

The Witch Bower

by Bambu

Post-war, Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy have formed an unlikely friendship which has grown into an intimate relationship. When Hermione's doubts about the relationship appear to derail a happy ending, the nameless, elemental guardians of the Malfoy line take matters into their own hands in order to ensure the future of the family.

Awakening

Chapter 1 of 7

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Author's Notes: I wrote this in response to my assignment for the Draco/Hermione 2007 Valentine's Fic Exchange on Live Journal. It's a post-war/post-HBP fic, with explicit sexual content, self-gratification, voyeurism. Thanks to SnarkyWench for carving time out of her ultra-hectic schedule to beta this for me.

~o0o~

At Midsummer, sentience crept through the dormant bower, stealing through roots and trunks, awakening the corner guardians of a private idyll in the New Forest. Untold time had passed since it had been wounded.

Later, as the Equinox neared, leaves faded from the full glory of summer, colors bleaching, bronzing into a riot of autumnal glory. In preparation, odd-shaped protrusions formed at the base of the four guardians. Small saplings sprang up at odd points within the perimeter of the bower's circle, their limbs weaving in a design which was not of nature's making.

As magic waxed, flora and fauna fell prey to an ancient power this generation had never seen. It had been centuries since its previous awakening and, with a rustling of limbs and leaves, the ancient protectors reveled in the health of the earth, drawing magic from the matrices of the northerly plains.

The need was not yet immediate, but it was growing

When night overpowered day, the bower would be ready to welcome The Malfoy's bride.

~o0o~

Please, please, please, the thought swirled in my head like a bezoar in an empty cauldron as he kissed me again. Please make me come. Tiny contractions in my hooded bundle of nerves heightened my desire and sent my pulse racing. I arched off the bed, making contact with his broad chest. He broke the kiss, panting harshly, and his breath tickled the curling tendrils of my hair.

My breasts ached, yearning for his touch, but I would have to be content with the friction of his chest hair. I murmured, "Yes, love, yes," as his narrow hips fitted between my legs.

He thrust awkwardly and missed.

Masking my disappointment, I raked my hand through his baby fine hair and made encouraging noises. The moment was still salvageable.

He grunted, and the sound was both aroused and annoyed. Such a proud man, I thought, wanting to help. Sliding one of my hands along his smooth back to the crest of his arse worked partially. His hips bucked -- it seemed in surprise -- and his erection made contact with my mons. Scintillating bursts of white flashed before my eyes and I moaned. I heard the breath whistle past his teeth as he sucked in his breath.

"Please," I whispered.

He pulled off me a bit, angling his weight on one arm. Quidditch had given him strong arms before removing my hand from his body with the other. He kissed me, twining our fingers together, but he tugged our arms up to the pillow and held my hand in place.

I was practically whining with need. Sharp, immediate, urgent. His own need was equally obvious as his hard length slid between my slick nether lips, and with this thrust, by luck or magic, he managed to sheathe himself deep within me.

Oh god, yes.

He didn't wait for me to adjust to his size. While he wasn't terribly thick, he was long and when buried to the hilt he hit my cervix. I'd been startled by it the first time, but it was arousing in a new way, and I thought I might grow to enjoy it. If he would only give me an orgasm.

Maybe this time.

That I was able to think coherently while he was thrusting into me wasn't a good sign, but every second thrust his pelvis hit my clit and it was just enough to heighten my desire.

When my legs wrapped around his waist he grunted, and I was encouraged enough to rock my hips, trying to undulate in time with the rhythmic flexing of his arse, but we weren't in synch. Surely it would get better. This was only our fourth time after all.

I wriggled beneath him, trying for more friction against his chest. But he had shifted for a better angle and cold air filled the space between our bodies, chilling my heated skin.

Oh, good, goosebumps. I welcomed anything to tighten my nipples.

A deep thrust hit my cervix, pulling another moan from me. Above me, he was grinning, but his eyes as they had been every other time we'd had sex were closed.

His thrusts became erratic, climax imminent, yet I was nowhere close. Swiftly taking action I slid my free hand around his ribs, between us, snaking toward my --

"Unh ... yes ... now ... unh ... Hermione." His release was spastic and jerky. Almost immediately thereafter he collapsed on top of me, trapping my hand between his belly button and mine ... and I was left wanting and disappointed.

Looking past him, I focused on the dainty, frosted glass chandelier hanging from the center of my ceiling. I had bought it this past summer when he had introduced me to antiquing. That was the first time we'd had sex, and it had been anything but satisfying. I had chalked it up to first-time nerves.

Maybe he would remember to attend to my needs this time.

But he didn't.

At least he didn't roll over and go to sleep. He was a gentleman after all. It was something I had never noticed in all our years at school or during the war, but his manners were impeccable.

I wished he was a little less mannerly.

Is there such a thing as a Madonna-Whore Complex for men?

He rose on one elbow, kissing me tenderly. It involved lips, tongues, and teeth. Oh, Nimue, does he know how to kiss. My desire flared to life, heating my skin. Now, now, now, I chanted silently.

Instead, he broke the kiss and rolled off the other side of the bed, subconsciously smoothing the rumpled, brushed cotton duvet, fingering the tufting at one of the small sage-colored leaves, before sauntering to the bathroom. He was a very handsome man. Tall and lean, he moved with the grace of an athlete and held himself straight and proud. All those centuries of pure-blooded ancestry must've been good for something.

When he ducked into the bathroom the candlelight shone on his hair, leaving it as pale as moonlight gleaming across snow. I heard the water run and seriously considered giving myself an orgasm while he was busy, but if he came back too soon his feelings would be hurt. It had taken me years to realize how sensitive he was, so I kept my hands firmly in place.

He returned to my bedroom dressed in his trousers and unbuttoned shirt, carrying my dressing gown in one hand.

Unexpectedly my eyes stung. "You won't stay? At least for a little while longer?"

His large hand reached for mine, pulling me from the bed. "Not yet, pet. I have to think of your reputation. Soon, though."

I willingly rose, sliding my arms into the silk folds of my dressing gown. One of my few luxuries, I'd bought the jade-colored silk in a tiny shop in Kensington one Sunday afternoon. Unexpectedly, he wrapped his arms around me from behind, holding the ends of the belt in his hands while he nuzzled my neck.

He didn't make sense.

How could someone so affectionate in private be so clumsy in bed? I turned in his arms, looking into his intense gray eyes. They were dark tonight and I couldn't quite read his expression.

"Please?" I asked, willing to ignore my body's need for the comfort of his arms. Merlin help me, I loved the man.

"I have to be at the manor before dawn. Some preparations for the solstice, but I'll see you on your birthday. Remember, Granger, I'm taking you to dinner at Epicurious."

He reached for my hand, interlacing our fingers as we made our way through my flat. Never once did he glance at the pictures on the wall of the narrow hallway, many of which were from our schooldays and of people I'd lost during the war. He was in only two photographs. We had never been friends until recently.

When we reached the front hall, which conveniently served as my Apparition point, he slipped his narrow feet into dragonhide loafers. Next, he retrieved his cloak from the coat rack which waddled toward him from the corner.

"We could eat here," I offered.

He shook his head, hair falling into his eyes, tugging me to him. I brushed a strand of the silken stuff off his face. "I made reservations weeks ago. Besides, I have plans." He winked at me.

Considering our past, you would think I would be less susceptible to his charms, but I was a complete marshmallow. "What plans?"

"You'll see. It will be a night to remember. One we'll remember for the rest of our lives."

Oh my.

He kissed me again, strong fingers threading through my messy hair. "Good night, Hermione."

"Night," I whispered.

He spun and disappeared with a *CRACK* which bounced off the walls. I'd modified the Security Spells on my flat to admit him six months ago. And how strange was that? Draco Malfoy was the only person other than me who could Apparate into my home without being misdirected to the atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

After he left, I sagged against the wall, absently staring at the small reception table in the entry. Nothing about the dark wood or the small bowl of floating gardenias drew my interest. Absently, I dipped a finger into the bowl, slipping it between two waxy petals to give the water a whirl. The white blossoms spun in a circle, their petals touching but never really connecting, each flower remaining a discrete whole.

Unaccountably depressed, I returned to my bedroom, passing by the lounge where our half-empty wine glasses stood on the low table before the sofa I'd found on another of our antiquing adventures. It was a walnut Austrian Biedermeier, hand-carved and upholstered in white. I had fallen in love with it at first sight and hadn't really been able to afford it, but I'd wanted it. The Galleons had come from my emergency fund and I'd brought it home with me that very day. It didn't look comfortable, but it had surprising depths to its cushions. In some ways the sofa reminded me of Draco: clean, elegant lines, unexpected depths, and a reassuring embrace.

Leaving the glasses until the morning, I padded softly into my bedroom, picking up one of the round pillows which had rolled onto the floor, ignoring the stack of books on the rug at the foot of the bed. The bed itself looked well-used, nestled as it was between the two built-in bookcases which had sold me on the flat in the first place. The duvet -- patterned pale green grasses against a creamy white background -- was rumpled enough to reveal the darker green sheet beneath and the remnants of our coupling. Nonetheless, the narrow path where Draco's hand had smoothed the fabric was unsettling.

My feet grew cold even on the Persian rug I'd inherited from Nana two years ago. The rug was the reason for my color scheme, a variegated display of greens and black against taupe. The colors blended well in the room and the wood-framed cheval mirror I'd brought from my parents' house reflected a mellow glow of candlelight.

Normally the room was refreshing and relaxing. But at that moment, my body was humming with the pent up need for release. Each time we had sex Draco wound me up, reached his own climax, and left me a ball of frustrated longing. I ran my fingers through my messy hair, getting caught on a tangle.

I couldn't remain in such an unsatisfying sexual relationship indefinitely, but it seemed like such a petty complaint. In all other respects I was rather blissfully content, except I had up-close and personal proof that inequity in a couple's sex life was disastrous in the long-run. It was the cause of my parents' divorce after nineteen years of marriage.

Maybe Mum would have some good advice for me. No, she would tell me to dump Draco, and that was not the answer I was looking for. There must be another solution. Regardless of the answer, I'd think about it in the morning. In the meantime, I was going to have to do something about my state or I'd never get to sleep and I had to be at the Ministry for my presentation at ten.

My fingers fumbled with the slippery material and the dressing gown slid into a heap at the foot of my bed. Fingers wouldn't be enough tonight.

Grabbing my wand from the third shelf of the right-hand bookcase, I flicked the smooth vine wood with practiced ease. "*Nox!*"

Obedying my intent, candles throughout the rest of the flat were snuffed, leaving only the candles in the bathroom lit. There was just enough flickering golden light to see by.

I sat on the edge of the bed, closed my eyes, and breathed deeply for a moment, trying to get my head back into the mood. The room smelled of Draco and sex, and my body's need simmered in all its frustrated glory.

No. Fingers definitely wouldn't be enough.

Sighing heavily, I opened my eyes, reaching for my eagle feather quill. It, along with a small stack of parchment and a bottle of ink, was always nestled on that third shelf next to my wand, just in case I had a notable idea during the night. Holding the quill in one hand and my wand in the other, I cast a Transfiguration spell. The eagle feather shifted weight, mass, and density. I wasn't sure the shape and length were accurate because Draco hadn't yet let me explore his body; however, the results appeared to have the right shape and size, even though I'd added a finger-shaped protrusion at the base.

I lay back on the rumpled duvet while murmuring a charm Nymphadora Tonks had taught me at some point during that last horrible year of the war, after Ron had been killed. In those days, my fantasy lover had been redheaded and freckled and sometimes my self-indulgent moments were accompanied by tears, but he had been replaced in the past eighteen months by a man with shiny blond hair and alabaster skin and hopeful thoughts.

The Transfigured quill began to vibrate in my hand, and, like Pavlov's well-trained dog, my body reacted. I would never admit how often I'd used these particular skills over the past few years, but my body knew exactly how to respond to the sound and feel of the artificial, vibrating cock in my hand.

Two nonverbal spells later, one a delicate Self-Cleansing Charm, the other a Lubricating Charm, my wand dropped to the bed, still close at hand for the final spell. I spread my legs. Slipping the replica between my nether lips, my gasp was loud in the room and I held my breath while my fingers pushed. Within seconds I was filled completely and the vibrating protrusion fit snugly against my mons.

Excitement raced through my limbs, my nipples furled, and my back arched.

I groped for my wand. "*Caresser!*"

Immediately, the Draco replica began to move ... in ... out When the first stroke hit my cervix I dropped my wand. My hands found my breasts, fingers plucking, rolling, tweaking.

I writhed in an agony of pre-release, the finger-like protrusion vibrating against my clit and small bursts of light flickered at the edges of my vision. My eyes closed, my imagination conjuring gray eyes watching me.

Overwhelmed by sensation, it didn't take long before I was a quivering, shuddering mess. "Draco!" I screamed, and then gasped for breath.

Suddenly it was too much. Too much. Yanking the vibrating replica from between my legs, I fumbled for my wand. "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Within seconds a damp quill lay upon my rumpled covers, its feathers sticking together in wet clumps. Yuck, I thought, and waved my wand. "*Tergeo.*"

Too tired to cast the spell nonverbally, I cleaned myself again and slipped beneath the duvet, wishing fervently that Draco was beside me. Post-coital cuddling was one of

my favorite parts of sex.

"Nox."

The meeting the next morning was my final, oral presentation to the Ministry's Muggle Relations Committee. After lobbying for grant money the past three months, the committee had tentatively approved my research and given me a date for my presentation. My research centered upon the historical segregation between the Muggle and wizarding world with an ultimate goal of amending the International Code of Secrecy. I eventually hoped to convince the Wizengamot that all young children needed to be tested for magical ability so that potential witches and wizards could be assured of living conditions designed to enhance and celebrate their talents rather than warp them.

The wizarding world and the Muggle one as well might not survive the emergence of another Tom Riddle. If the committee agreed to my grant, they would supply me with sufficient funding to support my research for the first year. My only requirements would be quarterly reports presented to the Committee itself.

Ten minutes before leaving the flat a familiar voice called my name. It was coming from the fireplace in the small room I used as an office. I practically raced through the flat, heels clicking on the wooden floors, and when I saw that familiar white-blond head, my heart actually fluttered.

"Granger! I thought I'd missed you."

"Is everything all right?" I couldn't help that my eyes strayed to the clock.

He noticed. "I have something to give you."

"Draco, I love that you think of me, but you need to save your money for the estate's ..."

"Just shut up already. Hold on." His head disappeared and then just his hand poked through the green flames. In it was a stalk of green-and-white bell-shaped flowers. I didn't recognize it immediately. At least it wasn't the rather clichéd single rose. I was unbelievably touched that he remembered how much I disliked stereotypic gestures of affection.

The stem dropped into my outstretched palm before Draco's face reappeared. A real smile curved his mouth, one seen rarely. He reminded me of a young boy who'd found a small puppy, terribly pleased with himself. "Molleluca leewis," I said, finally identifying the flowers. "Bells of Ireland."

His smile broke into a grin. "For luck."

Was it any wonder I was dithering about our relationship? Every now and then he made these terribly endearing gestures. "I'd kiss you but I don't want to muss my robes."

"Let's see them then."

Straightening to my full height, I spun in a circle.

"They'll do."

I bit my tongue on a sharp retort. It had taken me weeks to prepare for this presentation.

"Granger," he said softly, breaking into my annoyance. "You'll do." Our eyes met for a long moment. "Now go. Remember, I'll be in Wiltshire for the next few days, but I'll pick you up Thursday night for dinner. Seven sharp."

My clock chimed the hour and a sudden rush of adrenaline made me woozy. "I'll be late." I practically flew from the room, heels barely touching the floor.

As I performed the three D's of Apparition: destination, determination, and decision, his voice called out. "Owl me with"

Two hours later, I was practically giddy with happiness. Seven of the nine committee members had approved my research and the funds had already been transferred to my Gringotts account. My fingers trembled when I offered my note for Draco to the broad-winged Post Owl. It set off for Wiltshire and I took advantage of the sunny day by strolling through Diagon Alley, reveling in the sights and sounds of wizarding England's busiest street.

The aged cobbles were familiar beneath my feet, and the owls and ravens in their cages outside the Magical Menagerie watched passersby with sharp, intelligent eyes. They hooted and squawked as I walked past and I waved cheerily, as if they knew the reason for my good mood.

Before my next destination, I picked up some ice cream -- Mr. Fortescue had never been found, but the new owners kept his name on the ice cream parlor as a tribute. Soon enough, however, the noxious fumes and blaring sounds of Muggle London's traffic were my companions, but it wasn't long before I stood in front of an old-fashioned red-brick building sporting a dilapidated sign reading Purge and Dowse Ltd. The ugly dummy in the window practically knew my name but the formalities were always observed.

I slipped through the lobby, nodding at the receptionist before taking the stairs to the fourth floor. It was bitterly ironic that my dearest friend had become a resident of the Janus Thickey ward alongside Gilderoy Lockhart and Narcissa Malfoy.

Even after four years it hurt to see Harry. Aside from essential bodily functions, he had been non-responsive since the moment he'd defeated Voldemort. Defeated. That's the word the public uses. Those of us who were present that day used the term assassination.

We had worked long and hard to ensnare a mortal Voldemort, but the sacrifices had been more than I could bear for a long time. I had slept in a bed adjacent to Harry's for three months before my mum had taken me home to nurse me back to health. If it wasn't for Harry, I would be living in the Muggle world. The magical one had destroyed almost everything I loved.

When I reached his bedside, I conjured a small stool before kissing his forehead. The scar was still there, now faded to a vague reminder of its former, livid state. It was as faded as Harry's life force. I ran my hands through his messy hair in a ritual I performed three or four times a week.

The Senior Healer in charge of his case speculated that Harry had been a Horcrux-in-the-making when his parents were killed. As a result, when the Killing Curse rebounded all those years ago, Harry's soul had become entwined with the proto-remnant of Voldemort's soul. Then, when Harry killed Voldemort, Harry's soul was practically destroyed. There was little hope for his recovery yet I visited him every other day. He would have done the same for me.

I talked while feeding him his favorite chocolate ice cream. "I felt ill until I walked into the room. It was probably the way you felt that day in Courtroom Ten, but this was a much smaller room. There are nine committee members, Harry, and I don't think Mrs. Hopkirk liked me very much. She transferred from the Improper Use of Magic Office, and maybe she didn't want the post. Still, it was awfully nice to see Mr. Perkins." Harry snapped at the spoonful of ice cream as if it was a chocolate frog about to escape. "Remember him? He used to work with Mr. Weasley in Misuse of Muggle Artifacts."

A mediwizard walked through the ward, Levitating a patient, and a spill of platinum hair, swinging with more life than the rest of its body, caught my attention. Narcissa Malfoy was being moved. I turned completely in my chair to watch where she was being taken, my hand pausing mid-air. Chocolate ice cream melted, dribbling onto Harry's bed clothes, splattering into an array of Rorschach blots. I didn't notice.

I was paying attention to Draco's mother. It was reminiscent of how he and I had re-met.

An orderly had been treating Narcissa's unconscious body disrespectfully and I had taken exception to his rough handling. It hadn't mattered who she was, and it still hadn't

mattered after the orderly told me her name. He made vicious comments about the wives of Death Eaters while I stared at him in revulsion. Her pale, unanimated face lacked any expression, and her half-shuttered eyes stared without recognition at her surroundings. My heart clenched and I'd glanced at Harry farther down the ward, remembering the length of time I was a patient in that very same ward.

I still remember vividly how the color drained from the orderly's face when I took advantage of my prestige and gave him the rough side of my tongue. He visibly cringed like a mooncalf caught dancing in a wheat field, and was extremely cautious around his patient after that, surreptitiously glancing at me standing at the foot of her bed. When he completed his care, he escaped as if I were Voldemort himself. After making certain Narcissa was tucked in safely, I had turned to find her son standing in my former place at the foot of her bed, a completely shocked expression on his pale face.

He'd thanked me civilly and inquired about my health. The rest, they always say, is history.

Now I watched with narrowed eyes as a different orderly carefully returned Narcissa to her bed and deduced that they'd taken her for tests or a real bath.

Returning my attention to Harry, I saw the mess on the coverlet, oddly noticing that one of the blots looked like a Snitch. With a stab of melancholy I *Scourgified* the mess. "Sorry, Harry."

Then, Conjuring a warm, wet flannel, I wiped his face. His beautiful green eyes stared vacantly at the far wall. Their dull expression had unnerved me at first, but after hundreds of visits, it had become commonplace. It never stopped me hoping for a change.

I held his hand until he closed his eyes, and then I brushed his cheek with a kiss. "I'll see you Monday."

Although it wasn't normally my habit, I made my way to Narcissa's bed. "Hello, Mrs. Malfoy."

She was still a lovely woman, with eyes the most vivid blue I'd ever seen. I remembered from somewhere that they could be called gentian, but they were as lifeless as Harry's and pity stirred in my breast. She had been dumped on the steps of the Ministry of Magic two weeks after Draco and Snape's escape from Hogwarts. The absence of a Dark Mark on her skin had kept her at St. Mungo's rather than being incarcerated without due process in Azkaban.

"I know we've never met, but I'm a friend of Draco's. He won't be here today and I wanted to say hello. I come every few days to visit one of my friends, and I'll be happy to "

"She can't hear you." A clinical voice spoke from behind me. Turning my head, I saw a Healer I'd never seen before. He was short, bald, and very skinny, and looked at me as if I was something to study under a microscope, like lacewing flies or newt membranes.

"I didn't think it would hurt and I was already visiting someone."

He narrowed his eyes. "Granger," he said. The way he said my name was identifying rather than a greeting or acknowledgment.

Oddly enough, he reminded me of Severus Snape. I almost laughed. I'm sure it would have offended him terribly, but some things no longer worried me. I'd paid too high a price to let this wizard rattle me, whoever he was.

Ignoring him, I bent across the bed and kissed Narcissa, exactly the way I had Harry. "Next time I'll bring you ice cream, too. Harry loves it when I remember his favorite. It was nice to see you, Mrs. Malfoy."

Nodding my head curtly at the Healer, I slipped past him refusing to let his narrow-minded attitude dampen my day.

I was lucky to run into Tonks in the lobby she'd been hexed by a notorious hag and needed help reversing the spell -- and invited her to lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. It had been a couple of months since I had seen her last.

We caught up with one another's lives over warm Cottage Pie and Butterbeer. She had never really gotten over Remus Lupin's death, and her hair reflected her emotional state, hovering between orchid and violet.

"He gave you Bells of Ireland?" she asked between bites.

"One. He gave me one."

"He really loves you."

"I told you he did."

She eyed me shrewdly. "And do you really love him?"

I didn't answer for awhile, building a moat with my mashed potatoes.

"Hermione"

"All right! I do. I do love him. He's not what he was when we were in school. The war..."

"Hey! You don't need to defend him to me. I know he's changed."

"But Ron hated him. Harry hated him."

She said quietly, "Ron's dead and Harry's comatose. It doesn't matter how they felt."

"It's been five years, Tonks. Five years since Ron ... and I really do love Malfoy."

She laughed. "Lord, do you always call him Malfoy? Even in bed?"

"As if you have anything to complain about ... Nymphadora."

She flicked a bit of veg at me, but I deflected it, right onto her boots.

"Right," she muttered. "Sorry. Too much information."

"If you must know, I call him Draco." For a moment, I considered discussing my dilemma with her, but it seemed cruel to talk about something so minor when the love of her life had died saving her from Fenrir Greyback. And wasn't that something for me to think about?

After lunch I returned to my flat to organize my notes and presentation materials and to take care of some administrative details, like signing the bank draught for an automatic withdrawal for my rent on a monthly basis. I went into Muggle London at teatime to call my parents, separately, of course, to make arrangements to celebrate my birthday. They spent so much time jockeying for position with me it was exhausting just to arrange a simple dinner. It had been several years since their divorce; however, there was still a great deal of animosity between them.

My father remained befuddled about the break-up, having never understood that Mum was unhappy. He still didn't know why she'd left. Despite my suggestion that she talk to him, she maintained that if he had loved her he should have known she was unhappy.

Two days later, I left Mum's flat feeling as if no relationship could ever work out. She and Dad had always seemed so perfect for each other, friends and colleagues with a shared liking for travel, skiing, museums, and gardening. Obviously those things hadn't been enough to sustain their marriage. I didn't want to wake up years down the road blindsided by being left or being the one holding something back from my spouse.

The one nice thing about dinner had been listening to Mum talk about Draco. Despite all the horrible things he'd done to me while we were at school, my parents had liked him immediately if only because they thought he could see my worth. Note to all prospective suitors: show her parents you value your date's intelligence. It works like a treat.

I didn't see Draco for two more days, but we talked by Floo each night, and I made use of my bedside quill twice. He said he was making excellent progress on the estate, but wouldn't go into details. Sitting on the floor of my office wasn't as nice as having him there in person, but what he was doing was important to him. His family's lands had been neglected during the war and for the previous few generations. The first thing Draco had done after reclaiming his property had been to deliver every single Dark artifact in the Manor to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

We had discussed, on numerous occasions, how things had changed since the end of the war, for the greater wizarding world and for him in particular. In order to reclaim his family's honor and position in the world, Draco would have to be above reproach in all things. I knew it was one of the reasons he was so reserved in public.

Snuggling on my sofa until it was time to get ready for our date, I Summoned the cashmere throw I'd knitted just after moving into the flat. Nuzzling the soft yarn, my thoughts unraveled from a dense skein of memories.

The very first lunch Draco and I had shared was in a small tea shop several streets from Gringotts. We were both extremely polite, but after our meal was brought by the waitress, I had cast a surreptitious *Muffliato* around our table.

A pale eyebrow arched above curious gray eyes, but Draco said nothing. He was always more patient than I.

"May I ask you something, Malfoy?"

He placed his soup spoon on the charger before dabbing his mouth with the serviette. "What do you want to know?"

I remember feeling as nervous as the time I'd flown on an invisible Thestral. "I don't want to offend you, but I've really enjoyed talking with you"

"And that's supposed to offend me, Granger?" He chuckled.

"No. That's not ... I know I shouldn't ask this, but ... Look! I'm not always this ... awkward. This is awkward, but I'll just ask." The amusement died from his face and a crease formed between his eyebrows. I rushed on. "Are you being friendly to me because I'm me?"

Intelligence had never been the first thing people talked about when they discussed Draco, but he understood immediately and was furious. There were a number of mannerisms illustrating the difference between boy and man, but none as obvious as the way he controlled himself at that moment. His words were clipped. "Do you think I am incapable of rebuilding my reputation on my own? That I need to use *you* to do it for me?"

My teeth bit my lip bloody. "I don't think you incapable at all."

His eyes narrowed to mere slits and he angled his head so his hair obscured his expression. "What do you want me to say? Will you ever believe I enjoy your company on its own merits?"

"I want to believe you. I do, but ..." By that point my eyes filled with tears.

He rose from the table, slowly, as if making certain each of his movements were precise. "Until you decide whether I'm taking advantage of you or not, maybe we shouldn't see each other. I wouldn't want to damage your reputation by being seen with me."

I felt as if I'd been seared by an incendiary hex.

"Please don't go," I whispered. Our eyes had met and he seemed surprised by my tears.

He glanced around the café before removing his outer robe as if it was the reason for his standing in the first place. He gingerly settled on the chair once more. "I hadn't realized this meant so much to you, Granger."

I sucked on my lip, the thick coppery taste of my blood tainting the flavor of the meal. "It does. Most of my friends are dead, Malfoy. I don't want to be"

"Most of mine are as well and they were all on the losing side."

"See! We have a lot in common, and I just don't want ..." I met pale gray eyes, "... please don't use me."

His jaw worked, the muscles bunching under the skin. "Are you a Legilimens?"

"No more than a rudimentary one."

"Then let's go somewhere and you can take a look in my mind to make sure I haven't hatched some evil Slytherin plot to tarnish the good little Gryffindor."

I remembered snorting with laughter at the way he had twisted the words blushing for the fact that I had actually snorted. Lord, how embarrassing that had been, except my gaffe had relaxed him. I never accepted his offer of Legilimency, and after that day, he was more open with me. Our relationship blossomed like Professor Sprout's Fanged Geraniums until Draco was as much a part of my life as Harry and Ron had been when we were children and later when we were vigilantes.

The reminiscence was as cozy and warm as my sofa and I angled my head against a throw pillow. Within seconds I was asleep.

~o0o~

Expectancy

Chapter 2 of 7

It's Hermione's birthday and Draco has big plans for the night ... but are they what she expects?

The Witch Bower

By Bambu

All standard disclaimers may be found in Chapter One. My continued thanks to SnarkyWench is perennial and I should mention that the name of the restaurant in this chapter coincidentally belongs to a cooking school in New York (the use of it in my story was entirely incidental.)

Chapter Two: Expectancy

~o0o~

As the bower fed upon the earth's inherent magic, a ripe eagerness shimmered in the spaces between tree trunk and river's edge, a sign of the past and of things to come. Water flirted with the protected perimeter, courting an extension of its boundaries. A broad stone allowed the meandering river to mold its shape, curving into a hollow, warmed by the residual heat of summer.

An ancient guardian, the bower touched all living creatures of the forest, fallow deer and wild ponies, ruminants, birds on the wing and fish in the currents. Yet there was a curious discord within its realm, drawing attention toward the single, wizard-made structure and the heir within. Until the Solstice when the heir would be consecrated by the land, the bower could not offer solace for The Malfoy's anxiety.

Yet the heir was not the only disturbance the bower felt.

Relying upon the strength of the forest and the long banked power of the crumbling stones on the plains, the bower stretched its consciousness: first northward, then easterly.

Only one thing could call it from such a distance. The Malfoy's intended. However, the bower could not interfere.

Yet.

The bower held its breath in an expectant pause.

~o0o~

When the clock in my office chirped, *Time to Primp*, I practically leapt from the sofa as if Molly Weasley had sent me a Howler. Grabbing my cup and saucer, I deposited them in the kitchen before flying to my bedroom. Draco was picking me up in an hour.

I dressed carefully for dinner, wearing the robes I had worn on our first real date -- dinner and dancing -- a year ago. He'd liked them.

"The color is immaterial, Granger. It *clings*."

That was the way he said the word, *clings*, drawing the syllable as if he had licked the very letters of the word onto my skin. My reaction was entirely visceral. Yes, a woman's knees really could go a bit wobbly from a compliment.

I smoothed my hands down the front of the robes, wriggling a little in pure feminine vanity. I was a little thinner than last year. All the time I spent with Draco was good for my figure.

I managed my hair, the continued bane of my existence, with a few charms and properly applied Sleakeasy's. Why hadn't anyone ever told me you needed to use it while your hair was wet? Of course, Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil had been my dorm mates at school, and sweeter-tempered vipers you would never meet. I suppose it wasn't very nice to think of them that way. We did share a House affiliation, but we had never been and would never be friends.

Lavender and Parvati had finished their seventh year at Hogwarts and had sat their N.E.W.T.s in the ordinary way while I slept in tents and puked my guts out in fear as Harry, Ron, and I located first one, then another of Voldemort's Horcruxes. After the war, after my decision to remain in the wizarding world, I had been forced to lobby the Wizarding Examinations Authority, complete with letters from all my former professors -- save Snape -- before they allowed me to sit my exams. I had been twenty-one at the time.

Dragging a brush through my hair, I remembered my last encounter with Lavender Brown, now Goldstein. Having gone to Madam Malkin's to choose professional robes, I had been looking at myself in the magical tri-fold mirrors. The Charmed mirrors showed all angles of a set of robes without the customer having to contort themselves into pretzels to see the line of their back.

"That swot look always did suit you best."

Turning to see who was so rude, I saw her: Mrs. Anthony Goldstein. That's how she introduced herself to people. *It's a pleasure to meet you; I'm Mrs. Anthony Goldstein*. It was as if her entire identity evolved as a result of her marriage. Making the mistake of giggling the first time she used the phrase in my presence, I managed to destroy whatever civility we had maintained over the years.

Thus, hearing her comment, I took the liberty of being expedient and ignoring her. Evidently, Lavender hated being ignored, even if was by me.

"Did you ever pass your N.E.W.T.s, Hermione? I heard you begged Mrs. Marchbanks to let you sit the exams."

My lower lip occupied my teeth, preventing me from saying anything which would lengthen her stay. Instead I consoled myself with the fact that her hips would soon rival Molly Weasley's in the matronly department.

"I never," she tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder, "thought you could be quiet if your nose wasn't buried in a book. Perhaps Malfoy's been practicing some of his father's arts to keep you docile."

That did it.

I had listened to Bellatrix Lestrange insult my heritage, my looks, my integrity and my chastity across a battlefield without so much as a flinch, but insult someone I cared about and my temper flared like an Unforgivable. Two seconds after Lavender had spoken, my wand dug into her soft belly and I dropped my voice to something low and threatening. "Say what you will about me, Mrs. Goldstein, but utter another word about Draco and I'll have you brought before the Wizengamot on charges of slander."

Her doughy face paled and only an imbecile would have missed the tension between us. The saleswitch was obviously not unintelligent, and interrupted us with a timorous, "Is everything all right, Miss Granger?"

Backing away from my former dorm mate, I carefully hid my wand. "I'll take these robes, they're perfect. I'm certainly going to remember seeing you today, Lavender. I'm sure you'll remember it, too. Won't you?"

I didn't wait to see if she mustered a response. By the time I left the shop she was gone, but I came away with two important things: a set of professional dress robes and

the realization that I loved Draco Malfoy.

The mirror over my sink clucked at me, bringing me out of my reverie.

It was time to shake off the memory of Lavender and anyone else who gave Draco and me oddly speculative looks or whispered as we passed. This was my birthday and the man I loved was picking me up in ...

Damn!

... less than five minutes.

I had spent too long day-dreaming. I wasn't quite ready.

Of course, this would be the day Draco chose to be early. "Granger?"

"Just getting my shoes." Without glancing in the mirror for a last look, I slid into my new court heels. They were high enough to look pretty without having that cramp-inducing arch which made women walk as if they'd been hobbled.

Like the gentleman he was, Draco waited at the Apparition point. When I got my first look at him, his splendor nearly stole my breath. He looked spectacular in a charcoal gray set of dress robes with a French blue dress shirt. The expression on his face made me falter though; it reflected a longing I didn't quite understand, but it was gone in a moment.

"You're stunning, Granger."

Me, not the robes, not the heels or hair or make up, but me. He thought I was stunning. It was compliments like that which set him apart from other men wizard and Muggle alike.

My heart raced and I crossed the room, ignoring the gift he offered. It was a slim rectangle which was most likely a book, but I wanted the favor of a kiss instead. Threading my fingers through his hair, excitement burned low in my abdomen. His lips were just a little chapped, but I didn't care. I nipped his bottom lip then flicked my tongue. When his tongue joined mine I felt the electric jolt all the way to my toes.

"Mmmmm," I hummed, "you taste wonderful."

"I *taste* wonderful?"

"You're very pretty to look at, too, but kiss me again."

He obliged me. It was my birthday after all.

Warm lips, dangerously sinuous tongue ... my breath caught in my chest and my nipples tingled. Why couldn't this be the way he did everything? When we broke the kiss, I rearranged his hair. My fingers had mussed it in their enthusiasm.

"Aren't you going to open your present?" His voice was deep and a wee bit ragged.

"If you'd like me to, unless we'll be late for our reservations."

"The restaurant will hold them." It was such a Malfoy thing to say I shook my head and smiled.

He handed me the package then. It was beautifully wrapped with Self-Correcting Paper For All Occasions which changed from gold to silver the moment we entered the lounge.

I wondered what Draco had chosen for me. He knew I didn't like overly sentimental, commercialized gifts. It was something I had learned from Ron, who never quite had two galleons to rub together. Once the three of us had gone into hiding, Ron had still managed to give me the most remarkable things, always something unexpected, always heartfelt.

Draco sat next to me on the Biedermeier while I carefully pulled off the emerald green ribbon.

"Get to it already, Granger." He twisted the signet ring on his finger.

This was the first significant gift he'd ever given me and he watched like his Eagle Owl brooding over its nest egg. Something about his intensity made the gift more special, and I dropped the ribbon on the table before peeling back the paper.

He hadn't gotten me a book.

It was a small, flat box which, when opened, revealed an International Portkey, departure and arrival date to be determined, for the Library at Alexandria.

I dropped it and launched myself into his arms. Even with the grant money from the Ministry, there wouldn't have been enough for a trip to the great wizarding library.

Kissing him everywhere -- his lips, his cheeks, his nose, then lips again -- I managed to ask, "How ... how could you afford this?"

Draco stiffened beneath me. "It's a gift, Granger. You don't ask questions like that."

His lips thinned and I kissed them soft and plump. "It's the most marvelous gift you could have given me, Draco. I just ... I know that rebuilding your estate is important and I don't want you to compromise ..."

A slightly calloused palm cupped my cheek and I leaned against it. "I didn't compromise. If it'll make you feel better, I sold Lucius' cane collection and used the money from the sale."

I stared at him, at the tiny quirk lifting the corner of his mouth, and then we both burst into laughter at the irony of Lucius Malfoy living or dead --financing a Muggle-born's research. "Then I shall enjoy the trip even more," I managed to say between bouts of giggles.

His hands positioned me so he could stand, then he pulled me to my feet. "By the time you come to the Manor, there won't be anything left which could remind you --" He broke off his comment, shifting uncomfortably as if he'd said too much.

I was surprised. He had never invited me to Malfoy Manor before. We had always stayed here or in other places in the wizarding world, but never Wiltshire, never his home. "Thank you, Draco. You know how much this means to me."

He forestalled any other questions I might ask. "It's time to leave."

We arrived at Epicurious exactly on time. The restaurant's stone façade was quite grand and its windows shone with constant care. We were met at the door by the Maitre d'. "Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, your table is ready for you."

Winding our way through the stylish dining room where several couples and foursomes were already seated throughout the room, I was reminded of the Connaught Hotel. Epicurious' mahogany walls gleamed with polish and the large fireplace was alight with a blazing fire. The chairs were plush and upholstered in a deep chocolate brown print. I relaxed immediately in the familiar yet new atmosphere and murmured a question to Draco, "Did you remember about my grandmother?"

"You mean where she used to take you for tea?"

He was so smug that I knew he'd ventured into Muggle Mayfair to see the historic hotel. He could be so lovable at times. I touched his arm in thanks, but he pulled away. It wasn't obvious to those watching, but it felt like a slap to me. Draco wasn't one for public displays of affection. It was one of those Malfoy things which had slipped my mind.

Expecting to be shown to one of the tables in the main room, I was surprised when we were escorted to a small, private room. Two casement windows overlooked a narrow lane outside the restaurant, and the candles burned brightly from lamps hanging at intervals.

The table was set for two, gold flatware and fine china already sparkling against crimson table linen. A remarkable arrangement of pure white fluted tulips was set in the center of the table. The flowers must have come from the Malfoy greenhouses as tulips were out of season. Besides none of the other tables in the restaurant had flower arrangements.

The Maitre d' held my chair while I took my seat, and I waited until Draco and I were alone to speak. "Thank you, Draco. The flowers are stunning."

"Happy birthday, Hermione."

"It's been wonderful."

"It's not over yet. I think you'll remember tonight for a long time to come." A slight flush stained his pale cheeks, but it could have been the heat of the room.

"I'll remember it for the company."

He smiled, pleased. "I hope you don't mind that I've taken the liberty of planning the menu?"

Under other circumstances I might have been annoyed by his presumption. "Not at all. I'm sure whatever you've chosen will be delicious."

It was.

The first course was roasted fennel bisque accompanied by a crisp white wine. Our conversation shifted with the courses and the wines, from light-hearted conversation to more serious topics, and I told him about seeing his mother at St. Mungo's.

A Montrachet accompanied the fish course of sautéed John Dory filets tucked into phyllo dough resting atop a bed of saffron vegetables. When I released the steam on my pastry bundle, Draco asked, "When would you need to go to Alexandria?"

"Ideally, it should be as soon as possible. Historically, the wizarding and Muggle world co-existed for centuries before Hogwarts was founded and the Statute of Secrecy enacted. I need proof of that harmony. Bill Weasley offered to give me a reference to the site at Giza, but Alexandria is ... Draco, it's more than I'd hoped for." Suddenly my eyes were misty and I reached for his hand.

Draco recoiled, reading my intention clearly. "Not here, Granger. We're in public."

We were alone in a private room, with no one to see but the waiter. I blinked furiously, hurt beyond expression. After a minute, when I was still struggling to find my composure, I said, "Will you excuse me for a moment? I need to find the ladies' ..."

Immediately, he rose from his chair and stepped around the table and next to me saying very quietly, "Later. When we're completely alone."

I forced a smile. "All right. Give me a minute though."

He escorted me to the door, his eyes following me as I made my way through the diners. At least half the restaurant was watching us, either openly or covertly.

Once I was in the ladies' room, I took a series of deep breaths. Then I splashed water on my face, staring into the wood framed mirror, and tried to get my emotions under control. My thoughts were in a jumble. Draco's gift and the choice of restaurant were so wonderful, but how could I be in a relationship where I couldn't express myself freely? I understood who better how it felt to be under the judgmental eyes of society. From my fourth year at school when I'd received hate mail to more recent events after the war, I had learned full well how cruel public scrutiny could be, but I refused to give into it, to be something or someone I wasn't. Couldn't he see there was a happy medium?

Not wanting Draco to see how hurt I was, I cast a quick glamour over my eyes and nose, disguising the redness from my tears. I retraced my steps to the private room, slowing as I could clearly see Draco talking to our waiter. He handed the man several galleons and a small velvet box.

A jeweler's box.

Oh!

Now his comments about remembering this night for the rest of our lives and his being able to stay overnight at my flat soon made sense.

This was serious. He was serious. More serious than I'd given him credit for.

I practically bolted.

My palms were slick with nerves and my heart beat erratically. My mind whirled in distress. I loved him, yes. But marriage? I couldn't. Not with so many things left unsaid between us.

The Maitre d' spoke quietly from behind me. "Can I be of service to Miss Granger?"

I couldn't ... wouldn't ... embarrass Draco this way.

My mind raced.

"Yes, please. I'm not feeling terribly well. Could you --" I grabbed at his arm as if I were about to faint.

He supported me instantly, guiding me to the nearest unoccupied chair. "How may I assist you?"

The back of my neck prickled and I felt every eye in the restaurant on me; my palm itched to grab my wand. "Could you fetch Mr. Malfoy, please?"

"Immediately, Miss Granger."

I closed my eyes and truly felt unwell.

"Granger? Are you all right?" Draco's voice came from somewhere above me and I couldn't bring myself to look into his eyes.

"No," I said faintly. "Suddenly, I'm not feeling at all well. Could you ... would you?"

His shoes shifted, a shiny contrast to the richly woven Oriental rug beneath his feet. "We'll leave immediately."

I nodded briefly, fully aware of the scene I was making. Better this than -- let them talk about Draco's chivalry. Let them talk about anything but the fact that I was terrified he might ask me to marry him.

Carefully, he assisted me to my feet and through the restaurant. His arms were strong and sure, and I leaned on him, keeping my eyes on the floor. By the time we left the restaurant, I was nauseated and dizzy.

We were at my flat within minutes, and he held his tongue the entire time we were in public. The moment we entered my flat, he asked, "Granger? What's wrong with you?"

I stumbled toward my bedroom. "I don't ... I can't ... maybe it's been too much"

He helped me onto the bed while pressing one of his palms against my brow. "You've been working too many hours. You push yourself too hard." His hand was gentle and I couldn't hold the tears back any longer. "Granger?" He sounded panicked.

"It's ... it's ... all right." I sobbed, turning my head into the soft cotton of my pillow, silently calling myself a coward. "I'm ... I'll be all right."

The edge of my bed dipped as he sat. "Hermione, what can I do?"

"Nuh nuh nothing," I wailed.

He muttered an incantation and, in the next moment, placed a cool cloth over my eyes. His very solicitousness made me cry harder. I loved him but I was afraid it wouldn't be enough. I didn't want to end up like my parents. I didn't want to hurt Draco.

"Shh-shhh," he whispered softly. After another minute, a diagnostic spell swept over my skin. "You're exhausted, Granger. We could have celebrated your birthday another night."

"I'm sorry, Draco. Really I am." I kept my eyes closed, but tears escaped their prison.

He held my hand for a long time, as if debating with himself. I prayed that he wasn't going to ask me to marry him now.

He didn't. I was relieved but it didn't make me feel any better.

"Not to worry." His free hand rubbed my back, soothing away my distress. "There will be other times. I have to be at the Manor in the morning, and you'll probably feel better for a good night's sleep. Floo me when you wake up. Don't set your alarm, all right?"

Was it any wonder I loved this man?

I was so confused.

"All right," I whispered. "Thank you, Draco, for everything."

He kissed my cheek, pulled off my shoes and folded the duvet over me. "Go to sleep, love."

Within minutes he had left and I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, my head felt as if it had been stuffed with old Quidditch uniforms, caked with grime and stiff from disuse. My eyes were so puffy they were practically sealed shut, and my body felt as if I'd been dueling against the Carrows. Groggily, I made my way to the bathroom, squinting at my reflection in the mirror. The light hurt my head and my stomach churned.

It wasn't often I had a migraine, but this was certainly one worth remembering. I felt like crawling into the rubbish bin and hiding for a month. Instead, I fumbled in the cabinet for a potion. I couldn't take it on an empty stomach, so I stumbled to the kitchen. The pale buttercream of the walls and the yellow tile was entirely too cheery for me. At least I was still in my clothes from the night before and my wand was tucked into the sheath along my left arm.

I flicked and swished, blocking the light from the window over the sink and silencing the sound of the tea kettle. Weak tea and toast were all I could manage. I steeped my tea and added a little milk, then nibbled on my toast as I made my way back to bed.

My room was blessedly dark and I set the mug on the shelf next to my eagle feather quill and stack of parchment. I shed my robes from the night before, dropping them into a burgundy puddle of fine linen. I unbuckled my wand sheath and left it atop my dresser, then rummaged in the top drawer for my oldest, most frayed nightgown. It was flannel and had a pattern of tiny periwinkle flowers which were almost faded to nonexistence. I had slept in it my last two years at Hogwarts, and it always gave me the feeling of being safe.

After I drank my tea, I popped the cork on the small vial I'd left beside the bed. The potion burned all the way to my stomach, but the nausea subsided quickly. I laid back and stared at the dark ceiling.

What was wrong with me? A man who loved me ... who I loved in return ... wanted to marry me.

Why had I panicked?

Hadn't I managed to stay friends with Ron and Harry through the most impossible of circumstances?

Of course, I knew what it was. It was my parents, but Mum and Dad came from a different generation. They didn't talk about things much.

That was just it. Draco and I hadn't talked about things, either. We talked about everything else, but this one area was so ... so ripe for misunderstanding, so tied to one's sense of self-worth.

A bath.

That's what I needed. For some reason, my thoughts always seemed to clear when my body was neck deep in hot water. Pleased to have chosen a course of action, I rose and drew a bath. While the steaming water poured from the old-fashioned faucet, I filled an empty sachet with uncut oats, rosemary, and calendula flowers. Dropping the sachet into the tub, the hot water activated the herbs, filling the bathroom with the rosemary's pungent fragrance and the delicate sweetness of calendula. The sachet spun in a dizzying whirlpool before I sank into the tub, letting the water cover me to my chin. My thoughts swirled and spun -- heat and passion and love and lust and the future -- until my thoughts resembled the whirlpool I'd set into motion with the sachet.

I soaked until the water was cold.

Regrettably, no solution presented itself to me by the time I wrapped myself in a towel.

"Granger?" I couldn't tell if Draco was in my flat or only on the Floo. "Hermione? Are you all right? Sod this! I'm coming through."

"I'm here, I'm here," I called, and my throat tightened at the concern I could hear in his voice. "I was in the bath."

The stormy expression cleared the instant he saw me. "What's going on, Granger? How are you?"

"I woke up with a wretched migraine. I've only just got up."

"Nice towel."

I actually smiled. "Thanks. I was about to put on the old flannel nighty."

"My loss." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Look, do you want me to come over? I have to be at the estate from midnight on, but I could bring you dinner."

How could I not want to marry this man? "Thanks, but I'll just open a tin of soup and go back to bed. You were right, I really am tired."

Draco preened a little. That was the way to any man's heart it wasn't food or sex well, maybe a little sex -- but tell him he was right and he preened.

"We didn't finish dinner last night," he said. "Dessert was going to be the best part."

I replied honestly, "Your thoughtfulness was the best part, Draco."

He actually blushed. It was adorable. Add flattery to the list of *How to Manage a Man*.

"Dessert, Granger. When shall we have dessert?"

"Day after tomorrow? There's something I want to talk with you about."

He frowned. "That sounds ominous."

"It's not really." I toyed with the edge of my towel.

"Something I need to know about before dessert?"

"Just something to talk about in person. When we talk by Floo I can't kiss you."

"We can't do other things by Floo either," he replied, and his eyes darkened, an odd greenish black in the off-colored flames.

"True." Despite the odd color of his eyes, I recognized his expression and my voice was a little breathless. "So, the twenty-second? Will you have dinner or do you only want dessert?" I blushed at my unintentional innuendo.

"Dinner sounds good. We'll need it before dessert and after." He cocked his eyebrow.

I giggled and he laughed. It wasn't often we were silly, but it always left me feeling buoyed with self-confidence. "Good luck tomorrow," I said.

He gave me a sharp look. "What do you mean?"

"You know, with whatever it is you're doing at the estate. I know you've been working on it for months."

The tense look vanished. "Thanks, Granger. I look forward to showing it to you soon."

"I'd like that."

We chatted inconsequentially for a few minutes before saying good night.

We were comfortable talking about so many things that discussing our sex life should be easy. Right? Right. It had all the classic ingredients for backfiring in my face, but he needed to hear and understand my concerns if I was going to consider his proposal seriously. I finally acknowledged to myself just how much I wanted to take his proposal seriously.

Draco really had been right, I was exhausted. All those weeks of preparation for the oral presentation had left me low on sleep. By the time I crawled into bed, I wasn't even interested in a little tension relief to get me to sleep.

It would be good to have that talk with him. I snuggled into my pillow and my last thoughts before sleep claimed me were of Draco.

Unfortunately we never had that conversation on the twenty-second.

~o0o~

Provenance

Chapter 3 of 7

Expecting to have a long heart-to-heart talk with Draco about her concerns, Hermione takes an unexpected detour.

The Witch Bower

By Bambu

All standard disclaimers may be found in Chapter One. My thanks to SnarkyWench is perennial, and I should mention that the name of the restaurant in this chapter coincidentally belongs to a cooking school in New York (the use of it in my story was entirely coincidental.)

~o0o~

Chapter Three: Provenance

~oOo~

Light and dark were perfectly balanced and the old ways had been honored once again. The bower stretched its limbs, both arcane and mundane. The magic of the plains flowed along leylines unseen by the naked eye, nor those tainted by the advances of the industrial revolution. Leaves, branches, trunks and recent additions to the bower were clothed in elemental fabric.

The Malfoy had been sanctified and would sleep for two cycles of moon and sun, recharging with the influx of his realm's power. He was safe in his wizard-made structure. Soon he would be abroad. Soon he would feel the health of his land, as if it were his own body, his own hands and feet. Soon his land would share in his strength and his husbanding.

It was time.

The bower was ready for its first bride in three centuries.

It knew where she was.

It reached.

~oOo~

At first, it was impossible to tell if it was a dream or not.

A swooping sensation in my tummy caused me to clutch at the bed to ground myself, but there was nothing to grab beneath my fingers. Suddenly it felt as if I was cocooned by nothing but air. I struggled to open my eyes, to waken if I was asleep, but something held me in its thrall.

Unfamiliar magic tampered with my mind. It was and wasn't like being subject to the Imperius Curse, and I couldn't seem to form a coherent defense.

Panic raced through me as swiftly as a Wronski Feint. After a brief mental struggle, it seemed as if the strange magical touch loosened whatever constriction had been placed on me and I could open my eyes.

Immediately I wished I hadn't.

I was hovering in the cool night air. Damp cloud cover dusted my face with moisture, and a lustrous Wine Moon hung in the sky like a giant galleon yet partially shaded by wisps of cloud cover.

What was going on? Was this an out-of-body experience?

I'd only read of those in fantasy novels and didn't think it was possible in the magical world. Perhaps it was a realistic dream? Except none of my dreams had ever felt so tangible.

Maybe someone had broken through my wards. They were the best known to wizardkind, but nothing was impenetrable. But how? Who?

My defensive skills were a bit rusty, but my mind reeled with possibilities. Was Draco safe? Harry and my parents?

If the Weasley twins had lived, I would have suspected a prank or a mind-altering potion, but there was no one I knew that would've played such a trick on me. Oddly enough, I relaxed as I rounded out the list of suspects in my mind. My mental functions weren't impaired at all.

Remembering an old martial arts film Dad liked, I decided to act like the hero and conserve my energy for whatever experience lay ahead of me.

Unfamiliar magic touched my mind. It was a bit like Legilimency -- at least the way I experienced Legilimency -- where concepts and emotions were expressed more clearly than language and images. The concept of my safety was paramount.

Swallowing my fear, I reminded myself that I had met many new and wondrous creatures since entering the wizarding world at the age of eleven. This might be something ... er ... someone ... new.

It was then I realized how quiet it was around me. Too quiet ... too dark. London was never this dark. Even in the middle of the night, ambient light from the city glowed in the night sky. In contrast, there was moon and star light above me and nothing but darkness below.

The odd swooping sensation in my tummy continued, and it became obvious that I was moving ... flying.

Again that curious intelligence pressed a concept into my mind. Time. There was a schedule to follow.

An infused calm settled upon me, probably a result of the unfamiliar magic. In my peripheral vision I could see the dark landscape below. Intermittent bonfires dotted the expanse of black, but my constant companion was the moon and whatever sentient being had taken me from my bed. For some reason I couldn't explain, I felt as if I'd been wrapped in a tentacle of magic and was being pulled toward the main body of whatever creature held me. Still, there was no hint of menace and despite my unease and confusion, I did feel safe.

After an indeterminate period I changed directions, the moon was now on my right, and it had begun its descent toward the far horizon. With much effort, I managed to maneuver from a recumbent to standing position. It was extremely odd hovering mid-air, but it was better than being flat on my back.

I looked about me as well as I could in that magical embrace and noticed an eerie dilution of the night sky in the east. It looked as if it had been painted with watercolors and the bottom inch had begun to run with too much water. The palest shade of gray announced the coming of dawn.

It was impossible to tell how far I had traveled or where I was, but bit by bit, the night sky grew lighter, and the landscape revealed itself beneath me. Unfortunately, there was nothing but mist and fog, which roiled like a smoky potion in a cauldron.

My frosty breath told me it was cold although I couldn't feel it. Whimsically, I thought it absurd that I was having an adventure while wearing a tatty flannel nightgown. I felt a bit like Wendy Darling being taken to Neverland. But I didn't have a Peter Pan leading me or a Captain Hook waiting at the other end of my trip. We'd already vanquished the evil scourge of our day, and in his wildest dreams, Captain James Hook had never been as evil as Voldemort.

As daylight approached, gusts of wind blew through the thick cloud cover and fleeting glimpses of the earth below teased me, swirling into view, but not for long. It was like trying to spot a unicorn in the Forbidden Forest. Then, as if catering to my thought, the fog opened long enough for me to see clearly and I realized how very far away the ground was ... or my bed. Flying had never been my strong suit and panic spiked at the edge of my enforced calm.

What if the magic lets me go? What if I fall? Could I Apparate while falling to my death? Get a bloody grip!

My wand was in my bookcase. Fear darkened my peripheral vision and I breathed in shallow gasps. Instantly the cocoon of magic tightened around my body, reassurance washing over me in palpable waves, and I fought off the panic, allowing myself to be calmed.

Half of my problem was that I had so little information to work with. My mind wove outrageous scenarios with scant information, but indulging in that luxury would only leave me terrified. Instead, I looked around me. It was too dark for birds to be about, and I didn't see any planes in the air. It was almost like being aloft in a helicopter or a hot air balloon, but quieter.

A dog barked somewhere below, its voice carrying in the quiet, early morning.

As we moved beyond the damp cloudbank and with the coming dawn, I could see much better. However, it wasn't comforting at all. I didn't recognize this countryside. Nothing looked right.

From the direction we had flown and the placement of the sun and moon, I should have been west and south of London, but there was no M4 in sight. In fact, there were no highways at all, and from this height it should have been easy to see at least one.

My hair flew into my eyes and I brushed it away impatiently. At least the magic had eased up so I had some freedom of movement.

A gentle notion pressed into my mind; pay attention it seemed to say. I was nothing if not accommodating, after all the entity held me in its power. I looked in the direction I seemed to be pointed toward, and in the distance a glimmer of light shimmered along an undulating ribbon of water. A river. But which river?

It could be any north-south flowing river in England, but something about the broad flat plains reminded me ...

With a sense of rightness I guessed it was the Avon, and if we followed it, we would run right into the Channel at Portsmouth. Wracking my brain for anything I remembered from childhood geography lessons, I realized I was most likely traveling above Wiltshire.

Wiltshire.

Draco lived in Wiltshire. Did he somehow have a hand in this ... whatever this really was? Was this something to do with his estate business?

He wouldn't do anything to hurt me. I knew that ... instinctively and experientially. The inarticulate conscience guiding my journey seconded my belief in Draco's innocence.

Descent was so gradual and my thoughts so consumed with Draco -- I knew he would worry that it wasn't until I had dropped a dozen meters that I noticed how the growing dawn's light illuminated the entire plain and surrounding forest to the east.

This was a very different landscape than I remembered from trips taken with my parents as a girl. Still, I'd never seen the plains from the air. What was to say this wasn't how it looked normally? Yet, I couldn't see any cities at all, no church spires or roadways crisscrossing the countryside. Things I knew should be there.

Twining columns of smoke rose in the distance, situated along the silver ribbon of water bisecting the land.

If it was the Avon a smug certainty in my mind supported my hypothesis -- then where was the canal? Mum and Dad and I had hired a boat and taken a picnic lunch on the Kennet and Avon Canal one summer. We'd stayed overnight in Avebury to look at the henges.

A warm sense of satisfaction flooded my body, imposed by the magic which had bound me.

As if my thought sped my passing, I suddenly saw the enormous, man-made barrow of Silbury Hill. This I remembered, except it looked very different. Squinting against the pale gray light, I tried to see more clearly in the mist playing peek-a-boo with the ground. My spine prickled with foreknowledge as I stared at the gently rounded peak of the burial mound. This Silbury Hill didn't have a flat top.

Where was I?

Again a deep chuckle echoed deep in my mind, and I had the sense that the entity was amused by me. If I hadn't been so unnerved, I might have been vexed.

Turning my body, I tried to slow my pace to see whether I could spot the enormous henge of Avebury. From my height I should be able to see it over my left shoulder. If only the mist would cooperate.

There.

Curlicues of fog ebbed and flowed around Avebury's stone circle, causeway, and the glinting mirror-like reflection of the water-filled ditch -- moat -- around the henge.

A morning breeze blew more of the fog into whirling eddies allowing me to see the entire Avebury henge intact. The entire ring of massive stones was complete. There was no village of Avebury, no sweet shop, no curio shop to tempt the crowds, shillings, and pence from the pockets of visiting schoolchildren.

I seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. The question hadn't been where was I.

No ... no ... I should have asked when was I?

A rough sort of affectionate hand invisibly tousled the curls on my head, as if patting me like a good student.

I shuddered, suddenly, overwhelmingly terrified.

The otherworldly presence magically erected a mental wall between my fear and my brain. It felt as if cotton wool had been slipped into place odd and dampening. My heart rate slowed down and we resumed our travel, passing Silbury Hill in a wink, before I could truly see how 'young' the structure was.

Southward I was propelled, responding to a sense of urgency my magical host was subordinate to, and the landscape blurred before my eyes.

We sped over flat, fertile land, which, in my experience, had been dotted with cities, towns, and small farming communities, but there was nothing of urban life to be found here and now, or, better yet, here and then.

While I was wrapping my mind around the concept of *then*, we stopped.

I hovered over another circle, but it wasn't what my subconscious expected. My parents had taken me to the most famous of henges during spring holidays my third year at school. The sheer size of the Sarsen stones had been awe inspiring and I had sneaked a touch of one of the time-worn stones. I distinctly remembered the roughness of its pitted surface and wondering what the massive rocks could say if they could speak.

What I now saw below me bore no resemblance to that circle and it should have. The water-filled moat wasn't a surprise. I was prepared for that by the great ring at Avebury, but there was no stone here. This henge was a ring of wooden posts sunk into the ground near the inner rim of the moat.

Where are the stones, I wondered. Was this a henge I had never heard about? One predating the great standing trilithons of Stonehenge?

Aubrey holes.

The name might have come from the abducting magic or from a memory of my voracious youthful curiosity.

That's what they'd been called. Aubrey holes. A forerunner of the great stones.

My stomach clenched.

I was seeing things which had existed thousands of years ago ... four thousand years.

If my emotions had been entirely under my control I would have been hyperventilating. The entity controlling my actions calmed me. Soon it seemed to be saying, soon I would understand.

Goodie.

Let's hurry it up then. I'd like to go home now.

Really.

Contrary to my wishes, however, I remained suspended in the pre-dawn air, ten or so meters above the circle. If I hadn't been so freaked out, I might have appreciated the beauty of the archeological site. There was no car park nearby, no motorway running alongside whose sole contribution seemed to be corrosive exhaust fumes eating away at stones set in place four thousand years ago ... or was it five hundred years from now?

I closed my eyes, wishing fervently this was all some strange sort of dream. After several minutes, I peeked through my lashes. Nothing had changed except I could see more clearly as the sun began its ascent over the horizon.

And there it was, Stonehenge in all its Neolithic glory.

I bit my lip.

This wasn't all right. It really wasn't. I desperately wished for the comfort of Draco's arms.

Instead, the magical cocoon compressed as if offering the comfort of its embrace in Draco's place.

And then we waited.

I had never been so aware of the planet, of the way the moon set and the sun rose. It was so quiet hovering mid-air. There was nothing to distract me from really looking at my surroundings or to feel the power of the sun as it chased the pre-dawn chill from the air.

Briefly I flirted with the idea that this whole experience maybe it was a vision quest was supposed to teach me my own insignificance. Except that was a lesson I was likely to need. The war had taught me that. Ron's death and Harry's semi-catatonic state had taught me that.

The sun's leading edge limned the horizon, radiant light its crowning glory. With its ascent, the fabric of time and space stretched ... the magic cocooning me seemed to weaken and thin.

Alarmed, I began to tremble, and then a faint caress of my cheek let me know that whatever had brought me would attend to my safety. Nevertheless, I could feel a greater power at work.

Power I was intended to meet.

It was the closest thing to an actual thought I'd yet understood. Then I wondered what greater power there could be other than this amorphous sentience holding me in its grasp.

As the tendril of pre-verbal thought faded, magic -- ancient, ponderous magic pulled at my soul. It wasn't like the Dementors or the quick electrified jolt of instinct which made my incantations work. This was entirely different. I'd never felt it before, except perhaps that time we'd ventured deep into the Forbidden Forest in search of the fifth Horcrux. That had been an ancient, loamy sort of feel. This was the same, but different.

How does one *meet* power?

Awareness prickled along my spine and I turned my head, instantly sighting the figure of a lone individual walking down the broad causeway leading to the circle of Aubrey posts. Pale light shone on his pale hair.

Malfoy?

Was this a trick? A joke?

What was this?

Impatient magic dropped me closer to earth and the pull of that ancient power centered in the balls of my feet, humming up through my legs and spreading throughout my body.

When I was hovering not five meters above the center of the circle I could tell the approaching figure was indeed a man. His clothing was unlike anything I'd ever seen outside a museum. A heavy hide garment, slit down the front and tied at intervals with strips of hide, covered his torso and fell to mid-thigh. His leggings were also made of animal skin; fur side turned inward and held in place by more thin leather strips. His footwear was bulky but form-fitting, and it appeared to be constructed from a single piece of leather wrapped around each foot and tied at the ankles.

Despite this rudimentary clothing, he walked tall and proud and carried a staff.

He was fascinating, and I hardly noticed that I had dropped lower to the ground, close enough to see his features clearly. His face was narrow and I was sure that if he looked at me I'd see gray eyes. And the hair was as fair as Draco's or his father's had been. It was long and tied in a tail at the nape of his neck.

His inherent magic, backed by the ancient power I was here to meet, called to me. Was he a wizard? It might only be the ancient magic I was feeling. Maybe I was learning that the Malfoys had once been Muggles.

A tight squeeze warned me to pay attention, and it was then I noticed that I hovered barely a meter above him. Why didn't he see me? Perhaps this was a dream -- or a hallucination -- after all.

Draco's ancestor for I was sure he was that -- halted at the perimeter of a denuded circle in the center of the enclosure. Carefully placing his staff onto the flat earth, he then untied the thong restraining his hair. It fell loose and snow white about his shoulders. It reminded me of the way Lucius Malfoy wore his hair on formal occasions. Next, the man removed a pouch slung over his shoulder, letting it drop to the ground before untying his tunic. He shrugged that off, folding it into a neat bundle and placing it on the verge. He wore no shirt of any kind.

Fortunately, this Malfoy ancestor wore a loin cloth so I didn't have to worry about seeing his dangly bits. Using the folded tunic as a seat, he removed his foot coverings and leggings. Finally he stood wearing only his breech clout, and I couldn't help but compare his physique to Draco's. This man was shorter, but he was well-muscled and I fancied I could see Draco's long limbs in this forerunner of his family.

He looped the small pouch over his head, across his chest, and picked up the staff before stepping into the circle of denuded earth. He raised the hand-hewn wood and I could feel power radiating from him. A corresponding vibration echoed in my abdomen, not from my womb or my stomach, but from what Tonks would call the center of my chi. So much for my theory that he'd been a Muggle. This man was definitely a wizard.

This Malfoy ancestor raised his arm, shoulder height, staff balanced horizontally in one hand. One end of the staff pointed toward the rising sun, the other to the setting moon.

Unexpectedly, the air shimmered and rippled around me, and, abruptly, I was dropped onto Draco's many times great-great grandfather.

That is not to say I crushed him, for I didn't. Instead, I seemed to meld with him ... with his body.

His eyes were mine; his hands, my hands, gripped the smooth wood of the staff; and his lungs, my lungs, filled with deep breaths of air. I might not understand his language, *per se*, but I understood his meaning, and my unnerved thoughts were contained in a tiny corner of our shared mind. It was as if I were a passenger in his body.

It reminded me of the time Barty Crouch, Jr., masquerading as Mad-Eye Moody, cast the Imperius Curse on me. I had that distant feeling of well-being as the body I inhabited proceeded to move as directed, yet I could feel everything which was happening.

I wondered if the ancient magic had taken control of us both.

He ... I ... we ... placed the staff on the earth, its ends pointing toward both sun and moon. When he ... we ... rose, we straddled the staff, and I could feel the coarse dirt beneath his ... *our* ... feet. Without conscious thought mine he raised our arms, forming the most rudimentary shape of a Bridget's Cross I could imagine. We faced the sun with our eyes closed. Pale yellow sunlight shone on our face.

Turning his head to the right, we aligned our sight with one of the perimeter posts before crossing the thick, damp ground cover. Without ritual, Malfoy retrieved an implement embedded in the ground at the base of the post. It appeared to be a flat sort of bone.

Quickly returning to the center of the circle, the early Malfoy aligned himself ...*us* ... once again and then dropped to our knees. Using the bone, we dug a small divot in the center of the ground. I felt small pebbles pressing against his knees and the flex of his muscles as we dug in the dirt. He was strong and the task was finished with swift, efficient movements.

When we rose to face the sun once more, I felt the earth change ... our feet were no longer cold. The ground heated beneath us as the blond pulled ancient earth magic from the henge.

It felt as if we were a conduit for the earth's power and I felt alive, connected in a way I'd never felt before.

He arched his neck and suddenly we were looking up into the sky. The sun's light shone in our face and we were warmed from above and below. My body heated and my womb twitched with the combined magic. Correspondingly, Malfoy's groin stirred with the early signs of arousal. I felt it in our shared body. His testicles felt heavy and he had the beginnings of an erection.

He accepted it as if it was a natural aspect of the rite, and turned his mind's eye to a broader range of mental vision. Confined as I was in his mind, I could still sense the greater world beyond this small, denuded circle. One, two, eight people were nearby, several farther beyond. But it wasn't just the people. There was the silken cool touch of the water, the solid presence of the earth, and the myriad animals inhabiting the plains. I could feel their lives' essence, too. Somewhere at the far edges of his reach, this wizard could feel the ancient woods of the forest which lay south and east of here.

It seemed that we had waited until that last touch - the distant forest -- before dipping into the pouch slung across our chest. Tiny, hulled pieces of grain, slipped through our fingers, before he gripped a handful and removed our hand before carefully spilling the grain into the divot at our feet. He next retrieved a smaller bag from within the pouch. It was quite small, and I remembered its oddly tensile texture from Potions classes. I recognized an animal's stomach lining when I saw and felt it. This bag was filled with water, and we emptied its contents onto the grain.

Kneeling once again, Malfoy placed our palm over the small hole and thanked the moon and the sun for their blessings. Then drawing on the power of the earth he offered her his gratitude for the bounty of the harvest. For a moment, it felt as if the heat of the sun had been channeled through his body, and when he removed our hand, the divot had been covered as if it had never existed in the first place.

He closed his eyes briefly before rising and picking up his staff from the ground, and magic hummed from within the wood.

I stayed with Malfoy while he crossed to one of the timbers in the circle, then removing a slate hand-axe from his pouch examples of this sort of tool, I'd seen at the Museum he cut a notch in the wood. I could see other notch marks lower on the pole, and I realized that we were marking the date.

It was a calendar of some sort. How very, very clever.

The second the thought solidified in my mind, I was ripped from his body; his only acknowledgement was a shudder which shuddered through his lean muscles.

I rose in the air and the proto-Malfoy returned to his clothing.

My abducting, cocooning magic hummed in great satisfaction just before my mind became clouded. Maybe it had all been a dream, but even as I had the thought I knew the experience had been real.

As I sped through the clear blue sky -- for the sun had burned off the last remnants of fog while I'd been with Draco's ancestor a rushing of darkness, its wings fluttering softly in my mind, its feathers metaphorically sweeping gently against me, induced me into a deep, dreamless sleep.

~o0o~

Idyll

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione wakes up a captive ... by whom and where is she?

The Witch Bower

By Bambu

All disclaimers and author's notes may be found in Chapter One, except my undying gratitude to SnarkyWench continues unabated.

Chapter Four: Idyll

~o0o~

As the moon ascended its throne, the plains, the New Forest, and the guardians of the bower drew the power of the moon into the very heart of the tiny glade which had been wrought for its newest, most precious guest.

Magic, like sparkling, dancing moonbeams, held sway. The small eddy created by a newly concave rock submerged at river's edge gleamed as it spun in lazy circles. Where moonlight touched, a silver reflective surface shone; its images at once near and far: the round face of the moon; a roaring fire in an enormous fireplace; a semi-clothed branch hanging overhead, its leaves all but sacrificed to the coming winter; the pale face of a man, white hair fanned out on a pillow the color of New Forest bracken.

The moon rose higher in the night sky shrouding the eddy in darkness and images fractured into splinters of rainbow light.

Elsewhere, the bower's attention hovered above the young woman nestled upon a magical bed of broadleaf limbs, woven and clothed with green leaves. Her bare feet were tucked under the hem of a many times washed garment.

The bride was in her bower.

All would be well.

~o0o~

"... Granger."

It was my name spoken in a strangled sort of groan which woke me. It was impossible to tell if it was the remnants of a dream or a thing born of real time and space, and my brain felt wrapped in cotton wool, gauzy and sleep befuddled.

"... Hermione ... unh ..."

It was Draco's voice, but he didn't sound normal. It sounded as if he was in pain.

My eyes flew open and I rolled to the side, to get up.

Oh shit! Shit, shit, shit!

Great Merlin! Where was I?

I leapt to my feet. Just as on the Salisbury Plain, I felt grass beneath my bare soles and it was cool and wet. Wildly I turned, looking for something, anything familiar. But there was nothing here I recognized.

Where? How? Oh fuck! It was real. Last night was real.

My head swum with dizziness and my knees threatened to buckle.

"... Granger ... yes ..."

I shook my head. Adrenaline raced through me as if it was a Snitch in flight.

Draco? Where was he? Was he here? Was he hurt?

My need to find him, to make certain he was all right, overrode my sense of disorientation. It didn't matter how I came to be here ... or wherever *here* was for that matter. Draco needed me.

I opened my mouth to call for him and then shut it with a snap. Don't be a first-year, Hermione, I scolded. You fought in a war! What's wrong with you ... four years of peacetime has addled your brains. Constant vigilance!

Muscles and reflexes remembered first, and I crouched low to the ground, one hand feeling behind me as I backed under the corner of whatever platform I had been sleeping on, listening hard while my mind ricocheted like a Cornish Pixie. Were Draco and I the only ones in this woodland or were there others? Were we being watched? Who did this? Weren't all our enemies in Azkaban or rotting under the soil?

"... there ... right there ..."

Where?

My gaze flitted from tree to tree, skimming over rocks and ferns, settling briefly on the river not five meters distant. Draco was not to be seen.

The gurgling of the river was a constant background noise, but there was no sign or sound of anyone else. No humans, no animals in sight. If I wasn't so worried, the beauty of the glade would have enchanted me as narrow rays of sunlight spotted the landscape.

Disillusionment Charm? Projected Simulacrum? Invisibility Cloak?

"... unh ... there ..."

I could hear him panting between words. What had happened to him? My fear spiked.

The sound was coming from the direction of the river.

Blood pounded in my head and a gossamer touch of something prickled at the edges of my awareness. It reminded me of last night's strange experience, but I wasn't about to let someone or some *thing* access to my mind. I used the Occlumency proficiency Remus Lupin had taught me and repelled the attempted mental intrusion. Whatever it was might have toyed with me while I was asleep, but I was awake now, and Draco needed me.

Without a wand and only half-dressed there was little I could do defensively, however, if whoever had abducted me had wanted me dead, I wouldn't be crouching on the

forest floor in threadbare flannel.

I had to find Draco.

Not quite confident of my own safety, I darted to the nearest tree, an ancient oak. When I tried to slip around the trunk, I made my second unpleasant discovery of the morning. There was a magical barrier beyond which I could not pass. It was invisible, fortunately not lethal to the touch, but it was impenetrable without my wand.

"Hermione." This time he wound it out into more than four syllables, and it was guttural.

Where was he?

I ignored the barrier in lieu of finding Draco -- was he hurt? bleeding? - and dashed between trees, always on the inside of the invisible wall, hissing once when my bare foot landed on a pointy rock amidst the detritus carpeting the forest floor.

Nearing the river's edge, I crept close to a small curving sort of -- inlet, I supposed. The water looked very still. Perhaps it would be quieter there ... babbling brook indeed. The water was glassy, mirror-like as the sun's rays refracted off the top of the quiet little niche. Here, adjacent to the still pool of water, I could hear Draco again.

My fingers braced against the trunk of the tree I used as cover. Subconsciously my fingers traced the rough patterns of the bark where pieces of the tree's outer skin had broken off. It grounded me somehow, and I balanced lightly on the balls of my feet, ready to duck or run if necessary.

"Yes, Granger. Come."

I took a step ... the glossy surface of the water as reflective as a mirror.

There was Draco.

In the pool of water no, not in the pool but on the pool -- on the surface of the water I could see an image of Draco.

He was lying on his back on a four-poster bed. He was naked.

"Draco?" I whispered, afraid someone might hear. I crept closer, trying to see whether he was all right.

His eyes flew open and he shouted my name, writhing on the bed.

Oh my god.

One of his hands worked furiously, stroking his erection, while viscous white fluid coated his hand and his taut abdomen. I couldn't tell what his other hand was doing since it was hidden from my sight between his legs. But he bucked wildly.

"Granger ... oh, gods ... Granger." He groaned.

Circe.

I knelt at the side of the pond, ignoring the suspicion that he'd put me here for some reason because that made no sense at all. If I could see him, perhaps he could see me.

If he saw me he could find me.

Craning my neck, I checked around the small clearing. It remained devoid of human or animal forms. So no animagi to worry about; and I'd never heard of such a thing as a Floramagus.

"Draco?" I asked quietly.

"Granger?" He shot bolt upright, covering himself with the sheet. Absently I noticed that the material stuck to wherever his ejaculate had dotted his body. I would have been seriously aroused under other circumstances.

"Yes! Draco, help me. I've been taken --" Anything else I might have said was lost as a handful of acorns splashed into the pool, fracturing the image. Draco's face and hands and naked chest were carried apart on ripples made by the disturbances of the acorns.

I would be a fool not to realize the interruption was deliberate.

I whirled and raced back to the relative safety of my tree trunk, my heart rate somewhere between fear and frantic. Something ... someone ... some entity was battering at my Occlumency shields, but I wasn't giving way. I crouched and felt for anything I could use as a weapon. I only found two small stones and three acorns, nothing useful against a wand-wielding captor.

Then, shielding for all I was worth, I looked for an escape.

There were numerous openings between trees, but I suspected they were warded against my leaving. The river might be an option. I watched the small pool, waiting for the surface to calm maybe I could see Draco again estimating how far from deeper water this niche was. Did the barrier meet at the water's surface? Could I swim beneath it? How long could I hold my breath?

Wait a minute.

It had taken me some time to realize some of the trees weren't merely stunted or broken as I'd originally assumed, but now I noticed there was a design, some purpose to a number of the young trees and even a few of the larger trees. There was *furniture*. Near the platform where I had awakened there was a very large oak. My initial impression had been that the trunk was misshapen. Now, however, I could tell that the odd protrusion was shaped like a ... chair.

It also appeared that the platform where I'd awoken was a crude sort of bed, with leaves for a mattress. Casting my eyes around the small glade I noticed other things. A narrow ledge formed from the trunk of a broadleaf tree, just at the right height to be a desk or a table. For a desk chair, a smooth rock was situated at exactly the right height my height.

An atavistic chill shuddered up my spine. Until proven otherwise, I would operate on the principle that none of this was coincidence and that indeed someone had fashioned this little prison for me.

I glanced back at the river.

Defensive tactics ... escape tactics. Think, Hermione, think. You're addlepatated.

No, I was hungry and needed to find a bathroom. Fear may have driven me thus far, but after the first flush of adrenaline had worn off, other bodily needs clamored for my attention.

I could use the river, but I had to drink the water at some point the Muggle part of my mind screamed *you can't drink this, what about giardia cysts?*-- and I didn't really

want to drink where I ... erm ... well.

A pit latrine would work well. I could find a good digging stick, maybe a thin sheet of deadfall ... abruptly, I got angry with myself. Stop thinking as if you're going to be here for a long time ... you're going to escape.

I knew better than to venture into the water when the likelihood of my being seen was greatest. Nightfall was only a few hours off. Patience had been a hard-earned virtue during the war years. Nonetheless, I knew how to wait.

Now I would deal with my most pressing problem: my bladder.

I rose slowly, keeping my body hidden as best I could although for all I knew whoever was watching had set up surveillance and could see everything. That thought alone was a bit unnerving.

Something pressed against my mind and I shielded with as much strength as I could muster. It seemed to be enough. Whatever it was left me alone, for the moment.

When I stepped cautiously into the clearing, I noticed three areas of the glade which were effectively screened off: one near the sleeping platform, another on the other side of the sleeping platform between two large trees, and another by a dark tree leaning across the river.

It looked ... could it be ... my word.

Carefully, I made my way to an oddly shaped tree near the river, dodging around ferns which grew to my waist and around large gray rocks, stubbing my bare toes only once when I was too busy looking for hidden observers or a telltale shimmer of a badly cast Disillusionment Spell.

When I reached the tree which leaned over the river's edge I knew I had found my bathroom.

I was down-stream from the mirrored pool where the current ran swift. A protrusion of the tree's own trunk jutted out over the running water. Even more startling, was that it was a loop ... with an open center. My kidnapper, whoever it was, had fashioned a toilet seat for me out of a living tree. From the nearby proximity of a flourishing overgrowth of chest-height braken, I would be hidden from most everything upstream. It seemed I had a relatively private Water Closet.

By now my need was urgent, and there really wasn't a better option. Once again, however, I scanned the area restlessly. That magical presence lurked just beyond my Occlumency shields, waiting as a Kneazle will stalk its prey. Under the circumstances it really wasn't surprising that it took me a few minutes to relax, but I did.

"Granger?"

I yelled, "I'm here!"

"Granger, all right there?"

I clambered off the tree loop, scrambling across the clearing, sliding to my knees at the edge of the pool. Once more it was mirror-like. Where the sun's beam glanced off the surface I could see Draco, but he was no longer in bed or even the same room. Instead he was in my flat, in my bedroom. It looked as if he was talking to himself.

"Granger?" he called, sticking his head into my bathroom.

"I'm here. I don't know where I am but I'm here." He acted as if he hadn't heard me.

"Fuck, Hermione ... don't do this to me." He'd dressed hastily, the top buttons of his shirt were out of order and his hair was in disarray.

I dug my fingers into the damp mossy edge of the pool. "I'm not there. I was taken last night. Please find me."

He strode from my bedroom, and over the burbling of the river, I could hear him tearing through my flat as if making certain I wasn't lying hurt somewhere. My chest was tight and it suddenly hurt to breathe. He had only told me once that he loved me. But this ... this showed me.

I called, heedless of any eavesdropping captor, "I love you, Draco."

The rummaging noise stopped. "Granger?"

The sound of running footsteps drowned out my, "I'm here," and he entered my bedroom, chest heaving. Swiftly he surveyed the room again and then dropped to his knees next to my bed, raising the bed-skirt to peer underneath. His face had lost all trace of color when he stood, clutching my wand in his hand. "Hermione ... love ... God."

"Draco," I whispered.

His head whipped around. I saw his mouth move and could read the words he was saying. "Where are you?" Then I heard the next bit. "Granger, where the fuck are you?"

"I don't know. Can you hear me?" Again he didn't respond to my question, and I started to cry. "Draco, why can't you hear me?"

"Hermione, I hear you. Where are you? Are you all right?"

"No, Draco, I'm not all right. Well I'm not hurt, but I'm somewhere in a forest. I don't know how I got here."

His lips moved. He was speaking, but why couldn't I hear him? "... Granger, I'll find you. I won't lose you."

My heart clenched and the tears came faster. "Draco."

His lips moved.

I whispered, unconsciously reaching for the image of him shimmering across the water's surface like a slick of Mandrake oil. "I love you."

He started shouting, his cheeks flushed. "... Granger!"

"What?"

"Granger!" It was louder now, more desperate.

"Draco, I'm here, I can see you. Why can't you see me? Why can you only hear me sometimes?"

He spun on his boot heel, talking fast, but I only heard the end. "... Granger, do you?"

"Do I what?"

And then I got it. I'm not usually so slow-witted, but I also had never been kidnapped before, even after everything that had happened during the war.

"Draco, I can only hear what you say after you use my name."

I read his lips.

"Draco, I didn't hear that, but I saw your lips move."

"Granger, what happened? Do you have any idea who took you? What they want? Where you are?"

"I have no idea what happened. I did have the strangest experience last night, Draco. I couldn't tell if it was real or the most surreal dream I've ever had, but if it was real, then maybe where I am is linked to it. Did you know your ancestors look just like you?"

"Granger, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Draco, your ancestors look just like you."

He raked his fingers through his hair. It was a clear sign of his anxiety and frustration. I remembered the gesture well from six years of school and shared classes. "Granger, stay on track. What do my ancestors have to do with your abduction?"

"It's because of what happened last night, Draco."

"Granger, stop just saying my name."

Oh.

I'm a complete berk.

"Draco, sorry. I had a very strange experience last night, but I thought it was a dream. Now I'm not so sure. It was quite surreal, and --"

"Granger, we can have an intellectual discussion some other time. Right now I need to know everything that would help me find you. Everything I've tried has been useless, even the bloody Four Point Spell."

"Sorry, Draco, but the experience could be relevant. What were you doing at the estate last night?"

"Granger, what does that have to do with your abduction?"

A cloud passed over the sun and our connection was lost.

Just like that.

One moment we were talking and the next minute the connection was gone. I was left staring at the clear, idly swirling surface of a minor river eddy.

Choking on a sob, I reached for the place Draco's image had just been, leaning forward, enough for my chest to press into the edge of the riverbank. My fingers broke the surface of the water, creating a small, ripple effect.

He was gone.

With my emotional state in such turmoil it was difficult to maintain my Occlumency shielding and I felt the would-be invader searching for an opening. I dug my fingers into the damp moss and took both a deep breath and firmer control of my mind.

Think analytically, Hermione.

Shifting my balance and twisting my upper body, I looked up, through intertwining branches toward the sky. All I could see through the forest's canopy were dark clouds. The obvious correlation was that the pool required sunlight to operate. A sweeping glance across the glade confirmed that there were no sunny patches to be found.

I got to my feet. The sun would shine again, and I would make the most of my opportunity when it did providing this wasn't some sort of mind-fuck game of my kidnapper's. But I didn't think it was. Something that wicked wouldn't resort to dropping acorns in a pond to interrupt a conversation.

My tummy growled at that moment, but I ignored it. I did dip my fingers into the pool, rinsing off the mud I'd gotten under my fingernails from the ground, and then splashed my face with some of the cool water.

It was time to assess my surroundings.

Draco would need that information to find me. I have no idea how long it took me to feel my way around the perimeter, except out into the river, but my stomach was twisting with hunger by the time I'd finished my circuit. It was a bit eerie realizing I was essentially in a room furnished entirely by and from nature. When I returned to the river's edge, I used the Water Closet once more, using two leaves which obligingly dropped at my feet.

Afterward, I gathered several arms' worth of deadfall bracken. It wasn't terribly comfortable, but it would serve as a barrier between me and the damp ground by the pool. I had no idea how long my wait would be.

I made my bed near the clump of tall-standing ferns nearest the pool, and used a broad boulder as a headboard. Then I settled in to wait the reappearance of the sun. After awhile my thoughts strayed to my reluctance to make a relationship with Draco permanent. My feelings about the subject had shifted sometime between my anxiety attack in the restaurant and now. Possibly it was a result of the strange ritual on the plains, or perhaps it had been seeing evidence of Draco's attachment he couldn't have known I was watching or maybe my thinking had grown clouded following the war, because it seemed clear to me now that my fears about our relationship were trivial. They could become significant if we didn't talk about them openly, but they were manageable. We weren't my parents. How had I not realized this before?

The snapping of a twig sent all thoughts of Draco from my mind and I held my breath to be able to hear better. Turning my head slowly -- I surveyed the glade. Once again there was nothing there.

Then I looked the other way.

Across the river, not five meters distant stood a small, Fallow Deer. It wasn't grazing, rather it was paying attention to something in my general direction. Perhaps it saw something I could not, perhaps it was an Animagus, come to watch me, except it wasn't looking in my direction. It seemed to be looking somewhere mid-air.

I didn't move, just stared.

After several heart-pounding moments, the deer stepped toward the river. I'd always liked to watch the way deer moved. Their movements were often stilted and jerky, but when they bounded across a distance, they were amazing. I noticed that when this deer bounded from the river's edge in an attempt to cross an easy meter leap it smacked into a barrier it couldn't see.

I felt an unexpected kinship with the small animal.

It leapt back onto the river bank.

My eyes grew dry from watching, but after another long wait, it approached the water once more ... only the deer moved upriver, beyond the place I knew my prison's walls

were.

That answered my question about whether the river could provide me an escape. I would prefer not to get wet in this weather. I wasn't particularly warm, but the night would grow cold. I wriggled deeper into my bedding as if to create and conserve body heat. The noise startled the Fallow Deer and in four great bounds it was gone.

My stomach growled again and I kneaded it with a knuckled fist. It wasn't as if I hadn't been hungry before. In those horrid two years after we'd left Hogwarts, Ron, Harry, and I had gone without meals more times than I could count. By the last confrontation with Voldemort, we were too thin, and it was only Harry and I who were left. In some ways, our grief over Ron's death and our near-starvation had fed our need to end the war, to come home, to eat a Molly-made meal.

That first night after we had assassinated Voldemort, when the rest of Britain was shooting off Weasley's Wizarding Wheeze fireworks the store run profitably by a suitably chastened Percy I sat in the hall of St. Mungo's while the Healers worked frantically on Harry. Care-worn Molly Weasley brought me some of her stew and fresh bread. I think it was the best meal I have ever eaten.

My mouth practically watered at the thought of her oven fresh bread with a slab of butter melting across the hot surface. I could practically smell it now.

I blinked at the memory. I needed to do something. The sky remained cloudy, but the perimeter needed checking again.

When I stood, there was something different about the glade. I didn't know what exactly, but something. I felt an external presence battering at my mind, and Occluded with as much power as I could draw on and still function. Although, maintaining the mental shield was harder than it had been earlier in the day. Then I had been refreshed from sleep and adrenaline ... ah ... adrenaline crash. I would have to watch that, and I would have to make a decision about the water soon. It was possible to survive without food for several days only if I stayed hydrated. That was another little trick we'd learned fighting a vigilante war. *Aguamenti* had become a spell I could cast blindfolded and rendered mute ... but I had never cast it without my wand, and I was wandless now.

While these thoughts rattled around in my head, I marked the perimeter, assessing the barrier for any sign of weakness or change. By the time I reached the sleeping platform, I discovered what had changed in my forest cell. There was something on the 'table' protrusion.

Cautiously I approached the table, avoiding the stone seat. If I sat, it would limit my response-time. On the flat, bark-covered surface were three items, two of which were filled. Each of those was made of bark, and they looked identical to the same bark as the 'table'. While I stared at the cup and bowl, I thought of the Neolithic Malfoy's pouch and his animal stomach filled with water.

The bowl was curved, using the natural inclination of the bark itself, and held a mound of berries, a small handful of grain, and some sort of nut, still in the shell. I couldn't tell what was in the cup, but water was the most plausible assumption. The third item was a small, palm-shaped rock. I puzzled over its use for a moment until I thought about the nuts. I almost laughed at the primitive nutcracker, but it wasn't really funny.

The food might be poisoned or dosed with some sort of potion. Then again, this could all be a hallucination of some sort.

I looked down at my filthy nighty, the round grassy stains where I'd knelt at the river's edge.

It would have been easy to kill me, but I hadn't been hurt.

If this was a psychological game someone was playing, they were very, very clever. Remembering the acorns, I shook my head. Still, I needed to eat, but the table was too unprotected, too open.

I balanced the rock on the bowl and carried it and the cup back to my bed of bracken. The first, easiest test was the water, and I smacked my increasingly dry mouth at the thought of quenching my thirst. Settling down on the makeshift bed, I leaned against the stone, placing the bowl on my lap before examining the cup. It was made of birch bark and the seam was perfect. I was certain it had been made with magic.

But if magic was being used by my captors, why didn't they just give me a real cup and a bowl? Why was the food so unrefined, so raw?

There was a mystery here and I was growing convinced that it was linked to my previous night's experience. Malfoy's ancestor had used rudimentary stone aged tools.

My stomach growled again.

It seemed there was no time like the present to see if I could manage some wandless magic. I knew it wasn't really possible, but every witch or wizard had, at some point in their lives, performed spontaneous, undirected magic, and Harry and I had been able to conjure water out of desperation.

Closing my eyes, I brought the cup to my lips and sniffed. It smelled like water. If it hadn't been so dry, my mouth would have watered in anticipation. I thought about my magic and then formed the spell as clearly and distinctly as possible in my mind. "*Purify!*"

Nothing really happened. Oh, I could feel my magical ability flowing like blood, but there had been no spark of light, no sizzle of magic. For all I knew nothing had happened.

Still, I would hope for the best.

I stuck out my tongue and dipped the tip into the liquid in the cup. We'd learned that lesson the hard way. I remembered Harry being horribly ill from pond water. He had spent three days vomiting, shivering, and sweating. It was terrifying, and Ron and I argued bitterly over what to do. When Harry vomited blood, Ron gave in. We took him to Hogwarts, too afraid to go to St. Mungo's.

Poppy Pomfrey scolded us something fierce even as she poured three potions down Harry's throat in rapid succession. She hid us in her office for two days, and then helped sneak us out of the castle in the dead of night. As a farewell gift, she gave each of us a small bottle of tablets to make almost any water potable. She was one of the few people I kept in touch with on a regular basis.

I remembered her lecture. "You never drink questionable water. Stick your tongue in it first. If it becomes numb then spit everything out. If not, then wait half an hour before trying to drink. Small sips, mind you. And wait in between to make sure. You'll undoubtedly know if it's tainted fairly quickly. Still, it's best to drink from a running river if you've no other choice. Drink from the fastest running part you can reach ... and use those tablets."

If the birch bark cup held tainted water, then I would have to see about wading into the stream to get a drink, but I felt no taint, no metallic taste, just clean, cool water which was very, very refreshing. It was difficult to wait between sips, but patience was my watchword.

After drinking a third of the water, I turned my attention to the food. I attempted the same sort of wandless magic, holding my opened hand, palm facing down, over the berries, the grain, the nuts and the rock. "*Purify!*"

I ate a berry first. The high water content made it an ideal choice. It looked like a bramble berry, and it burst in a tart explosion of flavor in my mouth. Fortunately, there was no tang of fermentation. I ate the rest of the berries and tested the grain in the same manner.

My only difficulty came in opening the nuts. The birch bark bowl was unacceptable to use as a surface and the ground around me too springy. In the end I used my headboard I refused to call it a headstone, although having had that thought, the word bounced around in my brain like a rogue Bludger. This would not be my final resting place. I wouldn't let it be.

While I finished my meal, another of the forest's inhabitants came by my small glade. With racing heart and sweaty palms, I snapped my head in the direction of a rustling of leaves. Just beyond the invisible barricade was a small, russet and white, shaggy pony.

In that moment I knew where I was. These ponies didn't just wander the length and breadth of Britain. No, these ponies were found in a few protected lands across the isles. Considering my adventures of the evening before, it was logical to assume I was in the New Forest, to the south and east of Stonehenge.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, my Occlumency shields suffered a fresh onslaught. I actually swayed under the attempt, but didn't yield, although it was growing more difficult to hold onto my personal defenses.

While I pondered the identity of my would-be mental invader, I stared at the small woodland pony. One of my hands was suspended between bowl and mouth, and when I realized that, I smiled and popped the hazelnut onto my tongue. Several minutes later the pony ambled off, disappearing behind a tall clump of ferns.

When I heard his voice this time, I was standing in the river washing my face and hands in the tickling current.

"Granger didn't do this. You know her, cousin. She's not the type." He sounded angry.

"Draco!" I shouted as I sloshed my way out of the river, taking mincing steps, careful not to fall on the rocks.

"Granger?" He sounded incredulous.

"Draco, I'm coming. Wait."

"Granger, you're driving me out of my mind. Are you all right?"

I slipped on the ground cover trying to get to the pool quickly, landing hard on my bum. But I didn't waste a moment, scrambling on all fours to the pool's edge.

His image was in a different location on the still pool and I had to lean out, over the water. It would be disastrous if I fell in. The break in the cloud cover revealed a sun already on its descent toward the horizon. Draco's hair appeared like a golden crown and his face glowed a warm hue. I noticed he was in what appeared to be a study, with saffron walls and cozy couches, and there was a fire in the fireplace. I almost cried when I saw Tonks standing at the mantle. Her hair was the shade of a raven's wing, the color she used when she was serious, or in battle. Seated to her left was another Auror, judging by his robes, but I didn't know him. He was obviously junior because he was the one taking notes.

I spoke fast. "Draco, listen. I don't think I have much time. My ability to see and hear you depends on the sun. I was taken from home by some force, some magical entity which I've never encountered before. I had an extremely strange experience on the plains before waking up in the forest. I'm in some sort of a glade which is approximately five by ten meters in size. There's a river at one of the boundaries and the whole thing is protected by invisible shields. I don't know how strong they are because I haven't my wand. There are rudimentary amenities and I do mean rudimentary and something keeps trying to gain access to my mind."

The junior Auror charmed the quill to record my words, its pale gray feather bobbing in the air as the nib scribbled as quickly as I spoke.

Draco had leaped to his feet to pace while I talked. "... Granger, damn it!"

"What? I mean ... argh ... Draco, what did you say?"

"Granger, I said Occlude then, damn it!"

"I am. Draco, I am. I have been ever since I woke. I'm exhausted and I feel it prying at my mind all the time now. Or maybe it's trying harder, I'm not sure which."

He spun, trying to orient on the sound of my voice. I could see Tonks asking questions, but I heard nothing.

"Granger?" Draco asked.

"Draco?"

"Hermione, answer Tonks."

"Draco, I didn't hear Tonks. What did she ask?"

"Granger, this is the most bollixed up method of talking. Tonks wants to know if you can give us any hint of where you're being held."

Oh. I hadn't said.

"Draco, I saw a Fallow Deer this morning, but they're everywhere. This afternoon, though, I saw a pony. A shaggy, small pony. I think I might be in the New Forest."

His head came up. "Granger, are you sure?"

"Draco, no, I'm not sure. But it makes sense considering the strange experience from last night. I was at Stonehenge then."

"Granger, you might be right outside my bloody door." He whirled toward Tonks, his face a mask of infuriated impotence. I couldn't hear all of what he said. "... Granger doesn't make mistakes. You know that. If she says she's in the New Forest, then we're going to search every fucking twig until we find her."

I think I loved him more at that moment than ever before. The color of his hair turned orange, and my mouth was instantly dry. "Draco ... Draco, I haven't much time."

He whipped around again. "Granger, keep talking to me. Don't stop talking."

"Draco the sun's going down. Look, if something happens ..."

"Granger, shut the hell up. I will find you, even if it takes my standing on a street corner begging for help. You hold on. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Draco, I do. I will. I just wanted you to know "

"... Granger, don't say it. You'll say it in person. Do you hear me, Hermione? You'll tell me in person."

"All right. Draco, all right. Find me, Draco."

His image shone off the water in a great golden gleam of light and then the image splintered into a thousand mirrored images of his frantic face before disappearing completely from sight.

The pool was simply an eddy of water once more.

Loneliness bit me hard then, and I stared for a very long time at the water, looking through the clear surface, down to the flat stone bottom.

I shivered suddenly and realized it was getting chilly. Shaking off my melancholy and firming up my mental shields, I walked the perimeter of my prison once more, seeing if there was a warmer place to be found. I didn't really want to move from the pool's side, because, well, I was closer to Draco there.

On my circuit, I discovered a most intriguing thing when I examined the sleeping platform. There was a quilt of leaves, woven together with magic, but it spread the length of

the platform, and I thought it would make an excellent cover for my bed of bracken. Aside from my filthy flannel nightgown, it would be my only cover.

By the time dusk was falling, there was another cup of water and bowl of berries, nuts, and grains waiting for me upon the hip-height table. I collected the food and returned to my bed of bracken and leaves, settling under the surprisingly heavy blanket of foliage. It wasn't full dark yet, but I wanted to build up some warmth before true night fell. Again I used the wandless Purification Charm for whatever good it might do and ate my small meal. I chewed slowly, remembering the times Harry, Ron, and I had shared a single helping. The slower you ate the more you tricked your system into thinking you'd actually eaten enough.

Saving three of the nuts already shelled I visited the Water Closet one last time before crawling under the blanket for the night. I huddled under the leaves, smelling the fresh green smell, wishing with every cell of my being that Draco would find me, and knowing that I couldn't hold my mental shields indefinitely.

Alone, miserable, and frightened, I closed my eyes and tried to pour all of my remaining determination into protecting my mind. It might have been an hour that I remained curled in a fetal position before the stresses of the day took their toll and I fell asleep with the gurgle of the river as my lullaby.

~o0o~

Enlightenment

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione takes another journey and all the puzzle pieces start to form a complete picture.

The Witch Bower

By Bambu

All standard disclaimers and author's notes may be found in Chapter One. However, my continuing thanks for SnarkyWench's help is perennial.

Chapter Five: Enlightenment

~o0o~

Possessively the bower kept the forest's curious inhabitants at bay, waiting for the moon to rise high in the night sky. When the bride slept deepest she would listen once again. Unlike the last bride to grace the glade with her presence, this witch loved The Malfoy.

In the meantime, the bower stretched, feeling The Malfoy's distress. He still hadn't learned to listen yet, but that would come in the fullness of time.

Time was inexorable and the rites would be performed under the moon's full beauty. Balance would return to the Malfoys and the forest would be protected once more. None of the new generation had lived under one of The Malfoy's guidance, but the rocks and the riverbed and the trees ... the old ones. They remembered.

They had waited. For centuries they had waited.

Soon, they would be as one: Malfoy, bride, and forest.

~o0o~

This time when I awoke to find myself in mid-air, wrapped in a cocoon of magic, with a delicate mental intrusion, I wasn't as terrified as the first time. I was, however, considerably angrier.

Just what is this? I thought at the intelligence. What are you doing? Why have you taken me from my home and my loved ones? What purpose do you think to accomplish? Couldn't you simply ask politely rather than snatching me while I slept without so much as a by your leave or my clothing?

With no pause between questions, I was finally stopped by the completely disconcerting impression that the entity was amused ... and there were strongly affectionate overtones in our connection.

As was becoming a habit I had no intention of continuing, I was floating once again. The full moon hung like a pale wreath in the sky and a blanket of stars was my company. This time, however, the distance I traveled wasn't nearly as great as the first, and I deduced that we were northward bound.

When we arrived at our destination, I recognized the great stone henge of the Salisbury Plains instantly.

The plains surrounding the henge shone silver in the pale moonlight, but there was no expected glimmer of a moat surrounding stone ring as I had seen on my earlier visit. I then noticed that some of the stones had fallen, a capstone lying awkwardly on its side. The entire ring had an air of desolation about it ... as if it had been abandoned.

Swiftly on the heels of my thought it felt as if I'd been hugged. Immediately thereafter, I was whisked away from the henge, the hanging moon on my right. *South again*, I thought, *toward the forest*.

Once more a sense of affection and a little pride for my quickness was pressed into my mind. I traveled in silence, looking at the stars above me. I remembered how excited Professor Sinistra would become on clear nights above Hogwarts. But the sky had never looked like this.

There was magic in the air.

After awhile, my curiosity was overwhelming, and I wanted to see where I was being taken, so with some considerable effort I managed to turn face down.

The last time I journeyed in such a fashion, the landscape had been dotted only by a few bonfires. It was different now. I ignored an increasing sense of urgency from my guide. I recognized the feeling though. It reminded me of how I would race from one classroom to the next at Hogwarts terribly anxious about being late for a lesson.

During my initial days in the wizarding world, I absorbed information like a sponge soaked up a spilled potion. To that point in my life, I'd been called a freak by my peers. Strange things, inexplicable things happened around me so often that I had no friends, and my mum and dad, as doting as any loving parents, were in over their heads,

and the strain on their marriage had been very great.

There was a succession of visits to doctors, specialists, and psychiatrists. At one point, I went to a hypnotherapist. When I was ten, they considered finding an exorcist. I was an anomaly. The results of all the diagnostic evaluations indicated that I was terribly healthy, my intelligence was in the highly gifted range, and, understandably, considering the circumstances, my social skills were underdeveloped.

Of course my social skills were underdeveloped; how they could have been anything but stunted? I didn't understand how these strange things happened around me, but I believed it was my fault. I was the reason my parents had never had a second child. I was the reason they were always worried, always taking me to museums and libraries and doctors.

In some ways, the legislation I hoped to introduce wasn't just for orphans. It was for other magical children, like I had been, who were frightened and confused about themselves, who were ostracized and treated like lab jarveys instead of loved and supported as their magic began to manifest.

When the Ministry official arrived at our house that Saturday morning after my eleventh birthday I'll never forget that day to explain to my parents that I was a witch, my life changed. At first, Mum had thought I was being accused of some medieval crime and had tried to shove the man out of our house practically hysterical with fear. When he removed his wand from his pocket, my father had practically attacked him, thinking the man was drawing a weapon.

I can laugh now, but it was terrifying then. After casting a Cheering Charm or three and offering Mum a Calming Draught, the Ministry official had then explained that he was a wizard and I was a witch, an extremely gifted one.

Apparently the Ministry tracked spontaneous bursts of magic from Muggle-born children to determine whether their magic was strong enough to earn them a place in the wizarding world. In some cases, they left the poor children to their own devices. My legislation would be designed to give assistance to all children of magical ability, if only to understand they weren't abnormal.

Learning I was a witch that day -- that there was a tangible explanation for all the strange things which happened to me and around me had been a huge relief. My parents and I had seized upon the idea as a dying man will grasp even the point of a sword to keep from drowning.

Was it any wonder I had already read my textbooks before stepping foot onto the Hogwarts Express? Or that I read everything I could get my hands on when I arrived at school? Once at school I had learned there was nothing wrong with me; but it took me a very long time to get rid of the guilt and the shame I'd kept hidden.

Suddenly aware my abductor was listening to my mental wanderings -- listening quietly and attentively -- I was afraid. Not of imminent death, but afraid for my most intimate, private self.

Sensing my distress, the entity soothed me as best it could, offering formless reassurance and a tightening of the surrounding magical cocoon in what could best be described as a full-body embrace.

It was then I realized we were at our next destination. The moon was behind me, and we had traveled east during my reverie.

I was hovering above what appeared to be an encampment of men soldiers and their horses. Scattered here and there through a surprisingly large collection of tents and an occasional lean-to were small campfires. There was a low hum of talk none of it intelligible from my height but there was no fear or panic in the overall tone. I was all too familiar with the sound of those emotions. It seemed these men were quite literally gearing up for the skirmish to come.

They didn't wear rough hide clothing, instead the men wore tunics and leggings and fur vests to keep them warm against the night's chill. Armor glinted where firelight kissed its surface and more than one man was polishing helm or hauberk. I recognized medieval armor from my many trips to the museum with my Dad.

But the common men were apparently not my concern as I was propelled past them, although I couldn't help but notice the size of the camp. I wracked my brain to remember my Muggle history. England had been invaded numerous times throughout the ages, but rarely with such a large force. There had to be thousands of men here.

My guiding entity radiated approval, and I felt as if I was close to understanding its purpose in abducting me. Pausing over the largest fire -- there were fewer men here and none polishing their equipment it was obvious that these men were alert and ... on guard. I shivered suddenly and a tendril of magic embraced me soothingly.

The guards' attention was drawn to an approaching visitor, and I was astonished to recognize white hair. Malfoy?

A rumbling assent confirmed my thought, and I was dropped closer to the ground.

This Malfoy was sumptuously dressed in comparison to his companion. He wore a tunic like the others, but the linen was obviously of a higher quality and his trousers were of well-tanned leather you could tell by his supple gait and the soft gleam of the leggings. He wore a cloak of heavy material ... I couldn't tell the type of fabric, but it was dyed a reddish hue. He was taller than his escort, carrying himself with a self-assurance which could seem mocking or arrogant so easily.

What was this Malfoy doing in an encampment of Muggles? Was he a Squib?

As he neared the largest tent, a man stepped out to greet him. He was dark-haired and dark-bearded. Shorter than Draco's ancestor, this man had an air of command, which was confirmed by the soldier's reactions. He and the blond clasped forearms as equals.

I didn't understand a thing they said, but when they stepped into the tent, I found myself abruptly along for the ride.

As had happened once before, at the center of Neolithic Stonehenge, I shared a body with one of the Malfoy ancestors. His hands were my hands, my feet his. I smelled the pong of stale sweat and gamy aroma of mutton. I looked through Malfoy eyes at my companion. His features were familiar.

We ignored the cot in one corner, boots making little noise on the rugs overlapping one another, covering the bare earth beneath them. They were worn and hand woven, but my interest was drawn to the table and Malfoy's intense emotions. He was in a state of excited anticipation. I felt the rough grain of the table's surface with our shared fingers, and our eyes catalogued the litter of scrolls and writing implements. In the center of the tabletop, a large, parchment map had been unrolled, held in place by a goblet and a rock on one side, and a large book on the other. Malfoy's heart raced when we recognized the map. It didn't take much for me to deduce that this was the purpose of his visit.

With eager interest we looked at the map. It was noticeably of England, but it didn't have the definition I was used to, nor did it show the number of counties and towns I expected. Instead England was divided into three roughly equal parts: Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria.

Saxon England.

But these men weren't Saxons. I just knew it. I listened harder to the almost comprehensible language. It sounded Gallic.

Oh.

Normans.

My head swam with comprehension. Either my mind or my body had traveled backward in time a thousand years. This was nothing like a several-hour backward jaunt with Harry and the Time Turner to save Sirius' life.

I looked at the dark-haired man carefully and clues fitted neatly into place. It was a pretty safe assumption that he was William the First.

The two men -- and me sitting in a little corner of Malfoy's mind -- pored over the map, paying specific attention to a small, cross-hatched section. I roughly guesstimated that small section was part of present-day Wiltshire. Yes, there was a circle ... two circles drawn on the map, and the section of land this generation's Malfoy caressed with our gloved fingers was a little south and east of the southern circle.

Avebury, Stonehenge ... the New Forest.

The men were laughing now -- deep throaty laughs of men who've just made an agreement they're both pleased by -- And I felt the rumble deep in our chest.

The dark-haired man, whom I now thought of as the Conqueror, rapidly unrolled a piece of parchment, glanced at its contents, nodded, and handed it to us. Our eyes scanned the document. I couldn't read it at all, as it was in some archaic form of English. But whatever it said quite pleased Malfoy.

In quick succession, the document was signed by Malfoy. I could make out the shape of the 'M' in his signature followed by the soon-to-be Norman King. Then the Conqueror dripped red wax next to his signature and pressed his signet ring into the rapidly hardening glob. I was surprised when we withdrew our wand and cast a spell on the document. The parchment glowed red, then turned yellow, green and finally blue before the spell's completion.

A jolt of magic coursed through Malfoy's body, followed immediately by deep muscle fatigue. It was as if Gilderoy Lockhart had removed the bones from our body. Whatever spell Malfoy had cast required a great deal of our power, and the deep satisfaction for having protected his home was so clear I had no trouble understanding him.

The Conqueror showed no surprise at the use of magic, and it was only then I remembered that until the seventeenth century Muggles and wizards had coexisted on fairly equitable terms. He poured fresh goblets of wine and we clasped The Conqueror's arm again, sealing the deal.

Abruptly, I was withdrawn from Malfoy and once again suspended mid-air. It seemed this was to be a night filled with surprises.

This time, the blurring landscape of which I could only see small clusters of light as we passed overhead - wasn't a surprise. In very short order I was hovering over the forest, above a small glade next to a river where a small fire was fed by a small attendant. A house-elf, I thought excitedly. It was smaller than any house-elf I'd ever seen, although it had distinctive green skin, long ears, a pointy nose, and large protuberant eyes. It looked a bit like Dobby and wore a small tunic.

It paced several feet from the fire, clearing a small patch of the forest floor until there was a circle of bare earth. After that, the small creature snapped its fingers, arresting the fire mid-crackle. *A stasis charm of some sort* I thought. Next, the house-elf withdrew a small pewter chalice and bowl from a pocket of its tunic. Then with another snap of tiny fingers the cup and bowl enlarged. Water filled the cup and grain from a pocket in the house-elf's tunic filled the bowl. The two items were set on the edge of the bare-earth circle and a final implement -- a smooth, palm-shaped rock -- was placed next to the bowl.

An instant later, the small servant disappeared.

I hung expectantly over the circle, intrigued.

It wasn't long before I heard someone approach. Turning my head, I watched the man approach; his cascade of white hair gleamed in the dappled moonlight.

Malfoy.

Yet this was not the same Malfoy I'd encountered just moments before. From this man's style of clothing, which I recognized, it appeared that we had skipped forward a few centuries. This Malfoy was tall and lean, and walked with lethal grace. He was sumptuously dressed in a brown velvet jerkin belted at his waist, the sleeves of his fine linen shirt had lace cuffs, but they were partially covered by the heavy, wool cape fastened at his throat by an ornate silver clasp. He wore full-cut breeches of cloth with leather inserts terminating in the tops of his square-toed black boots. If he hadn't been carrying a wand, this man could have stepped from the pages of a history book or off the screen of a historical re-enactment.

With economy of motion, Draco's ancestor strode around the glade, releasing the stasis charm on the fire with his first spell. The crackle of oil igniting in wood and the smell of smoke filled my ears and nostrils. I watched while the blond marked off a perimeter beginning with an enormous oak tree in one 'corner,' then cast a series of spells, some verbal, some not. He was beautiful to watch and I was practically mesmerized by the swish and flick, jab and hook of his wrist action. I did get to see that this Malfoy had gray eyes and a hint of a narrow, pointed chin.

My thoughts immediately turned to my Malfoy.

A sharp squeeze around my waist reminded me to pay attention and only when Malfoy cast a barrier spell across the river did I realize where I was. This was the glade ... my glade ... my prison.

My brain reeled with information, trying solution after solution, attempting to put all the pieces of information together into some sort of cohesive whole.

It wasn't until he had completely disrobed that I was dropped into his body. I was rather pleased to see that he hadn't succumbed to the ridiculous fashion of a padded codpiece having more than enough natural padding to fill out the triangular piece of cloth at his groin.

It was when he picked up the tools left by the house-elf that I touched with his hands, smelled with his nose, and felt the chill of winter in his tightening scrotum. The crackling fire did nothing to fend off the cold. Our jaw clenched, and our teeth bit down on our wand he only had two hands -- as we stepped into the circle, pacing a cross-hatched pattern until we found center circle.

Dropping to our knees by now I was familiar with the feel of grit and dirt beneath bare skin he set the chalice, the bowl, and the wand down before proceeding to dig a small hole with the flattened stone. It looked a great deal like the rock I'd used to crack open the hazelnuts I'd eaten for dinner.

The rock wasn't terribly easy to wield ... not like the bone the first Malfoy had used in the henge ... but it got the job done. It fitted neatly into the palm of our hand. Then the blond rose to his feet and straddled the divot. Still holding the rock, he spread our arms and raised our face toward the sky.

He started to speak, and I knew it was a ritual. I caught snatches of familiar words, chanted in Middle English, like someone reciting Chaucer. What caught my attention was the feel of the rock ... it was ... it had ... there was magic there.

We bent, carefully placing the rock in the divot, then piling the grain from the bowl onto the rock in a mound. It didn't matter that some of the grain fell into the hole, only that all of it was used. His fingers smoothed across the carvings in the lip of the bowl. Next, he rose, shifting until our feet were anchored in the dirt, and then he raised his voice in a singsong chant. This time we poured the water over the mound of grain, drenching seed, stone, and dirt.

Power.

Deep, ancient power pulled from the planet, from the earth beneath our feet, from the forest and the trees, from the river, and the nearby plains, and even from this stone which was somehow the stone of the henge. I felt it through his feet, up his legs, through his groin, heating his genitals rapidly, until his ... my ... our ... erection was thick and tumescent. Magic shuddered up our spine and out along our arms.

We threw our head back to stare at the moon, feeling her light upon our face. As had happened with the henge Malfoy, I could feel the quiescent life teeming in the forest, the nearby ponies and deer, and further distant, I could sense the presence of magical creatures and three humans in a stone manor. I could feel the essence of the foundation stones of the structure; they held the same magic as the rock in the divot at our feet and in the standing stones on the plains.

As if we channeled that ancient moonlit power, we spread our fingers. Bolts of white light shot from our fingertips into the newly erected perimeter barrier. It sparkled and crackled with ancient, elemental magic before settling into a jeweled translucence, dripping down into the earth.

In our body, earth magic and lunar magic commingled, and we dropped to our knees, both hands covering the hole we had dug so few minutes ago. Our eyes closed but our mind was open, a conduit for the tremendous magic of the plains and forest.

Malfoy bent his head in a humble reverence. I found the ritual deeply moving. The Malfoys were part of this land as much as the land was part of the Malfoys.

When we moved our hands, the earth had accepted our offering, and the smooth stone sat alone atop the healed earth. There was no sign of the small divot or the grain or the water. Just like Stonehenge.

In a heartbeat, I was wrenched from this generation's Malfoy. Contrary to my expectations, I wasn't hovering high in the sky, instead I remained within the perimeter of the glade's protections.

Instead of the expected sight of a setting moon, I found a full moon rising in the night sky. There was no Malfoy, no house-elf, and no fire. There was, however, a bare circle of earth.

I felt a bit like a pebble skipped across the surface of time. I had no idea when the entity had taken me this time.

Remarkably I wasn't alone. The sound of weeping came from the corner of the glade. When I craned my head in its direction I saw a young woman, clad only in her pale muslin chemise, huddled against the oak's trunk. She seemed terrified. I empathized completely.

She was a pretty young woman with long hair the color of the morning sun. I wondered who she was. By the light of the silvery moon, I peered around the glade. It was different from when the other Malfoy consecrated it. There were more trees now, almost forming walls around this sacred space, and I could easily see the beginnings of the glade that I would recognize in my own time.

I wondered how long a wait there would be this time, and my silent, magical guide radiated censure.

Fortunately the wait wasn't lengthy.

After a few minutes, the young woman's tears finally quieted. At that moment, the boundary sparked and color striated outward from a pinpoint as his hand passed through the barrier followed by the rest of his body,

Like the previous Malfoy, he was dressed in the height of fashion for his time. This blond dressed in a Restoration period three-piece suit of navy colored silk, with a contrasting golden waistcoat. The double-breasted coat sported decorative gold buttons which matched those on the waistcoat. The cuffs of his jacket bore the same embroidery pattern found on the hem of his form-fitting breeches. His white hose showed trim calves and his feet were shod with gleaming patent leather shoes topped by gold buckles.

He could very easily be considered a dandy. I was delighted that he didn't wear one of those dreadful powdered wigs. It seemed that in every century Malfoy men knew exactly which fashions to follow and which ones to eschew.

It was his dress which gave rise to a scholarly and, at the moment, wholly inappropriate train of thought. I surmised that this might be the historical moment when wizarding fashion deviated from Muggle. Had I not spent so much time studying the International Statute of Secrecy which was signed in the late sixteenth-century, I wouldn't have thought of this. I eyed Malfoy's clothing again, the hypothesis made sense. Muggle trends changed far more rapidly with the advent of technology and wizarding clothing remained more old-fashioned as the community became increasingly isolated from outside influence.

A magical tug on my hair drew my attention to my immediate surroundings. The young woman had flown at the wizard as if he was her savior, but he, in turn, looked at her as if she was an anathema. He held her sobbing form to him, but the look on his face was resigned and terribly sad.

He was a very handsome man. His features reminded me strongly of Draco, who I missed with an actual ache in my heart. This wizard's hair was that customary spill of Malfoy silk, and his eyes were pale, almost the color of blue ice.

This English I understood ... mostly.

She was terrified, but he explained. Their parents had arranged their marriage.

She gasped even as they walked toward the earthen circle. He said something more to her but I didn't understand it. Her reaction, instead, was perfectly communicated. She clutched her chemise tightly across her chest and backed away from him.

He gestured to the circle, but did not attempt to touch her. From a small satchel he'd carried slung across his back, Malfoy removed a familiar goblet, bowl and stone. He drew his wand and the young woman flinched.

I liked the way he tried to relieve her fears; it reminded me of the way Draco had treated me the night I'd panicked in the restaurant. That ache in my heart was sharp, and my throat closed and my eyes grew damp. Draco. I wanted him ... fiercely. He should see these things. They were his ancestors.

Once again that sharp tug on my hair.

All right, I thought crossly. I'll pay attention, you horrible meddler.

The young blonde had been coaxed next to the circle and she held the bowl of grain in her hands. Malfoy said something and the woman's hands began to tremble, her head to shake. He bent low and spoke quietly. I think he said, "Calm yourself, my dear. I would not willingly hurt you, but this must be done."

Then he stood a little apart from her and began to undress. First he slipped off his shoes, then his coat, which he folded fastidiously before placing it atop the shiny patent leather shoes. Something about his fastidiousness reminded me of his Neolithic ancestor and I smiled fondly. Next to be unbuttoned was the embroidered silk vest. It looked to be a very fine piece of material, and I wondered idly when I would be dropped into this Malfoy.

After removing the vest, Malfoy removed his white hose, sliding them off his well-muscle calves and over his feet.

I suddenly realized just how intelligent this generation's Malfoy was. He was putting on a show for his bride. It was a very clever, intriguing strip-tease, and it was having the desired result. The young woman kept sneaking peeks at him. She might be afraid, but she was interested.

When he untucked his white linen shirt, all of the disparate clues I'd been fed began to coalesce, and I was not comfortable with my conclusions. I was no voyeur. I'd never even watched a porn film in my life. All right, maybe I had read a little erotica on occasion. Who didn't? But my adventures in literary and erotic titillation were confined to books, the occasional thought about the statue of David, and Draco Malfoy, but nothing else, thank you.

The ancient sentience tried to offer some comfort, in much the same way Draco's ancestor was coaxing the young woman. This was not a happy turn of events. I tried to close my eyes, but they were held open by my implacable guide.

It's remarkable how quickly the eyes begin to dry out, and mine started to burn. I needed to blink. It was uncomfortable and still the magic wouldn't let me go. The message was clear: my eyes were hostage to my acquiescence.

Damn it.

Slytherin tactics, I thought viciously. I hadn't thought of House affiliations in years. A deep rumble of amusement echoed in my head, and I gave in with bad grace.

My short internal argument with an amorphous magical being had distracted me from the proceedings in the glade. When I looked at the couple again, I noticed they were both now in the same state of undress. Malfoy wore only his mid-thigh length ruffled shirt ... which was unbuttoned, and she wore only her chemise.

Malfoy held his wand and the stone in one hand, the goblet of water in the other.

He looked at his young bride and said in understandable English, "After you."

Then, as he took his first step onto the bare dirt in the sacred circle, it was my foot which touched the cool earth.

I had been dropped into this generation's Malfoy.

Oh, my god.

It was fortunate that he was well-prepared for this ritual, because we were gentle with our companion.

Together the three of us found the center point of the circle before dropping to our knees. He handed his bride the goblet while we laid his wand on the ground near our knees. We looked deeply into her blue eyes and said clearly, "I trust you not to hex me."

A brief smile crossed her face, and I saw how beautiful she was when she was unafraid.

"Some of what we do will be together and some I must do alone," he said. "Do not be afraid, my dear."

"Is this the secret to the Malfoy marriages ... the reason they are so happy?" Her accent wasn't as easy to understand as his, and it struck me that the reason he was comprehensible was because I was in his head and I could feel his intent through our shared body.

He inclined our head then bent to our task. It didn't take us long to scoop out a satisfactory hole, nor to place the stone in the center.

I expected to rise to our feet, like the other rituals I'd participated in. But this one was different. This one was important in a different way.

Magical eagerness sat in the back of my mind. I recognized its magical touch after all the time I'd spent being transported across centuries, but what was it doing in my mind now?

Comprehension was swift. This ritual was why I had been snatched from my bed, the reason for being shown some of the family's history.

The ground was cold beneath us, and as I had at Stonehenge, I felt small gravel dig into his knees. We didn't stand. Instead, Malfoy coaxed his bride into a cross-legged position just on the other side of the earth bowl we'd dug, balancing her hands on the grain-filled pewter in her hands. Our fingers caressed the symbols on the bowl before we released her hands.

Next we settled on our bum, crossing our own legs, so that we encircled the hole. We gritted our teeth at contact with the dirt on our bits, and I had private, feminine thought that women were lucky not to have to contend with a ponderous scrotal sac getting in the way all the time. The ground was cold and hard beneath us, but we carried on.

Picking up the goblet, we stared at the young woman. Her breath came in quick, shallow gasps and he said, "As my eyes, mouth and hands do, follow my lead. Together we must join on this sacred ground in this sacred union."

Her hands shook harder, but she only nodded her head. Her eyes were swimming with tears.

Clever man, good man that he was, he did nothing overt to startle her. He just met her look for look until her eyes held steadily upon ours. Then we began to breathe deeply. Consciously.

It took time and patience, but eventually her breathing pattern synchronized with ours. Only at that point did he take his free hand, our left, and place it palm facing her, directly over the stone nestled in the earth. She, in turn, placed her palm against his, and I could feel the tremors of her body against his ... mine ... ours.

The ritual of grain and water proceeded, and by the time heads were thrown back and magic pulled from the earth and sky, there was no fear left in the young woman, only his arousal, pulsing hard and eager, and her moist lips waiting for his.

I felt the mind-body shift and breathed a sigh of relief. As my escort propelled me high into the night sky, I saw Malfoy remove his shirt while his bride removed her shift. They came together in a moonlit painting of light and dark, coupling in a ritual as old as human and wizarding kind.

I expected to be dropped back in to my present time, but I was to be disappointed in that expectation.

Instead we hovered over the glade, and it was as if a timed-action camera had filmed my location. As the night passed and dawn drew near, I watched a series of bridal night encounters, young women some terrified, others eager to meet their prospective grooms and young Malfoy men all lean and tall and fair, some resolute, some angry, some joyful as each couple followed in the ritual bonding between man, woman, and land.

Before my eyes, the glade flourished, protected by Malfoy magic, here in the heart of Malfoy land. It was something I had never understood or truly encountered before, a sacred duty to the land as well as to the family. Having grown up in a city, I had never spent much time in the natural world. Certainly not until I'd gone to school. My adventures in the Forbidden Forest had never been fun for me.

Now, however, I had learned something precious.

Lightning on the horizon startled me, and I saw angry black clouds scudding across the sky heralding a silver sheet of rain, falling like a curtain from the sky to the earth. Booming thunder crashed nearby and I jumped, truly frightened for the first time since I'd found myself in this second ritual journey.

Magic soothed me, and as the first pelting raindrops hit me, I realized I was protected by a magical shield. I relaxed and paid attention. Trying to understand what else it was I was supposed to see.

What I saw in that pale morning light, gray and overcast, was the devastation of the forest. Lightning flashed in the sky and the sharp distinct stench of ozone tickled my nostrils. Where it landed I saw trees burst into flame, then smoke filled the sky as the torrential rain drowned the fire.

I heard a sharp crack and then a thud. The sound was familiar, I'd heard Grawp make that sound when he had lived in the forest. It was the sound of a tree being uprooted and crashing to the ground.

I looked at the now-familiar glade, watching the Malfoy protections flare and burst into sparks -- like Catherine Wheels -- when broken branches flew through the air and impacted against the barrier.

Lightning struck the perimeter shield and I cried out, covering my eyes. When I looked again, the barrier had almost been destroyed because branches, leaves and small rocks were hurtling into the glade. An ancient tree just beyond the southern guardian had been struck, lightning having been deflected from its original course. The massive trunk was broken, and half the tree had collapsed onto the forest floor.

I have no idea how long I hovered over the New Forest, watching the massive destruction of so beautiful a place. In my heart I cried for the land, for the trees, and for the

Malfoy whose turn it was to care for this land.

The storm passed, but the forest was not the same.

The glade had suffered.

Time blurred again, and in stop-action I saw nature repair itself: new growth, new trees, new ferns to replace those lost by time and storm.

I never once saw another Malfoy come to the glade. What had happened to them? Why didn't they come?

As the sun rose high in the sky, time slowed until I hovered over the glade as it was in my time. Yet there were no odd protrusions or my Water Closet, but the eddy was there and the stone I used as a headboard.

It was late afternoon and I could smell the pungent redolence of the earth. I'd never noticed such things before, but I would from now on. I heard the *CRACK* of Apparition, and in the distance saw a distinctive gleaming head of blond hair. Malfoy. I wondered which one, and hoped it wasn't Lucius.

It wasn't.

It was Draco. My Draco.

I screamed his name, but magic stole my voice.

Tears started in my eyes and I was furious and so sad I couldn't stand it.

Please, I thought at the entity. *Please let me go to him. He'll be so worried*, I thought, before I realized what I was watching wasn't happening now. He wasn't coming to rescue me.

Magic attempted to soothe me, to remind me that I was here for a purpose, and like the good swot I'd been since I was eleven, I paid attention.

Draco hadn't reached the glade thus far. He was too busy taking in his surroundings, as if he'd never seen this part of the forest before. He passed the side of a rotted trunk of a fallen tree. Startled, I recognized it as the tree I'd seen hit by lightening during that terrible storm.

I was so happy to see him, to have him near me. He was wearing his customary clothes, black worsted trousers and a linen shirt. He was so handsome it was hard to breathe, and I smiled that he was this generation's Malfoy.

He walked around the base of the broken tree, and finally crossed the perimeter of my glade. He stopped; his wand abruptly in his hand. He'd felt the magic.

With ruthless swiftness, he cast a Revealing Spell, and the barrier shimmered ... but it was faint. A pale imitation of what I'd seen in the past, of what I'd helped create in the past.

Draco paced around the glade, looking as if he was sight-seeing. But then he stopped in the center, unconsciously, or subconsciously directed by genetic imperative. I recognized the resolute expression on his face. Tilting his head back, he looked up through branches and to the sky. His voice was resonant and filled with conviction. "I swear, by all my ancestors, to restore the Malfoy name, to reclaim my family's honor, no matter how long it might take."

He dropped his head, and I could tell he was marking this spot, this territory. Draco remained standing quietly, in deep contemplation, for another few minutes. Then he turned and strode from the glade, stepping beyond the great fallen tree and Disapparated.

My mind was so full of what I'd seen, what I'd experienced, that I didn't realize night had fallen, or that I was being gently resettled into the bower of my time, my place, and my imprisonment.

I didn't even feel the leafy blanket being laid over me, nor did I notice when sleep overtook my whirling thoughts.

~o0o~

Denouement

Chapter 6 of 7

It is a new day and Hermione is no longer alone in the glade. It's time for her to put the puzzle together for the future.

The Witch Bower

By Bambu

All standard disclaimers and author's notes may be found in Chapter One. However, my continuing thanks for SnarkyWench's help is perennial.

Chapter Six: Denouement

~o0o~

The bower watched over the newest Malfoy bride. It had been host to generations of young women, melding their power, their life's essence, and their ambitions to the Malfoys. But this one was special. She was the first Muggle-born, the first snatched from the metal and artificial rock of the cities.

The bower had taken fate into its ephemeral hands, displacing the bride from her home, teaching her what she must learn. She, more than any who had come before, needed to see what it meant to be The Malfoy, to know how the land and the family had once been tied.

All that remained for the bower to oversee was for The Malfoy, sleeping uneasily in his bed, crying out for his mate, to take his bride.

It was time.

The bower reached.

~oOo~

The raucous calls of jays in the forest canopy woke me. I hadn't really expected to be home yet, but it would have been nice. I kept my eyes shut, letting all the memories of my recent out-of-body, out-of-time, out-of-place experiences wash over me. It would take awhile to process everything I'd seen and done.

The jays flew off leaving me with the sound of the river flowing nearby. It wasn't as loud today; perhaps I was growing used to its constant presence. Then, at that precise moment, I realized I was not alone. My breath caught in my throat, and my mind worked at a frenzied pace.

It should be him.

Cautiously, I rolled onto my back, turning my head to the right. I recognized the white hair, the smooth expanse of back. He was curled on his side and under the 'blanket' with me.

"Draco?" I whispered and reached out to touch him. To make sure he was real and not some product of my imagination or the entity's teaching.

He rolled over so fast my hand was trapped beneath him, and his eyes were moving so quickly, scanning my face, my hair, my mouth, that I was practically dizzy watching him.

"Granger?" he asked, his voice hoarse and sleep-choked.

I started to cry. "Oh, Draco."

He pulled me to him roughly, and we clung to each other for a very long time.

When he angled back enough to press his lips to my forehead, I noticed that my cheeks were not the only ones which were wet. His fingers splayed through my matted hair, cradling my head and I felt him murmuring something against my skin. I was distracted by re-learning his smell, soap and spice and him.

Then, leaning his brow against mine, Draco murmured, "I love you, Hermione."

With one trembling hand, I brushed the tears from his cheeks, while I whispered, "and I you."

He kissed me swiftly, and then put me away from him. "We have to get out of here. And I'll see whoever has taken us in Azkaban." He shoved the leafy blanket off of us, and I noticed that while he was nude to his waist, he was wearing a pair of soft flannel sleeping pants. They had seen better days, but flannel gets better the older it is. He got to his knees, and then took a look around. "Where the hell --"

I saw the instant he recognized our location. His entire body jerked and he looked at me with incredulity.

"Merlin's left testicle!" He rose to his feet and without conscious thought offered me his hand. I grasped it and rose, noticing that my hands were filthy despite my attempts at cleaning them in the river. "We have to get out of here," he repeated.

Without letting me speak, he crossed the clearing, pulling me with him. I couldn't help but think this was going to be interesting.

We passed over the center of the glade, over a patch of bare earth, cut in a circle - it hadn't been there the day before. I knew what it was and I was fairly certain what it meant for me.

My feet were sensitive from having walked all over the bare forest floor the day before and I wasn't moving quickly, but Draco was impatient. "I don't know ... I don't ... what the fuck is going on?"

"I think --"

He cut me off. "Let's talk once we're home. Then you can tell me everything." He squeezed my hand as if to say he wasn't meaning to be autocratic. Instead of irritating me as it normally would, I was touched by his worry and protectiveness.

Of course, when we reached the barrier, he sailed right through it ... all the way to the hand which clasped mine. He could come and go, but it seemed I could not. Instead of releasing my hand, Draco, stubborn man that he was, couldn't accept that I had to remain. He pulled and tugged and cursed. I had never heard him swear like that - it seemed a bit too common for a Malfoy, and I smiled a little.

I watched the late afternoon sun gleam golden off his hair, adding luster to his skin tone. He was really striking. The most handsome Malfoy I had ever seen. And he was mine.

Seeing my smile, he pushed himself back through the barrier, annoyed. "What's funny, Granger?"

Nothing. Everything. "I've never heard you swear like that. It just struck me as amusing."

"I have to get you out of here. I don't understand why or how you got here, but I think it's my fault, and I won't let you be hurt."

My mirth was dust in an instant. "I'm not hurt, love. And I don't think I'm going to be allowed to leave, at least for a little while."

"A little while? Jesus, Granger, you have no idea. I can't tell you what it's been like. It's been hell. I moved my mother and Potter to the manor under protection. I've been everywhere searching for you. I've seen Bill Weasley, and even went to Alexandria."

I couldn't do anything but stare at him. "Why ... er ... when ... how? How did you do all this?"

"How? I traveled by Portkey." He sounded impatient. "We have to go. I have to get you out of here."

But I was stuck, bemused by the lengths to which he'd gone to try to find me. My heart was full, my feet were glued to the ground, and my mind was reeling with facts, clues and bits of information. He tugged on my hand. "C'mon, we'll try another place."

"Portkey? How did you get a Portkey to Egypt? It usually takes weeks to arrange and I've only been gone a day."

That stopped him in his tracks. He stared at me, the crease between his eyebrows told me he was thinking hard. "A day? Hermione, you've been gone for two months."

"What! Two ... two months?" My voice could rival a jay's for shrillness. Suddenly I needed to sit down, my legs didn't seem able to support me, and I swayed where I stood.

"Granger!"

Strong arms wrapped around me, one sliding down behind my knees as he lifted me in his arms, carrying me across the glade, next to the river. He sat me upon the river's edge and then, without pause, he found a frayed end along the hem of my nightgown and tore a strip of cloth from my garment. He dipped the thin flannel into the river. I was

too bemused to make any sort of protest about my nightgown.

Months. I'd been gone for two months?

The feel of cool damp cloth roused me from my stupor, and I looked into an anxious face, noticing only then the dark circles under his eyes and the pallor of his skin. He was thinner than I remembered, his cheeks a bit hollow. I raised my hand to trace his features, the full pouty lips, the fine aristocratic nose and the raspy feel of his pale beard.

"I ... I ... Draco, it's only felt like a day. But there's so much to tell you. So much you need to know."

"I know that I have to get you home. The rest can wait." His jaw worked, and he scooped me up again, walking toward the nearest barrier which shimmered with iridescent brilliance. It seemed that his passing through it had activated it in some way.

This time he was unable to cross, regardless of whether he was touching me or not.

My mind reeled, rapidly fitting pieces of the puzzle together. Absently I noticed the changing light filtering through the canopy. Dusk was approaching rapidly, a sign of the shorter days of the year. I looked around the glade noticing subtle differences between the plants inside the perimeter and those just beyond the barrier. It seemed that the Malfoy ancestral protections created a sort of greenhouse effect, for these plants were still green, still supple while the forest beyond showed all the signs of an early winter. There was no frost on the ground, but the trees were mostly bare and the bracken was sere.

Glancing around the glade, my eyes came to rest on the table protrusion, where I'd gotten my meals yesterday, or last month. It held our provisions. Only they were no longer made of birch bark. A flutter of recognition and anticipation started in my tummy. How many times, since that first time I watched a tiny house-elf enlarge them, had I seen this goblet, this bowl, and this hand-shaped stone?

I finally, fully, understood.

"What the hell is there to smile about, now, Granger? I should never have listened to that old coot. We're stuck in this infernal place. I'm burning his portrait as soon as we get back."

I slid out of his arms, my feet finding their balance on the soft mossy ground cover. "What portrait? What old coot?"

"That can wait," Draco said through gritted teeth as he punched the semi-visible barrier. A striation of purple and white blossomed from the impact and Draco grunted. Then he punched it again.

"Stop! Draco, stop. Please." He faced me then, his expression despairing. I pulled him to me and it was a sign of his distress that he was completely compliant. "Love, I think we have to tell each other what has happened and I think we have to do it now. If what I suspect has to happen tonight, then I need to know what you know."

I caught a whiff of his shampoo as his hair swayed with the movement of his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you know what this place is? What it means to your family?"

"I ... it's ..." He blinked, focusing his attention on me. "I only know what my many times great-grandfather's portrait said. He called it the Heart of the Malfoys, and said this was where all true heirs were called when they dedicated themselves to the family."

Draco stopped talking for a moment, and I felt his hands clench into fists at my hips. I covered one of his hands with mine, and his grip was so tight his knuckles were bloodless. Softly, I said, "I saw you. That day in the forest, I saw you dedicate yourself to restoring the family's honor."

He stepped away from me, gaping in open astonishment. "What? How could you ... why have you never said anything? Granger --"

Before his mercurial temper could decide I'd been deceiving him since Midsummer, I interrupted, "Last night, when I dreamt, or was taken. I saw you. It's all part of what's happened to me since I was abducted. But I understand it now." He looked completely confused as I supposed he should. "Will you tell me everything your great-great-great --"

"Magnus."

"Sorry?"

"My many times great-grandfather's name was Magnus. Magnus Uther Malfoy." Amusement twitched in the corner of his mouth. "I think you would have liked his mum, she had an affinity for acronyms. You with SPEW and she with MUM."

"Draco." I said it with that voice, and despite our surroundings, he laughed. I loved his laugh. It was rich and deep and my insides turned to goo every time I heard it.

"Sorry, Granger." He pulled me against him, resting his brow against mine. "You don't know how glad I am to see you. I've missed you, Hermione. Don't ever go away again."

I ran my fingers through his silken hair. "I don't think I ever shall. Or I'll just take you with me."

His cheek was rough and he turned his head to kiss the palm of my hand. My voice was a little unsteady. "Will you tell me the rest about Magnus? What else he said."

He huffed. "I should have known you'd return to the point. Fine. MUM said that in order for the family to prosper, each Malfoy heir had to show our fealty in the Heart of the Malfoys on one of the old pagan sabbats or during a full moon. I thought he was extremely irritating. The only other thing he said was that his son hadn't been a believer in the old ways and had refused the oath. He wouldn't explain more than that."

We had moved while he spoke, back to my, our, little bed. I pulled the leafy blanket over the lumpy bracken and Draco and I sat. I suspected we would be talking for some time. Until moonrise at least.

"I searched the bloody manor, every dungeon and attic, and then the grounds, looking for the Heart of the Malfoys. It took me weeks. Then, several days before Midsummer, I found an old family map," a sudden chill raised goosebumps along my arms, and I was fairly certain I knew exactly what map he was describing, "really old, and preserved with several layers of spells to keep the parchment from cracking and disintegrating. It would make your knickers wet, Granger." I narrowed my eyes at him for the comment, and he smirked. "It showed the extent of the Malfoy lands and on that map was a small circle which read *The Heart*."

It made so much sense, and what he said next placed the last rune of the equation, and both sides of the theorem balanced.

"You know how I feel about being in a forest during a full moon. There are still werewolves about, you know, although I don't know of any on Malfoy lands. So I came here at Midsummer and made the pledge. I came again on the Solstice, at midnight." He looked at me through his lashes. It was unintentionally beguiling and I felt a little curl of heat low in my abdomen. It reminded me that my bladder was full. "It's your turn," he said.

"I know, but I need a trip to the Water Closet first."

"Water Closet?" His eyebrow raised in query.

"It's the glade's approximation of a bathroom. Here, let me show you." I pulled him to his feet and we linked our fingers as I guided him to my Water Closet. He laughed when he saw it, but noticing my blush said nothing more than, "Thank Merlin I can stand."

"Well you go ... stand ... while I stay here. I'll meet you back at the blanket."

"Blanket?"

"You know, our bed, the leaf cover. It's what the glade made for my blanket."

"The glade made? Granger, are you feeling all right. Fuck! We have to get out of here."

I arched up onto my tiptoes and brushed his lips with mine. "We will. I'll explain. I think we'll be able to leave in the morning."

His eyes narrowed. "Why do you think that?"

"I'll explain. Trust me."

What he said then nearly stole my breath.

"I do." With that declaration, he turned to find a place upstream, a little ways distant from the natural screen separating us.

The sound of the river masked any noise we made and I felt much better after I'd used the sacrificial leaves. I thanked the tree, this time believing it understood me, and then I met Draco at the river's edge to wash my hands.

By rights we should have been starving, but I wasn't really hungry and he said nothing. Our attention was elsewhere. We got as comfortable as possible on my bed, with me leaning against the headboard I was the only one with something to cover my back -- and he nestled between my legs, slouched low enough for me to lean my chin on his shoulder.

I had never before appreciated what a good audience he was. He listened to my every word, asking only one or two questions, but didn't otherwise interrupt.

At the end of my tale, he twisted in my lap, and without a word, gathered me into his arms. We sat there while he absorbed the enormity of my adventures. The last remnants of daylight had gone and the moon hadn't yet risen when he spoke. "So you believe we're here to get married?"

"In the eyes of the forest and land, yes."

He raised my chin with a single finger and our eyes met. "I never got the chance to ask you, but I planned to that night. Your birthday."

Here was my opportunity to plead ignorance, to move forward as if there was nothing for us to talk about. But after my experiences within the Heart of the Malfoys, I couldn't go forward with a lie on my lips. I swallowed hard. "I know."

"You do?"

"I panicked."

Understanding stiffened his spine. "That's why you had me take you home."

I held him tighter. He didn't fight but he didn't relax. "I didn't know how to talk to you about some of my concerns. You know about my mum and dad. I didn't want to hurt you and I was afraid."

"Was? Are you afraid now?"

"Of a great many things. But not about us."

He was too smart to ask what had made the difference, but he was quiet for a little while. "Then if I were to ask you again?"

"You already know the answer."

"I do?"

"Yes."

He kissed me and it was as if it was our first kiss. His lips were dry and a little chapped, but I imagined mine weren't any better. Neither of us tasted particularly minty fresh, but it was real and it was arousing. I shuddered and he broke the kiss.

"We should probably wait."

"Yeah," I agreed. But I touched my finger to the moisture beading on his lower lip then spread it like gloss over that plump skin.

He snatched my hand. "Don't do that."

Desire spread its wings and I caught my breath. "Really?"

"Really. According to you, we have a ritual to perform."

I nodded. "When the moon is full."

He turned his head, took a look at the reflective silver patches of moonlight on the river downstream. I noticed the bare earth circle was illuminated completely by the moon and I knew that it was time. "Draco."

"I know." He let me go and I rose to my feet. When he was standing, he turned away from me. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

His skin was cool and smooth under my palm, and I felt the tension in his body. "I'm sure. My doubts are gone. If we have trouble, I'll talk to you about it. I'm no longer afraid."

He faced me. "I never expected you to be afraid of anything. I'll talk to you, too."

"That's the best promise we could make each other. I'm sure we won't always see eye-to-eye on things."

He snorted and I smiled.

The, without another word, we crossed the glade to retrieve the chalice, bowl, and stone.

"This stone?" he asked.

"I believe so."

He placed it on the flat protrusion while, with reverent fingers, we both traced the markings on the pewter. "I've never seen these before," he said.

Quietly, we gathered our ritual tools. As we walked to the edge of the earthen circle, I had the sense that the entire glade was paying attention. I placed the bowl of grain at my feet, then, meeting Draco's eyes, I removed my nightgown. I felt the weight of his stare, and even though we'd seen each other nude, had known one another intimately, it felt like our earlier kiss -- as if it was the first time.

The night air was cool enough for my nipples to retract and my skin to prickle. Despite the circumstances, or because of them, desire beat its wings and heat sparked in my womb.

I watched as he slid the flannel pants from his hips, the dark golden curls at his groin offered little warmth against the chill of the air.

Lifting the metal bowl in my hands, I stepped next to this generation's Malfoy. He gathered the goblet and the stone, then, together, we stepped into the circle.

The second my bare foot touched the gritty earth, I felt the magic, the sentient energy of the glade, the broader distant energy of the forest and the plains beyond. Somehow, it felt as if my entire life had built to this moment. The difficulties of my childhood, the years of friendship with Harry and Ron, the war years, learning how to love from Ron, and then his loss, Harry's loss, all of it had molded me into the woman I was today.

Unerringly, I found the center of the circle. I had done it several times now, but each of those times it had been someone else's ritual. Now it was my turn. Willingly, eagerly, I was offering to bind my life to Draco's and to this land, his land, our land.

Draco's expression was as serious as I'd ever seen it, and we didn't speak as we knelt on the ground. I'd forgotten how cold the dirt could be, but ignored it. I watched him turn the unfamiliar stone in his palm and reached out to show him how it should be held. His swift glance and clenched jaw reminded me how proud he could be ... and yet I also knew it masked a vulnerability he strove to hide from the world. He closed his eyes for a moment before accepting my help.

"This is why I was taken, love. To understand."

He nodded abruptly and then the fingers of his other hand wrapped around mine, creating an odd sandwich. "We'll do it together then."

My heart soared. "Together."

"Always together."

I blinked away my sudden tears and concentrated on digging a hole in the earth. It hadn't been done for centuries; the dirt was hard-packed and the stone still wasn't sharp, but we managed. Our hands got filthy but it didn't matter. Once the hole was large enough, we placed the stone in the center.

Unlike the last ritual I'd participated in, it wasn't the Malfoy, Draco, who coaxed me into sitting cross-legged. I was the one who coaxed him. The openness of our position, naked as we were, was a little odd. There was nothing hidden from each other and I noticed that he shifted a little where his testicles touched the cold earth. Remembering how uncomfortable it could be, I vowed to tell him about that some day.

Together Draco and I formed an enclosure around the divot we had dug, our knees touching. I felt a low-lying hum of magic at each place I touched the earth or him.

"Do you feel it?" I asked, balancing the pewter bowl in my hands. It was filled with the same type of grain I'd eaten the day before.

"Yes," he nodded, and reached for the goblet of water.

Because he had never said the words and I had, as his many times distant ancestor, I was the one to speak. "As my eyes, mouth, and hands do, follow my lead. Together we must join on this sacred ground in this sacred union."

His hand the one holding the goblet shook, and I found that I was trembling just a bit as well. Even if it was what we wanted, there was an enormity to this ritual which couldn't, shouldn't be taken lightly.

By the silvery light of the moon his eyes met mine and held. Pale gray, like the early morning sky, to mid-brown, like the very earth we sat upon. I began to slow my breathing. Within three breaths he had synchronized his respiration to mine.

Staring unflinchingly at another person isn't something we do often in our normal lives. It's uncomfortably intimate, but this was Draco and I loved him.

I have always thought the phrase *the eyes are the window to the soul* was rubbish, but sitting cross-legged on the cold ground in the Heart of the Malfoys, I learned there was more to it than I had ever understood. If one looked long enough, deep enough, and without fear ... then one discovered that they were indeed the window to the soul.

Draco's soul was beautiful.

He precipitated my next move, clearly remembered from my descriptions, and raised his left hand, palm forward. I shifted the pewter bowl to my right hand then placed my left hand against his palm. It was larger than mine, damp with nerves and slightly calloused. I could feel the tremor in his body, but I could also feel his pulse throbbing between us.

In. Out.

Our breaths had found a rhythm, and within our own time our hearts began to beat as one. I no longer felt the cold air or the hard ground beneath me. My entire existence seemed to be focused our heartbeat and our breath. I'd never felt closer to another human in my entire life. Not Mum or Dad, not Harry or Ron. And not even Draco those few hours ago as I was telling him what had happened to me.

I knew him now, just as he knew me.

My eyes watered and I knew it was time. We knew it was time.

Loath to end the moment, we reluctantly moved our hands, together holding the pewter bowl directly over our earthen vessel. I fingered the runes carved along the top of the pewter before dipping my right hand into the bowl. Gathering a handful of grain, I carefully mounded it atop the stone, piling it high, using every single morsel. Then Draco and I placed the bowl to my left, beyond the boundary of our crossed legs.

Power.

Familiar, ancient power rose up through the cooling outer shell of the planet, flooding through my body, my feet, my legs, my mons. I was suddenly wet with urgent, primitive need -- my uterus, my heart and beyond.

Through our joined hands, I felt Draco react to the magic. He was partially erect and I remembered how that felt, the urgent blaze to a man's desire instead of the slow, rolling boil of a woman's.

I took a deep breath, and Draco followed suit.

We needed all four hands to hold the goblet. We were shaking so hard, so filled with elemental power. We wrapped our hands around the stem of the goblet. There were

too many fingers, but we managed to pour the water over the grain, soaking it, causing much to wash into the basin we'd carved together.

When the goblet was empty we placed it to the right of our enclosed knees. Next, we leaned back, our palms, left and right, touching as we tilted our heads to look up into the night.

The moon dominated the sky, hovering immediately overhead. It was full and pale, but we felt its power nonetheless. I closed my eyes, aware Draco was probably doing the same. The cool touch of magic danced over my face, my hair and shoulders, tightening my nipples, and melding with the earth magic grounding me.

My entire body trembled from the massive energy, and as before, I could feel Draco's life force, and the nearby wildlife, the trees and plants of the forest, three life forms in the stone manor, and underlying all of that, there was a distant link with the great crumbling henge on the plains. I could feel Draco's impatience, and I began to speak. I knew not what I said, but I recognized it from that first Neolithic moment at Stonehenge and from the Malfoy who had sanctified this ground.

It was a binding, a promise, a vow.

Draco spread his fingers, locking our hands together.

Then, channeling all that magic, we bent forward to place our hands over the hole in the ground. We were so close that we pressed our cheeks together and could hear our breaths, still in synch with one another, as we sealed the wound we'd made with our own hands. The stone's smooth surface fitted beneath us, no longer grain-spotted or damp from the water sacrifice. But I no longer cared about the stone or the gritty dirt beneath my bum.

All I cared about was Draco.

He looked at me as if he was starving.

Using our hands as the fulcrum, he rose awkwardly to his knees. I couldn't resist him. I didn't want to resist. It no longer mattered what we had or hadn't done in the past. This was now and everything was different.

I didn't wait for permission; he'd already granted me that.

Opening my mouth, I caught the drop of pre-seminal fluid glistening at the tip of his rampant erection. Draco sucked in his breath, the first one out of synch with mine since we'd begun the real ritual, and I smiled in sheer feminine delight as I tasted the salty, bitter flavor of his essence.

It wasn't enough. I wanted more and so I opened my mouth, engulfing the soft mushroom-headed erection, slipping my lips past the ridge of his glans, tonguing the thick ridge of his vein along the underside of his shaft. I heard him groan, his hands moving, but our fingers were still entwined and I wasn't letting go.

His dark golden curls tickled my nose, my lips, and my chin, and I inhaled the musky aroma of his most private place. Then, hollowing my cheeks, I sucked, rocking back on my pelvis, leaving his erection glistening in the pale moonlight.

"Granger ... Hermione ... love." His erection bobbed in the night air.

"Draco." I said and tilted my head. His eyes were shadowed, fixed upon me, and desire took flight in one powerful down stroke. I surged up from my sitting position, pulled as if by magic.

He conquered my mouth, his tongue sweeping against mine, tasting, thrusting, compelling me to respond, to submit. I welcomed him gladly. And then my hands were free and touching ... touching ... touching him in all the ways I'd ever needed: the fine hair of his chest, his pebbled, knut-sized flat male nipples, the lean ripple of muscle leading to his goodie trail.

My emotions were overwhelming and amidst desire there was profound love and more than a little awe.

He pulled back, his eyes smoldering with an intensity I'd rarely seen, but we knew one another now. There was nothing to fear and everything to gain. Keeping his eyes on mine, he settled back on his haunches and, for the very first time, took one of my nipples in his mouth.

I gasped.

I mewled.

He suckled, tonguing me until my womb clenched and my clit sparked with tiny spasms.

I cried out his name.

And suddenly I was on my back and he was between my legs. In one savage thrust, he slid home and I came so hard that I saw the stars above the night sky at Stonehenge.

I distantly heard Draco shout as he shuddered his release.

Magic suffused him ... me ... us.

I was Hermione Granger.

I was Draco Malfoy.

I was the Heart of the Malfoys.

I was the henge on the plains.

My heart pounded and I heard his rasping, ragged breath in my ears. I loved the feel of his body pressing on mine and I clung to him, never wanting the moment to end, feeling more replete than ever before.

I whispered to him, to the glade, to the land, "I love you."

Draco angled off me, his arms shaking from the effort. "I love you."

He managed to get to his knees and then to his feet, brushing off the dirt embedded in his skin. Instead of offering me a hand, Draco retrieved our clothing from the edge of the circle. Then he helped me to my feet; in truth, I was rather shaky. We didn't speak. What was there to say after an experience so profound? We retrieved the bowl, the chalice, and the stone before making our way to the river.

We touched frequently -- little touches -- a finger, a sweep of the hand down my back as he guided me across the glade.

At river's edge, Draco brushed off my back, my bum, and my legs with his pants before doing the same for himself. I smiled, he grinned, and we washed ourselves in the cold water.

We then dried one another with the ragged hem of my nighty. Four hands and ten willing fingers made the work of dressing swift but satisfying. Once dressed and

somewhat clean, we found my bracken bed and curled up underneath the green blanket. Limbs fitted in an embrace we were loath to break.

We kissed then. Softly, reverently, deeply.

I closed my eyes, breathing in the night air, and had never felt so connected nor so content.

Draco's lips brushed the corner of my eye.

Our breaths synchronized once again.

One, two, three.

And then we were asleep.

~o0o~

Affirmation

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione and Draco awaken to the first day of their new lives.

The Witch Bower

By Bambu

Author's Notes: All standard disclaimers may be found in **Chapter One**, even my thanks to SnarkyWench for carving time out of her ultra-hectic schedule to beta this for me.

~o0o~

The bower's magical barrier radiated with new layers of fortification, powered by the magic of the earth and sky and the couple sleeping under a blanket of leaves. Sparkles of rainbow light scintillated between trees, ferns, and grasses. All of the Malfoy lands and family would winter with ease, flourishing in the coming years.

The bride's consecration had been according to the traditions the bride had been shown. The bower touched her bonded life force delicately, as if she were the newest shoot in the glade, sending a breath of magical affection through that connection. She stirred lightly in her sleep, a smile causing a faint dimple in one cheek.

She was a highly satisfactory mate for The Malfoy.

Tenderly, a magical hand removed the living blanket from the entwined couple. Then deftly, without disruption, the bower shifted The Malfoy and his bride from river's edge to the wizard-made structure generations of Malfoys had called home, and from there onto the bed they would share for their lifetime.

~o0o~

The first thing I noticed when I awoke was really two things. For one, I couldn't hear the gurgling river nearby, nor was I lying on the hard ground, albeit padded with a bit of bracken. Instead, I heard deep, even breathing and felt the soft resiliency of a feather bed beneath my hips. If I listened more carefully, I could hear logs shifting in a fireplace and knew we weren't at my flat. There was also an utterly wonderful smell of hot tea and something to eat.

My mouth salivated at the thought of breakfast, my stomach growling in agreement. My body was distinctly unromantic. Despite the enticements to wakefulness, I wriggled closer to Draco, my backside snuggling against his hips, and nestled my head into the bony pillow of his arm and shoulder trying to get comfortable.

He chuckled. "I'll need that arm at some point today, Granger, and it's fallen asleep."

I turned to face him. He had dirt smudged across the bridge of his nose and his hair was slightly oily, but his eyes were filled with an inner glow and they were the softest dove gray. Unbidden my fingers found his mouth, tracing his lips, and he didn't shy away as he might have done in the past. Instead, miraculously, he kissed my fingers before placing my hand over his heart.

My lips curved in a smile. "Good morning."

Draco wrapped his arms around me and rolled onto his back, pulling me across his body. His morning erection pressed against my hip. My fingers glided down his stomach, encountering a bit of a rough patch where dirt had turned to mud from the river and crusted against his skin. I giggled to think of this usually impeccably groomed man having a bit of mud on his skin, but I didn't stop my exploration. I found his goodie trail, and my index finger traced its slightly coarse path until I could dust my fingers over the mushroom head of his cock. The dove gray had almost disappeared from his eyes as his pupils dilated to black, and his quick intake of breath let me know he was as affected as I.

This wasn't something he would have done a couple of days ... months ... ago, and I sent a private, mental thank you to the glade for its interference.

Draco's hands wrapped around my biceps and he practically lifted me atop him, straddling his hips, feeling the hot, slick shaft of his erection nesting between my nether lips. His hands released my arms, but they slid down, over my elbows, my forearms, and clasped my hands in his, exactly as they had done the night before.

My nipples tightened and the nubbin of hooded flesh between my legs tingled. Despite my eagerness to have joyously abandoned sex during the light of day when I could watch him, my body had more pressing demands. I drew one of our joined hands to my mouth and kissed his knuckles while watching his chest rise and fall in an escalating rhythm of excitement.

My voice, when I found it, was deeper than normal. "With all the desire to continue this right now, I'm ... would it be utterly unromantic of me to ask you where the Water Closet is?"

I felt his amusement in the rise and fall of his chest beneath me. "It might sound completely unromantic to anyone else, but this is us, Hermione. It's not unromantic at all. In

fact, I'd like a bath and something to eat before we continue what I hope will be a most welcome addition to my daily schedule."

He sounded so patrician, but he had released my left hand and was tracing one of my nipples as he spoke. His eyes were riveted to the path of his finger. It was almost as if he'd never before touched a woman's breast, let alone mine.

In the quiet of the room his stomach growled and his eyes flew to mine, a hint of color staining his cheeks. I giggled. "Mine did the same thing just before you woke up. I'd like to do nothing more than stay here with you, but I'm starving and I'm filthy. Could we postpone this?"

"Yes, of course. We can do this later." All at once, the Draco Malfoy I was most familiar with dropped back into place, his face a mask of the bland handsome aristocrat. It terrified me. He must have understood my reaction, for his hand left my breast to wrap around a hank of my filthy hair and pull me toward him. His eyes blazed. Unerringly, he placed his dirt-ingrained left palm between my breasts, directly over my wildly beating heart. "I haven't forgotten what has happened, nor do I intend to backtrack in any way. I only want to postpone our idyll for a short time. I, too, would like to clean up, and I must notify the authorities that you've been found."

I shifted uncomfortably, my bladder reminding me that my need was increasingly urgent. "What will we tell them? I don't want ... can't we just hide for a little while longer? Please."

He smiled that elusive, winsome smile which always got to me. "I would like nothing more than that. Let me check on mother and Potter first."

Instantly I remembered Harry, and my expression must've shown how guilty I felt because his hand cupped my cheek.

"None of that. He's been in excellent care. Having them here has been easier than I'd expected. I visit them every day, and while I'm not you, I do talk to him."

"Shouldn't I -- Aren't there things we can do now to help them?"

"We'll find out, but let's hide for just a bit longer. Let today be for us."

How could I refuse such a request when it matched my own desires? When he ran a single finger from my collarbone down my chest, in the valley between my breasts and down to my navel, I was practically quivering with anticipated yearning.

Then an expression crossed his face that I'd never seen before: it was a wicked smirk. "If you'd like, Granger, I'll join you in that bath."

We both knew exactly what I thought of his suggestion because a freshet of moisture dampened my nether lips and his unflagging erection. "I'd like that."

His hands slid to my hips and I rose off him, reluctantly, a little insecure about whether the new Draco would remain after we faced the outside world. Selfishly I didn't want to see it happen yet. He seemed to sense my mood, and in a sign indicating just how much we had learned about each other during the ritual, Draco clasped my hand, slipped from the bed, and led me past a seating arrangement toward a closed door at the end of the room.

□

While we walked, I absently noted that his room was easily twice the size of mine. It was a pleasant surprise that the colors were similar to those I had chosen in my flat. I glanced back at his bed. Linens in muted earth tones with golden brown and taupe accents enhanced the flame of his headboard. I had no idea what type of wood it was, but it was sturdy and handsome and the bed's four corner posts almost reached the ceiling. At the foot of the bed stood an old captain's trunk, with an assortment of blown glass vases, and next to them were a silver tea service and a small plate of scones.

Draco paused in front of the door he'd led me to, not relinquishing my hand. "Granger, last night ..."

Recognizing his expression, I tenderly cupped his cheek and said, "I don't want us to forget, to lose what we've gained." He leaned into my caress. "It's important."

Our eyes met and locked. Unconsciously our breathing synchronized and I smiled while I dropped my hand to his heart. Once again, he raised one of his hands to my heart, nestling it in the valley between my breasts, and as easily as that we were united ... just as we had been in the glade.

"It is indeed." He smiled before opening the door onto a lavish *en suite*. A bath was already waiting and I noted that the fragrance wasn't Draco's but mine. House-elves, I remembered. The estate had a number of house-elves which Draco had begun paying wages the moment he'd taken up his inheritance. As a novelty it was wonderful to have my needs anticipated, but I wasn't sure how it would feel in the long run. He pulled my hand to his mouth and kissed the palm, drawing my attention back to him. "You do realize that we were married last night."

"I suppose we were." A glad little bubble rose in my chest. "Was it ... I hadn't realized ... is it official?"

"It has all the validity of a more modern ceremony. I'll send an owl to the Ministry to confirm it."

"All right."

"Do you want to go through the whole ritual?" His eyes bored into mine.

"We already did that."

"That we did." Draco laughed suddenly and I joined in. It was easy and playful, and it put my residual fears at ease. When our laughter trailed off, he leaned forward to nuzzle my cheek, pressing a kiss to the pulse point beneath my ear.

But I'd had a thought which sobered me. I didn't want him ever to regret what we'd done. Rebuilding his family's honor was so important to him. "We could do the whole modern ceremony if you're worried about what other people will think."

He angled to lean his shoulder against the door, and part of my mind admired his lean, naked form. I waited while he considered my comment.

When he spoke, his voice was even and thoughtful. "There is no modern ceremony which could compare with the majesty of last night's ritual. We're married. We just have to file the papers, unless you *want* a formal ceremony."

"Not really. Last night was ... magical, for want of a better word."

I loved that smile, the one which lit his eyes. "Let me attend to the formalities while you find your bath." He tugged me close to him, and his erection surged to meet me.

My fingers quickly encircled the silken sheath and I practically purred as he bucked into my hand. "Did I tell you that the first time I watched you in the scrying pool I saw something very interesting?"

"What?" He gasped as I stroked him. I felt the blood heat under my hands and his erection grew as I fingered the ridge of the vein running the underside of his length.

"I saw you, thinking about me, in a great big bed." I nodded across the room. "That bed."

He blushed. "You didn't?"

"I did. If I hadn't been so scared at the time I would've been *wet*, just like I am now."

His hand slid to the side, off my heart, cupping my right breast. His eyes were hot and predatory.

I leaned closer, my hand stroking. "How soon will you join me in the bath?"

"Give me ten ... no ... five minutes." His voice was husky, sending a thrill from my nipples to my clit, and I shivered.

"Please hurry. I want you, Draco." I released him. "I need ... need ..."

"To prove that what happened last night wasn't just the ritual?" He supplied the answer.

"I think so. Do you understand?"

"Yes, and I agree. But also like you, I would like to be a lot cleaner this time." He smiled then and kissed me ... a closed mouth brush of lips against lips. Then he swatted my bum.

I shrieked. "Draco!"

He laughed and left me at the door of the en suite. "Go, Granger. Get cleaned up. I have work to do before I explore every inch of your body."

He was halfway across his room before he handily scooped a navy blue dressing gown off the back of a chair. I watched him slip his arms into the sleeves before I stepped into the bathroom.

It was everything one could expect. It was luxurious but tasteful, all white and gold, with frosted windows for privacy. Candelabrum anchored to the large mirror lit magically when I closed the door, and I looked at myself ruefully in the reflective glass. My hair resembled a rat's nest and there were dirt streaks on my legs and arms and across my chest.

I quickly made my way to the porcelain toilet thanking one of Draco's forebears for incorporating modern toileting facilities in this old building. The next order of business was to clean my teeth. I found a two toothbrushes and a small vial of tooth powder. As the daughter of dentists I was familiar with a variety of teeth cleaning methods. My mum always told me that plain baking soda would suffice if I didn't have toothpaste handy. I'd always laughed at her, but perhaps she was right.

Wetting the bristles of the brush first, I sprinkled some of the powder atop them. It reminded me of piling the grain on the stone in our ritual, and I paused for a moment, letting the entire experience wash over me.

After several moments, the sharp scent of peppermint reached my nostrils and my brain, and I noted that the tooth powder had clumped on the head of the brush. I smiled, and returned to my grooming. The soda was gritty and slippery, and it polished my pearly whites quite effectively. It took extra rinsing, but when I had finished, I couldn't believe how clean my teeth felt. I was sure there was a magical enhancement added to the concoction, but I didn't really care.

My stomach growled again, twisting and demanding. I crossed to the door and peeked into Draco's room. He wasn't there, and despite the fact that I'd just brushed, I dashed across the room to snatch a scone from the tray. It was still warm. I stuffed it in my mouth as I returned to the bathroom, chewing and swallowing as if I hadn't eaten in weeks, which in some respects was a rather accurate assessment.

I brushed my teeth again, and then climbed into the large tub.

It was heaven.

Exactly the right temperature, exactly the right fragrance. I slid under the water entirely, soaking my matted, filthy hair, and then erupted through the bubbles. My hair dripped down my back, tendrils floating amidst the thick blanket of bubbles.

"Mind if I wash your hair?"

I turned my head to see Draco braced against the door frame watching me. He still wore the dressing gown, but it was unbelted and his partial erection was framed by panels of navy silk. I raked my eyes over him and my mouth was suddenly dry. "Not at all. I would love it actually."

He crossed to the sink first and scrubbed his teeth, and I smiled to think we were similar in this way.

"How are Harry and your mum?"

"They're fine. Apparently they sleep better here than at St. Mungo's." Our eyes met in the mirror. "I'll show you where his room is later."

"I'd like that."

He rinsed a fourth time and then slid an arm out of his dressing gown, revealing most of his back.

"Draco!"

"What?" He turned to face me, but I didn't see the quick concern flash across his face. Instead, I was still seeing the red marks on his back.

"Your back ... what ... when ... did I do that?"

He arched his back and turned his head, getting a look in the mirror, one hand still tangled in the blue silk. "Oh. You must have. I don't really remember. I was paying attention to other things." His eyes sought mine in the mirror and I knew that the flush on my cheeks was from more than the heated water.

"Me, too," I whispered.

He re-oriented on me and stepped next to the tub, the silk trailing behind him. "Budge up."

I scooted, and he put one long leg into the water, wrinkling his nose at the scent. "I'll smell like you."

"And that's a bad thing?"

He chuckled. "Not really. I like the way you smell."

I ran my hand up his calf, feeling the coarse, wet hair under my fingers. I rubbed his dirty knee with my hand, turned dirt to mud which then dripped into the bubbles and water, turning them brown. My eyes fastened on his groin, and his obviously growing arousal.

"Hermione," he growled.

I flicked my eyes up to his. They were dark again, dark with desire. "Hmmm?"

"Let me get in to the tub. Then you can assault me."

"Assault you?"

"Have your way with me. Is that better?"

I nodded and he smirked, but his expression turned to something softer as he withdrew his other hand -- bunched into a fist -- from the silk and slid into the tub behind me. I half-turned in the vee of his legs.

He said, "I know we've done this a bit backwards, but these are yours ... ours." He opened his fist. Nestled in his palm were two rings.

My breath caught in my throat and my eyes flew to his. "Oh, love." I leaned up to kiss him, and it was fresh and minty.

When we broke the kiss we were both breathing fast and simultaneously. He had clenched his hand while we kissed, and I now took his hand in mine, opening his fingers to touch the two rings, reverently tracing the carving. I recognized the pattern ... the words in old English. I looked up when he spoke.

"They're Poesy rings. I had a different ring a diamond -- to give you at the restaurant, but after last night"

There it was again, that proud yet vulnerable expression. I doubted he had ever let anyone else see it. "These are perfect."

His shoulders relaxed and he smiled the winsome curve of lips that was mine alone. "You can have the other ring too, but I thought -- Magnus told me where to find these this morning, and I ... they seemed right."

"I want to meet this MUM of yours, but he was right. They're ideal."

"Give me your hand, Hermione."

"I want to put yours on you as well."

"Of course." He offered his palm to me and I chose the larger of the two rings. I held the gold band, my thumb noting each groove cut into the soft metal, just as it had noted the same notches in the pewter goblet and bowl in the glade. "Will you tell me what it says? What it means? I can't read it."

He fingered the remaining ring. "Poesy rings stood for many things. In this case these mean fidelity and honor and forever."

Tears stung my eyelids and he took my left hand in his.

"It reads," his voice was a gossamer caress as he slipped the smaller ring over the knuckle of my ring finger, magic sizing it immediately to fit, *the Heart of the Malfoys*"

"Oh!"

Our eyes met and he pulled my hand to his mouth. "With this ring, I thee wed," he said, his mouth brushing both ring and finger.

My hands trembled. As in the glade the night before, it seemed that magic was playing its part in our private vows, but I knew the only magic here was us and what we felt for one another. I raised his left hand and slid the ring, which widened under my touch and the size of Draco's knuckles, onto his ring finger. His eyes were as damp as mine. "I take thee to my wedded husband, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for now, for always, and hereby I pledge thee my troth."

I kissed his finger as he had mine.

A dark blond eyebrow arched. "Do I get to kiss the bride now?"

"You'd better." I replied joyfully.

He cupped my cheek and his fingers felt raspy. I pulled back for a minute and he cocked his head in query. I turned his hand, noticing only now how water-logged his fingers were. I turned my hand as well. I looked like a prune.

I couldn't help it. I started to giggle. "Do you realize," I gasped, still laughing, "that we've exchanged rings in a bathtub?"

His laughter rippled the surface of the water. "I don't think we'll ever do things like other people." He said it almost ruefully.

"I think you're right. But, Draco, I don't think I'd want to. We aren't other people. We're us."

"That we are, Granger. That we are." He sat up suddenly and reached for a bottle on the inner ledge of the tub. "I wanted to ravage you here in the tub, but really, I think the whole wrinkly skin bit has changed my mind."

I laughed and grabbed the cinnamon scented soap from the soap dish, working a rich lather between my hands. "Next time then."

"Absolutely."

He poured a dollop of viscous shampoo into his hand and proceeded to wash my hair as if he'd done it frequently instead of this being the first time. While he worked my hair, I covered his chest, shoulders and arms with fragrant suds.

Frequently pausing for kisses, from butterfly brushes to deep tongue-twining moments, we were bathed and clean in fairly short order.

I stood first, letting the water and soap drip down my body. Draco rose behind me, lifting a small golden cauldron filled with warm water. He sluiced it over me in a fresh rinse before offering it to me for return treatment. "Self-filling, Granger."

As I rinsed him, I commented, "About that. I'm not really a Granger any more, am I?"

"You'll always be Granger to me. I don't think I could get used to calling you Malfoy, even if you are the Heart of the Malfoys."

"No, I can't see you doing that either."

We stepped from the tub, drying off in warm, thick towels, and then, together, hands clasped we re-entered his bedroom. We were so sedate that I tugged on his hand and practically ran to the bed, which had been made in our absence. I leapt onto the thick camel-colored duvet, Draco tumbling after me.

"Now! Now you can have your wicked way with me."

"After we eat," he said, sitting up and nodding at the tray at the foot of the bed. "I'm starved. I'm surprised you aren't as well."

I pouted a little, but my stomach agreed with him. It was already taking sides, I thought with some amusement. "I had a scone earlier, but I am hungry."

"Jilly's scones are not to be missed, but I think this will sustain us for our dalliance, my lady." He attempted to bow, but he listed toward the side to an accompaniment of my mirth.

"Then we shall just learn that food can indeed be an aphrodisiac. Let's see what ... Jilly? ... has given us now."

I expected him to pick up the tray, but instead he took the opportunity to lean across me, pressing against my breasts while he reached for his wand atop the chest next to

the bed. Our eyes met and my nipples tightened despite the warmth of the room. He stayed in that position for a minute or so, both of us distracted by the connection we'd created between us.

Arching up, I kissed him, and the moment changed into something else. Draco flicked his wand, the tea tray floated off the trunk, flying through the air to hover over us on the bed. "What is your pleasure?"

"Maybe I want to tie you to the bed posts and have my wicked way with you. You're too easily distracted from my charms, my husband ... oh! ... my husband." The lightheartedness of the moment changed once again. "Draco, you're my husband."

He nodded. "And you are my wife."

"It's different when you say it out loud, isn't it? It's rather nice, actually." I tilted my head. "My husband."

He angled over me, centimeters from my face. "My wife," he whispered just before he kissed me.

We forgot about the hovering tray filled with delicacies from the kitchen. We forgot about anything other than each other. I threaded my fingers through the silken strands I had always envied, and kissed the corner of his mouth. "I love you."

He said nothing, only devouring my lips, sucking my tongue into his mouth. It was incredibly erotic and I rocked my hips, feeling the ridge of his cock against my abdomen. His hands wandered, just as I'd always wanted them to, and then he wrapped them around me, rolling us until I was on top.

Neither of us was experienced enough to complete the motion without breaking the kiss, but when we came to rest, we were once again in the position we'd been in before our bath, before the exchange of our rings, and our spoken vows.

I smoothed my hands across his chest, his hair soft and slightly damp under my palms. I'd always liked hair on a man's chest. There was something adult about it. Denuded chests made me think of little boys. I had never been interested in having a little boy in my bed. I wanted a man.

I smirked a little and tweaked his nipples. He grunted and I felt his cock jerk.

"What was that, Granger?"

"Just checking."

"Checking what?"

I flicked my fingernail across the ridged dusky bud and he groaned. "Checking that you like it as much as I do."

"Christ!" Draco's hands found my breasts, and he pinched first one and then the other. Not too hard, but enough.

I whined and slid along his fulsome desire. I was wet and ready, so very ready. Rising on my knees, taking my weight on my thighs, I slid my right hand to grip his pulsing soft-steel shaft and guide him to me. My other hand flattened over his pectorals, and his hips bucked upward, slipping neatly in place. Removing my hand from between us, I used it to balance on his hip, and lowered myself onto him slowly, fully, feeling every inch of his hard length fill me.

His eyes never left mine, and for a moment it was as if we were still in the glade, on the bare earth, coupling while magic seared through us. We breathed in unison and I ground against his pelvis, his coarse pubic hair adding friction against my clit. I felt the impact through my entire body, inhaling sharply, out of synch with Draco, but our eyes never left one another's.

He grabbed my left hand with his and placed it directly over his heart. Then he put his on my heart—it was the same gesture as earlier but far more erotic. Our hearts beat in time and my breathing shifted to match his.

I rose, sliding upward until he was barely encased within my body. My heart pounded in my ears, in my palm, in his chest. Then, he flexed his arse, slamming into me, hitting my clit with his pelvis.

"Unh."

"Fuck, Granger. Do that again."

Once more I rose, arching my back slightly, tightening my inner muscles. Air whistled past his teeth, but our eyes, our hands, our lungs and our hearts were connected. He pushed into me again and I cried out.

He moved then, grabbing my hands as we had been joined in the glade and earlier in my bedroom the night I'd been so unhappy. But this time he wasn't preventing me from touching him. This time he pulled me to him, wrapping around me, rolling us until I was underneath him, and then he braced himself on his elbows and thrust. Deep enough to hit my cervix. It almost hurt, but he pulled back and thrust again.

"Draco." It was a whisper, an endearment.

"Yes, baby." He thrust again.

I slid my hand between our bodies, slipping my fingers around him as he pulled out and thrust in, using fingers to press against my clit. My eyelids fluttered. Lights sparkled at the edge of my vision.

"Look at me, wife!"

My eyes flew to his, heart racing.

He thrust again.

"Husband," I cried.

He roared his release, slamming into me, my hand trapped between us, but it was enough, and I arched off the bed, my inner muscles contracting about his pulsing shaft.

I gasped for breath, extracting my hand and wrapping both arms around him, sliding against his sweat-dampened skin.

"Hermione," he murmured rather raggedly in my ear.

"Draco." I fingered his hair, looking at the golden band on my finger. He angled off me, dropping to the mattress at my side, panting. His forehead pressed into earth-toned bedding. I turned toward him, smoothing my hand along his spine to the crest of his bum. "Are you all right?"

He tilted his head, gray eyes peering at me through a curtain of white hair. "Never better actually. Give me a moment."

"You may have all the moments you need, for the rest of our lives if you like."

"Oh, I like. I like it very much indeed."

After another minute, he stretched like a cat before sitting on his knees. His left hand rested upon my hip, and he groped for his wand with his right hand. He cast a gentle Cleansing Spell on us both. "Something to eat and then a nap, don't you think?"

I eyed the still floating tray, my stomach telling me how interested it was in the display of food. "I do. What about later? After our nap?"

"Well, then, I think," he eyed me with dark gray eyes, "after a visit with Potter and Mum ... I think I'd like to ravage you in the tub."

"Yes, please."

"Excellent."

As he fed me the first hothouse strawberry, I knew that my life would be filled with great happiness.

~o0o~

Winter's touch was seen in the frost coating branches, dying leaves, and stones of the forest beyond the bower's perimeter. It was a time of sleep and renewal in the heart of the Malfoys. The last green leaves clinging to life within the bower quickly fell under the season's inevitable encroachment.

Moonlight, the color of Malfoy hair, gilded the naked branches of the trees, shining in pale blotches onto the dark forest floor. In the midst of one of those patches, a small russet and white pony folded its legs, curling into a sleeping position atop an abandoned bed of deadfall bracken and a blanket of magically woven leaves.

The bower, having achieved its purpose, was content to doze peacefully until the sun's return.

Its work had been done ...

... until the next generation.

~o0o~

Finite Incantatem

Final Author Notes: I'm unaware of any restaurant called Epicurious, but when I Googled the name, I discovered a website (epicurious.com) which hosts some of the Culinary Institute of America's best recipes. Also, the photographs are culled from several places, most notably: [Visit Wiltshire](#); [Pictures of England](#); [The Connaught](#); and [Boughton Monchelsea Place](#).