you . . . had tried to kill yourself, I thought maybe we could learn together."

Draco presses himself against the bars, as close to freedom as he has been in months. "I'm still a prejudiced prick."

Granger smiles. "Thank god. I don't know that wizardkind could recover from a well-mannered Malfoy."

It surprises him that she keeps shifting in degrees and he can't remember when he stopped resenting her. Her coming and going is a filter, something that clears his mind until some feelings become impossible to revive.

Maybe that's the point; that's what forgiveness is. It's not something only granted to the deserving. Maybe forgiveness is meant for those who need it most and the brave survivors who need to give it.

Some playwright said, *it is worse to want to die, and not be able to* Draco thinks that there is nothing better than wanting to live.

He reaches through the bars, his hand jutting awkwardly between them.