

Moments of Compassion

by Bambu

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer and Author's Notes: Only the order of the words is mine, all the characters and this universe belong to JKR and her assignees. I wrote this in response to a prompt given to me by Geminiscorp at Live Journal's HP Con Envy.

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Hermione didn't know where Harry and Ron were. They would probably be angry with her if they knew what she was doing, but she clung to the belief that it was the right thing to do. She lengthened her stride to keep up with the gimlet-eyed Auror who had agreed to accompany her.

Up four flights of broken stairs, along two corridors, skirting debris and occasional gruesome remnants from the previous day's battle, Hermione focused on the here and now, and not on the tremendous losses of yesterday. It might have been a victory, but the taste it left behind was sour and its stench metallic.

"Where did you say the room was?"

"Around the corner."

The Auror eyed her skeptically. "I was a student here not so long ago."

"It doesn't appear all the time," she explained. "The house-elves call it the Come and Go Room, and your need must be urgent."

He snorted with gallows humor, but then asked, "Crabbe, did you say?" When she nodded in affirmation, he continued to speak. "That one isn't likely to need urgent care now is he? How do you know..." He paused as they rounded the corner and saw the fickle room's door standing ajar. "I'll be buggered," he muttered and drew his wand. "Stay back, Miss Granger."

"It may not be..." she started to say, but he blocked her passage, and she stumbled to a halt rather than step on his robes.

"Until we know what or who is here, you will stay behind me." His tone brooked no disagreement.

"Fine." It irritated her to be treated like a child, but his point was germane.

As they reached the door muffled noises could be heard from within, and Hermione wrinkled her nose from the burnt smell left by the summoned and uncontrolled

Fiendfyre.

Hermione peeked around her protector's broad back; her fingers flew to her mouth, covering her gasp. Tears fell from her eyes without notice and she swallowed her nausea.

Inside the damaged room where furniture, books, knick-knacks and forgotten magical devices had collected over centuries, and which were now charred, some into unrecognizable ash, was seated a visibly grieving Draco Malfoy. He cradled the limp, partially burnt body of the friend who had sown the seeds of his own destruction.

The Auror backed away from the door quickly, practically knocking Hermione off her feet. She looked up to see the man swallowing convulsively, for the sight of Crabbe's body was particularly gruesome. Hermione tasted the salt of her tears and brushed them from her cheeks.

The Auror squared his shoulders. "All right, then."

Hermione's fingers clinging to his sleeve stayed his re-entry. "Wait, please. Give him a moment."

"I don't have a moment, Miss Granger. There are other things I must do." To his great credit, he hadn't said 'more important things,' and Hermione liked him for it.

On impulse she said, "Let me talk to Malfoy, and then you can take ... put Crabbe with the others."

This tall man was among the few who had heard the disjointed retelling of eight months' worth of hardship by three exhausted teenagers, and the expression in his dark eyes showed that he remembered salient points of the story. "After what happened to you are you certain?"

"Yes." Surprisingly she was. In hindsight, Hermione recognized how uncharacteristically Draco had behaved when he hadn't instantly identified her or Harry when they had been dragged into his home as prisoners. Draco Malfoy had always been easily frightened, and it had shown real courage for him to have taken the chance he had. And in light of what had happened after the others were taken to the dungeons, Hermione knew he wouldn't hurt her now. Even his behavior during the Battle for Hogwarts was consistent with the actions of a terrified young man, desperate to survive. How he would live with himself later was anyone's guess.

Looking up at the Auror, Hermione met his even gaze. "Give me a few minutes. He'll let you take Crabbe's body."

"I can give you five minutes."

"It shouldn't be that long. I'll call you." She flushed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I don't remember your name."

Something like a smile flirted with his lips, and he said equably, "Saunders. Will Saunders."

"Thank you," she murmured before slipping through the partially opened door.

Silence greeted her entry.

Draco was no longer holding Vince Crabbe's body, and he was no longer making snuffling noises, or the sounds were so quiet it was impossible to hear as his face was buried in his hands, and his shoulders were shaking.

Unable to bear the sight of so much pain Arthur Weasley's stricken face staring at Fred's body came instantly to mind. Hermione practically flew the distance between the door and Draco's side. Her inarticulate distress alerted him to the presence of another, but before he recognized her through his red-rimmed and swollen eyes, Hermione's arms had encircled him. She crooned, "Hush," in his ear.

Whipcord arms wrapped around her, skinny fingers grabbed her robes, digging into her back, but Draco wasn't trying to hurt her. He was unburdening his soul, and he clung as if she were his only lifeline.

He had clearly been crying for some time as he'd reached the hiccupping, shuddering stage, and after several moments, when he was quiet, Hermione summoned the Auror. Draco kept his face buried in her thick hair, and she whispered, "It's all right. He's being taken back to his family."

Finally recognizing Hermione's voice Draco froze, but he didn't release her, and he didn't pull away.

Within moments they were alone, Saunders had retrieved the body, and it was only then that Draco leaned back.

He looked terrible. The last months which had leached any fat from Hermione's bones had done the same to him. He hadn't been starved, but it was clear that he hadn't been nourished either. He desperately needed a bath and a shave; Hermione noticed the pale stubble on his chin and jawline.

She had never seen anyone who looked so lost. Had Harry been present, he could have told her Draco looked exactly the way Ron had when he had destroyed the locket Horcrux. Stripped of all superficial masks, torn down by their own insecurities and inadequacies.

Draco swallowed and his Adam's apple bobbed; he was so thin it looked painful. "Why?" His voice was hoarse, and cracked. "Why are you here? Why would you do something like that?" His hand waved in the direction Auror Saunders had taken with Crabbe's body. "Why would you do this?"

"I..."

Suddenly, he pushed away and scrambled back several feet. "Fuck, Granger! How can you touch me after what happened? After..."

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"How could I not?"

That wrung a snort from him. "Granger, we've hated each other for seven years. You've slapped me, I've wished you dead." He faltered. "You ... I ... we..."

"Were both victimized by your sadistic aunt, and you saved my life from that horrid werewolf." She shuddered at the memory of Fenrir Greyback's hands touching her, those filthy, savage hands.

Inadvertently, Draco's eyes dropped to her breasts. They used to be fuller, but he seemed mesmerized nonetheless.

Without conscious volition Hermione remembered Draco's pale skin, his narrow chest and protruding ribs. She remembered that he had been gentle. She remembered the way his eyes blazed as he breached her maidenhead, and she remembered how he'd screamed in agony when Bellatrix Lestrange had hexed him afterward. His body curled like a foetus while his mother forced her sister to change the focus of her ire. And Hermione remembered the agony of Bellatrix's Cruciatius, exponentially stronger because it was fueled by her anger at her nephew's perceived weakness.

Hermione thought she might vomit.

Shakily, she rose to her feet and started toward the door.

"Wait!" Draco called out. Then he, too, rose to his feet, awkwardly, as if he'd been sitting for a long time.

Hermione paused on the edge of flight, or perhaps panic.

"I'm..." His mouth closed. Then it opened again, as if the words were competing for exit. "You. I thank you. Thank you for seeing to Crabbe."

"You're welcome." Hermione bent her head, her wild hair tumbling about her face.

She allowed Draco to step closer, and he swallowed hard. He said softly, "I was glad you escaped."

"Me, too." She almost smiled, and then raised her head to look at him, brushing wayward tendrils of hair from her face. "I'm glad you weren't killed."

The furrow in his brow relaxed. "All things considered, it might've been easier if I had been."

"No!" she cried without knowing why his statement bothered her. "Don't say that."

"It'll be Azkaban for me."

They stared into one another's eyes. Hermione would remember the exact color of his, and many years later, she would paint her office that same color. "Maybe. I don't know."

"You know I'm not Marked."

"I don't actually."

Embarrassment colored his too-pale cheeks. "You saw me. There's no Mark."

Frost cooled her voice. "I had other things to think about at the time."

He jerked back as if she had slapped him, and her compassionate nature overwhelmed her trauma. She stepped forward, hands reaching for him. "Sorry. I'm sorry," she said, and her voice broke.

He took her hands, more gently than she would have expected, and brought them to his chest. It was an unconscious, courtly gesture, and it overcame her reluctance. "It's all right," he said in his hoarse voice.

His grey eyes searched hers, and after a moment, he lifted one of her hands and kissed its back. His lips were chapped, but their brush against her skin was as delicate as a bee walking on a rose petal.

From the outside corridor, two voices shouted her name. Harry and Ron.

Instantly, Hermione and Draco were feet apart.

"I have to go." She stepped to the door. With one last glance at Draco, she said, "I'll testify for you. In front of the Wizengamot."

And then she was gone.

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