

Stunned

by Bambu

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two years... with Narcissa. What does Draco think of that?

Immobilized and Inspired

Chapter 1 of 2

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Spoilers: HBP

AN: This is as PWP as I seem to be able to get, and I have great empathy for Em North. Even as plotless as possible, this baby topped thirty pages. I should probably issue a fluff alert.

At this point in canon, Draco's wand hasn't been identified, so after reading through a list of Druidic Ogham trees in Sirona Knight's Celtic Traditions, Druidic, Faerie and Wiccan Rituals, I thought that Alder would be a good choice for Draco. It's linked to oracular and protective sensitivities, is thought to be a bridge to the Otherworld, and it symbolizes purification by fire. It was the idea of protectiveness and the symbolism of purification by fire that seemed to really encompass Draco Malfoy's character. In some ways, it seems that his entire life - well, from pubescence forward - has been lived in a crucible. Please forgive me if it doesn't quite fit with anyone else's concept.

My heartfelt thanks go to SnarkyWench who has encouraged me when needed and lent her keen eye to the final draft. Any mistakes are my own and, despite all good intentions to the contrary, things sometimes slip past my contact-lens-enhanced vision.

For Krissy, since she asked so nicely... I hope this speeds her recovery.

~o0o~

Chapter One: Immobilized and Inspired

"Petrificus Totalus!"

The hex had no real place in the steamy, orange-blossom scented air of the ornately appointed *en suite*; however, it was effective. The nude body of the twenty-two-year-old witch froze in place, her limbs immobilized at the moment of the spell's contact. Hair the color of roasted chestnuts tumbled riotously over the terrycloth bath pillow, multiple curly strands suspended in the bubble-coated hot water, and thick lashes screened a pair of heavy-lidded brown eyes. Pale skin contrasted with the color of her

hair, a light dusting of freckles caressed her almost-dainty features, and full lips bespoke a volatile nature.

Intense, gunmetal grey eyes tracked the satiny skin covering the tendons of her arched alabaster throat as it smoothed into collarbones, shoulders, upper arms, and upper torso until it was hidden from view by the floating, pale golden bubbles.

He placed the length of Alder he'd wielded to stun his prey carefully atop the fluffy white towel awaiting the woman's need, and a gilt-limbed stool obligingly waddled from the vanity to the wizard's side. He ignored it, his attention never leaving the partially submerged woman's form. Greedily, he took in her recumbent posture as he circled the free-standing, claw-footed tub, his movements lithe, silent and predatory.

Halting at the foot of the tub, Draco Malfoy entered, for the first time since the night he'd fled Hogwarts, Hermione Granger's field of vision. He had waited years to gain the upper hand in their particular Passion play, and he savored each and every upwelling of victory flooding his chest. Imagining her reaction to his presence, he raked his eyes over her nude body.

Her knees were petrified in place, spread, and leaning against opposite sides of the warmed porcelain. A dusky, crinkled nipple played peak-a-boo through the soapy camouflage. Instinct merged with smug satisfaction and overrode conscious thought, sending sparks of arousal straight to his groin. Muscles bunched along his jaw and a fist clenched in negation of his physical reaction, but Draco's eyes widened with understanding and perhaps malicious glee, for he'd noticed, under the dissipating bubbles, that one of the witch's slender hands was nestled firmly between her legs, at the apex of her thighs.

In another circumstance, or an earlier time, he would've assumed it was a prudish reaction to cover her modesty, that she'd somehow heard him enter the room. But they were no longer at school, nor were they children by any stretch of the imagination. Neither had he been careless with the information he'd gleaned about her movements nor in his infiltration of her rooms, timing his penetration with that of the changing of Auror shifts within the heavily guarded Manor house and Malfoy estate. His eyes swept her face and Draco realized that her flushed cheeks, heavy-lidded eyes, and arched throat meant something far more intriguing than a girlish desire to hide her nest of curls from his prurient interest.

A swift understanding twisted his lips into what could have been an angelic smile, but was something else entirely.

Her stunned body began to sink into the warm water, and he strode to the head of the tub. From this position he had a bird's eye view of her body, and the surge of power he felt at her vulnerability was heady. Draco reached down to thread his fingers through her hair, scraping fingertips pragmatically along her scalp. Having filled into the lanky potential of his teenaged years, his palm cupped her head as if as holding a Quaffle one-handed. He curled his fingers and grasped a handful of surprisingly soft hair, and, with one sharp wrench, he pulled her further out of the water, propping her more firmly against the tub's bend.

Draco's laugh was low and mellifluous. He had pulled her hair harder than he'd intended, but she was a member of the Ministry's occupational forces, and he didn't forgive easily, especially when it came to her.

Had she free use of her limbs, she would never have allowed him the familiarity of touch without some form of retaliation, and it was a good thing he'd known exactly when and where she was vulnerable or the situation could have been dangerous. As it was, she was at his mercy, and he reveled in the power granted by his control.

The waddling stool following him like a doting house-elf, and when he reached the foot of the tub he stopped, allowing the stool to catch up to him. He folded his long legs until he was almost at eye level with the motionless brunette, and gingerly took a seat on the ridiculously ornate pouf.

Glazed brown eyes didn't register surprise or anger or distrust. Indeed, they couldn't because of the spell he'd cast. But he had no illusions. Had Hermione not been stunned, he knew that all those emotions and perhaps hatred would have been reflected in the dark depths of her eyes.

Adjusting Hermione's position had revealed more of her body to his sight. Both breasts were now visible above the rapidly dissolving layer of bubbles, nipples hardened into tightly furled buds. He'd never realized when he'd seen her on a daily basis that she'd developed into a curvy woman. However, at that time, she hadn't made a move without her watch-wizards in tow, and he had been consumed by the need to save his family.

Thoughts of his family pricked his conscience and the reasons he'd risked the trip, but the harsh parameters of his fugitive state and the view of lush womanhood reminded Draco that it had been quite some time, years in fact, since his last encounter with a naked woman. He shifted positions on the stool, his trousers becoming tight with suppressed interest.

He smirked at her. She would hate that it had been he who'd caught her in such an exposed position. "So, Granger, why are you still in my home? After two years you should have found *all* the Malfoy skeletons."

She lay still in the tub, unmoving. The water was cooling and gooseflesh raised on her limbs.

Cocking an eyebrow, he taunted, "What? No answer? Cat got your tongue?"

No reply.

Leaning forward, he skimmed the fingers of his right hand across the surface of the water, as a tiger tests a river before striking its prey. Draco was inches from the smooth skin of her shin, and only a couple of feet from a source of more intimate pleasure. By now, all the bubbles had disappeared, leaving no doubt as to what activity she'd been engaged in when he'd cursed her. Two fingers, middle and ring, were lost within the folds of her body, and her thumb had halted mid-rotation over the plump bundle of nerves that she'd been stimulating.

For a long moment Draco's reason for ambushing her was subordinated by a heady rush of arousal, and he began to salivate in anticipation of the feast before him. Even as his nerve endings sparked with awakening interest, he successfully refused to acknowledge it. He had more important things to do than to enjoy a little visual titillation.

Unseating any potential desire from the Firebolt of his imagination was easy if he reminded himself that *he* was living *here* in *his* home, taking *his* place at his mother's side while *he* was in exile. Draco had been wanted for questioning by Magical Law Enforcement since the night of Dumbledore's death. He and Snape had successfully eluded both sides until just prior to the final battle when Snape had kept to the letter of the Unbreakable Vow he'd entered with Narcissa and had leaped in front of an *Avada Kedavra* meant for Draco. It had been Bellatrix Lestrange's final Unforgivable, and that had been thirty-six months previously. Since then, Draco had been living hand-to-mouth in a figurative sense, holed up in a gamekeeper's hut on an estate in the Cotswolds. Initially, it had been both sides who'd wanted him brought in, and then after the final battle and the occupation of the Malfoy estate, Draco had remained high on the Ministry's 'Most Wanted' list.

"Don't bother answering, Granger. I know why you're still here. Where's the Auror on duty? They've grown complacent. Otherwise, I couldn't have walked in on you diddling yourself so handily."

He laughed at his own pun, but the enjoyment of the taunt was greatly lessened by the fact that Hermione was unable to respond. If he was honest, half the reason he'd spent the better part of six years tormenting her was that it was just plain fun. Not only had her reactions been spectacular, but those of her best friend and would-be lover had made Draco's efforts more than worthwhile.

As he baited his once-academic nemesis, her petrified body began its inevitable slide deeper into the tub, and a glint of gold on the ring-finger of her left hand drew Draco's attention. Squinting, he attempted to see whether it was a solid band or something with more flash, like an engagement ring. That wasn't something his informant had revealed, and, for some reason, the possibility of her permanent attachment incensed him. His anger cleared the heady fog of distraction.

"I want some answers. I want to know what you've done to my mother."

Rising, he took a swift tour of the room, ascertaining nothing beyond normal bathing accoutrements and the powerless body of the submerged witch. When she was in residence, Hermione's nightly bathing ritual was as regular as clockwork. That had been the reason combined with the timing the twice daily changing of the guards -- that

he'd chosen now to accost her. Jealousy tasted bitter on his tongue at the thought that his home had become hers.

Picking up the towel she'd made ready, he held on to it. She would have to ask for it. Draco smiled at the thought as he leaned against the vanity, ignoring the nudge of the obliging stool at his knees. He flicked his wand and sub-vocalized, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Galvanized action accompanied the unfreezing of Hermione Granger. She shot straight up in the tub, a Botticelli nude rising from a half-shell. One hand curved across her breasts, a glint of green on her finger, and the other hand hid her Mound of Venus in an instinctive, protective gesture. Water sluiced from her skin, a shimmering cascade into the choppy bathwater. Her wild mane spilled over her shoulders and down her back in a ripple of luxuriant waves, several falling to cover her breasts, freeing her wand-hand. Before the rush of blood could stain her cheeks, Hermione flung her right hand toward the bedroom door and shrilled, "*Accio...*"

"*Silencio!*" Draco shouted over her truncated spell, adrenaline racing through his body as he anticipated her rounding on him with arm raised. He was prepared for it. It's what she would've done the last time he'd seen her... had they still been in school. But Hermione's survival skills had been honed on a battlefield, and she was no longer the easily taunted girl she'd once been. Instead of fulfilling Draco's expectations, she moved toward the door, quickly high-stepping over the sides of the tub, and onto the gold-veined marble floor.

The alluring sway of her partially covered breasts momentarily distracted Draco, but not for long enough. In one stride he'd grabbed Hermione's left arm, his hand sliding along her slick skin until he tightened his grip to prevent her escape. Her wet feet slipped on the stone floor and she lost her footing, sliding to her knees against his legs, her face turned at the last second before smashing against his hip. Spreading his legs to brace for impact, Draco held her arm at an awkward angle, and he knew that she would have a hand-shaped bruise in a matter of hours.

Draco was panting. He'd never been so close to this witch, except in his third year at school when she'd slapped him. With the exception of the volatility, this was nothing like that earlier encounter. His heart pounded in his chest and his mouth was dry.

He looked down at her. Her eyes were closed, her chin tilted in the determined manner he remembered from when they were children... and a kaleidoscope of memories flashed through his mind. From the perspective of an adult he recognized the mannerism. She was unnerved... and attempting to hide it.

Something like affection tightened in his chest, and his heartbeat evened out.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She ignored him, turning her head so that he could only see her profile. Her easy dismissal infuriated him and his gut clenched. Their bodies were so close that he could have counted the tiny freckles along the crest of her cheek bone had he wanted to. But that was not his purpose. Draco shook her arm, and her head involuntarily turned in his direction as she opened her mouth in a cry of pain which he would have heard had the Silencing Charm not been in effect. As it was, he saw the glitter of tears in her eyes, and that odd feeling in his chest twisted in both triumph and consternation. He gritted his teeth and tucked his wand in the pocket of his black trousers. Bending slightly, Draco reached for her other arm, lifting her to her feet.

Hermione erupted into action, kicking, clawing, biting... anything to free herself from his grasp. She wriggled like a crup attempting to slip its lead in a roomful of Muggles, and Draco's hands couldn't get purchase on still damp skin as he grabbed at her arms, legs, waist, breasts. Ultimately the only thing her explosive bid for escape accomplished was that Draco ended up with a bundle of warm, naked woman wrapped tightly in his arms in a mockery of a loving embrace, and his palms tingled with a sensory knowledge of her body.

Her face was pressed against the placket of his shirt, and she was panting raggedly, attempting to catch her breath. If this had been a different type of encounter, Draco could have easily tucked her head beneath his chin and held her tenderly in his arms. He loathed himself for the fancy and her for evoking it.

"Granger, stop struggling."

Tossing her head defiantly, a section of chestnut hair flipped over her shoulder. Hermione's eyes were dark and glittered with strong emotion, and she stared at him defiantly.

"I can *make* you talk." His voice was low, threatening, and he tightened his hold on her arms, forcing her breasts more firmly into his chest.

In reaction to his words, her chin quivered faintly, but still she met his eyes, unwilling to bend. Her attitude infuriated him, just as it always had. She was naked, silenced, and under his control, and still she was rebellious. Frustration boiled in his gut. "Damn it, Granger! I want some answers. Talk to me."

Draco was completely unprepared for her reaction. Despite her incipient tears, she rolled her eyes at him. He was gobsmacked. Then she gave him the look he'd grown to detest at Hogwarts, the one that said she thought he was a daft arse. When he remembered the Silencing Charm, his cheeks heated and he hoped she wouldn't notice. It was just one more thing to add to the score between them.

"I'll release the spell if you give me your word that you'll tell me what I need to know, and won't attempt to escape."

A silent test of wills took place between the clothed fugitive and the nude witch. After several very long minutes, in which generations of patrician ancestors decried his manners and decades of pure-blooded dogma applauded his high-handedness, Draco remembered that she was in fact a nude woman in his arms, and that her skin was cooling rapidly under his hands.

"All right, I'll release the spell if you will agree to speak with me." He set his chin. He would compromise no further.

She appeared to remember his mannerisms as well as he remembered hers, and she nodded once in a less-than-gracious acquiescence.

When he removed his right hand, cautiously, to retrieve his wand, Hermione proved that she was the Gryffindor he remembered. She honored her agreement.

He released the charm and her body. She remained in place, and, to his surprise, didn't attempt to cover herself again. Instead, she watched him with an intensity that made him uncomfortable... it was as if she knew something that he didn't.

"All right. Why. Are. You. Still. Here?"

"Well, obviously because you won't let me return to my room to dress."

"Granger," he snarled.

"And Narcissa convinced me that *you* had manners! Honestly, Malfoy! If you know enough to ask why I'm *still* here, then you know the reason I'm here in the first place."

"You're cataloging the Malfoy Dark Arts collection."

"Yes."

"You should have finished months ago."

"I saved the best for last."

He narrowed his eyes. The best of the Dark Arts collection had been stored in a secret room under the library, and its existence was known to very few people, albeit the

majority of those with the knowledge had died as a result of the wizarding world's unsuccessful civil war. Even more importantly, no one could access the room without being accompanied by a member of the Malfoy family. The implications of her comment were deeply disturbing, but fit neatly with what he'd learned about her mission at the estate.

"And that would be?" Surely she didn't know.

If she'd been wearing footwear, the impatient tapping of her foot and the hip-cocked stance of her body would have annoyed him. As it was, the faint percussion of her bare foot sent a rhythm of motion throughout her body. He was distracted from the tight line of her mouth once again by the sway of her naked breasts, and his interest was piqued in spite of himself, their history, or his recent abstraction with her every move.

Noticing the bumps of goose flesh on her pale skin, Draco's estimation of her courage raised a notch. But when he waved his wand, she flinched, and he realized that she wasn't quite as sanguine as she'd have him believe.

Deftly, Draco transfigured the fluffy white towel into a dressing gown for her. Allowing her to dress leveled the playing field between them, but he still had the advantage.

As she slid her arms through the sleeves of the warm cloth, he said, "You were going to tell me what Malfoy relics you've been discovering, Granger."

"Was I?" She didn't even look at him.

"Oh, yes." He stepped closer to her, looking down at the sliver of fair skin revealed by the wrapped dressing gown, and his hind-brain railed at him for allowing her to cover her body from its unfurling interest. "You will tell me what you've found, and you will tell me how you've influenced my mother."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Malfoy. I've done nothing to coerce Narcissa. I wouldn't! She's my..." She broke off, her eyes widening, and she clamped her mouth shut.

"She's your what, Granger?" Draco's hands itched to touch her, but he didn't know whether it was to strangle her or fondle her. His gray eyes flickered for a moment, remembering that he had in fact wanked on more than one occasion after having had an argument with the fiery know-it-all.

"It's immaterial to this discussion. For your information, since you seem to want the information so desperately, my investigation will be complete once I finish with the artifacts in the library."

They were back to the superficial heart of the issue.

"There were only six items that would interest the Ministry in my fath...*Lucius'* library. It doesn't explain why you've been here for *two* years. My mother has never been accused of Death Eater activity. She doesn't bear the Dark Mark."

"I know she doesn't." Unintentionally, Hermione's voice softened. "Your mother has been a most accommodating hostess."

"What do you mean by that? You've been in the library for over two months. You should have been finished weeks ago." He noticed her eyes narrow at his knowledge of her activities, and he went on the offensive, using a taunt that had never failed to rouse her ire. "It seems your know-it-all reputation is highly over-rated if you can't identify an astrolabe or the variety of sneak-o-scopes and foe-glass. What did you do at the library for all those hours? Diddling yourself in front of the librarian, perhaps?"

Hermione blushed, and they were both reminded of what she'd been doing when he'd hexed her. She took a step away from him, toward the door.

"You unscrupulous bastard! I have bent over backwards to make certain that none of my findings implicate your mother... despite the fact that you and I both know she was aware that these devices existed and to what use your father put them."

"Why have you *bent over backwards* to help her? She's the wife of a Death Eater and *my* mother!" He stepped toward her, and within three seconds, she was pressed against the wooden door, her chest heaving, and her eyes sparking with fury. He'd never thought much about her looks, but at this moment, she was magnificent.

"Because, you imbecile, she's my friend!" Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth.

It was obvious that she hadn't intended to let that slip, and Draco leaned into her. "What do you mean she's your *friend*?"

Seeing that she wasn't inclined to elaborate, Draco braced one hand against the flat wooden panel of the door, and retrieved his foot-long Alder wand from his pocket, fingering it where she could see the highly polished wood.

"What have you done to her? What spell did you use? The Narcissa Black Malfoy I know would never befriend *you*!"

Tears welled in Hermione's eyes and she braced her palms on his chest, pushing at him ineffectually. He had her neatly trapped. His eyes were so fixed on her face that he didn't notice the unusual, square-cut emerald on her ring finger.

"Of course you wouldn't believe she and I could be friends." Initially her voice was that haughty tone he remembered so well, but it became breathy and emotional as she continued, "That it was beneath her... well, let me tell you, Mr. Pureblood Bigot, we are friends and I did *nothing* to her. She likes me for me, not because of my birth... and... and... it took a long time... and... and... I cherish her friendship. And you obviously don't know her as well as you think you do!" Hermione tilted her chin and looked over Draco's shoulder, focusing on the opposite wall.

Draco reeled from what she'd just said. He knew that she wasn't lying. She had always been a terrible liar a brief memory of her face in Dolores Umbridge's office years before flashed through his mind. She'd been lying then, and couldn't conceal it, so she'd hidden her face not to give it away she wasn't hiding her face now.

"Fine... so you're friends, Granger. Setting aside that improbability for now, you still haven't answered the question as to why you're still here? Oh, Merlin, did she invite you to live with her? Have you asked her for money?"

If his mum had indeed befriended the pride of Gryffindor, then he had to know more, had to understand Hermione's motivation, because what she was saying put an entirely new spin on the information he'd been gathering about her for the past several months.

Small, pearly white teeth shrunk by the school matron in their fourth year-- captured Hermione's bottom lip. She was biting the plump morsel of flesh so hard that the skin was bloodless.

Emotion twined in a hard knot in his chest. Draco had always hated it when she'd refused to acknowledge him, when she relegated him to the level of an annoyance as if he was some easily dismissible pest.

"Answer me, Granger," he demanded.

She said nothing, refusing to look in his direction, and her gaze remained stubbornly focused on the gilt-framed mirror behind them.

"Look at me!"

She might still have been stunned for all the response she made. The only difference was that Draco could feel the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, and the sweet, citrusy scent of her bath assailed his nostrils, the knot tightened inside him.

He would *make* her pay attention to him.

Indeed, had Hermione been looking at him she would've seen the instant the idea sprang into his mind, and she would have been prepared for... for something. However what he did to gain her attention would never have occurred to her outside of a torrid fantasy.

Draco bent his head and captured her lips in a bruising, breathless kiss.

Fourteen years of diametrically opposed philosophy and combative confrontations ignited in a single moment, one initially intended to gain Hermione's attention, but in less than a second it metamorphosized into something else entirely.

Draco's conscious thoughts imploded, and he became lost in the sensations of her reciprocal enthusiasm.

Hermione whimpered as Draco's tongue tested the seam of her lips, and she felt his fingers threading through her tangle of hair, pulling her closer to his body. She felt the heat of him through his linen shirt and the rough woolen texture of his trousers as, even in exile, Draco Malfoy was impeccably dressed.

Her eyes fluttered closed as her mouth opened to Draco's insistent tongue. The first swipe of the roughened slick tip teasing her taste buds sent a shuddering reaction down her spine as if she were chilled. She wasn't cold. Indeed, an incendiary flush of heat raced through her limbs, while her fingers slid up and beyond the smooth cloth covering Draco's torso. One small hand fingered the pale, corn silk spikes of his hair as her other hand wrapped over his shoulder to pull him closer, to mash the hard planes of his chest against her breasts, the nubs of which were so taut they almost hurt.

Tongues dueled for dominance, and even in their instinctive fervor to unite, Hermione's need to prove herself to this scion of pure-bloods fueled her actions. She took the next opportunity to slip her tongue past Draco's teeth, dragging its leading edge along the ridges of the roof of his mouth. He groaned, and she exulted at her ability to elicit such a reaction from him.

As they attempted to prove that humans had no need for oxygen, her whimpers an arresting counterpoint to Draco's deeper guttural encouragement, Hermione's mind flitted from image-to-image tracking the history of their dysfunction, to the moment at which he'd discovered her in the bath.

She'd never been so thankful that Draco wasn't a Legilimens as when he'd petrified her. Hermione wouldn't admit that it had been him she'd been fantasizing about in the tub. Two years as the constant companion of a widowed and grieving Narcissa Malfoy had done what six years of competitive education had failed to achieve. Hermione had learned to know and like Draco Malfoy. At least, she liked the Draco Malfoy that his mother talked about.

He relinquished her mouth for the satin of her still-damp throat, and Hermione raggedly caught her breath, even as she threw her head back to give him access. Draco suckled at the pulse point in the lee of her jaw, his sharp nose nudging her earlobe. She was ablaze with sensation, tiny spasms in her core demanded attention to her spiraling need.

"Granger..." It was long, drawn out, a harsh vibration against her skin.

Hermione's hands slipped from his shoulders to rake across his torso, exciting the nipples of his pectorals through the fine weave of his shirt.

He was an illicit fantasy, she thought whimsically.

Nibbling his way to the vee of her neck, Draco proceeded to delve into the suprasternal notch between her collar bones. Hermione was certain that he could feel the beat of her fluttering heart.

How had it come to this, she questioned, even as her head thudded against the hard wood of the door. Draco was marking her, his teeth nipping at the join of shoulder and neck, and she was allowing it... more than that, she felt dragged by the sensuality of the man paying such attention to her.

With heightened sensitivity, Hermione quivered with eager expectancy, even as memories of the past two years, her journey to this place and time spooled through her mind.

The first six months of cataloguing Class Three Dark Arts artifacts as the only permanent member of a rotating occupational unit living on the Malfoy estate had earned her the cold civility of her hostess.

Draco marked her throat, murmuring, "So sweet, Granger." Her answering moan oddly balanced this heady experience with her earliest memories of life in the Manor.

She remembered departing Wiltshire for the weekend anniversary of her parents' and Remus Lupin's deaths nine months after her assignment began, and returning to the Manor on the Sunday night, her eyes hollow and heart aching. She'd finally begun to wear her mother's engagement ring. Not a tear had escaped her control the entire weekend, but entering the bedroom that had become hers at Malfoy Manor had ripped a gaping wound in her heart. The pretty blue room had become more of a home to her than the house she'd grown up in, and Hermione's grief and guilt had consumed her. She had crumpled into a sobbing heap at the foot of the large bed, and if she hadn't been so distraught, she would have been mortified to realize that Narcissa Malfoy had heard her cries.

As the elder witch had explained to Hermione months later, in those few elastic moments, when Narcissa had watched from the doorway, she had been graced with an epiphany. It hadn't mattered what blood the sobbing young woman had running in her veins, Narcissa's maternal heart had recognized the grief of a child who needed comfort, and she hadn't been able to ignore Hermione's need and live with herself.

Hermione had never known that Narcissa had crossed the room before making a conscious decision. All the young witch remembered clearly of that dreadful night was being held in a tender embrace and sobbing her heartache into the older woman's shoulder. She'd cried herself out, and had fallen into a fitful sleep, only to waken the following morning, with breakfast and a vial of headache potion being delivered by a house-elf under 'Ma'am Malfoy's orders.'

Moved by the remembrance of such care, Hermione placed her small hands on Draco's face and pulled him into a deep, searing kiss. His body was flush against hers and, even with a restriction of movement, her hips rolled against the hard ridge of his erection. She tasted his groan and a jolt of electricity raced between her nipples and her womb.

"Months... I've heard about you... living here... for months..." His voice was low and the vibrations of it shuddered down her spine.

Her senses were filled with Draco's taste, his smell the loam of the deep woods and his touch. One of his work-roughened hands slipped through the open vee of her dressing gown to cup her breast, long fingers rolling its distended nipple. Hermione keened a muffled cry against his demanding tongue.

Memories of her early months in the Manor spun hazily through her mind, and she vaguely recalled that her friendship with Narcissa truly blossomed the day she'd coaxed Andromeda Tonks to visit. The emotional reunion had been rife with tears and recriminations and mercy. Thereafter, the sisters had met frequently, and Hermione had found herself, on more than one occasion, surrounded by albums upon albums of family memories, photos wizzarding and Muggle of both families throughout the years.

Many pictures had been removed from their pages, loving fingers tracing familiar faces and shapes on the moving or still images. These favorites had been passed around the room accompanied by sighs, coos and the occasionally shed tear. A still Muggle photograph of gruff journeyman Ted Tonks holding his newborn daughter, the fuzz of her hair a deep purple, had ended face-up on the coffee table next to a picture of a grinning, stunningly handsome Lucius Malfoy, holding his newborn son, mouthing 'I love you,' into the camera.

That newborn son had turned into a handsome man with something beyond arrogance in his face, despite his patrician, cocky manner. The something might be called sorrow, or by the more discerning... experience. The exact descriptor escaped Hermione's mind as Draco suckled her left earlobe into his mouth and bit down, enough to mark the lobe, but not enough to break her skin. Incomprehensible sound tumbled from her lips and Draco bucked into her, the door thudding behind their combined body weight.

"Gods... Malfoy..." Her voice was a ragged moan.

Memories began to truncate, flitting one to another, while Hermione's mind began to itemize the things she'd learned from the loving eyes and heart of Draco's most devoted fan: his mother. She knew about his childhood fears, his nightmares, his small triumphs, his sensitive soul, and his desperate need for his father's approval.

And Hermione had learned about the difficulties of Draco's sixth year at Hogwarts, after his father's incarceration and Voldemort's decision to punish the Malfoy family for Lucius' perceived failure. Narcissa had shared with her now most intimate circle -- her sister, her niece and Hermione -- the details of her visit to Spinner's End and her begging for Severus Snape's help. She'd revealed Bellatrix's distrust, and Snape's acceptance of the Unbreakable Vow. Hermione and Tonks had spent hours discussing the dual allegiance of the spy and the heartbreaking decision he'd had to make. In the end Snape's sacrifice had been to save his protégé's future, at the expense of his own. That Draco had grieved as much for his ex-professor as he had for his own father had endeared him to Hermione.

A rasp of stubble over the now bared skin of her left shoulder dragged her mind back to the here-and-now.

"Granger... want you...."

It was deep and needy, and Hermione's breath hitched. "Yes."

She bent her head to nuzzle against the improbably silken texture of his hair, musing irrelevantly that he must keep it place with a charm because the spikes had none of the stiff texture of a gel or potion. Her flight of fancy could only be explained by the fact that she'd always been fascinated by his hair. It was such a contrast to the wild bushiness that she'd inherited from her father. As fair as the moon when they were children, it was now the color of ripened wheat, darker than either of his parents'. But the promise of a ripe harvest suited the man better than the pale moonbeam that he'd been as a child.

Among her last coherent thoughts before her brain gave in to the demands of the rising heat propelling her impetuous decision, Hermione remembered that Narcissa had kept in touch with Draco while he'd been in exile. She'd been negotiating with the Ministry on her son's behalf. He didn't bear the Dark Mark, and while it might take years, or less, the Malfoy vaults were plentiful.

Hermione had never mentioned Narcissa's confidences or unwilling participation in the conspiracy surrounding Dumbledore's death. She'd dutifully fulfilled the terms of her contract, cataloging the Dark devices and artifacts of the estate. But she'd promised Narcissa that she would vouch for Draco's re-entry into the wizarding world. Having borne the brunt of unreasoning prejudice for years, Hermione refused to add her momentum to the pendulum of public opinion and participate in a 'witch hunt' for someone whose only real crime had been to attempt to save his parents' lives.

Draco's lips surrounded the dusky peak of a nipple completely short-circuiting Hermione's ability to think clearly beyond a breathless utterance, "Oh... gods..."

The hand playing in his hair pulled him closer to her body, seeking more of that lovely wet warmth. The emerald setting of her mum's ring caught in his hair, and Draco's grunt of discomfort dragged Hermione out of her sensory overload.

Carefully, Hermione removed her left hand from his scalp, mumbling, "Sorry," against Draco's lips. But he'd straightened up, his mouth leaving her breast with an audible pop.

Her hand was grabbed and Draco scowled as he fingered her delicate ring, the clear blue-green depths of the faceted stone winking up at him in the softened glow of the room. "What is this?" he demanded.

On the one hand, his ignorance meant that his informant hadn't told him everything; on the other, it meant that he didn't like what he was seeing. For some reason, the second part of that rationalization thrilled her. "It was my mother's."

The swift alteration of his attitude was a thing to behold. His face, which had darkened with displeasure, now flushed and the look he gave her was obviously remorseful. Hermione had never before appreciated just how expressive he was -- not really a good Slytherin at all, she thought, completely irrelevantly.

"I'm sorry." When he kissed her this time it was different. The lambent flame of their initial lust was tempered, maturing precipitously into something less fierce but more meaningful. His lips were soft and needy, and they fluttered with emotion as they pressed against hers. Hermione's heart filled, indefinably with a pleasurable pain, and passion skittered down her spine.

When he leaned down to take her nipple back into his mouth, desire overwhelmed her, and she spared no more thought to whether their dalliance, if indeed it was something as frivolous as that, was a good idea. If she'd been wearing knickers they'd have been soaking with the evidence of her readiness. The warm musk of her arousal mingled with an added spiciness that was different enough from Draco's earlier woodsy smell that Hermione knew it was the aroma of his need, and it blended with the fragrance of her bath.

Teeth replaced lips, and the dark tip of Hermione's areola was rolled between rows of even, white teeth as Draco dabbed his tongue over the nipple caught in his mouth.

A whimper escaped her. Then Draco's hand slid across her chest to roughly abrade her other nipple as glittering white lights danced in the dark of her closed eyes. "Unhh... Draco... c'mere..."

Conflagration and Culmination

Chapter 2 of 2

...Hermione and Draco come together...

Stunned

By Bambu

~o0o~

Chapter Two: Conflagration and Culmination

Heeding her request Draco straightened, his eyes, heavy-lidded and almost charcoal in color, took in the adorably rumpled sight of the witch he'd pushed against the door. Her hair tumbled about her head and shoulders, and the transfigured dressing gown had slid down her shoulders, baring her upper body to his sight. Her lips were pursy and glistened from the tracing of her tongue. As she raised her eyes to look directly at him, his erection twitched.

He had to have her, to hell with their past... she was his present... and, if his mother had her way, she would be his future. He'd resisted his mum's enthusiastic missives, but perhaps, in this case, mother did indeed know best.

Draco placed one palm flat against the door directly beside Hermione's head, and threaded the splayed fingers of his other hand through the tangle of curls, cupping her skull in the palm of his hand. This touch was as different from his earlier adjustment of her petrified body as it was possible to be, and he watched her eyelids flutter closed. Leaning forward, he rested his brow against hers, "I'm here... Hermione."

It was the first time he'd ever used her given name, and her eyes flew open. If the sparkle in their brown depths wasn't enough to tell him she appreciated the gesture, the leg that suddenly wrapped around his hip was a clear indicator.

He ground his hips against hers, and Hermione encouraged, "Please..."

"Oh, yes." His face was so close to hers that he used his nose to caress the bump of her dainty nose, and then feathering kisses, ever so lightly, across the freckles dusting her cheeks, he captured her lower lip between his. Sucking hard, he pulled her mouth toward him, testing her willingness a last time.

She followed him, her lips engaging his even as her hands unbuttoned his shirt. Losing patience with her blind task and he almost laughed at her kittenish growl of frustration she ripped the last few buttons from their anchoring stitching. But the unvoiced laughter died in his throat at the first touch of her hands on his bare chest. He shuddered and rocked against her, and one of her hands snaked around to his back and down to cup the swell of his arse.

That had done it.

With that single fondle, he'd had enough foreplay. Draco wanted her naked... naked and impaled upon his now throbbing erection. He spared enough thought to pull his wand from the pocket of his trousers, and with a whip of his wrist and a husky, "*Finite Incantatem*," the dressing gown he'd transfigured returned to its original towel form, and fell into a forgotten puddle at their feet.

Gulping in air, Draco struggled for some sort of control. He hadn't been with a woman in over three years, celibacy being the better part of keeping hidden from spies or informants, and while intimate familiarity with ten digits might bring immediate relief, they received Trolls in terms of satisfaction.

Gazing down at the woman he'd hated, fantasized about, been jealous of, and who had been important to him in one way or another for more than half his life, Draco knew that he didn't want to slam her against a door... he wanted to shag her into oblivion, but not in the bathroom.

"Bed..." he panted.

She slid the leg from his hips, and he almost panicked thinking she had changed her mind. In the next second, he was reassured of her eagerness by fingers scrabbling at the buttons of his trousers, and he chuckled as he heard her almost frantic cries, "Yes... now... yes... right now... oh... Draco... so long..."

Almost-black brown eyes darted to his, color stained her cheeks, and Draco captured her lips, swallowing any sound of bruised feelings. Then he licked his way to the rapidly thrumming pulse under her jaw.

"There's no going back, Granger... once we do this."

"I don't want to go back." Her hands continued with their assigned task, and his desire surged free of its constraints as she slipped his trousers and pants over the turgid peak of his erection and arse. The material joined the puddle of terrycloth on the floor.

"Good." He was having difficulty holding onto his train of thought, but this was important. "I don't share."

"Neither do I. Besides," her eyes twinkled and Draco's heart did a funny sort of skip. "I know all about you... the good and the bad."

"At least you admit there's some good..."

"I've learned recently that there's a lot of good..."

Hermione's fingers wrapped around his erection, her thumb using his pre-ejaculate as lubricant. Draco swayed toward her, his heart oscillating with the spike of adrenaline.

"You just keep it well-hidden, Draco."

He knew how to silence the oft-garrulous woman, he kissed her. Her hand stilled its stroking motion as their tongues danced, then, when he released her, she sucked in air as if she'd forgotten how to breathe. Draco's eyebrow arched. He liked having an impact on her.

"You've had your chance to back out."

She leaned forward and inhaled the scent of his neck, he shuddered in response, and she whispered, "I'm exactly where I want to be... no matter how unconventionally this began."

He chuckled once more, even as his breath hitched when he felt her tongue laving the skin of his neck. "We've always been the exceptions to the rules. But, how will I explain it to people...."

"You could lie..."

"Nah... I'll tell them it happened the moment you slapped me in third year!"

The flash of her teeth rivaled the sun. Abruptly, Draco was finished waiting.

No longer caring whether they made it to a bed, he ran his hands down the slope of her spine, fingering the sciatic dips above her pelvis. Draco splayed his fingers to cup her bum. As if they'd done this before, their motions coordinated seamlessly, and he lifted Hermione, her legs immediately wrapping around his waist. One of her hands sought his erection, jutting between their bodies, her slender fingers encircling him, guiding him to her.

Hermione's tongue found his ear and she exhaled his name.

Draco's knees almost buckled, but he gritted his teeth and, in a single swift stab, plunged into her slick depths. "So warm... so wet... Hermione."

It felt like coming home, and he knew in that second that he wanted to keep her. She was tight and deep, and he held himself still as she adjusted to his size. She was a little thing, he thought irrelevantly, as she signaled him to move. He waited no longer, crushing her against the door, he pistoned his hips, thrusting into her, his hands on her tight derriere.

Her hands were free to roam... and they urged him deeper.

Draco's heart pounded, the blood thundering through his head. But he could hear his ragged panting... and hers.

The sound of Hermione's joyous abandon was like magic to his ears. He wanted to hear that sound again and again, preferably interspersed with her calling out his name as she climaxed.

Bending his head, Draco bit her neck, adding another love bite to the already purpling mark he'd left earlier.

Wrapping her legs more tightly around his waist, Hermione wriggled her hips for greater leverage. It wasn't enough... for either of them.

Draco wanted to pound her into the mattress, not against the hard wooden door. She was almost purring in his arms, her fingernails digging into his skin as she kneaded his shoulders and upper back. Draco imagined what she'd look like in orgasm, and wanted to watch her writhing beneath him. He didn't want to worry about how long his legs would hold up.

"Bed..." he said again. It was a plea... a request... a fantasy, and when their eyes met, he knew that she understood the intention behind his single word. Draco locked his legs and leaned away from the door, taking her weight with him. Staggering slightly under their combined weight, Draco anchored her more firmly.

One of her hands reached behind her, groping for and finding the door knob. With one quick twist the door opened, and Draco staggered into her bedroom.

Draco felt rather smug as Hermione remained impaled on his rigid length, wrapped around him as tightly as Devil's Snare captured its prey. Her voice was encouraging, and he remembered how she used to boss her friends around. It had always driven him spare, but now he found it surprisingly endearing.

"Only a few more feet, Draco."

He was as hard as he had ever been in his life, his erection unflagging with the relocation of their tryst. He planned to appease whatever deities existed in order to have this witch... again... and again.

When they were five feet from the bed, Hermione rhythmically tightened her vaginal muscles around him. *Christ!* Draco had never experienced a woman deliberately stimulating him in such a manner. His knees buckled, and they landed on the thick Abraxan-hair rug.

Hermione was dislodged during the jarring impact, although she wasted no time scrambling to her knees, planting kisses all over his face, crooning to him.

Draco ached with the need for release and he grabbed her ribcage, her full breasts resting on his thumbs. Hermione's hands wandered over his slick skin, his nipples tightening as her nails scraped across their pebbled surface.

He leaned forward and nipped at her lower lip, an admonishment, an urgent reminder. Now was not the time for play.

Hermione understood immediately, "Forget the bed... we'll use it next time..."

"You're damned right we will." Draco arched her torso to the floor, then his hands danced across her skin to reach her legs, spreading them and pulling her hips against his straining erection. He draped her slender legs over his thighs until her feet were flat on the white Abraxan, and she was angled in a wedge. The glistening curls at the apex of her thighs teased his almost painful scrotum.

Draco's heart was pounding and his forehead beaded with sweat. His arousal wound tight. This was it. Hermione's hands kneaded air as he raised up, angling his hips. His slick shaft dragged along her vulva seeking the core of her warmth while her hands wrapped around his unblemished forearms as he drove himself into her once again. The air escaped his lungs as if he'd been hit with a Bludger in the solar plexus. She was still so tight, like a velvet fist clenching around him.

Sweat trickled between his shoulder blades as he stroked in and out, jerking her hips to meet his thrusts, her shoulders chafing against the carpet. She was an image to remember forever, hair spread in a wild aureole around her head, breasts undulating, lips swollen, and her eyes... her eyes were dilated but held his as she moistened her lips and flexed the muscles of her bum.

A visceral whine started in her throat and Draco felt as if it was connected directly to his groin. His answering bark was animalistic. The pitch of her tone altered, and her fluttering spasms rhythmically squeezed him. His blood was boiling. "...I can't... Granger... now..."

He'd be damned if they didn't come together this first time. Pulling one hand from her hip, Draco glided his long fingers between their bodies and he arched over her, Seeking and grasping the hooded nodule of flesh nestled beneath her damp curls. As his mouth captured an erect nipple, he pinched the pulsing morsel of flesh.

Hermione came undone with bucking hips and mewling cries... his name and other incoherent phrases.

Releasing her breast to watch her writhing beneath him, Draco plunged into her, deeper than ever. Her contractions were so powerful they triggered his climax, and he came in explosive, shuddering spasms. In a primitive, possessive rite he shouted her name, and continued to thrust through her contractions, the aftershocks of her orgasm enticing every last drop of ejaculate from him.

Scintillating lights danced in his vision, and, panting, Draco dropped his face into the valley between her breasts, one still-taut peak teasing his sight as he nuzzled her damp skin. Closing his eyes, he caught his breath. He felt more satisfied than he had in... since he couldn't remember when.

A small hand caressed his flushed cheek, and he was moved by the tenderness of her gesture. He smiled into her breast, and her other hand traced the length of his back. Together, they lay entwined until he could no longer remain inside her, and, brushing a kiss on her now-smooth nipple, Draco moved to sit up. Hermione's arms tightened briefly, denying the inevitability of their uncoupling.

Draco thought Hermione looked sated and beautiful in this moment. He could feel her thighs trembling, still draped across his legs, and Draco knew that the strain of their position would leave her sore the next day. He wouldn't admit it to her, but he was happy she'd have something to remember him by. Glancing at her throat, his gaze lingered on the livid love-bites he'd given her earlier. He grinned wickedly, and she wrinkled her nose at him in response.

Gently, Draco eased her legs from his and she rolled to her side. For all the excitement of the moment, sex on the floor wasn't terribly comfortable... and less so for her.

Rising to his feet, he offered her his hand. Her smile was reward enough, and for some reason, Draco's heart sped up. She gracefully gained her feet using little of his strength, and then she yawned.

"Missing out on your beauty sleep?" he teased.

Hermione's eyes darted to the bed and back to his. Softly, as if she was afraid he'd laugh at her, she asked, "Would you like... *can* you stay?"

The ornate, gilded clock on the bedside table read past midnight, and he mentally calculated the timing. He hadn't intended to remain this long, and his lips curved in a gratified smile. "Until the changing of the guard."

Sorrow shadowed her eyes, a small sound of denial held upon her lips. Hermione pulled him into her embrace. They both knew that it was his cousin who was on duty, and who might be willing to look the other way if she caught a glimpse of him. Perhaps.

For long, seemingly timeless moments Draco and Hermione embraced, and he gave in to the fancy he'd had earlier in the bathroom, when they'd been so at odds. He tucked her head under his chin and held her tenderly in his arms. He loved the feel of her small fingers playing with the dusting of blond hair on his chest.

She tilted her head offering her lips for a kiss, and he obliged. It was relatively chaste considering their recent pastime. When they broke, Hermione tugged him to her bed.

Draco quashed the irrational surge of anger that it was he who was the guest in his own home, and acted as host. He stepped in front of Hermione, raising the duvet to let her slide into the bed first. Ducking under his arm, she left enough room for him to slip in after her. He folded his long body after her, relishing the texture of fine linen, but he had other preferences for sleeping this night. He coaxed Hermione across his chest, her breasts crushed against his, and he grunted in approval.

Hermione squirmed until she found a comfortable position and tucked one hand under her cheek, her fingers lightly tickling his breast bone.

Wrapping his arms around her and beyond, he covered them and kissed her springy hair.

"Hmmm... Granger... Hermione... I still need to know what you're doing in the library."

She didn't answer. Draco raised his head to look at her. She was fast asleep.

A contented, indulgent smile graced his handsome face and, remembering where he was, he muttered, 'Nox,' plunging the room into obliging darkness. He stroked Hermione's skin, the repetitive motion lulling him into the first peaceful sleep he'd had in several years. Never once did he question the seeming inevitability of their intimacy.

It was still dark when Hermione was roused to almost-wakefulness by the insistent pressure of her bladder. Sleep befuddled, she didn't immediately understand why she couldn't move, or realize that the hand settled snugly between her thighs wasn't hers. As she began to straighten from her semi-fetal position she remembered instantly why she was hampered, who was wrapped around her like a creeping fig, and what they'd done to make her thighs not to mention other parts of her agonizingly sore.

Surprisingly, her mind didn't immediately begin to shriek in horror, or cast aspersions on her character, her chastity, her sanity. Instead, delicious images of a tousled, predatory blond lover filled her mind, and she unconsciously licked her lips. The encounter had been more and less than she'd imagined. More memorable than she'd ever thought possible and less emotionally scarring than she'd expected.

Lightly running her hand along his arm, she captured his hand and removed it from between her legs. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips at Draco's subconscious sign of possessiveness. Disentangling herself carefully from his body, Hermione slipped from the bed and padded quietly across the room to the *en suite*.

When she returned to the bedroom, his eyes were gleaming in the faint light of rapidly approaching dawn. With a bittersweet clench of her heart, she wondered if he would speak first, and what he would say.

Instead of talking, he merely lifted the covers, the gesture expressive and welcoming. Hermione's throat worked, and tears filled her eyes -- how had she ever thought he was one-dimensional? She crawled in next to him and, still, neither of them spoke. For to say anything would draw the inevitable realities of the day nearer.

Draco rolled toward her and their eyes met in the partial light. His fingers threaded through the wild tangle of her hair, in what seemed to have become his favorite demonstrable sign of affection toward her, and he pulled her into a tentative, testing kiss.

She met his mouth eagerly, the mint of her toothpaste mixing with his slightly stale taste, but she didn't care as she pushed him flat on his back, rolling atop him. Further cues weren't necessary as her body reacted to the physical impetus, nipples tightening, liquid flooding her core. Cocking her leg across his hips, Hermione moaned at the evidence of his arousal. His hand flexed in her hair.

Ignoring her screaming muscles and the soreness of her vulva, Hermione broke the kiss and levered herself above him, straddling his hips. Draco grunted, and one hand cupped her breast while the other held her hip. He tweaked her budding nipple.

Hermione gasped as a spark of heat ripped through her, linking breast to womb, and she ground into his pelvis. The slickness of her arousal coated the ridge of his tumescent erection.

Decisiveness was part of her nature, just as leadership was part of his, and Hermione took action. Undulating her hips toward his face, Hermione lifted off his body enough for her to maneuver. Simultaneously she rotated her pelvis and, using one hand to guide him straight and center, she jerked her hips backward, sucking in her breath sharply as he filled her once more.

It burned only for a moment, abused muscles making themselves known. She had been a little impetuous, her body not quite ready yet... but she and Draco hadn't the time for leisure, and Hermione wasn't going to waste another moment of what little they had.

His groan instigated a fresh surge of moisture, and Hermione squeezed the muscles of her bum, lifting, rocking, and grinding on his hard shaft. She was finding her rhythm.

"Guh... that's... Christ... Hermione..."

Draco's hands were all over her, pinching, rolling, twisting her nipples to hardened peaks, and then his hands were sheeting across her skin, one set of fingers finding the pulsing node of her pleasure, the other wrapping around her back and pulling her down to him.

"Ah... yes... please..." Hermione collapsed atop him, hair tumbling around their faces, the tingling pleasure creating more lubrication, and her hips began to gyrate, almost uncontrollably. She was awash in a swell of emotion.

Seeking his lips, Hermione entwined her tongue with Draco's feverishly, desperate to memorize his taste.

When he turned over, retrieving his hand from between their bodies, it startled her. But then he was atop her, pushing up on his hands, stroking into her with a fluid pace. He rocked at a different angle, and the impact of his curly-coated pubis against her mons pulled a startled, "Oh," from her. She'd never felt contact like... that.

Hermione arched her back, her breasts pressing against his chest, and wrapped her legs around his waist, cooing encouragement in his ear. He breathed through his mouth, head hanging next to her, spiky blond hair tickling her ear, as he drove with a fierce urgency into her body.

Their rhythm was ancient. Some deeper, primal connection was being forged in the crucible of the mating between the once Slytherin prince and the former Gryffindor princess.

Her climax tantalized her from the edge of her senses. It was within her grasp, but Hermione didn't want to come before Draco, they were equals on this pitch, so, smoothing her hand up over her legs, her ankles now locked behind his back, she reached for his arse.

He nipped at her lips, his breath ragged.

A feeling of pure, feminine power raced through Hermione, and she stroked her fingers along the valley between his straining nether cheeks, dipping to tease the bud of his anus. He jerked, their pelvises slammed together, and she cried out, "Oh! There."

Pre-orgasmic spasms contracted the walls of her birth canal, and Draco grunted, his thrusts erratic.

Her release was building, a conflagration ready to burst into existence... with the right combination of elements. It was just beyond her reach.

Hermione stretched and, with one swipe of a finger, she flicked her nail across the slick, satin stretch of taut skin of his perineum.

With a raw shout, Draco pounded into her, spurting his release. "Hermione... Fuck!... Granger!"

He bit her neck, and she saw stars.

Her climax prolonged his release, and they continued the intimate pas de deux until her muscles no longer rippled.

Draco dropped to his elbows, his weight a welcome pressure. He cupped her head in his hands and dropped his brow to hers. His eyes were closed, but Hermione greedily

took in his features, memorizing him as if there would be a NEWT-level exam. There were dark smudges under his eyes, more prominent in the early morning light, and she realized that he wasn't just lean, he was too thin for his frame. Her heart clenched, and she nuzzled his face.

He opened his eyes and Hermione's breath caught in her throat. She'd never seen him look so unguarded, so vulnerable. Without censor, the question spilled from her lips. "Who's taking care of you?"

"It's just me." His voice was husky, and a little cautious.

"No house-elves?" She turned it into a jest and was rewarded by slight smile.

"Not for a long time. Mum sends money."

Hermione was humbled by his show of good faith. "I know she does."

She could tell that it was his turn to be surprised by her trust. "You do?"

"Yes. I told you, Narcissa and I are friends good friends. She talks about you, you know. A lot."

His chest rumbled with mirth and he said, "Well, she's my mother. She talks about you, too." He swallowed hard. "I've been jealous."

She was astonished. "Of what? Me?"

He slipped from her body, and rolled to his side, still facing her. With a single finger, he brushed a lock of her hair from her sweaty face, and nodded his head. He didn't look at her when he confessed, "For years."

She held back a laugh because his honesty was so endearing, and so painfully revealing. With one hand, she turned his head to face her. "You pillock. *YOU* are the topic of most of our conversations. You have nothing to be jealous of... you never have."

The undertone of amusement in her voice caused Draco to stiffen he loathed being laughed at -- and Hermione understood immediately. His already battered pride had been hurt. Quickly she sat up, sore muscles complaining. He'd pulled back at her sudden shift in position, but Hermione didn't pause, kneeling next to him, and held his face between her hands. Her eyes filled with apology. "You've never had anything to be jealous of, Draco. I could never take your place with your mother. Never. You are deeply loved."

Draco's eyes widened, "Really?"

There was a subtle fugue to the question, the knowledge of which was clear in Hermione's eyes. She whispered, "Yes."

The clock on the Hermione's bedside table chimed, startling them from their mutual absorption. A musical voice announced that breakfast would be served presently.

The intense moment had been broken and the outside world had intruded upon their idyll. The awkwardness of the situation seemed to suddenly dawn on the two former-combatants.

Hermione got off the bed, looking into his shuttered expression. "I'll find your clothes."

She crossed to her writing desk to retrieve her wand, then, ignoring the tension she could feel suddenly radiating from her bed, she entered the bathroom and shut the door.

Closing her eyes tightly, she leaned against the hard wooden barrier, and a tear escaped to trail down her flushed cheeks. Her emotions were hurtling inside her like the Cornish pixies Gilderoy Lockhart had released in her second year of school. She hadn't a prayer of settling them, so with a mental *Stupefy* she ignored the immobilized thoughts for now to deal with the practicalities of cleaning herself, dressing, and restoring Draco's clothing.

She had brought nothing with her to change into, and Hermione couldn't bring herself to return to the bedroom nude at this point. Thus, with a deft swish and jab of her whippy, vine wood wand, she transfigured two towels into a pair of soft Muggle jeans and a heather grey jersey. It didn't occur to her until later, after Draco's eyes glanced at her clothing that not only were her breasts unbound, but the top she wore matched the color of his eyes... exactly.

Gathering her Gryffindor courage, Hermione re-entered the bedroom. Draco was sitting up in her bed, the duvet pulled up to his waist, and he was looking with open amusement at the small table by the window. Immeasurably relieved by his equanimity, she ventured a look at the table. It was set for breakfast... for two.

The house-elves knew he was there. That meant Narcissa knew.

Her heart beat irregularly, and she met Draco's eyes. The shuttered look had vanished, replaced by the receptive man she'd come to cherish seemingly overnight, and Hermione wanted nothing more than to forget the outside world and crawl back under the sheets with him.

But that time was past.

She padded barefoot across the antique rug and offered his *Scourgified* and *Reparo'd* clothing, and his wand. Draco's hand caught hers, and Hermione licked her lips. His eyes followed her tongue's movement, and any residual panic Hermione had been holding at bay evaporated as thoroughly as if *Obliviated*. He had been as affected by their night as she. She squeezed his fingers, and he accepted his clothing and the length of Alder.

"Shall we see what we have for breakfast?" Hermione asked, her voice a trifle unsteady.

"Certainly," he spoke behind her, and Hermione heard the rustle of cloth as he dressed, his voice muffled slightly.

She looked at the groaning table, and stifled a giggle. "It seems your mum thinks you don't eat enough."

"Why?"

"Well, there's scones, and clotted cream. Porridge with currants and cream. A mixed grill, and..." the giggle when had she begun to giggle like a girl, she wondered, exasperated escaped, "is that *trotters*?"

Strong arms snaked around her torso, and his breath tickled her ear. "Probably. I liked them a lot when I was a kid. It was so plebeian according to my parents. You should have seen my fa... mother's reaction the first time I asked for them at the dinner table. My tutor was sacked the next day. I haven't eaten them in years. Still, it's nice that she remembered."

It appeared that Draco had decided how to handle the awkwardness of the situation. He ignored it. Hermione leaned against his chest, and angled her head, an invitation if he wanted to take it. He did. He kissed her neck, hugging her briefly before releasing her and holding out the chair for her to be seated.

She flashed him a smile. "*There* are those manners your mum keeps trying to convince me you have."

"Gentlemen always treat a lady with respect, Miss Granger." He took the opposite chair and began to serve himself.

Hermione grabbed grilled tomatoes and a scone before pouring herself a cup of strong breakfast tea and offering to pour his.

For a few minutes they ate in companionable, domesticated silence, as if they'd shared a breakfast table for years. In some respects they had, only it had been different tables.

After consuming his first bowl of porridge, he began on his chop. "I have to know what you're doing in the library."

Hermione froze, her hand halting midway between plate and mouth.

He continued, his tone a little pleading, "You have to understand."

She said nothing, just stared at him. The silence lengthened, stretched taut... and snapped. "I do understand, Draco."

Pros and cons of giving him the answer he sought, that had spurred his intrusion and its outcome -- the night before rushed in a whirlwind through her mind. She carefully placed her scone back on the dainty porcelain plate and dusted off her fingers. "I'm cataloguing your father's secret cache of Dark devices under the library floor."

Draco's eyes widened in shock and then narrowed. "No. How? Mum? My mother has revealed it to you?"

An array of expressions crossed his features, his pale skin flushing as Hermione recognized anger and disdain settle into familiar lines on his face. She knew that the secreted Dark Arts paraphernalia and references had been in the Malfoy family for centuries, long before some of them had been classified as Dark. But after what had occurred between them the night before, and again this morning, Hermione hadn't thought to see his patrician mask so soon. She bit her lower lip to keep it from quivering, and she looked out the window unwilling to show just how much his reaction had hurt.

She was so consumed by her distress that she didn't hear him move, until he pulled her from the chair and into his arms. He pressed his lips to her brow. "Please understand, Hermione, I have to know. My existence has been so precarious... expecting to be arrested daily, never knowing who to trust. Almost every value I was raised to believe in has proven to be wrong. I've only been able to rely on two people and Lucius wasn't one of them. My mother is the only one left. Or is she?"

Hermione sniffed. She did understand. It wasn't that he didn't trust her, *per se*, but that he needed to have evidence to support the direction his heart wanted to take him. She could understand that, considering how his father had perverted his ethics.

Hermione swallowed hard, her decision made. In truth, it had already been made the night before when she'd let him between her legs. "You were right. I should have completed the Ministry's assignment weeks ago, but I've been stalling for the past month. I've been secretly helping Narcissa catalogue the hidden collection so that she can present it to the Ministry as her final negotiating leverage in granting you a full pardon. There were very few who were willing to take on this task, and no one seems to be terribly interested in my report, so I've been able to delay my results on the more mundane collection."

Hermione felt his heart thumping hard in his chest and he couldn't cover the sudden flexing of his arms as they held her.

"A full pardon? You're helping her? That... that means..." His voice was hoarse.

"You would be free, Draco. It means you could come home."

"I could come home." He kissed her, ravenously, proprietarily. Neither noticed, nor said anything, in the emotion of the moment that Hermione had referred to '*home*' as the Malfoy Manor. It was where they both assumed she would be.

The little clock chimed the quarter hour, and they burst apart.

All at once their interlude was over.

Hermione didn't know what to say. It hurt her to think that he was going to leave. She raised her fingers to his lips. "How is this possible? Draco... I don't want you to go."

She let him gather her close.

"I don't *want* to leave. I *have* to."

"I know." Her eyes were glassy with repressed emotion, and his arms tightened about her until breathing was almost painful. Draco buried his face in her hair, and she inhaled his scent, nosing the lee of his throat.

His voice clogged with repressed longing when he asked, "Where will you be next Friday night?"

Hermione gasped, hope flared in her chest, and her eyes shone as she looked into the steel depths of his eyes. "Here... I'll be here... in the bath...."

"Really?" his voice was husky, graveled with emotion and resurgent arousal.

"I'll be waiting for you..." She wrapped her arms around his lean torso and squeezed with all her might.

He hugged her back, and gently released her. His eyes held hers in the intensity of the moment. It was more than an agreement. It was a promise. "Good. I'll be here. Only this time... Hermione... don't start without me. I want to watch."

Hermione blushed, and he gave her a knowing grin.

Draco turned his head to look at the little clock one final time... it was one minute before eight. He kissed the tip of her nose, and, with a *crack* he vanished, exactly on time as the Auror shift changed on the estate. The magical signature of his Disapparation was registered on the Ministry's monitoring system. But it was only one of more than twenty, and after two years of quiet transitions, the reports were automatically printed on parchment, and simply filed away. No one bothered to read them any more. There were other, more urgent tasks to attend to in the burgeoning, rebuilding wizarding world.

As Draco disappeared, Hermione's hand flew to her throat. She stared at the spot where he'd so recently stood, thoughts bouncing around her mind... those irritating Cornish thought pixies escaping the control of her petrification. One, however, was more prevalent than the rest. She had to find Narcissa. They had work to do.

~oOo~

~Fin~