

Swing Time

by Bambu

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Chapter 1 of 1

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This story was written as a back-up assignment for Live Journal's 2006 Hot Summer Nights Exchange, and required a plotline that included Half-Blood Prince canon, kissing, smut, and a relatively happy ending, without alluding to anything Hermione/Ron or Draco/Ginny. It takes place post-Half-Blood Prince, and pre-Deathly Hallows.

SnarkyWench has, as always, made time in her busy life to check my work. I appreciate it always, and this time even more! If you still find a mistake, it'll be my fault. I probably changed something after she took a look. Sigh.

~o0o~

"He hates it here."

"Of course he hates it here."

"You'd think he'd be grateful he's still alive and not in prison."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione turned from the Burrow's kitchen window and the sight of the dejected young man straddling the Weasley family's old swing. Slightly exasperated, she narrowed her eyes at her messy-haired friend. Periodically, they had this same discussion, and she was growing tired of his inflexibility. "Malfoy is grateful. That's half the problem. Think of his..."

Harry interrupted her in a mocking, sing-song voice. "...side of things. He has nowhere else to go. He's staying with a group of people he was raised to hate, and everything he ever believed in has been proved false. He's alone, he's been disowned, and he's confused."

Hermione's exasperation abruptly matured into irritation, and she tapped her foot, glaring at her friend.

Impatiently running his hand through his hair, Harry snapped at her, "Malfoy's been here for bloody weeks! He's practically useless. He deserves to be in Azkaban with his father!"

"Harry James Potter! That's a terrible thing to say. You heard his story he took Veritaserum you know what he said was true." When her friend said nothing, she knew she'd made her point. Her voice lost its strident tone, as she said, "He's lost almost everything."

"Don't," Harry warned.

"Don't what?" A bewildered expression crossed her face.

"I know you, Hermione Jean Granger. Don't start a spew campaign for Malfoy because you feel sorry for him."

She turned her head from him, color staining her cheeks. In a smaller voice she said, "That's S. P. E. W."

Despite Harry's warning, it was difficult for Hermione not to feel some compassion for the blond's plight, even if he had been horrid to her for most of their acquaintance. His treatment of her since her arrival the week before had been nothing but icy civility.

Harry took a step in her direction.

She forestalled his next comment. "Malfoy wouldn't welcome my help, you know. That's why I should be the one to tell him. He has to get along with you ... you're the Chosen One..." she poked Harry in the ribs as she used the Daily Prophet's moniker for her friend, "...and Ron's family has offered him refuge, so he has to be nice to Ron. Ginny's just returned to school, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are his hosts. None of the other Order members would be tactful, and you know some of them would enjoy delivering this news to him." When Harry snorted, Hermione glared. "That's not very nice," she admonished.

"I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not. He's a vicious little bastard." Harry's arms were crossed and the dishes they were supposed to be doing continued an endless cycle of washing themselves, despite the fact they had been clean for at least three rinses.

"He has been." Hermione sighed. "Even so, he still deserves some sympathy. He doesn't have to be nice to me. It's safe for him to hate me ... normal in a time when nothing's normal."

"You don't have to do this."

"I know, but I'm still the best choice." Her chin tilted in that ever-so-determined mannerism her friends knew and sometimes admired.

"Don't let what he says get to you." Green eyes shone with his concern. Harry was fiercely protective of his closest friends, especially in the wake of Dumbledore's death and the Death Eater attack on Hogwarts.

Hermione avoided his eyes and swallowed hard. "I have to tell him now, before the rest of the family comes home."

Harry growled her name while she stepped past him, patting his arm affectionately as if it conveyed her agreement. When she opened the kitchen door, light from the cozy room spilled onto the uneven flagstones cutting a path through the kitchen garden, and Hermione paused momentarily to evaluate her quarry.

The light cut through the forefront of an encroaching fogbank, casting her slim shadow upon the patchy lawn. It drew the blond's attention almost immediately. He might appear completely self-absorbed, but his defensive instincts had been finely honed over the months he'd been in hiding.

Draco Malfoy turned his head in her direction, his longish hair whipping in an arc and gleaming as it caught the light. Fine white-gold strands wrapped around the thick rope supporting the swing upon which he sat. The swing itself hung from an old oak tree with a massive trunk and sturdy branches testifying its great age. Hermione almost fancied the tree curved protectively over the young wizard, so gracefully did its branches bend.

The sight was picturesque.

It was a fallacy.

Unwelcoming grey eyes met hers while she carefully picked her way toward him over the rough ground. The moisture-heavy air carried the smell of rain, and Hermione thought there would be a storm before daybreak. It seemed an appropriate natural metaphor for her upcoming encounter.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I have some news to tell you. I'm afraid it ... it isn't very good." Hermione would have hexed herself if possible for stumbling over her own words.

Draco stiffened, his grip on the ropes tightening until his knuckles were bloodless. "Spit it out then. I'm sure you pushed your way past everyone else to deliver it. Couldn't wait to get a little of your own back, could you?"

"No!" Appalled he would think such a thing, Hermione's words tumbled from her mouth. "That's not it at all. I just ... well ... I thought it would be easier if it came from someone you already knew. Someone you were familiar with. You know...."

He eyed her coldly. "Spare me your rationalization, Granger, and just say what you've come to say."

She hesitated. How did one tell someone else their mother had been killed in a Death Eater raid? How had her dad broken the news to her? She swallowed hard and forgot Harry's warning. A tendril of compassion twined about her heart.

"Well?" he snapped. "What is it?"

So much for civility, she thought. But the news she had to tell compensated for his attitude. "Your mother was discovered this morning by Aurors..."

"She's been arrested?"

His swift question derailed her for a moment. "Er ... no, that's not it."

"She's been taken to Azkaban, then?" He stood up, one hand clinging like Devil's Snare to the rope.

Hermione hadn't noticed how tall he had grown until he seemed to tower above her. He wasn't menacing, but she thought he easily could be. Just his sheer physical presence was intimidating. At her back, Hermione could feel Harry's presence bristling with desire to snatch her beyond Malfoy's reach, but there was silence coming from the house.

"No, Malfoy." She looked into his eyes, into the foreknowledge which swam in their depths, and knew he had been delaying the truth of her message. *Why did I agree to this?* She bit her lip, and then, so softly it was almost a wisp of fog, she said, "I'm sorry to say, your mum's been killed."

If it wasn't for his hand holding onto the rope, Hermione thought he might have fallen. Indeed, he swayed with the impact of her words. When she offered a tentative hand to help him, he pulled away from her as if she were an incendiary hex.

His voice was harsh. "Where?"

And she had thought breaking the news was difficult. This was worse. "She was ... her body was found..." her throat grew tight; she didn't even like the arrogant prat and she was about to cry for his loss, "...in the rubbish bins at St. Mungo's."

A strangled sort of sound escaped his mouth and Malfoy's legs gave way.

Hermione lurched forward, but the swing's wooden seat halted his disjointed folding and he jolted to a stop, his body slumped in loose-limbed misery. She stepped closer, hovering over him. He didn't respond, and Hermione cast a nervous glance over her shoulder toward the house. There followed a long, awkward silence which became even more unpleasant as it stretched beyond the point of discomfort.

The fog crept in, enveloping them as if they were the only two humans in existence.

Time snapped.

"Why did you tell me?"

"You already hate me. I thought it might be easier for you."

His face was a mask of incomprehension.

"I can't tell you how very..."

And then the dam broke, and all his grief and confusion spilled forth in the easiest emotion ... anger. "Get the fuck away from me..."

Even though expected it, Hermione felt as if he had hit her. She hadn't remembered how volatile he they could be. Hermione's eyes never left his face, and she saw the second he made the decision.

"... Mudblood!"

Stumbling back to the house, her own eyes filled with tears, she decided she hated being a know-it-all.

~oOo~

"He hates it here."

"Of course, he does. He hasn't left the house or garden in eight months. It's like a prison."

Once again, Harry and Hermione were doing dishes at the Weasleys' sink. It was the first day they had been at the Burrow in three weeks, enjoying a home-cooked meal. There had only been Harry, Hermione, and Malfoy for tea, but Mrs. Weasley provided a full spread in case any of the others might arrive. The smell of toasted scones and lemon curd lingered in the kitchen.

Once again, unpleasant news was about to befall Draco Malfoy.

"He swings until Ron and the twins return," Harry said.

"I know he does."

"Yes, you do, don't you, Hermione." He crossed his arms in the maddening way he had developed over the past three or four months. Her friend had changed since electing not to return to Hogwarts when the school re-opened for what would have been their seventh year.

While Malfoy had consistent tutorials with various Order members on a daily basis, Hermione, Harry, and Ron crammed their lessons into condensed blocks of time. The hunt for Horcruxes was secret, sporadic, and intense, but ultimately fruitful. The three friends had managed to find and destroy Helga Hufflepuff's cup and Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara. When they were in residence at the Burrow, Harry took extra lessons with Mad-Eye Moody. Evidence of the paranoid Auror's tutelage was increasingly apparent as Harry became more engaged in the wizarding world's rising conflict.

Half-accusingly, the young savior said, "You watch him every night we're here, Hermione. Why?"

"I ... I just" How could she possibly explain? Since the night she told Malfoy about his mum things had changed between them. For the first three weeks, he refused to acknowledge her existence. After that, there was a period of time he flicked his eyes in her direction when either of them entered a room. Every time she returned from a field trip, as Harry called their Horcrux hunting, Malfoy seemed to know unerringly where she was at all times. At first, it had frightened her. But then one night, she overheard Mr. Weasley telling Malfoy it was true Hermione had recently lost her mother to a Death Eater attack. In the days and weeks following that conversation Malfoy still marked her presence, but occasionally, he would give her a nod of acknowledgment, and he was scrupulously polite when they had to work together.

He never again called her a Mudblood.

"Oh, sodding hell!" Harry exclaimed. "You've started to feel sorry for him, haven't you?"

"That's not it!" She didn't understand her own feelings about Draco Malfoy, how could she possibly explain them to the least sympathetic well, besides Ron person she could imagine? Hermione fingered the sleeve cuff of her pink jersey and tried to explain. "I understand how he feels. I know what it's like to lose a parent to the Death Eaters."

"So do I." Harry's reaction was predictable.

"No, Harry. You don't."

His anger rose so swiftly and so inextricably linked to his magic it almost knocked her off her feet. "What the bloody hell do you mean by that? My parents are dead because of Voldemort! Sirius is dead because of a Death Eater! Dumbledore..."

Hermione stopped his rising diatribe with a hand to his mouth. He wrenched away from her touch, ironically in much the same manner as Malfoy had the night she broke the news of his mother. Harry glared; his hands in tight fists at his side. He was as angry as she had ever seen him, but she talked over his spluttering fury. "You know what it's like to have grown up without your parents, and having been told lies about them. You know what it's like to be an orphan. But, Harry, you don't know what it's like to have lived for eighteen years with a loving mother ... having her dry your tears when you fall off your bicycle that first time, or read you a book before you go to sleep, or have her there when you buy your first bra ... er ..."

Her inadvertent faux pas worked in a way she hadn't planned, but was extremely effective nonetheless. Harry blushed and choked with laughter, his anger dampening in an instant. "Too much information, Hermione."

"Sorry," she said, unrepentant, while they returned to their interrupted tasks.

"It's all right. I get your point."

"Good. Now get the rest of the point. I don't feel sorry for Malfoy. I empathize with him." She waited for her friend's grudging nod. "I've also noticed that he's changing. He's becoming more involved in what's happening around here. Do you know he de-gnomed the garden yesterday?"

Harry's wand halted in the process of sending plates to their proper places. As he turned to look at his friend, a trail of mix-matched porcelain hung suspended mid-air, a dotted line between sink and cupboard. "Malfoy would never soil his hands over something so mundane."

"Mrs. Weasley watched him. She had to show him what to do the first time. She said he was very enthusiastic about the rest. Apparently he had to bathe a second time."

"What's he up to?" Harry muttered.

"Honestly, Harry! He's not up to anything. His entire existence has changed and he's finally beginning to adapt." Her annoyance with her friend's stubbornness suddenly evaporated like Amortentia when left in an open cauldron for too long. "And now I'm going to change it even further. I'm not so sure I'm the right person to tell him this time."

"You know you are. Your earlier reasons are still valid, though he might not hate you so much anymore. You do work together fairly often."

Her shoulders sagged. She remembered the expression on Malfoy's face when he had called her Mudblood; his reaction to her news the last time she pulled his emotional feet out from under him. She didn't want to see either of those looks on his face again.

And Hermione really didn't want to examine why that was.

Harry flicked his wand, and the plates noiselessly slated themselves in their proper positions. No matter what anyone said about the Boy-Who-Lived, he was a dab hand at household chores, and he never shirked his share, unlike every single one of the Weasley offspring when they were at home.

He asked, "Would you rather I told him?"

Hermione shook her head, negating the disastrous potential of that conversation, and nibbled on her lower lip. She tore some of the skin, but the tiny pain reminded her of the uncomfortable knot of anxiety sitting heavily in her stomach. The knot had formed the moment Mrs. Weasley Floo'd in from Headquarters to deliver the news of Lucius Malfoy's death. Harry and Hermione had just begun to clean up after their meal when the family matriarch had stepped through the green flames. She hadn't wasted more than the time it took to deliver her message, ascertaining that one of her putative children would break the news, before stepping back into the fireplace, calling out, "Headquarters."

With a sigh, Hermione opened the back door and stepped into the chilly autumn evening. The sun was about to set and a glorious array of color splashed across the darkening night sky.

In the kitchen, Hermione heard Harry activate the Floo. He, too, was leaving for Grimmauld Place. At the time she had delivered the news of Narcissa Malfoy's death all the Weasleys were otherwise occupied, but tonight, the entire family -- save Ginny at Hogwarts and Percy, who remained firmly stuffed up the Minister's arse -- was attending an emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.

This time, Hermione's hands were sweaty and her knees felt a bit like jelly.

Malfoy stopped swinging as she crossed the patchy green lawn. Sometimes, he just sat on the hard wooden seat, staring into the oak's branches, and at other times, he swung with all the pent-up fury in his heart, his feet hitting the leaves and small limbs of the great, sheltering tree. Now, as he watched her, his expression rapidly shuttered.

Hermione's heart raced; for a moment his expression had been so open, so vulnerable. She avoided looking at him directly. *Why does it have to be me this time?* But she already knew the answer to the cyclical question. And yet, this time was different.

Before the last few months, it had been easy to despise him. Even though she had spent years in the same school, in the same classes, she never really knew him very well. He had been some amorphous stereotypical pureblood who stood out from the crowd because of his animosity for Harry and Ron. That dislike combined with Malfoy's childhood prejudice and spilled onto her. But now -- after everything that had happened in the last year -- she understood him better, and that made all the difference. They weren't friends, but as far as Hermione was concerned, they weren't enemies, and she no longer disliked him.

"Is it Severus?" Malfoy's hoarse question greeted her.

"No. He's still undiscovered as far as I know."

Finally looking at him directly, Hermione recognized the patrician mask he had kept firmly in place during the early months of his residence at the Burrow. It pierced her heart.

"My father then." His voice was leached of all emotion.

Their eyes met and held.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Hermione almost whispered.

"Afraid? Why would you be afraid he's dead? He hated you, Granger. He tried to kill you. He thought you were nothing but a ..."

Even as she knew he deserved whatever solace rage could bring him, she interrupted, "It's a figure of speech, Malfoy. I'm sorry your father is dead. I'm not sorry the Death Eater who would have cheerfully eviscerated me is dead. I'm quite capable of separating those two things."

"Are you?"

She nodded, still caught by his pale eyes and the depths of anguish she could see so easily reflected in them.

Then, shutting her out, Malfoy closed those eyes and turned his back to her.

It was a clear dismissal.

It was also an indication of their changing dynamics that he hadn't shouted or insulted her.

Involuntarily, Hermione's hand reached out to touch the bloodless fist curled around the thick rope holding the swing in place. Before she could make the physical connection, she jerked her hand back and withdrew her sympathetic touch.

Abruptly, she left, but not before she heard him whisper as if to himself, "Then why can't I separate those two things?"

Before she reached the kitchen door, Hermione heard the creak of ropes as he began to pump his legs, swinging as hard and as high as the arc of rope and canopy of tree would allow.

~oOo~

"I don't think he hates it here any more."

"Of course he doesn't," Hermione answered, and turned toward her friend, absently noting the way his messy hair glistened from the few raindrops which had landed on him before he had entered the house.

It was rare these days for the two of them to be at the Burrow at the same time. The war was building to its climax, and there had been open fighting in the magical villages of Britain for several weeks. They owed one another daily, exchanging news and refining strategy, but their roles in the war had been redefined after finding the final Horcrux. The three friends, accompanied by Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, had acted upon information from Snape, killing and destroying the final piece of soul Voldemort had secreted in his pet, Nagini.

As a result, Hermione was no longer fighting on the front lines. It had infuriated her at first, until Harry explained how much he relied on her to be his touchstone behind-the-scenes, especially when he couldn't be there. Since he had never treated her like a 'girl,' before, she knew it had nothing to do with her abilities and everything to do with trust. These days, her time was spent in research and abstract presentations of obscure magical tracts for the Order of the Phoenix's strategists.

Harry hadn't been to the Burrow for a fortnight, and Hermione gave him a once-over, making sure he was unscathed. He was lean and hardened in a way she had never expected to see. Nevertheless, there was a gentle quality to his expression which she knew was reserved for his closest friends and those he loved.

He tugged her into a fierce hug, and she let go of the teacup she had been washing. It didn't matter that her hands were dripping wet. She hugged him back with equal strength.

Hermione had taken to washing up the Muggle way if there were fewer than four at a meal. For some reason it grounded her. The daily chore also gave her a perfect view of Draco during his swing shift as Fred and George Weasley had called it.

Fred would call out, "Oh, look it's gone four!"

"Malfoy, it's time for your swing shift!" George would finish.

For all their mocking, however, there would be an underlying note of understanding which couldn't have existed the year before.

With a final squeeze, Harry let go of her and snapped his wand from the quick-release brace on his forearm. With a swiftly flicked charm he dried his hair and the back of his shirt. "Thanks, 'Mione, I needed a second bath!"

She smiled at him. "It's good to see you, too."

When he didn't respond to either her comment or her smile, instead glancing toward the window which neatly framed Draco's rather indolent slouch on the Weasley swing, Hermione's banter died on her tongue. Dread flooded her with a dementor-like chill. "What's happened?"

Harry didn't answer right away. Instead, he swished and flicked the dishes in the sink clean and shelved, all the while looking out at his childhood nemesis. "I like what Malfoy's done to the garden."

She ignored the comment Draco had indeed taken over the Burrow's garden with dramatic results for she recognized a delaying tactic when she heard one. "It's lovely, but what is it, Harry?"

"I have something for you to deliver to Malfoy."

Without conscious thought, Hermione backed away from her friend. "No," she whispered. "It's not ..."

"It's not Snape, if that's what you're thinking." Despite the continuing espionage and valuable information their ex-professor provided the Order, Harry would never like the wizard. He always seemed to spit Snape's name as if something foul was in his mouth. Meetings attended by the two wizards were inclined to be highly volatile, although each restrained themselves because they had the same goal: destruction of Voldemort.

Marginally relieved, Hermione ventured a question. "Then why are you reluctant to tell me?"

"Because I don't know what it means."

"Harry, you'll have to be more specific." Never the most patient of people to begin with, the horrifying news which arrived on a daily basis had worn Hermione's patience to nil. These days, Mrs. Weasley practically lived at Grimmauld Place providing meals and healing round-the-clock. The Burrow was used for private conferences and recuperation for the family and a select few.

"I have a gift of sorts for Malfoy." Harry turned toward the front room. "Accio wand!"

Gooseflesh prickled Hermione's arms as a serpent-headed, ebony stick flew into Harry's gloved hand, and the muscles of his jaw clenched. She had seen that cane on several occasions, none of them pleasant.

There was no question in her statement. "Lucius Malfoy's cane."

"Yes. Snape delivered it from the Malfoy family solicitor today. Draco Malfoy has apparently been reinstated as his family's heir, and this is part of his inheritance."

"All right, then. Why don't you give it to him?" Hermione ignored his outstretched arm offering the cane.

Instead of answering her directly, he said, "I can't touch it. It burns me, even through gloves." When she still didn't take the family heirloom, he placed it on the kitchen table. "You're used to giving Malfoy news."

"But this isn't like that." She did not want to deliver this legacy. She worried what she might see in Draco's face: joy, anticipation ... perhaps evidence the entire past fifteen months had been a ploy. That he hadn't changed as she believed.

Harry's eyes glittered like their gemstone namesake, and Hermione knew she had no choice. "The final confrontation is weeks ... days away," he said. "I can feel it. I have to know if I'm putting my faith into a plan that's a trap."

Her heart sank.

It was a valid point. Given all the history between Draco and Harry, Snape and Harry, and the Malfoys and the Weasleys, unhesitating trust was almost too much to ask.

Expelling a heavy sigh, she acquiesced. "All right."

"I know you're friendly with him, and I understand." Suddenly he made a sound that was half-cough and half-laughter. "I never thought I'd see the day when I understood anyone's friendship with a Malfoy, let alone yours. But he's been a useful bastard."

"Harry! That's rude."

Instead of being angry, he gave her a fond look. "Sorry." Then his expression turned entirely serious. "I have to know, Hermione."

She reached for the cane, and dropped it the second her fingers touched its ebony staff. "Ah! It ... it shocked me!"

Nursing a blistered finger, she watched Harry non-verbally levitate Lucius' cane to the table's surface.

"Interesting spell, that," he mused, and she noticed his jaw had unclenched when he no longer held the cane. "Security Jinx or Anti-Muggle Charm?"

"You've made your point," she said, huffing in annoyance. "I'm going."

He held out a small piece of parchment, folded intricately and sealed with magical sealing wax. The indentation in the golden blob of melted wax was a crest of the scales of justice. Wordlessly, she took the missive with Draco's name written on the unfolded surface.

Pushing through the kitchen door, Hermione wrapped her Molly-made green cardigan tighter, and stepped into the rainy night. Her heart raced as she hurried across the garden, walking quickly on the recently added paving stones leading to the massive oak.

Over the course of the past several months, Draco had taken to spending part of his swing shift tending the Weasley garden. Without the continuing incursions of garden gnomes, the ground no longer rippled and caved as a result of their burrowing. The lawn's surface was uniform, and the shrubs and flowers flourished under his daily care. After routing an infestation of Knarls, the roses had bloomed in a heady array of color.

That summer, when Mrs. Weasley enjoyed the rare luxury of being home, she took her tea in the garden. It had been Draco's presentation of a beautifully transfigured table and chairs for her comfort which had finally won over the younger Weasleys. They didn't necessarily like Draco ... he still had that aristocratic reserve, but they appreciated his intelligence and his gallant gesture toward their mother, and thereafter tolerated him more amicably than before.

Hermione's heart clenched as his welcoming expression faded into one she was all too familiar with. Cold rain splashed on her face; it matched the chill in her heart.

Not waiting for him to ask, she said, "It's not Professor Snape."

She was unable to break the habit of calling the spy by his former title. Snape was too disrespectful and Mr. Snape too strange. Calling him Severus would take the downfall of Voldemort.

"For Merlin's sake, Granger! There's no one left!"

"No one's dead. At least no one I'm aware of."

"Then what's wrong?" His tone softened slightly.

Brushing her wild hair out of her eyes, she stepped next to him, and was peripherally relieved that the oak's canopy functioned like an umbrella. No rain slipped through its branches.

Holding out her hand, she offered him the letter. Reluctantly, he accepted it, grunting his appreciation when she cast a small, waterproof bluebell flame above his head so he could read.

When Draco unfolded the parchment it was blank, but, as if the touch of his skin verified his identity, letters began to appear on the vellum. When complete the command glowed in luminous silver.

Family first.

The words rose off the parchment to hover mid-air. Then, after a moment, they evaporated. Another set of words appeared on the parchment. They were an incandescent green-hued signature.

Lucius Abraxas Malfoy

Enraged, Draco dropped the parchment as if it had scalded him, and rose from the seat of the swing. He ground the parchment into the dirt and grass with his well-worn boot-heel.

"*For fuck's sake!* Now he sends me that message ... he learned it on his bloody death bed! Bollocks!"

Hermione turned to leave, accommodating his previous demand and request. Before she had taken two steps, he asked her a question.

"What was it?"

"Sorry?"

"What came with it? What trinket does he think will remind me of my glorious family first?"

Bitterness didn't enhance his voice, and Hermione glanced in his direction. He was looking directly at her when she answered, "His cane."

In two strides Draco was at her side, the bluebell flames following him. "Did you touch it? Let me see your hands."

"Only for a second." The patter of rain was drowned out by the thudding of her heart in her ears.

Draco inspected her hands in the bluish light of her waterproof flames. He dropped her left hand when he found the blistered fingers on her right. "The damned thing has a jinx on it."

"Really?" she asked dryly, except it came out rather breathlessly.

He looked up, and their eyes met again. "It's keyed to the family. Only a Malfoy or its possessions can touch it without coming to harm."

"I see."

"Put some of Mrs. Weasley's burn-healing paste on this." Then suddenly realizing he was, in effect, holding her hand, Draco dropped it as if she was as jinxed as his father's cane.

Hermione flushed. "I will. Thank you."

When she reached the boundary of the oak's protection his voice arrested her departure once more.

"You know, Granger, you're the only one who brings bad news."

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Hermione thought, and braced herself for a scathing comment.

"It's easier when it comes from you."

Whirling on her heels did he mean he still hated her or something else brown eyes darted to grey. He was much closer than she had realized, and she was completely taken aback by the expression on his face. It was almost affectionate.

"I can't say it's a pleasure to tell you these things, but I don't want you to hear them from anyone else. They wouldn't..." She broke off and looked down at her wet shoes. She had almost said, "They wouldn't care if it hurt you. In fact, some of them would count on it."

An admission of that nature would have been entirely too revealing.

But it didn't matter if she'd said the words, Draco had heard them anyway. One long, slightly-calloused finger tilted her chin upward. His expression was unreadable. "I know they wouldn't." Hermione stood there, held captive by his intense regard and the point of his finger. Then, he dropped his hand. "If you don't mind, I'd like some time alone."

"O-of course," she stuttered. Then almost like a hunted Snidget, she bolted for the house, Draco's final words ringing in her ears. "Thank you, Hermione."

~o0o~

"He'll hate to leave here."

"Of course he will." Hermione turned to meet her friend's all-too-knowing expression. "What are you doing here, Harry? I expected you to be at Grimmauld Place, celebrating with everyone else ... with Ginny."

The Man Who Triumphed blushed when reminded of his reunion with his recently be-ringed fiancée. The two had been practically inseparable since Voldemort's defeat three weeks earlier. Ginny had been in Harry's heavily guarded room at St. Mungo's before the Senior Healers had finished evaluating his injuries. "I was," he said. "But I came to give Malfoy the good news. I don't think Scrimgeour's going to owl him until tomorrow."

"Typical," Hermione muttered.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "The Ministry is going to miss the revenue from the interest of Malfoy's frozen assets. Kingsley told me the galleon amount. It's quite staggering."

"I don't think it's the money he'll care about, Harry. I think he'll just be happy to have his home back." Hermione glanced out the window, where she watched the summer breeze play with Draco's long hair. He was swinging idly, his shirt-sleeves rolled half-way up his forearms, showing the world that he had not been branded before his sixth year, despite rumors to the contrary.

This time there were no dishes to keep Hermione's hands occupied, and they gripped the rough soapstone of the Weasley's kitchen sink. One strap of her copper-colored sundress slipped off her shoulder. Annoyed, she tugged it back into place.

Harry shifted his position. "The Unspeakables and Aurors released the Manor today. There's no reason he can't go back tonight. That's part of the reason I came. I wanted him to know he could go home." He paused for a moment. "I think he'll miss the garden though."

Hermione's heart was in her throat, and she just nodded in answer. The garden had been Draco's refuge for almost two years. Before Ron moved in with Luna Lovegood, he had referred to the area around the oak tree as Malfoy's room. The twins thought it so funny they had crafted a signpost with that label.

"I'm sure he'll miss it. It's the only thing that's made these two years bearable for him." She refused to look at Harry. He'd become entirely too good at reading people.

"It's not the only thing he'll miss, Hermione." Harry crossed the room, a residual limp the only physical remnants of a battle which had left hundreds maimed or dead, but none unchanged.

She refused to look at Harry, and practically jumped when he put one arm around her shoulder, inadvertently shoving the thin strap back down her arm. "Do you want to tell him he's been given his freedom?" he asked. "It's your job, you know. You gave it to yourself."

Unable to trust her voice, Hermione simply nodded again. Warily, she glanced in Harry's direction, relieved not to find condemnation in his expression. His green eyes shone in the glow of the kitchen lantern, and his face was filled with unexpected sympathy.

Startling her with the sudden move, Harry cupped her face between his hands, then leaning forward slightly, he kissed her brow. "If you need to talk, I'll be around tomorrow. Right now, I'm going back to the party to find Ginny. If I don't return in another three minutes, she'll do a Four-Point Spell and come looking for me."

Hermione laughed at his entirely accurate understanding of the youngest Weasley. "She would at that, Harry. Your life will no longer be your own."

He smiled rather happily at the prospect, then, with a loud CRACK, he Disappeared from the house. Hermione went back to looking through the kitchen window at the Burrow's only other resident.

Hopeless, hopeless, hopeless.

How could she have ever let herself care for the blond? She knew it was a feeling born of time and isolation and heightened tensions. While he might have learned to tolerate her presence, and perhaps harbor some miniscule affection for her, once he learned his family's estate had been released, he would be gone from her life faster than a Snitch in flight. Sighing for the pang in her heart, Hermione gathered her resolve and opened the back door.

It was a sultry evening. Wind-whipped leaves skittered across the sandstone path, and she was thankful her hair was braided. A few strands escaped their bonds to blow across her nose and eyes. They clung as a spider's web to skin, and she impatiently brushed it from her face.

Draco didn't hear her approach. He kicked his feet every other downward swoop of the swing. She had never seen him so at peace. It was a good look on him. It was an image she would hold close to her heart in the years to come, long after he had moved on from his wartime experiences.

Somehow drawn by her melancholy, Draco turned his head. Something in her expression must have alerted him because he muttered a word and the swing halted its forward momentum. He jumped lightly to the ground, gracefully, as if he had practiced the maneuver a hundred times, as indeed he had. "What's wrong?"

Cursing herself, Hermione quickly pasted a smile on her face. "Nothing. There's nothing wrong this time. I actually come bearing good news."

"Are you going to tell me Severus is getting married? I already know that. He owed me this afternoon." Draco began to laugh. It was a rich and deep sound. "Well, I can tell you didn't know! You should see the look on your face, Granger!"

She blushed. "I'm just surprised. I've never thought of him like that ... I mean, who is he marrying?"

"Brace yourself. It's Penelope Clearwater."

"The Ravenclaw?" she asked, remembering that Penny Clearwater had once been Percy Weasley's girlfriend.

"The same," Draco said with relish at the gossip. "What a perv! Dating one of his former students."

"Well, he wouldn't have much choice would he? Most of the younger British witches he'd meet would have been his students."

"Still sticking up for him, I see."

"He's entitled to find happiness after all he's gone through. I wish them the best."

Draco stepped closer to Hermione, and she had to tilt her head to meet his eyes. He smiled. "I'll be sure to tell him you said that. Granger's specialty ... compassion and understanding for the Slytherin outcast."

Abruptly, Hermione wanted to be finished delivering his freedom. She wanted to nurse her stupidly unrequited feelings in private. "The Ministry is unfreezing your family's funds and they've released your home in your name," she said abruptly. "You're free to leave here any time you like."

The expression on his face changed the moment she spoke. From rather congenial good humor, he now stared at her with an unreadable look. The intensity of his regard made Hermione uncomfortable and she shifted nervously from foot-to-foot, focusing her attention on the third button of his white shirt.

"When?" was his only question.

"Today. Now. I don't know about the funds. Harry thinks you'll get the owl tomorrow, but he was just here to deliver the news about your home."

"Did you come with him?"

Confused, she looked up. His eyes were very dark, and framed by thick lashes.

"Er ... no. I was already here."

"Why?"

"Sorry?"

"Why were you already here, Granger?"

"You weren't at the party, and I wanted to make sure you were all right."

He smirked and crossed his arms. "Is that so?"

She blushed and wished for the cover of dark. "Yes."

"Liar." He stepped closer to her. "What did you really come to say?"

She stepped back, suddenly angry that he was toying with her; suddenly aware that he must already know what she felt for him. Her eyelids prickled with impending tears. "I came to tell you good-bye. You won't ever have to see me again after tomorrow ... er ... tonight. You can leave here any time."

Stupid, stupid, stupid girl!

"I know. I got the owl this afternoon."

Startled, she met his eyes again. "You did?"

"I did. Now, intrepid little Gryffindor, tell me why I'm still here." He began to circle her, and she mirrored his movements until she faced the house and he faced the swing.

Her temper, never quiescent, erupted. "I don't know, Malfoy! Why are you still here?"

"That is the question, Granger... Hermione. Why am I still here hours after receiving notice that I've been pardoned; that I'm free to resume my life or what's left of it?" He stepped closer.

Hermione backed up, her anger vanishing like a Boggart when laughed at. She and Draco maneuvered like they were executing the steps of some intricate dance until the back of her knees hit the seat of the swing and she abruptly sat. Absently, she noted that he had charmed the wooden seat to remain stable. "I don't know," she said.

"You don't know?" His tall figure loomed over her, and Hermione bit her lip to keep it from trembling. "Such a clever witch and you don't know me better after working together all this time. No educated guess?"

"No," she whispered. "I don't know, Malfoy."

"Let's table that for a moment, then, shall we? Why don't you tell me again why you're here when you should be celebrating with the other Order members at Grimmauld Place?"

She was trembling so much that she gripped the rope to ground herself. "I- I came to say goodbye. After tonight ... well our lives will be different."

"I fervently hope so." The look in his eyes held something she didn't quite recognize.

Suddenly, Draco stepped back and held out his hand. With her eyes fixed on his, Hermione accepted his offer, unprepared for the jolt of awareness which coruscated up her spine when he wrapped his fingers around hers. He helped her stand, but didn't relinquish his hold on her. Instead, he pulled their joined hands to his chest, and she followed her hand, stepping next to him.

"Does this mean I'm going to get a farewell kiss?"

Hermione sucked in her breath. "I ... I ... Malmmmph..."

While she dithered, Draco had bent to touch his lips to hers.

Spontaneous combustion was an apt description.

They had always been a volatile combination. If Harry had always been able to incite Draco's anger, then Hermione had always sparked his passion.

She moaned into his mouth, eagerly welcoming his exploring tongue. Inspired by her encouragement, Draco pulled her roughly into his arms, one wrapped around her waist, his hand spread along her lower back and the crest of her bum, fingering the thin fabric of her dress. His other hand cupped the back of her head, fingers threading into her tightly braided, thick hair.

Hermione relished the taste of him, something she had fantasized about only very late at night and then felt guilty over the next day. He tasted of Molly Weasley's apple tart and Arthur Weasley's Muggle brandy. Delicious.

Her thoughts swirled with all the reasons kissing him was a bad idea, but it wasn't an opportunity she would ignore. It would most likely be her only chance. At least she would have one memory to cherish.

She flicked the tip of her tongue along his soft palette, mapping the center ridge. Draco shuddered in an altogether enticing manner, and Hermione wrapped her right leg around his left thigh. When he bucked into her, her nipples tightened and a freshet of damp moistened her knickers. Gods, she had wanted this for a long time.

As if mimicking her thoughts, he broke the kiss, and groaned into her ear. "I'm here," he said, huskily, "because I've wanted to do that for a long time."

"Good," she replied, her hands smoothing down from his shoulders, across the hard planes of his chest.

He pulled back a little. "Good?"

"Yes," she hissed, attention focused almost entirely on her trembling fingers as they worked on the buttons of his shirt.

"What are you doing, Granger?"

She'd gotten the first three buttons undone. "What..." enough to reveal his suprasternal notch "...do..." she began to suckle his skin "...you -" inhaling his distinctive musky

scent "...think..." making a memory "...I'm doing?"

He muttered something Hermione ignored while her mouth followed her fingers. Kissing and licking her way down the opening placket of his shirt until she discovered his flat male nipple; it pebbled under her tongue.

Galvanized into action, Draco grasped her bum in both hands, lifting her off the ground. She could feel his slightly calloused fingers as his maneuver hiked her dress above his hands, and her wand rolled in its thigh holster. Hermione's skin tingled under his touch.

He turned, sinking onto the seat of the swing with her firmly placed on his lap, her legs folded to either side of his hips. Her mind paid no attention to the improbability of this happening, only that it was.

Draco nipped at her pulse point then, laving the tender skin before exploring her throat further.

Tugging his shirt free of his trousers, Hermione's greedy hands snaked along his smooth skin. Once more, her mouth fastened on one of his nipples, and her tongue teased its budding peak.

Suddenly, one of his hands touched the bare skin of her back. Draco had slipped his hand under her dress.

With a little cry, Hermione abandoned his chest to meet his waiting mouth. Their tongues twined and tasted. Then, it seemed his hands were everywhere: caressing her breasts, dipping under the lace of her knickers, skimming her bum.

His erection was hot and hard between her legs, and Hermione writhed against him. She needed to feel him ... just ... ah ... there.

He grunted and broke the kiss.

They were both panting.

"Are we really doing this, Granger?"

"Merlin, yes!"

"Do you want to go..." His arm gestured toward the house.

She rolled her hips, and he made a sound like he had been sucker-punched. "No, Mal -- Draco. It's too far. There's no one here but us."

"Right."

He leaned backward a bit and the swing shifted. Hermione's weight slid her forward, pelvic girdle impacting with his trouser-sheathed erection. The jolt of arousal was so intense an explosive whimper escaped her mouth.

The strap of her dress had dipped low on her bicep, and Draco pushed it further, revealing that she hadn't worn a bra. Her body was exactly the right angle for him to mouth her breast, and when he tongued her tightly furled nipple she felt it in her womb.

Gasping, she said, "Besides, this ... is ... your room."

"Have you ever done it on a swing?" he mumbled, the sensations of his voice on her tender skin sending shockwaves to her hooded bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs.

She ground down on his rigid arousal, moaning before answering him breathlessly. "Is it possible?"

He let go of her breast with a little pop. "We're resourceful; we'll make it possible."

His grin was wicked and captivating, and Hermione knew exactly why the Malfoys had always been so powerful. They had charisma in spades. Coupled with their intelligence and their ambition, it was no wonder they had excelled in the magical world. And it was no wonder a wizard like Tom Riddle would have wanted them in his stable. When Draco bit her neck, all thoughts of the wizarding world's shifting dynamics scattered.

"Yes!" She ripped her wand from its holster and with a swish and a non-verbal *Divestio* they were both naked, their clothes folded neatly in a pile on the ground, and his erection nestled in the damp curls of her pubis. Then, pointing her wand at her abdomen, she closed her eyes, steadying herself. Never before had Hermione been quite so wanton.

"Have you done this before?" Draco asked.

Brown eyes flew open, staring at his face. His eyes were so dilated they looked as dark as the night had become. She nodded. "Twice. I was remembering the correct wand movement for the contraception charm."

"May I?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and then, very slowly, she offered him her wand. He brushed her lips, his gaze never leaving hers. They both recognized the importance of the moment.

With a fillip, a jab, and a glow of purple light Hermione felt the none-too-familiar tingle of a contraceptive charm engage. Another wand movement and the seat of the swing altered shape, just enough for comfort. Grinning wickedly, Draco threaded the whippy vinewood through her braid. "Just in case we need it."

Hermione took advantage of the simmering stage of the moment by tracing his features with her fingers. It was something she had imagined doing once or twice ... or a hundred times. His skin was soft around his eyes and high on his cheekbones, but lower on his face stubble prickled against her fingertips. When she grazed his mouth, his lips opened and he caught her fingers. He sucked them into his mouth, laving the tips of her fingers and then pulling back until they popped out of his mouth.

Hermione ground her hips against his satin-skinned erection and felt the jerk of his muscles as he reacted. Their eyes met. In mutual accord, they ceased their play. She rose on her knees, her hand snaking between their bodies to guide him exactly where she wanted him to be. Slowly, ever so slowly, she sheathed him within her throbbing core.

"Unh! Granger, you're so hot and tight."

Involuntarily she clenched her inner muscles, and he groaned. Realizing was holding her breath, Hermione exhaled.

He rolled one rigid nipple between his teeth and flicked its tip with his tongue.

"Malfoy!" She exclaimed, grabbing onto the rope for balance. The movement arched her back, thrusting her breast into his mouth.

He groaned and shifted his attention to her other breast, and the wind, which had begun to pick up, chilled her wet nipple, tightening its peak even more.

With her free hand, Hermione began to explore his nude torso. Draco's skin was beautiful, alabaster in the ambient light from the Burrow's windows, and when she pinched

one of his nipples, his hips thrust and he jerked inside her.

So she did it again.

"Gods, woman! Just like that."

She kissed him instead, and it was hot and hungry.

Their movements began to rock the swing, slightly at first, and then more energetically as Draco leaned to explore her neck and shoulders, and then away to reach her breasts again. Hermione's body shifted with his movements. Together, they created a fluid rhythm ... forward and backward.

Hermione accommodated his exploration and sampled his taste, nuzzling his suprasternal notch before licking that slight indentation between his collar bones. She loved the faint salty flavor on his skin. He had obviously been working in the garden earlier.

The movement of the swing propelled their coupling. When the first tummy-tingling swoop happened, a gasp and an, "Ahhh!" burst from her mouth.

"Like that, do you?" His look was too knowing for her to think the feeling accidental. She felt him kick his legs, the muscles of his thighs bunching beneath her; the movement seated him more deeply within her.

She dropped her head to his breastbone. "Unh ... Malfoy"

"Yes, Granger?" His voice was husky and deep, and she shuddered, clenching her vaginal walls.

He grunted in response.

Hermione hadn't been in an elevator for years, but the sensation was a bit like descending an express from the thirtieth floor to the first.

When the swing dropped once more to the perigee of its arc, the pressure in Hermione's pelvis was indescribable. Frantically, she clutched Malfoy's arm with one hand and the swing's rope with the other. "Oh! My.... What ... what ..."

"Speechless, little one?" He nuzzled her earlobe, and she felt him withdraw her wand from her braid. "Ready?"

The swing descended, causing her already tingling nerve endings to fire and spark with excitement. Hermione gasped again. "Yes!"

He chuckled, the swing rose upward toward the great oak's canopy, and Draco waved her wand. "*Perpetuo momentum!*"

The swing rapidly slipped downward. At the full extension of the swing's arc Hermione cried out, "Aaaah! Draco!"

When the swing passed close enough to the ground they could touch grass if they chose, he was thrust deeper, her mons hit his pubic bone and jolts of pre-orgasmic pleasure shuddered through her.

"Gods!" she exclaimed.

Freeing the hand bracing her back, Draco threaded his fingers through her hair, pulling her to him. His mouth devoured hers in a kiss so encompassing, Hermione wanted to crawl into him.

The swing crested its pendulous arc, leaves on the lowest branch of the sheltering tree broke free to nest in their hair, and then the swing dropped. Hermione's tummy fluttered, and the pressure on her pulsing bundle of nerves was enormous. When they reached perigee, flickering lights danced behind her closed eyelids, and her skin broke out in gooseflesh.

She made a sound that was a cross between a whimper and a whine, and he answered with a growl deep in his throat. The vibration she felt through his tongue only heightened her pleasure.

Her chest was pressed against his, her nipples aching and in need of the friction his sparse chest hair gave them.

They crested the forward momentum of the swing, and she gasped for breath just before the swing plummeted. There was no need for Draco to thrust his hips or for her to lift and lower herself onto him; the swing did all the work, and did it with unbelievable results.

It was the most intense sexual experience of Hermione's life.

They stared at one another, communicating wordlessly, as they swung toward the ground, gravity pulling them together and down. His eyes glittered with lust and something far more profound, and Hermione was certain her heart was his to read.

She would never forget this moment.

The swing swooped through the pendulum and began its ascent once more. Like the inevitable tide, Hermione knew her orgasm was close.

As they reached the top of the arc, she nibbled on his ear, and whispered, "Draco."

He hadn't moved the hand in her hair, and Hermione felt his fingers tighten against her scalp as he came, in great shuddering spasms.

He shouted something unintelligible.

The swing dropped.

At the bottom of the pendulum's trajectory, her world exploded in a glorious burst of sensation, and then nothing at all.

The next thing Hermione knew, she was lying on a soft coverlet, and a voice was calling her name. "Hermione ... Hermione! Come on, Granger, don't make me *Ennervate* you again. Wake up!"

It was Draco and he sounded frantic. This she had to see. Aware of a great languor which had spread throughout her body, all Hermione really wanted to do was sleep, but she managed to open her eyes. Wide grey eyes were peering down at her, and relief flooded his features.

She lifted a hand to cup his cheek. "That was amazing!"

His laughter sounded more like a bark than an expression of amusement, and he said sternly, "We're never doing it on a swing again."

It was then Hermione realized she was in Percy Weasley's bedroom. Well, it had once been Percy's bedroom, but it had been Draco's for the past two years. It was tidy, and Draco's transfiguration skills were evident in the décor. He had wrought the same sort of transformation on the room as he had on the garden. The colors were cool and subtle; the furniture altered just enough to give it lines of distinction.

When Hermione finished her perusal of the room, for she had never been in it since his arrival at the Burrow, she looked at him. Draco's hair was mussed and he was still

naked. Her breath seemed to escape her lungs. He was beautiful, all sinewy muscle and balanced proportions.

Then the implication of his statement filtered through her foggy brain, and Hermione's breath caught in her throat. She swallowed hard. She tried to make her tone light. "Where ... where else are we doing it then?"

"Next time, it'll be in a proper bed," Draco pronounced.

"This bed?" she asked, a slight smile curving her mouth. She had no idea where this relationship, if that's what it could be called, was headed, but she was going along for the ride.

He smirked. "And others. I have an entire houseful of beds for us to try."

Hermione's smile could have rivaled the sun, and she pulled back the covers to reveal her own nude body. "Then we should get started."

He slid between the sheets, and his body was cool next to hers. She shivered a little from the chill, but mostly in anticipation as he reached for his wand on the nightstand. Hers was lying right next to it. Clothes might not have mattered to him, but he had made certain to bring both their wands from the garden.

"Nox," he said, pointing his wand at the candles before replacing it next to hers. Then, turning toward her and hitching one leg over one of her thighs, he insinuated one arm under her neck and angled above her. Moonlight streamed through the opened window and shone off his pale hair. "To answer your earlier question ..."

"Which question?"

"Why I stayed when the manor has been mine since midday."

"Oh," she said, her heart pounding in her ears.

"It's your job to deliver my life-altering news."

"I see." She nuzzled his ear.

His swift intake of air was a reward, but his next words were even better. "I was waiting for you."

She kissed him.

~o0o~

Finite Incantatem