

A Life Sentence

by Bambu

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Chapter 1 of 1

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~o0o~

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Drip ... drip ... drip ...

The rank smell of bacteria-laden, stagnant water assailed his nostrils in the shadowy cell. The outlines of a metal cot and iron privy were revealed by dim light entering the confining space through a narrow clerestory opening twelve feet above the ground. It was far too high to reach, even if the cot could be moved beneath the raw gash in the solid stone. In this horrific confinement, day blurred into night and into weeks and months and years.

There was no concept of time, no one to visit to remind him that once he was someone else -- someone with a mind unravaged by the undead, unclean wraithlike dementors patrolling the harsh stone palace of hell. Once, he had lived in luxury as the petted prince of an aristocratic family, and his mum had sent him daily care packages of sweets and reminders that she loved him. Once, he had been the envy of his housemates and lusted after by young witches eager for his attention. Once, he had been even more. But those memories had been leached from him, expunged from his brain by the frigid, grasping things that held him captive, sucking the humanity from him until he was left a husk of flesh, bone, and sinew.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

The perpetual trickle of water sluggishly oozed down the rock-face of his prison walls until enough moisture was collected to bead and drop to the floor, forming the small puddle in the corner of his cell. The droplets were how he had learned to tell time in this place. They were what had kept him marginally sane over the course of his sentence.

Initially, after his benumbed mind had shaken off the shock of his incarceration, he had spent weeks ranting and raving about the indignity and injustice of his imprisonment, certain that he would be freed. The dementors had excised his jealously guarded hoard of happy memories first. For an indistinct period of time he had raged as each

memory was removed from behind the locked vaults of his mind, flooding his system with anger, lust, and fear as each vivid image was cut from him ... day-by-day, drip-by-drip.

He had been left a hollow shell, eternally chilled, skeletal in form.

No longer was he an object of fantasy; instead, he would now be the image of nightmares to small children who would have no idea that the real nightmare was in the images that played over and over in his mind: haunting him, preying off the withered and wretched thing that was left of his soul.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

It had been then, when nothing was left of his soul but tiny masked shards of memory, he learned to count the drops of water. Four-thousand-two-hundred-sixty-four drops to a day during the summer and up to nine-thousand-eight-hundred-thirty-three drops in the winter. And always, always the scream of the wind which howled around the island he would call home until the end of his days.

Breakfast was served at nine-hundred-fifty-seven drops, most days. The oat porridge was thick and twice-a-day filled with shredded bits of meat. At first, he had flung the bowl against the wall, demanding better victuals. He, who had been served at the finest tables in wizarding Britain, had been reduced to eating gruel, if he was lucky.

In the early days, he had eaten his porridge and then exercised to maintain his stamina and his physique, prepared for the day his release would be arranged. But day after day, week after week, month after month, so long that he had lost track of time, he wasn't released. Instead, he was left alone, and his memories and emotions had been harvested, a banquet for the dementors.

Now, he huddled in the corner of a darkened hovel, counting the drops of water -- lunch between two-thousand and two-thousand-four-hundred audible droplets -- waiting for his next meal, hating its advent because the dementors delivered it, sucking yet another memory from him in payment for his sustenance.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

One-thousand-eight-hundred-forty-six.

He had lost hope some time ago. Perhaps he couldn't really remember what hope was, only that he should have it ... had once known what it was. But those days had been ripped from him.

Clearly defined reasons for his incarceration had been sucked from his memory. In their place, he was left with the unending image of a slender woman with long platinum hair, fanning in a nimbus of light around her head, sprawled across a marble floor, blood dripping from her throat to pool beneath her head, staining her thick hair. An anguished cry had been ripped from someone's throat -- now it was as often him screaming in his cell as it was the memory of him screaming in a hall -- he had dropped to his knees to pull the woman into his arms, his hands becoming coated with coagulating, pure blood.

The beautiful woman, whose face had been pulled into an ugly rictus of death, was the same porcelain trophy wife who had sent care packages to a boy at school, carrying on a family tradition. Harsh, echoing sobs had been known to rend the air in both memory and reality. He had never cared that her family bore the marks of madness: one sister insane from the brutalities of Azkaban, the other a blood traitor because she'd married a Muggle-born. Those facts no longer carried any meaning. The only remaining fact was that she had bled as she died, and he hadn't been able to save her.

That's how he had been found -- kneeling in a pool of his mother's blood, his hands crimson, his robes drenched.

The only question he'd been asked had been 'Why?'

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

Why, indeed?

The question had haunted him from the moment he had found her. Why hadn't he known she would be a target? Why hadn't he been able to save her? Why hadn't he used his wand to seal her wound when he'd first found her? Why hadn't he called the Aurors immediately?

All he could remember was that it had been too late. His epiphany had been too late. He had chosen sides too late. He had forgotten he was vulnerable through this one weakness ... his family. Too late ... for her ... for him.

There had been no chance to prove himself, to prove his loyalties to those who could have saved him. To those he had hoped, in those first terrifying days, would save him. Instead, he had been imprisoned to await trial. It had been swift and merciless. His mind had been numb from grief and terrible, wracking guilt. The only words he had muttered in his own defense were that he had been too late.

No one else had spoken for him. He had hoped and waited and looked at every face in the courtroom, and he lost heart. He had been sentenced to Azkaban, the horror-filled chambers of a distant island. Remote, frigid, inhuman.

The final resting place of his father's body.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

It was a prison in which he was sentenced to live for the rest of his days as an isolated shell of a man who had once wished to right the wrongs of his family. But none of his earlier wishes and desires seemed to have meaning now. Rather, he was left with bitter regrets, fear, and that endless, lifeless image of his mother lying dead at the foot of the stairs waiting for him to find her one beautiful spring morning.

He curled into a fetal position and rocked, slowly, soothingly, his only comfort in his horrifying existence. Forgotten ... unloved ... unmissed. After a time, two-thousand-one hundred-one, the prematurely aged wizard fell asleep. It was unusual for him to sleep in the middle of the day; he rarely missed a meal. There was a slender thread of stubborn resolve underneath the shell of the young man he once was, and he had remained alive and relatively sane when so many others in neighboring cells had died or lost their minds.

One-thousand-one-hundred-eighty-nine.

He slept. Alone, chilled and bereft.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

The harsh grating of a rusty metal door being unlocked and opened jolted him out of his restless sleep. His long hair, once glossy and white-blond like his mother's, was filthy -- gray and wispy -- hanging in tangled clumps to the middle of his back. He wore it draped around his shoulders as if a cloak to ward off the cold.

The glow of candlelight preceded a body entering his cell and was a shock to eyes which had long been accustomed to the dark. He threw his hand in front of his face as a shield, croaking in fearful surprise. He'd not spoken in anything but shrieks and screams for longer than he could remember.

He had never received a visitor.

He couldn't make out the silhouette of the figure stepping into his cell. But the candle illuminating his small prison was incandescent, showing the rough-hewn walls, the dark, glistening stains of leakage and the dank, stagnant puddle in the corner.

A gasp and a stifled sob met his ears. It wasn't a dementor, although he could feel the arctic presence of one just outside the cell. A woman's voice something about it pricked the shards of memory ordered the creature back.

He cowered in the corner of the cot, warding off the light which brought a tiny flicker of warmth into his frosty cell. His heart clenched in his chest, and his throat was so tight he couldn't speak or scream or cry.

The light moved and seemed to settle in one place. The angle suggested it had been set on the floor. The cot sagged with the weight of another body, and, unbidden, he whimpered.

"Oh, Draco," she whispered in the otherwise quiet room.

Draco. Was he Draco?

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

Time was measured, and he counted, awaiting his fate. His mind automatically supplied the number: three-thousand-four-hundred-eighty-nine. He tabulated the drops even in his sleep.

"Do you know me?" Her whisper came, soft, sighing across the drip-broken silence.

He couldn't respond. He didn't remember how to respond. He could only remember the image of his dead mother, the dripping of water, and this woman's voice, tugging at an exploited emotion. It -- she was something he should remember, but the recollection was indistinct, sucked from him in the first months he'd been imprisoned.

However, lurking in the dim recesses of his mind a splinter of memory pricked his brain, from a time before his mind had been raped. She embodied something. She was the happiest of his memories. The short few months when, at twenty-three, he'd earned the love of a woman.

He dropped his skeletal hands from in front of his face, his eyes at last becoming more accustomed to the light. He squinted in the glare, attempting to see his visitor. She was seated at the end of his cot: a young woman with wild hair and deep brown eyes. She was thin -- too thin. He didn't think she should be so thin, but he wasn't sure.

His mental images were unfocused, a ghostly shade of the real thing. Nonetheless, there was something about this woman that called to him. An unfamiliar ache tightened his chest.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

A petrifying chill permeated the stone cell and he moaned in agony.

He recognized the ache and the feeling about this woman. There had been happy memories of her. He had kept one -- hidden -- protected by his remaining sanity. Yet now, his struggle to remember her revealed its existence, and the lush ripeness of the memory had lured the hovering dementor.

He whimpered in fear.

A shrouded figure poised in the doorway of his cell, its scabbed, scaly claw reaching for him.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" screamed the witch on his cot. A bright, silvery otter shot from the tip of her wand, the dementor sucked air, wind, and its own demise from the bright source of its death knell.

Four-thousand-five-hundred-three.

Drip... drip... drip...

He turned to face the witch on his cot, his body creaking with pain and disused muscles. He remembered her. He remembered her huge, luminous eyes. Her name was cloaked in hurt, fear, and the misery of his recent existence. He looked around the cell, to the multiple bright flames set in a circular pattern on whatever it was that this woman had carried into his cell.

They were candles, numerous small candles, twenty-nine in all, burning in a pattern.

"Happy birthday, Draco," she whispered.

Was it his birthday? Was he really Draco?

Something in the back of his mind said yes to the second question, but he couldn't answer the first.

He raised his eyes to hers, only to realize that the new drip he'd heard and had been counting had been her tears. Runnels of liquid saline streamed down her face to fall from the clean line of her jaw into a small pool in her upturned palm almost a supplication or an offering.

Her voice was thick with tears. "Do you remember me?"

He shuddered. He did remember her. She was part of that memory, the one he'd struggled to keep hidden all these days, nights, months, years.

His voice croaked and cracked; he had no control. It was broken as he was broken. "Her Her mione?"

"Yes!" She sobbed as she spoke, and then aborted a lunge in his direction when he recoiled, unused to touch, affection, or simply the presence of anyone else.

He watched her force herself back to the edge of the cot and scrub the tears from her face.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

He looked anywhere but at her. He was afraid. Afraid of what her presence might mean. That he might be returned to what had once been reality but was lost in a haze of blurred memories. What would reality be? What could he be? A spectre, a wizard, a wraith?

Was she a spectre, a ghost, a shade?

His eyes were dragged back to her as she moved off the cot to hunker down next to the flickering candle-festooned ... cake. Deftly she wielded her wand, and a spear of longing lanced his heart. He vaguely recalled having a wand at one time, and wielding it with her at his side.

He watched her, carefully, unsure whether to trust her or not. Whether she was a hallucination, or not.

She dug into the pockets of her robes and withdrew plates and cutlery. Then she proceeded to deftly shunt the lit candles to the side and slice the glistening treat. She held out a slender wedge of cake, but he didn't know what to do with it. He just stared.

"Go on, Draco, it's your favorite. Poppy Pomfrey helped me pack this with enough medicinal chocolate and Pepperup Potion to help you."

He continued to stare.

Was she a dream, or was she the release he'd so longed for but had finally acknowledged would never come?

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

Four-thousand-nine-hundred-eighty-two.

He reached a rail-thin hand toward the plate and heard the catch of her breath, half inhalation, half sob. He was careful not to touch her, but pulled the plate back so fast the fork clattered to the floor, loud in the otherwise quiet room. It didn't matter. He hadn't used a utensil in so long his fingers had become his only tools.

He greedily took the first bite, not caring if it was poisoned. Anything was better than this stagnant, lingering death.

It wasn't poisoned.

It was heaven. Rich, dark chocolate melted in his mouth, the heated tang of the Pepperup Potion sending a fiery spark to his intestines and blossoming outward toward his perennially chilled extremities. It was almost painful.

As the potion began to circulate through his system and the chocolate started to dispel his melancholy and depression, the synapses in his brain began to fire and spark, reconnecting cells and tissue, restoring his mental processes. His ears began to smoke.

The cake was rich, too rich for his system, but he licked the plate clean and looked to the witch for more.

She was no longer on the bed or next to the cot. No. Now, she was seated at his feet, on her knees, her eyes gleaming brightly.

"More," he croaked.

"After you drink something. And then we have to see if you can walk."

"Why?" he asked. The question that had haunted him for a seemingly endless period of time was the only word he could think to utter.

"I'm taking you home, Draco."

Hope lanced through him, but fear, which would take years to vanquish, was more deadly. "This ... you ... this isn't real. You aren't real." He turned his back on her.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

"No! Draco, it's real. I'm real." Her voice was choked. And then all was quiet. If he looked at her, he would have seen her chewing on her lower lip, peeling a layer of tissue in her distress, bleeding as she bit too hard.

Five-thousand-two-hundred-one.

She touched him. Lightly, tenderly, barely. But he felt it and rocketed off the cot, whirling to face her, his adrenaline speeding the chocolate and potion through his body. His mind became clearer.

"Her ... mione?" He put his back against the wall, partially to hold him up, partially to keep his back protected against attack.

"Yes, love. It's really me." She stepped closer, but didn't touch him. "I've come to take you home."

"I ... don't ... have ... home. Gone." He couldn't go back to that place, the place with the green marble floor.

"You're coming home with me. You're free, Draco. The letters of your pardon were signed yesterday."

"But ... no one ... you ... didn't believe me. Didn't come."

Her chest heaved. "I did believe you! I knew you hadn't done it."

"You weren't ... there. You didn't ... speak for me. You didn't come." He threw out his hands to keep her away from him.

These were the memories that had remained with him, fuzzy, out of focus, but sufficiently excruciating for the dementors to suckle on the misery of his anguish. They'd lingered long after any happy memories of her had been excised from his heart. The halcyon days of falling in love with the witch he had once hated. The joy of her loving him back. Of their brief happiness. Of the possibility of their building a life together.

He had gone to Malfoy Manor that spring day to ask his mother's blessing. Instead, his life had been utterly destroyed. And Hermione hadn't come to his trial. She hadn't seen him from the day of his arrest until now. It was this knowledge the dementors had left in place, and which had tormented him. Aside from the grief at his mother's loss, the evidence that Hermione hadn't believed in him had almost killed him.

"I couldn't." She avoided his eyes.

His heart, if possible, shattered.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

"Wouldn't, you mean." His tone was harsh, long-disused vocal chords inflexible after so much time had passed.

Hermione flinched as if he'd struck her. "I couldn't," she cried. "I ... You ... I didn't want to tell you this part yet. I wanted to give you some time. I didn't know if you'd even remember me. If you didn't, then how could I tell you?"

"What? Tell me what? That you didn't believe in me? That you didn't love me? That it was all a lie?" Festering bitterness found verbal expression, and his voice gained strength as he used it. "Was it some plan of ... of..." he wracked his brain for names long forgotten, "...Potter? Dumbledore?"

"NO! Draco, that's not it." Her hand was outstretched; a plea.

He ignored it.

His legs began to tremble, unused to supporting his weight, and Draco slid down the wall, folding into a huddled, skeletal mass of a once-handsome, once-vibrant man.

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth and the tears spilled over once more, following the previously blazed trails down her cheeks. "That isn't what happened." Her voice was choked and broken.

Draco understood broken. "Then tell me, Hermione, what happened?"

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

Five-thousand-six-hundred-twenty-seven.

The day was almost done. Soon he would begin the recount, starting afresh with the first droplet of a new day. Soon she would be gone, a figment of his imagination. He'd never before imagined food though, and his mouth watered with the remembered taste of the chocolate cake.

Her voice was very small and frightened when she spoke. But he heard it nonetheless. It interfered with his counting.

"I didn't come to see you," she said, "couldn't help you when you were arrested because I was in hospital."

He frowned. There was some other memory, something buried perhaps, or more probable, it had been stolen from him, greedily siphoned from his mind.

"Why?" There was that question again. Only this time, he seemed to be the one using it repetitively.

Rather than answering him, she asked a question. "What do you remember, Draco? About us? What do you remember about us?"

He looked up at her slender form, a small woman with an indomitable spirit. As the potion and medicinal chocolate worked their magic, he remembered. He had always noticed her, from the time she was a girl. She had annoyed him, challenged his comfortable understanding of the world. His opinion of her had changed some time after they had left school and he found himself on a committee with her at the Ministry of Magic. They had been forced to work as a team rather than adversaries. He had been doing his best to redeem his family name after the war, and she had just begun to build a reputation for herself. Surprisingly, they had worked well together, and over the course of the two-year project, feelings had grown between them.

"I thought you loved me," he accused.

"I did. I do." Her eyes were huge.

She still wore her heart on her sleeve, but he didn't know if he could believe the evidence of his eyes or his ears. She hadn't, after all, stood up for him when he had been sentenced, or at any time after that.

"Prove it. Tell me what you were doing in hospital?"

"If you don't remember ... how can I explain ... how..." Her chin tilted as if preparing for a blow. She opened her mouth, but an intense, frigid misery infiltrated the cell, and, once more, they were accosted by the hand of happiness-feeding decay and rot.

Hermione whirled, her robes flaring behind her, brushing over his knees. She braced herself, moving to stand in front of him, protecting him from the dementors. Two of them hovering just beyond the doorway. Hermione's wand pointed in their direction; they had been drawn by the strong emotions emanating from the stone cubicle.

Draco cringed on the floor, somewhat buffered by the chocolate and potion he had eaten, but not enough. He cried out in agony as the tiny spark of memory he had so carefully hidden was sucked into the forefront of his brain. His cry galvanized the witch blocking the dementors' access to him.

Her Patronus dispatched the unwanted visitors, and Draco knew time was growing short. She would leave, and if she were telling the truth, maybe, just maybe he could leave with her.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

She turned to face him once more, her chin set resolutely. "I didn't want to tell you this yet, not until you remembered more, but I wasn't able to see you after your arrest or indeed speak for you at your trial because the day your mother Narcissa -- was killed, I was attacked."

Draco flinched.

The possibility of her being hurt had never occurred to him. Instead, he had thought the worst of her, brought on by the lack of visitors and the lack of support he had received. In his shocked state, he thought the woman he loved had abandoned him to his fate.

"Are you ... what ... what happened?" It was vital that he knew. There was something he couldn't remember; something that made her answer important.

"I was thrown from the second story ... from my office, by Rodolphus Lestrage. He was seeking revenge for my capture of Bellatrix. It was luck that saved my life. Ginny was coming with me to my obstetrician's appointment that morning. She was at the entrance when I was forced out of the window. She was able to cushion my fall, but I was hospitalized for a long time. You were sentenced and brought here before I knew you had been arrested or could muster a defense for you. I'm so sorry about Narcissa, Draco."

But there was more. He knew there was more. He just couldn't remember what it was. "And?"

"I was unconscious for days, and then there were complications after that. It took me some time to sort out my life, to recuperate and to find the finances for an appeal. I had to hire investigators. Harry helped, and I had to support us ... er ... myself. I've been working for your pardon for the past five years."

Draco didn't even register the length of time. All he'd heard was "*Harry*," "*sort out my life*," and "*us*." Nothing else. None of the rest was important.

"Us?" he asked. Had he been about to leave this wretched hell hole only to have nothing to go to? It had been his biggest fear, one of the nightmares that had haunted him in the early months, before the never-ending image of his mother's dead body had filled his days.

Hermione glanced away, and he felt as if the remainder of his heart had been ripped from his chest.

Five-thousand-eight-hundred-ninety-four.

"Us?" he asked again. Maybe he didn't want to know the answer. Maybe he would stay here ... where he knew what each day would bring.

"Us," she answered softly. "Blaise and I. I had to earn a living to support us."

Death should have come more swiftly, he thought. Perhaps he could summon the dementors to feed off his agony until there was nothing left. They could bury his bones next to his father.

"Blaise? You ... you're living with Blaise?" His voice was dust, the remains of his fragile hope charred by the bitter thought that his oldest friend had usurped his position.

"Yes, Draco, I'm living with Blaise. Blaise Draco Malfoy ... our son."

His head shot up so quickly that he smacked it against the roughened stone wall. That was it ... that was the memory he had hidden so carefully, that had been almost completely excised.

"Son?" His voice cracked.

"Yes, I went into premature labor from the fall, and I was kept in stasis to heal until I could give birth. For three months I was insensate in St. Mungo's. My pelvis was

fractured, and a witch can't take Skele-Gro during pregnancy."

His memory was returning. She had been six months pregnant when his mother had been killed. They had planned to be married before the baby was born.

There was more. There was still more.

"You used Malfoy? You gave him -- our son -- my name?" Hope seemed to be reforming, taking on substance.

"Yes. It's a name I had hoped to carry, as well. He's named after his godfather and his father. He's a remarkable little boy, Draco, and I hadn't planned to tell you until you began to recover your memories."

"Where ... where is he?" Draco felt life take root in his heart, a desire to actually step outside these four walls, to see his son. To believe Hermione. To build a life with his small family. She had believed in him. She had borne him a son. Their son.

"He's with Ginny and Harry. They have a daughter, Lily, who is just younger than Blaise. He knows about you. I've told him all about us, and the man his father is."

Fear ripped through him again. How could he face his son like this? He was a monster, something to frighten children. "No. I can't see him."

"Draco! What -- of course, you can see him."

"Not like this." His clawed hands spread in front of him and he struggled to stand, ignoring her outstretched hand. He was still taller than she, but he was frail, and he no longer resembled the proud, intelligent, incisive man she had fallen in love with.

He was different, damaged.

"Naturally, not like this," she said briskly. "We have to fatten you up first, and get you out of here. Why do you think Blaise is staying with Harry and Ginny? I have it all planned."

His first dry wheeze sounded like a strangled cough. It was a rusty, disused laugh. He remembered. He remembered her plans, her color-coded charts and schedules. Of course, she would have it planned. As if on cue, Hermione held out a small plate with another serving of cake.

"You need to have a little more. Please, Draco. Please come home."

He accepted the plate, and the larger slice of cake. He recognized that by accepting it, he was taking the first, irrevocable, painful step to regaining his life. In between bites of rich chocolate, he asked, "What ... what does he look like? Our ... my ... son."

Hermione smiled and pulled a shrunken photograph out of her pocket. With a swish and a flick, it enlarged until it was life-sized -- for a five-year-old.

A little boy with curly blond hair, gray eyes, and a pointed chin was waving to him from a grassy knoll in front of a small, homey cottage. In one hand, he was clinging to Draco's old Nimbus broomstick, and he was wearing a miniaturized version of his father's Slytherin Quidditch uniform. In Blaise's other hand fluttered a Golden Snitch.

Draco's heart throbbed and his throat closed. He reached out to touch the image of his child, his eyes blurring with tears.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

One ... two ... three ...

It was a new day.

"Will you come home now, Draco?" The question triggered more memories.

The chocolate and potion were working. Draco's mind began to function more normally, and he attempted a small smile at the woman he had loved ... that he had never stopped loving. Her hand was extended toward him, hesitantly, as if she were afraid.

The old Draco Malfoy would have spurned the help. The old Draco Malfoy would never have engaged in an affair, or fallen in love with a Muggle-born witch, but there was nothing left of the old Draco Malfoy. He was an entirely new Draco Malfoy. He didn't know quite what he would become ... but he was going to do his damndest to build the best life for himself and for his family. To deserve Hermione, who'd been faithful and had worked to free him, and had named his -- their -- child after him.

"Yes," he said as he took her hand, her warm, vibrant hand. Her touch was electric. He'd forgotten what she felt like. He'd forgotten so much.

It was time to relearn.

He allowed her to hug him. She was the first human to touch him in more than five years and it was strange, but the feel of her arms surrounding him was wonderful. Hermione showed no aversion to the layers of filth or the stench of his body. She held him tightly, and he felt her breasts pressed against his chest. He inhaled sharply, the floral overtones of her hair triggering even more reminiscences. He knew her smell. He clung to Hermione with equal ferocity, and a tiny spark of remembered passion ignited in his loins, but his body was far too weakened to do anything other than remind him that once he had been a man. His legs began to tremble, unused to such exertion.

Rather than remaining in this festering pit of despair, he said, "Take me home, Hermione."

Her smile could rival her Patronus for illuminating the dark, and she led him to the rusty, metal-grill door, a threshold he had not crossed since the day he was incarcerated. The dementors remained at bay, beyond the reach of Hermione's Patronus. They were right to be fearful of this witch's power.

As Hermione and Draco left the rat-infested room which had been his entire world since his sentencing, Hermione said "Happy birthday, Draco."

They were the last words to linger in the dank, stained, cold cell.

Drip ... drip ... drip ...

~o0o~