

Remembrance

by Terra

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Her footsteps echo in the winding column of stone stairs leading up to the Astronomy Tower. It's dark and the air is dank. After spending all morning in the sweltering heat, Hermione savors the coolness on her skin. Trailing her knuckles along the rough stones, a habit by now, she remembers countless climbs up this narrow space, crushed in a single file, listening good-naturedly to Ron and Harry grumbling.

Drifting at the memory, she misses the last stair and stumbles into the observatory, heart pounding in her throat. Her hand darts out for the rusting latch on the door to keep her balance, and she presses her sweaty face on the smooth wood in relief. That's how she missed him at first, she thinks later.

Hobbling forward, she looks up and her sigh of annoyance mangles into a horrified gasp at the sight of Draco Malfoy on the ledge. Hermione chokes out: "What are you doing?"

Malfoy's head turns and he levels an imperious stare at her, brow puckered in mock confusion. "What does it look like?"

Hermione gapes at him like he's an imbecile. A breeze whips his unbuttoned shirt around him and she stares at his bare back, curved as if bearing an invisible weight, and lingers on the nubs of his spine. He turns to face her and she can't help tracing the serrated pink scar that begins at the tip of a bony hip, searing diagonally across his chest, to end at a jutting collarbone. His arms are spread wide, even with his shoulders, fingers splayed like wings.

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But his insolent tone jerks her back to familiar territory. "It looks like," she grits, "you're about to toss yourself over."

"It does, I suppose." Malfoy cocks his head. "Does that bother you?"

"Does that bother..." she sputters. "Are you raving mad? Get down from there! I am not going to let you," she forces out the word, *kill* yourself..."

"Ah. Typical Gryffindor charity then," he responds, nodding. "It's sickening, really. You'd probably knit Pettigrew mittens instead of dancing on his grave, wouldn't you?"

Hermione inches nearer, making her voice soft, soothing. "Listen, call it whatever you want, but I am not going to stand here and watch you throw away your life."

"Why not?" he asks, his tone genuinely curious.

"B-because I just won't!"

"You know . . . one of the Dark Lord's favorite ways to kill Mudbloods was to Imperius them and force them to jump off roofs or impale themselves on swords and such," he recalls casually, like he's reciting a history lesson for Binns.

Hermione flinches but she doesn't stop moving closer. "That's horrid. It it's evil. I'm glad he's dead." She fights the urge to take out her wand, dangling loosely in her robe pocket, *Wingardium Leviosa* on the tip of her tongue. Would she have enough time to catch him if she Stupefied him? She can't risk it so she keeps talking to distract him. "I'm not all sacks of puppies and sunshine, you know. I'd dance on Voldemort's grave. In fact, I'm planning to after you get down from there," she holds out her hand, "why don't we do it together?"

Malfoy's grey eyes flicker down to her open palm, then up her arm, tracing her face until his molten gaze is burning into her eyes, the desolate equanimity of his countenance slamming the air from her lungs. Suddenly, meeting his glare hurts, and her eyes are prickling as if she's been staring into the sun too long. But she doesn't dare to look away; the moment is too fleeting, brittle enough that a blink is all it would take.

The appeal in his eyes a plea that isn't a plea, a question that isn't a question sends shivers down her spine and somehow, she knows that *this moment matters*. Her feelings are a roiling mess, impossible to bottle into words, so she wills her face to give him the answer he wants. Whatever he sees makes him stiffen in anger.

The hard planes of his face tighten until he's glowering at her. "Stop looking at me like that, you stupid bint."

"Like what?" she retorts vehemently, relieved that he's released her from the desperate importance of whatever just passed between them.

"Like you give a damn."

"I do!"

"Why?" he demands.

"Because I'm a better person than you!" she throws back. "I'll probably leave Pettigrew flowers for saving Harry. I would stand between your mother and a Killing Curse. I would jump off this tower after you. Because I am a *good person*."

Malfoy tosses his head back in a bark of laughter. "Granger, you are the dumbest smart person I've ever met."

"I don't care what you think of me!"

"Is that right? Don't think I haven't noticed why you're so desperate to be teacher's pet. It's a nice consolation prize for having no female friends, isn't it? I bet you tell yourself girls don't like you because you're too smart and they're jealous that you're friends with Scarface and Weasel when really . . . they just think you're bloody annoying."

"If you're trying to goad me into pushing you off, it's working." Hermione's outstretched hand clenches into a fist. "But by all means, insult the person who's keeping you from offing yourself in a last bid plea for attention."

"And the claws come out," Malfoy sneers. "Let's not fool ourselves here. You loathe me, and I think you're the most grating shrew to ever come out of Gryffindor. Quite impressive considering the House."

"That's rich coming from a sniveling coward who does everything Daddy says and only has friends because you buy them," she snaps.

"Who wouldn't want to be friends with me?" he looks down his nose at her, "I'm pureblood, wealthy, good-looking. Whereas *you* are a Mudblood and the only thing remarkable about you is an uncanny resemblance to a beaver."

"Really. Because, Malfoy, from where I'm standing, you have nothing where it counts. Oh, not the things you were born with," she scoffs, "or people gave you. Strip away your so-called pure blood and money and," her eyes sweep over him distastefully, "passable looks and there is *nothing* redeemable about you."

"Exactly." Malfoy nods slowly, his lips stretched into a harsh smile, his grey eyes sharp and jagged. "Exactly. I couldn't have said it better. I know I'm beyond redemption."

Hermione stares at him in horror at being baited, flushing with shame that she's used familiar hate to escape the rioting emotions he's awakened in her. She says shakily, "Malf..." but the rest comes out as an incoherent shriek when he turns to face the sky, knees bending, body swaying forward.

Hermione launches herself the few feet left between them and slams into his side, clutching his midriff. "You ungrateful cretin! How how dare you!" she cries in his ear.

Malfoy snarls, "Let go of me." His bony fingers dig into her arms but she tightens her hold, clenching handfuls of his shirt, shoving her forehead into his shoulder. "Granger, get off me!"

"No! You don't like a Mudblood hugging you . . . well, I don't care! This is your punishment for being so bloody *stupid* and insane and..." Hermione swallows a sob, her vision starting to blur, the thought of watching him fall and fall until he hit the ground, his body bent in crooked angles, flashing over and over in her mind. She wipes her wet eyes furiously on his shirt.

"Are you crying?" he asks incredulously.

"Yes, and it's all your fault, you bastard! Making me say those awful things. What if you'd really died!"

"Granger, I wasn't going to jump," he mutters, sagging against her. "I'm not suicidal."

Hermione's gasp of outrage is muffled by his back. "*What?*"

"I come up here to remember," he sighs, "because short of Obliviating myself, I can't forget that I planned to murder Dumbledore here. And I almost let my aunt kill you. And I let Crabbe die when it should've been me."

"Th-that's all?"

"Yes, that's all. I force myself to stand here to remember how small I am, how much I still have to own up to. I swear."

She isn't sure she believes him so she lets go reluctantly, but the moment she loosens her death grip, he turns in the circle of her arms and knocks them away. Hermione staggers back until she falls against cold stone. Malfoy flattens his hands on the wall above her shoulders, and he leans in until she can see his dilated pupils. He peers down at her with an odd, strained expression. "You stupid girl. Who said you could cry for me?"

"I can cry for whoever I want to," she returns hotly, silently cursing the tears streaking down her face. But his shallow breaths are warm on her cheeks and she can't hide her trembling from him.

Malfoy whispers, "Damn you," and before she can shrink away, his lips are pressed against the corner of her mouth, moving in a caress as soft as petals blowing across skin. "Salty," he murmurs, his dark lashes grazing her cheek.

Hermione's face explodes with heat. "M-Malfoy, wha..."

"Shut up," he breathes, resting his head against hers. "I'm savoring the moment. I want to remember you like this. Trying to save my life, crying for me."

"Malfoy, I-I was wrong earlier." Hermione raises a quivering hand to his hair, cradling the back of his head, marveling at the contrast between her tanned skin and the bone white strands. "You're not unredeemable. This right now, refusing to forget the hurtful things, making new memories with me, *this* is redemption."

"Draco," at his name, she feels his pulse leap in his chest, "redemption begins with remembering."