

The Tower

by Delayed Poet

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione Granger was distraught. Now that the war was over and everyone was trying to rebuild their world, she simply felt lost. She'd played her part; once again she'd been the brains behind the operations that had allowed the trio to survive yet another confrontation with Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Though she couldn't take all the credit. Harry and Ron had certainly grown up a lot and finally learned to use their brains, even if only a little bit.

She was proud of them, proud of what they had achieved, yet she mourned. She mourned for those who had died throughout this ridiculous war and for those who had lived to see their loved ones die. She mourned for those of her generation who had grown up under their Death Eater parents, being taught the ludicrous notions of Pureblood Supremacy, and had, in essence, lost their childhood and innocence because of it.

Every step Hermione took sounded painfully loud in the abandoned corridor she walked through. She absentmindedly maneuvered around piles of rubble and deftly pretended that she didn't see the random splotches and pools of blood. She breathed through her mouth to avoid the harsh stench of the dead, the dying, and the injured that seemed to have permeated the very walls, even though everyone had been cleared out during that day.

This castle had been her home for six years. It had been where she'd found her boys, where she'd learned of the sorrows of a broken heart and the joys of feeling beautiful and genuinely appreciated for the first time. She'd had her first kiss within these walls, and she'd discovered that there were worse things to be teased about than being studious. She had learned so much more than magic within the ancient castle -- to see it in shambles broke her heart.

Hermione moved through the castle without a destination in mind. Her feet seemed to know where she was going, and she was content to simply let them lead her. She wasn't entirely surprised when they led her to the steep, winding staircase to the Astronomy Tower. Her hand hovered over the wall as she climbed over loose and crumbled stone to keep herself from stumbling.

The door leading into the room at the top of the tower looked as if it had been blasted off. It was singed in the middle and splintered out from there. With a sigh, Hermione moved into the room that was chilled with the early evening summer breeze. She crossed the room to the parapet, leaning against the barrier and looking out across the grounds.

Since she was there and didn't have to worry about anyone engaging her in conversation, getting her opinion on things, or trying to enlist her help in yet another rebuilding project that still needed to be done at the castle, Hermione closed her eyes, breathed in the cool air deeply, and let her mind calm for the first real time in almost a year.

She couldn't say how long she stood there undisturbed, but the moon was shining brightly in a dark blue sky surrounded by millions of stars, both dim and bright. She heard the scuffling across the room and couldn't stop the automatic reaction. Her wand was in her hand in a split second, and she'd turned to face the individual. She didn't lower it when she saw it was Draco Malfoy. His family might have managed to weasel their way out of Azkaban yet again, but she didn't trust them for one minute.

Malfoy held his hands up in a shocking sign of peaceful approach. Hermione didn't lower her wand; she absolutely did not trust him.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Her voice was not harsh, nor was it timid. As much as she did not like or trust him, she was most upset with him at that moment for disturbing the fragile peace she'd found atop that breezy tower.

"I was just looking for somewhere quiet to think about everything," he said softly, and she was surprised to see the way his eyes seemed to be full of pain and sorrow. He half-turned toward the doorway. "I'll leave you be, though."

"No, don't." Even as the words left her lips, Hermione wondered why she hadn't just let him go. Malfoy looked at her, raising one pale blond eyebrow, and then walked to lean against the parapet a few feet away from her. Instinct told her that she was not in any danger, so she lowered her wand but kept it out. One could never be sure or prepared; if she'd learned anything during the last year, it was that.

The minutes passed without any reference to how many or how fast they went by while they stood in silence. Hermione was surprised that though she was tense, the air surrounding them was not. She hadn't thought it possible to be alone in a room with Draco Malfoy and have a peaceful atmosphere.

"Why did Potter save me?" Draco finally broke the calm silence with the entirely unexpected question.

Hermione turned toward him, her elbow resting lightly on the rail. She considered his question seriously. She couldn't presume to know what was going through Harry's mind when they were all flying through the Room of Requirement with fiendfyre nipping at their broom tails. She could, however, give him her opinion of why Harry had saved his life.

"I think it was because Harry is the kind of person who values human life. It didn't matter that you and he never got on well," she said with a touch of dry humor. "When it came down to it, he couldn't let you die there *because* it was in his capability to save you. He truly is a hero." She knew that it wasn't about being a hero for Harry, it was simply who he was.

The corner of Malfoy's lips curved up slightly. "He does sort of have a saving people complex, doesn't he?"

Hermione took his question to be rhetorical, though her lips did quirk up in amusement. She remembered saying something very similar to Harry during their fifth year. The silence didn't last, and she was surprised at the next words out of Malfoy's mouth.

"I'm beginning to see why that makes him a better person," Malfoy whispered, his words almost lost into the night.

"He is an amazingly, genuinely good person, Malfoy," Hermione said softly.

He turned to her then, and she was shocked at the fierce intensity in his eyes. "Wasn't there anything that you were taught growing up that wasn't right, that you couldn't see it was wrong because it was all you knew?"

Hermione just stared at him, flabbergasted, for a moment, her lips parted slightly. "No," she finally said, "there wasn't."

Malfoy shook his head, disappointment pushing the intensity out of his eyes. "Then there's no way you can understand what I'm going through right now."

The words confused her. "Why would you want me to?" She was nothing but a Mudblood, an intruder in the Purebloods magical society to him. Wasn't she?

A few moments passed before he finally responded. "I owe so many people my life, Granger. I promised my servitude to a powerful wizard, allowed him to brand my arm." He paused, his right hand moving to brush over his left forearm. "And in doing so, I made myself into exactly what I was raised to abhor. Can you understand that, Granger?"

Hermione swallowed, her eyes looking up through her lashes at him. His words struck a sympathetic chord within her. "Not personally," she whispered, "but I do understand the theory."

His lips curved up without humor. "Do you know when I realized what had happened to me?"

"No." Nor was she sure she wanted to know. Seven years of disliking the young man standing next to her was not making it easy to feel the sympathy building for him.

"It was right here," he said as he moved closer to the doorway. "I was standing here with my wand pointed at Albus Dumbledore. He was very weak, he couldn't even stand, and I could have killed him without resistance. It was my task. If I did not accomplish it, the Dark Lord would have killed me and my family."

Hermione watched him as his mind traveled back to that fateful night nearly a year ago. She didn't dare move or make a sound for fear of bringing him back to the present.

"I'll never forget the conversation I had with him in this very room. When I disarmed him - it was the most exhilarating moment of my life. I hadn't thought it possible, and then it was all happening. I truly believed in that first moment that if I killed him my life, my parents' lives would be spared. The feeling overpowered the fact that I'd already begun to doubt everything."

Hermione was caught up in the story. She could imagine it, the confusion of being raised with twisted morals and trying to do right by them with a death threat hanging over his head.

"He talked to me, managed to pull the truth out of me of how I'd managed to get to that point. I'm almost certain that he'd already known or at least suspected most of what I told him. I imagine he was simply stalling." He shook his head and looked back at her.

"No," Hermione said, clearing her throat and shaking her head. "Harry was there. He wanted Harry to know everything so that he could tell the Order." She wasn't sure why she felt the need to explain, but now that the war was over, she didn't see any harm in it.

Malfoy nodded once. "Yes, that makes sense." With a sigh, he moved back to the parapet, leaned against it. "He gave me the option to step away from the Dark Lord, to join him. He promised that he would hide me, and that very night they would retrieve my mother and hide her as well. The Dark Lord would assume I had died and my mother had been captured and killed, as well. Dumbledore would have been right."

He looked at her, and Hermione could see the pain and regret in his eyes. "Why didn't you?" she found herself asking. She didn't know why the look in his eyes touched her so deeply.

"I wanted to; I wanted to lower my wand and take everything he was offering me." His eyes closed, and she thought he must be fighting off slipping into the despair of those moments when his life could have changed for the better, but hadn't. "The others caught up with me. With the other Death Eaters there, I had to find my resolve again, and quickly. Any sign of weakness in front of them and they wouldn't have hesitated to kill me then and there, or worse."

"Worse?" Hermione squeaked out before she could stop it. Her stomach turned at the thought of worse than the Death Eaters killing him.

Malfoy nodded slowly. "Yes, worse. Can you imagine what the Dark Lord would have done if they'd brought me to him as a traitor?"

The nausea coiled in her stomach. "I can't imagine worse than what I suffered at Bellatrix Lestrange's hand," she whispered, her eyes shining with the echo of the pain she'd suffered at the deranged witch's hand.

Malfoy's hand lifted as though he was going to reach out and touch her, and for a moment she wasn't sure if it would bother her if he did, but then he pulled his hand away

and brushed across his brow.

"I'm sorry for that," he whispered so low that she wasn't sure he'd even actually said it.

Hermione shrugged it off nonchalantly, though there was nothing casual about the subject matter. She'd been plagued with nightmares since that day. Not wanting to dwell on it, she said, "So, the Death Eaters showed up." She knew what had happened next, from Harry's description afterward, but she thought that hearing Malfoy's version might give greater insight into the entire situation.

"Yes, the other Death Eaters joined me here. They praised me for cornering a wandless, weak Dumbledore. And then the oddest thing happened. Greyback was goading Dumbledore, going on about enjoying the flesh of kids." At that, he paused and shuddered. Hermione felt bile turning in her stomach. Greyback was the single most foul individual she'd ever had the misfortune of knowing of, and she truly believed that he was even worse than Voldemort himself.

"And then Dumbledore expressed his shock that I had invited him into the school. In that moment, I felt ashamed and terrible that I had inadvertently done just that." She watched a visible shiver course down his body. "They were urging me to kill him, to get it over with, but I was quite literally frozen with terror. I was so torn between completely not wanting to have his murder on my shoulders and knowing that if I didn't kill him, I would be signing my entire family's death sentence."

Malfoy's voice faded into silence as he looked out over the grounds. She was shocked to see the unguarded pain and suffering in his expression. Her heart broke for the young man standing not a meter away from her. She didn't want to break the silence, but he was so close to the part of his story that she was most interested in. Though Harry had guarded the memories fiercely, he had told her and Ron an abbreviated version of the truth behind Severus Snape's actions, she still wanted to know more. She wanted to make sense of a senseless war and all the players in it.

"What happened next?" she asked, her voice softly carrying through the small space between them.

"Snape showed up," he said simply, looking her directly in the eyes. It caused a gasp to pass from between her lips. "Dumbledore said his name with such pained relief, it was almost like a plea, and I knew that there was so much more going on that any of us could have imagined. And then, Snape killed him. I was too shocked to move, to think. Everything was a foggy blur, even as Snape pushed me out of here and through the castle. I remember, afterward, thinking that it was a miracle that we'd managed to accomplish the task and still made it out there unscathed. I was relieved that I had been spared from being the one to kill Dumbledore that there was no room for me to think about how I would suffer for not completing the task personally."

Hermione gasped. She'd never even considered the possibility that Malfoy and his family would still have been punished. She was shocked to feel the hot tears burning moist trails down her cheeks. She'd never thought she could be so affected by Draco Malfoy's story, but she was. Several minutes passed before either of them spoke again.

"But you still fought against us, in the final battle," she whispered, unable to ignore that fact. She wanted to understand why he'd done it when he'd made it clear that he didn't like what he'd become.

"It was all I could do," he whispered, too. "To fight against him, or even to try to not fight at all, would have meant instantaneous death. I asked you earlier if you could understand how I'd turned into precisely what I'd been raised to abhor. Can you imagine, now, how when I returned home, I became the nothing. There was no congratulations, no pride for getting as far as I had. The Dark Lord personally saw to my," he paused, his eyes closing in pain, "punishment."

Hermione didn't think about what she was doing before she was wrapping her arms around him, pulling him against her. Her fingers stroked through his hair, and he held onto her tightly. She couldn't fathom why it didn't feel wrong. When he pulled away, they both pretended that his cheeks weren't moistened with tears.

"I don't know what to do now," he admitted, his voice cracking with emotion.

"Shh," she soothed, her fingers still moving softly through his hair. "You don't need all the answers just yet. Give yourself some time to work things out."

He shut his eyes and shook his head. Looking at her, he said, "That's not what I meant, but the future is definitely something to consider."

"What then?" she asked, completely caught up in the moment, in the stormy look in his eyes.

"I don't know," he paused, considering the right way to say whatever was on his mind. "I don't know how I'm supposed to interact with people, how to move past the nightmares and fears to find some semblance of a normal life. How do I completely change my personal philosophies now that I know what I know?"

Hermione's hand stroked down to cup the side of his face. "Maybe you start by learning who you are now, by discovering just what you want out of life. It's what I'm trying to do right now," she admitted sympathetically. "It's not an easy process. It's confusing and difficult, and most days I wake up wondering why I'm even bothering."

The tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them back stubbornly. She'd cried enough during the past week. "It won't be easy, but you don't have to go through it alone," she whispered. She didn't know what she was offering, but she knew she meant it.

Somehow, over the course of his story, Hermione knew that she'd completely changed how she looked at him. He wasn't the spoiled, whining brat that he'd been for most of his years at Hogwarts. He was simply a young man who'd learned life's lessons the hard way.

** Seven Months Later **

Hermione smiled as Draco walked up to her table. He leaned down and pressed a friendly kiss against her cheek before sliding into the seat across the table from her. He flagged a waitress and ordered tea before speaking to her.

"Hello, Hermione," he said, his lips curving up in a small grin.

"Draco," she returned, smiling back at him. "How have you been?"

She watched as his lips pressed together in a pensive line, knowing that he took her question as seriously as she'd intended it. Over the past months, they'd grown to a comfortable camaraderie.

"It's getting better," he told her. His lips quirked up in a self-deprecating smirk. "I'm not seeing danger around every corner anymore, and that's a nice change."

Hermione reached her hand across the table, covering his larger one. "That's great! And the nightmares?"

"Rare, anymore. And you?" he asked, turned his hand over beneath hers so that they were resting palm to palm.

"Harder to shake off than I'd like," she admitted with a grimace.

"Give it time. You're not alone," he repeated her own words from that momentous night back to her.

"I know. Thank you," she said sincerely. She never would have imagined that she and Draco could become such good friends, but over the past months, he'd become a friend she couldn't imagine not having in her life. "So, how's your apprenticeship going?"

"Good. Very good, actually. If I keep up at this pace, I'll have my Master's a half year sooner than planned," he told her, smiling proudly.

"Oh, that's great!" she said with a light laugh.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. When he fell silent, Hermione tilted her head, a small smile playing on her lips. She could sense that there was something more on his mind, and she knew he would say it when he was ready.

She didn't have to wait long.

"Hermione," he said softly. The word itself almost sounded like a caress, and it made her stomach flip. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to dinner sometime?"

Smiling, she said, "Sure. If you want to meet for dinner next time, I don't see anything wrong with that." As soon as she said the words, though, she couldn't help but wonder if she'd completely missed the point.

"Me either," he agreed with an indulgent smile. "Though that's not quite what I meant. I would like to take you to dinner, on a date," he explained, his fingers stroking her palm lightly.

Her stomach flip-flopped again, her heart sped up, and a light flush colored her cheeks. "Oh," she said softly. She pulled her lower lip between her teeth, and then smiled at him. "Well, I don't see anything wrong with that, either. I think I'd enjoy that very much."

From the butterflies in her stomach, Hermione had a feeling that this could be the start of a fun, exciting, beautiful adventure that she'd never expected to go on.

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A/N: First, I'd like to thank my lovely beta, Gelsey, for her patience and skills. You're the best!

Second, I hope you all have enjoyed this little one-shot. Please review, and let me know what you thought!