

Smart Woman's Dream

by HannahSmith

Hermione stumbles into Lucius in a bar and spends the night with him. And then what? Isn't she taking a great risk?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Note: Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound (any remaining shortcomings are mine, of course).

Disclaimer: Disclaiming ownership of anything that rightfully belongs to someone else.

CHAPTER ONE

Hermione sat alone in her office, thinking.

The war was over. The light side had triumphed her best friends and her family had survived; they had finished their education at Hogwarts. Hermione now possessed a degree in the History of Magical Science, and she had landed a job as a Research Assistant at the university where she had studied. She still got together with her friends regularly; that was one of the good things of the wizarding world no matter where a person lived, no one was ever further away than one Apparition's length. She had good reason to be happy with her present life, and in general she was. But today she was a little less happy than usual.

Fool, she thought. You know this is not going anywhere. You'll be left with nothing. You made him an offer he chose not to refuse only because he was curious, and now that he's satisfied his curiosity, he'll be just as formal and distant as always. Why did you have to go and get tipsy? And why did you have to run into the most dangerous and attractive man alive when you hadn't your wits about you like you usually do? And why did Ginny leave you to make a fool of yourself? And why, why... did he take you up on it? You're not even his type!

She tried to relive it all, but some passages were a little fuzzy. She and Ginny had been having slightly too much to drink at their favorite bar when, on returning from the ladies' room, she had bumped into Lucius Malfoy. She hadn't even known he was there. He had apologized, though it hadn't been his fault at all, and had commented on her dark-red dress matching the colour of her cheeks a condescending, insipid remark that meant nothing, just social glue. But in her half-intoxicated state, she had gone into it, telling him that she had been hoping for him to notice her, and would he share a drink with her? He'd led her to a table nearby and fed her some more alcohol while Ginny had snuck off, leaving her to her fate. After another thirty minutes of empty flirting, he'd invited her to leave the place with him. She'd said yes, then suddenly sobered up somewhat at the idea that this was getting serious, that he obviously meant business. But she had not been sober enough to back off. She had been flattered and excited after all, Malfoy senior was a most attractive man, even though he most probably was a very wrong man for a smart woman; and she had been extremely curious about what he would be like as a lover. And she had found out all right. He had taken her by the arm, and after saying a few quick words to Draco, who had turned out to be sitting in another corner, they'd left together. He'd Apparated them to her flat, straight into her bedroom. And from there things became fuzzy but not just because of the alcohol. *That man is a fabulous lover, she thought. He had done things to her she had never even heard of. And she was still blushing at the thought of some of the things she had done to him, fuzzy-brained as she had been. She heaved a sigh. Well, at least I've experienced it once in my life* she thought gloomily.

She refused to think of the fact that, indeed, she had harboured a slight crush on him for years, though she had only seen him a few times before. And she also refused to

think of the fact that she had been quite touched by his gentleness last night. She had not realized that a plain one-night stand could involve tenderness as well as simple lust and passion. And she had least of all expected it from him, cold-blooded Death Eater that he had been. Not that he had fooled her into thinking he meant anything by it, though. But this would definitely make it more difficult to forget about him as quickly as possible.

Around five in the morning, he had Apparated back to his own place after taking his leave of her very politely, thanking her for her pleasant company and a most enjoyable evening. But he had not said anything like: *we should do this again some time*. She knew it would take her quite a while to get the whole thing out of her head.

Hermione had not quite finished her reverie when someone knocked at the door. Before she could say 'Enter!', someone came in. She didn't need to look up she knew it was him. She could not suppress the rush of expectation. So, at least she hadn't terribly disappointed him last night; why else would he seek her out again? So, this might not end as a one-night stand: maybe a two-night stand...? And she looked up from her desk.

Lucius Malfoy, former Death Eater, present Ministry of Magic employee, admired and envied by many, hated and detested by probably just as many, sat alone in his study at Malfoy Manor, thinking.

The war was over. The light side had triumphed. He had made a smart career move; earlier than many others, he had understood that the Dark Lord was bound to be defeated at some point, and his disgust at the ever more extreme atrocities that he and the other Death Eaters were asked to commit increased with every raid. Then he had discovered as he had long suspected that his good friend Severus had truly joined the other side, acting as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix instead of the Dark Lord. It had not taken him long to calculate his odds; he had turned double agent too in the final, sordid phase of the war. When it was over, he had received much more praise for his recent switch than censure for his past sins. He had been offered a Ministry job instead of being sent to Azkaban; he had not lost his estate or his money; he had not suffered any serious injuries; and his son and his ex-wife had survived (though they had already been divorced long before the end of the war when she had run away with her brother-in-law, Rodolphus Lestrangle, who did not like Bellatrix' relations with the Dark Lord and was looking for an excuse to leave her). Lucius' son had seen the light of his own accord and now lived with him; they got along quite well these days. He was an eligible bachelor again, free to do as he liked. He had good reason to be happy with his present life, and in general he was. But today he was a little less happy than usual.

Fool, he thought. You know this is not going anywhere. She is far too young for you. Your past is tainted, your ways are set, and you decided to give up on superficial flings, remember? And she doesn't need you. She can get every handsome, intelligent young wizard she wants, having played an important role in the victory, being best friends with Mr Harry Bloody Potter and Mr Son of Muggle-loving Weasley. She was probably just flattered last night after all, you're still somebody in the wizarding world. Why did you have to go and take her up on a bit of silly flirting? Surely you're not that desperate! She's not even your type...

He rose from his chair and went to one of the large windows with a view of the beautiful grounds surrounding the Manor. He felt restless and a little angry with himself ~~for~~ getting sentimental in my old age, he thought with some self-mockery. *Where did this pricking conscience come from? Here I'm worried about the tender feelings of a girl who probably finished off more Death Eaters and other Dark opponents than flies in her life, even though she was my son's classmate. And ten to one that she's already forgotten about last night.* He realized that he would not like it if Hermione had, indeed, forgotten all about last night.

What exactly had happened? He had been sitting in a bar by himself. He and Draco had come together, but Draco had joined a few friends soon after their arrival. Lucius had been sitting alone, looking at the people around him. Most of them were not alone; they were there with friends or with their dates, having fun. He also noticed that most people were younger than he was. How had that happened? He saw some people he knew. He saw purebloods like Ginny Weasley, who sat at a table not far away from him, and Muggle-borns like Hermione Granger, who sat opposite to her. They seemed very lively and cheerful, talking and laughing and drinking.

He kept watching them for a while. No, he was not a snob about Muggle-borns any longer. He had seen the folly of that long ago, and so had Draco. He still was a snob about intelligence and talent, though. He could not bear stupidity and incompetence. He had never been able to tolerate it in his male associates, and these days he could not stand it in women either. He was sick and tired of dating silly females only because they threw themselves at him, just seeing his status, his wealth and his good looks, not able to see beyond that. The mornings after were always so disappointing that he had quit dating during the last half-year. But the Manor was large, and when Draco left for a home of his own at some point in the future, it would be very empty. He wondered if he was doing something wrong.

He was still watching the two girls. The Weasley girl was not unattractive; she had filled out in the right places, done something rather sophisticated with her hair, showing off good teeth by smiling a lot. The Granger girl was a different story altogether. He had never stopped to think about how she looked possibly because she hardly seemed to care about it herself. He remembered Severus telling him how eager to please she always was in class, how annoying in her attempts to be better than everybody else, and how her questions never ended. But Severus had had to admit (though grudgingly) that she was easily the brightest student he'd ever seen that she perhaps even came close to himself, which meant a great deal coming from the much-feared Potions master. He and Severus hardly ever talked about women, Severus leading a mainly non-existent sex life while Lucius thought it beneath him to flaunt his easy successes in that department. But he remembered how Severus had once told him that he found brains much more exciting than anything else, especially in a female, and that it was such a pity that so many truly intelligent females tried to hide their brains because so many truly thick-headed males felt threatened by them. Lucius had joked that Severus might want to try and court miss Know-It-All Granger, if he found her cleverness so irresistible. Severus had turned and left without saying another word, and they had never said anything about the subject again. Lucius knew that he had hurt his friend by saying that, for he knew very well that Severus still mourned Lily Evans.

He was still watching Hermione Granger. She had lost that girlish insecurity, that eagerness to please. Over the past few years, she had gained a confidence that translated into a certain grace in her movements, a composure in her features. He wondered what the girls were talking about.

Lucius looked away from Hermione Granger. He did not want to be caught looking at her. He went to the bar, paid for his drinks and headed for the exit, meaning to tell Draco goodbye on the way. But when he passed the ladies' room, he suddenly found himself bumping into Hermione, who had turned up there without paying proper attention to her surroundings. She looked at him with shining eyes, a blush on her face. His womanizing style had not left him; he apologized for their collision and complimented her on the colour of her dress and the roses in her cheeks, holding her by the arms a bit longer than the situation warranted. He expected her to be embarrassed and walk away from him; she'd never paid him much attention the very few times they had met before. But she did not walk away; she looked back at him and smiled, a beautiful smile, the light from the candles on the walls reflecting in her dark-velvet eyes. She told him that she had been waiting for him to notice her, and could they sit down and share a drink? He was more than surprised he was most pleasantly surprised.

He had forgotten all about his decision to stop his empty dating. Hermione Granger was different somehow. He had never dated anyone of her type, and he was curious. And she seemed curious too.

They had made love with an unexpected passion; she obviously was not very experienced, which he found rather endearing, but she had made up for her lack of experience with a stunning inventiveness and a very Gryffindor lack of timidity. Though their interaction had consisted of more action than conversation, he could tell that she had a quick and bright sense of humour. He did not stay with her all night; that had become his custom to avoid that disappointing morning after. On returning home he was still slightly dazzled. *Severus was right*, he thought just before he fell asleep. *Brains were* much more exciting than looks not that Hermione had not seemed quite beautiful to him this night. And when he woke up in the morning, he found that he would have liked to see her lying next to him now to share a light breakfast, to make some more conversation, and to make some more love.

Watching his woods under the morning sun, Lucius thought of it all. He found that he was still curious. He wanted to know more about Hermione Granger, and he wanted to know more about his own reactions to her. He wanted to walk with her under those trees, and he wanted to see what she would look like in his home. He turned from the window and arranged a few papers on his desk. Then he left the Manor and went to the building where he knew that she worked. He asked for her at the reception, went up to her room and knocked, and entered without waiting for permission.

'Good afternoon, Miss Granger,' said Lucius. 'Am I permitted a few minutes of your undoubtedly precious time?' He smiled confidently at Hermione, closing the door.

'Certainly, Mr. Malfoy,' she replied, hoping that her confusion did not show. 'Would you like some tea?'

'That would be excellent,' he said.

She went to a corner of the room where she kept mugs and teabags. He looked around and walked to one of the bookcases that lined the walls.

While Lucius was in the back, thumbing through the books on the shelves, out of sight for anyone standing at the door, the door opened, and his son looked around it. Hermione looked up from the tea she was making.

'Hi, Draco,' she said, remembering that he had seen them last night.

'I was looking for my father,' said the son. 'I was told by the receptionist that I could find him here.' He looked at her curiously. 'So you're his new paramour? They're getting younger every year.'

'Who said so?' she asked calmly.

'No one,' said Draco. 'I just thought you looked pretty infatuated last night, Granger, when you left together. And he never arrived home.'

'I see,' said Hermione. 'But maybe you should keep your thoughts on such subjects to yourself as long as they're not confirmed. Especially if you formulate them so rudely.' She gave him a cool glance.

Draco flushed with anger. 'Don't think it will last,' he said. 'My dad has had loads of women like you, but they never last.'

'Whatever you say,' she said. 'And now I'd like you to leave my office. Please remember to knock first next time.'

Draco turned his back on her and slammed the door behind him. Lucius emerged from the books and looked embarrassed.

'Please allow me to apologize for my son's behaviour,' said he.

'Oh, I'm used to him,' she said. 'And he's got a point. Infatuation, as he calls it, obviously always ends. What happens after that depends on a lot of things; it can vary between nothing, a nice memory, or some lingering sympathy. And sometimes it grows into love of some sort. But probably I'm not making myself very clear to you now. I'm not sure if you are capable of sympathy, and I'm pretty sure that you have no idea what love is. So you have fewer options than some other people. But I suppose that doesn't bother you much. Sit down.'

She gestured to the opposite chair, put the two tea mugs on the table between them and then sat down as well. She was glad to find that her hands weren't trembling. She didn't remember when she had decided to play it so cool, but it had come out rather convincingly, she thought or rather hoped.

He watched her with an expression of mixed irony and wonder. 'You're not being very nice to me,' he said.

'I'm sorry if you think so,' she replied. 'Maybe I'm wrong. Surely a lot of people around you are much less nice to you.'

'True, but you have shown some attraction to me.'

'I have. But that doesn't mean I have to like you.'

He lowered his mug. 'You amaze me,' he said.

'Good. That may keep you interested as long as it suits me.' *Is he buying this?*

'Well, well,' he said, narrowing his eyes. 'Quite apt at the game, are we?'

She put down her mug, too, and rested her chin in both hands, looking up at him. *Okay, here goes, she thought. May he not be able to see right through me like Snape always does.*

'Mr. Malfoy,' she said, 'last night's proceedings were very pleasant. I was not quite myself, as I'm sure you noticed not that I regret what happened, not at all. But I've not mistaken your behaviour towards me for more than it was. It's just that you know from experience what is the best way to get what you want for yourself. What makes you think that I don't understand that? And what makes you believe that it is not the same with me?' *There now reject him before he has the chance to reject you.*

He looked at her with increasing amazement. 'Do you feel used by me?' he said.

'No, I don't. You gave as much as you got.' *Liar, she thought.*

He took another sip of his tea and gave her an examining look.

'What if I tell you that I am quite capable of feeling sympathy?' he said with a slight smile on his beautifully curved lips. 'What if I tell you that I was nicely surprised to discover that a clever and book-loving witch such as yourself could be such exciting and adventurous company in more... earthly enterprises?'

She shrugged, but she could not help smiling back at his handsome face, feeling her desire for him building up again. He finished his tea and stood up, leaning over to her, his two hands on her desk.

'The reason for my calling today, Miss Granger,' he said in his lazy voice, drawing out the words, 'was to make another appointment with you, if you would wish it, that is. You did indeed surprise me; I'm beginning to think I may have missed something by being prejudiced in favour of more glamorous-looking women all my life. I feel we have not yet explored all depths of our present mutual areas of interest.' His eyes held hers with a laughing, inquiring look full of challenge and reckless promise.

She swallowed.

'It's Friday now. How about next Thursday, Mr. Malfoy?' she asked blandly.

He stepped aside from the desk and watched her for a few moments. 'Thursday?' he said with a lifted eyebrow. 'Is that really the best you can do?'

'I could try to squeeze you in on Monday,' she said, trying to throw in a flirtatious undertone, then looking down at her hands, hoping she wasn't blushing.

He smiled appreciatively, and in his eyes she recognized the look from last night when he had asked her if he could accompany her home. He did not answer her, but took a step forward and spread out his arms. Without really thinking or deciding about it, she rose from her chair and slowly walked towards him, her heart pounding in her throat, unable to say a word. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and began to kiss her so longingly and intensely that it made her feel dizzy, and she had to hold on to him for support. He kissed her until she lost all sense of time. It seemed ages before he lifted her up and made her sit down on the side of the desk, never removing his lips from hers. He kept on kissing her, unfastening his cloak while she pulled up her robe. Then he thrust into her impatiently, hungrily, crushing her against him as if to keep her from running away, his hands all over her body, whispering sweet words into her ear, kissing her lips and her face and her lips again, making her forget everything but him and what he was doing to her. She had closed her eyes and clung to him, completely abandoning herself to the wonderful sensations of the moment. She cried out against his shoulder when she came, feeling him come deep inside her just after that, and he tightened his embrace for a moment while she held him to her and tried to keep him inside her as long as possible. She rested her head against his chest, feeling his quick heartbeat gradually slowing down to normal. After holding her for a few

more minutes, he let go of her and stepped back again, arranged his clothes and hers, and picked up his cloak, which had dropped on the floor.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, knowing that she was flushed all over and that she had betrayed a very tell-tale eagerness.

He gave her a self-satisfied smile and tapped her on the cheek.

'Thursday,' he said contemptuously. 'Monday!' He shot her another lustful look. 'I'll pick you up tonight at eight,' he said. 'Be ready.'

'What for?'

He smiled broadly. 'For whatever takes our fancy,' he said.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'My place,' he answered. He opened the door, and looking back at her, standing in the doorway so the secretary on the other side could hear him, he said in a formal tone: 'Thank you for this most enjoyable exchange, Miss Granger. I'm very grateful that you managed to accommodate me in such a satisfactorily manner without previous notice.'

She jumped off the desk. 'It's been my pleasure, Mr. Malfoy,' she said with an uncertain smile.

He closed the door, and she heard him walk away while she was left at her office, full of confusion not to mention anticipation.

Damn Draco! Lucius thought on his way home. What was the matter with the boy? Draco had never bothered to comment on any of his father's dates before. Was it the old jealousy from their schooldays when Hermione would invariably get higher grades and Draco would often get scolded by his father for letting a Muggle-born get the better of him? Surely they must have gotten past that stage now?

But another thought nagged at the back of Lucius' head. Maybe this was another kind of jealousy. Maybe Draco had understood something that Lucius did not want to admit to himself as yet.

And what was Hermione thinking of, trying to tell him that he had only been using her, that she was all right with it because she had used him too, telling him to his face that he did not know what sympathy and love was, even suggesting that she did not like him all that much? Still, at least one thing was crystal clear: she might pretend not to like him, but she certainly could not resist him. He smiled to himself.

TBC

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione stumbles into Lucius in a bar and spends the night with him. And then what? Isn't she taking a great risk?

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CHAPTER TWO

In the following weeks, Hermione wasn't sure what was actually happening to her. They saw a lot of each other. Lucius would visit her at the office at impossible moments ('I've got a meeting in seven minutes, Lucius... No, that's NOT enough time'), call at her house preferably when she was taking a shower ('Ah, well, you can join me if you like'), overload her with gifts ('How did you know I love cinnamon tea?' 'Oh, Lucius... you really shouldn't...'), but never did he say anything that went beyond the present moment. Nothing to indicate that something of a more permanent nature was there; on the other hand, he said nothing to indicate that he was seeing other women after all, he had been divorced for years. Still, he said nothing to indicate that he actually *felt* anything for her apart from their obvious mutual sexual desire, which never seemed to abate and which made it impossible for her to put an end to this. And mutual it certainly was; once during their lovemaking he had whispered into her ear that he was becoming entirely addicted to her, that he could not get enough of her. And he proved it by his actions: when they were together, he could never keep his hands off her for long. It was the one thing she held on to.

A few times, after the first ten days, she had tried to protect herself and put an end to the affair, telling him that she found their meetings rather too frequent, that she needed more time to herself, that she did not want to impose on his time either. But she knew that he knew her arguments were hollow and her reluctance fake. She knew that she was falling for him hopelessly and completely with hardly any chance of a return. And she knew that her feeble and desperate attempts to end this affair were only attempts to save herself from some of the pain that would inevitably follow as soon as he'd become bored of her. She had no idea how he interpreted these attempts, and he did not tell her. All he did was ignore them or wave them away, making her forget everything by his brilliant smiles and breathtaking kisses. And after the next ten days she gave up, let go of her rational arguments, pushed her worries about his past and his true character to the background of her thoughts, and just enjoyed being with him, always thinking about him and longing for him.

One day, when she was at the Ministry for the arrangement of some grants for a new research project (and of course hoping to meet Lucius), she passed Arthur Weasley's office. She was on the point of knocking because she had not seen Ron's father for some time. But she heard voices inside and she hesitated.

'I'm sorry, Severus, but I find that difficult to believe,' she heard Mr Weasley's voice. 'It's a little too easy. I know he used to be your friend, and he is my colleague now, but how can you think that he's more than just a calculating opportunist?'

Ah, so the other person was Snape! Hermione tried to breathe as silently as possible. Apparently they were discussing Lucius. She knew she should not be eavesdropping,

but she felt that it was completely pardonable in this case. This was her chance to find out something more about that complicated man she felt so strongly about.

'No, Arthur,' she heard Snape's deep voice. 'You've got it wrong. That's not entirely your fault. I know he is doing all to keep up this appearance. It started as pure self-preservation, and now it's become so much of a habit to him that he cannot let go of it. But there is more to him trust me. We've known each other very well ever since we met as boys. He has never exposed me to the Dark Lord, either willingly or unwillingly, yet I'm certain that he must have had his suspicions about me for years. And he must have taken the trouble to hide them from the Dark Lord too, which really means something, as you well know. Give him the benefit of the doubt, at least a bit.'

Silence. Hermione still stood in the hallway, pressed against the wall, pulse racing.

Then Mr Weasley finally answered. 'I hope you're right, Severus,' he said. 'I'd hate to see you duped. You don't deserve that.' His voice was kind and friendly.

Snape cleared his throat. 'I won't be duped, Arthur,' he said. And in a much softer tone so that Hermione could hardly make out the words: 'And neither will someone else.'

Before Mr Weasley could say more, Snape swept out of the room too quickly for Hermione to pretend that she had not been listening. When he saw her, he immediately closed the door of Mr Weasley's office behind him.

'Good afternoon, Miss Granger,' he said matter-of-factly. 'We haven't met for quite a while. You look rather well these days. I presume your work is progressing?'

Hermione nodded. She did not trust her voice.

Snape took a long look at her and then gave her something that, for him, really looked like a smile.

'I'm glad of that, Miss Granger,' he said. 'But then I've always trusted your good judgment. Maybe you should have more faith in it yourself. Good afternoon.' And he walked away, robes billowing, leaving a wide-eyed and very puzzled Hermione behind.

She leaned against the wall, thinking. Did Snape know something about her and Lucius? Maybe Lucius had told him; they were friends after all. Or maybe he had seen them somewhere. No Draco! Draco and Snape were rather close. Draco was still not entirely happy to see her around so much, she knew, so he would not have bothered to keep their secret, especially not to his godfather. Well, it hardly mattered how Snape had found out. The far more important thing was that Snape trusted Lucius. Snape thought there was more to Lucius than he chose to show. If Snape didn't know, who would? And what about Snape's final remark that he trusted her good judgment? Was it a warning not to get involved too much? Or was it his way to express his approval? Probably the latter since he had smiled when he'd said it. Yes, she definitely preferred the latter.

This little scene made a great difference in Hermione's feelings about her situation. She had known Snape far too long not to have the greatest regard for his opinion. And as Lucius' friend, he certainly was in a position to know.

She knew that she might still be fooling herself, but she felt that this information provided her with an excuse not to give up on Lucius yet, even if she were able to. She kept a close watch on his behaviour towards her and tried to decide what it meant. It was true that he never made promises, never talked of anything that remotely resembled a commitment. But she remembered her surprise at his attentive and considerate behaviour ever since their first meeting; he was usually careful of her comfort and well-being, observant of her habits and needs. He seemed truly interested in her work, asking questions about it and remembering her answers. He had demonstrated as much when she'd shown him a part of her research and he'd made all the right comments. He showed much respect for her opinion and obviously admired her stamina when it came to scholarly research. He never said it, but he acted as if he cared for her. Maybe he was not one of those wrong men after all.

And then there were the discussions. Lucius kept luring her into defending her views on friendship and affection, loyalty and faith. He always ridiculed her sentimental notions as he called them, but somehow she got the feeling that he truly was interested in what made people on the 'good side' tick. Of course, since Voldemort's defeat, he had officially been on the 'good side' himself. But he had never yet told her how he really felt about it, and she did not always dare to believe what she had overheard at the Ministry. She sometimes doubted her interpretation of Snape's parting words. Lucius insisted that he was primarily practical in all social matters, though she found his recurring questions a little suspicious. But she knew she was prejudiced and thinking wishfully, hoping for her dream to come true.

And she rejoiced that, after three full months, he still seemed not to have lost any interest in her, his calls becoming even more frequent.

They were sitting on the sofa in front of the fire in his drawing room when he started one of those conversations again.

'Oh, come on, Hermione you're not that young and naive. You must have noticed that most people just use each other and call it friendship. And why wouldn't they since all parties benefit from it?' he said in a slightly amused tone.

'Oh, Lucius, we've had this sort of talk before. I don't want to talk to you about friendship and love anymore. *Because that reminds me of the one-sidedness of it between us.*

'I'm curious to hear your opinion you know that,' he said. 'I've always looked upon love as a mere convenience, furthering one's own interests by attending to that of some chosen other's.'

'No, that's just not true. Without love, life is unbearable for most of us.'

'So where does that leave me?' he said. 'How can I live, selfish, opportunistic, and power-seeking being that I am?'

She sighed. 'Maybe there is some true affection inside you, though you may not be conscious of it,' she said. 'Have you ever had any disinterested sympathy for anything or anyone? Your ex-wife, your son maybe?'

His face became cold and harsh for a moment. 'Not my ex-wife,' he said. He saw a look on her face that he did not immediately recognize. He had expected to see relief because he knew very well that she was much more involved in this affair than she had admitted as yet. But instead, she looked at him pityingly.

'I'm sorry to hear that, Lucius,' she said. 'You have deprived yourself of the very best things in life.'

He did not answer her, but raked up the fire a little more.

Hermione sighed. She was sick of this kind of conversation. And she was sick of hoping against hope. She was tired of pretending to take it all as lightly as he seemed to do. Maybe it was time for drastic measures. Maybe she should try to call his bluff. *And admit it you're hoping that just maybe Snape is right and that there really is more to him than meets the eye... that he may be capable of love after all... Keep dreaming!* she scolded herself.

'You know, Lucius,' she said, taking a deep breath, 'actually you're a cheat.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'How so, my dear?'

'You are the one using others, and you pretend that others are doing exactly the same so that you don't need to feel guilty. But you can only do that because others don't. You're exploiting the values of the rest of society while despising them. You laugh at others who hold up certain values, but it's only at their expense that you can do without those values.'

By the faint light of the fire, she could see his face harden.

'Well, I see what our Severus means by calling you a know-it-all,' he said. 'You've got me completely figured out, haven't you?'

She said nothing. She wished she had the courage to answer, *No, I hope not. I hope I'm wrong. I hope you'll contradict me and show me that you do know how to love...*

He turned to her and grabbed her shoulders, and she knew that she had made him angry.

'Shall I tell you something, Hermione?' he said in a dangerously low voice. 'It's been your precious society that has cheated me. I grew up around people who took it for granted that I would be just like them without giving me a choice people who expected me to join the Dark and give up on everything else. Have you any idea of the price we paid?'

Hermione tried to move back a little, but his grip on her shoulders was becoming almost painfully strong. The lines in his face were sharply drawn in the firelight, and the fire seemed to burn in his eyes. She realized that finally, finally he was giving her a glimpse of the real Lucius.

'Well, have you any idea?' he repeated in the same low voice. 'No, of course not. You just gloried in being a member of the Order, safely and soundly tucked up in all the right ideas and principles. You had the luxury of despising us without anyone expecting you to try and understand something of our motives. What do you know of the pressure... of the constraints and the compulsions... the blackmail... the horrors... the fear for oneself and one's family...'

He let her go now and wrapped his arms around himself.

'What do you know of switching off that button simply to survive...' he said. 'You never had to... You were never really alone...'

She tried to lay her hand on his arm, but he moved away from her.

He held up his left arm where the Dark Mark showed. It was clearly lined and unquiet, as if something stirred beneath. He cursed.

'What?' she said anxiously.

'It hurts,' he gasped. 'It always hurts a little, but now it hurts like in the old days when he summoned us...' His voice trailed away, and she saw him biting his lips. He grabbed his wrist with his right hand. She pushed his hand away and laid her own hands around his arm, covering the Mark. He stifled a cry.

'Please don't,' he begged. 'You're making it worse.'

But she kept holding his arm, and after a while, she felt him relaxing.

'The pain is gone,' he said at last.

She let his arm go, and he grabbed for his wand on the small table next to the sofa. *Lumos,* he said. With his right hand, he held the lit wand next to his left arm. The Mark was not entirely gone, but the dark lines had changed into white ones, like a very old scar.

Hermione watched his arm, not daring to break the silence, and then she looked up to his face. His expression was relaxed again, more relaxed than she had ever seen it. He finally put back the wand and averted his gaze from his arm to her eyes.

'You little witch...' he said in a low voice. 'What in Merlin's name have you done to me?'

'Nothing, Lucius,' she said. 'I had no idea this would happen.'

'No, no,' he said impatiently. 'What have you been doing to me these last few months?'

She shrugged. 'Satisfying your curiosity and fulfilling your sexual needs,' she said with a tinge of bitterness in her tone. 'And my own, of course.'

He turned to her and took her face between his hands.

'You don't mean that,' he said. 'That's not how *you* feel, Hermione. I know it isn't. But you're afraid that that's how *you* feel about it, aren't you?'

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. 'Of course you are. I've not given you any reason to think otherwise.'

He slowly pulled her towards him and enfolded her in his arms, her face hidden against his chest, his hand on her hair. She felt warm and welcome there. It was the first time that she had shown him some of her anxiety, and she hardly dared to believe the tender, loving way in which he was comforting her.

'Do you know what things I remember when I think of you and of our meetings, my Hermione?' he whispered. 'You think I only remember the passion, but I don't... I see you making tea for me, carefully watching it so that it's exactly the right shade... putting in exactly the right amount of honey... I see you folding up my clothes when you think I've fallen asleep... I see the shape of your arm when you push back my hair while we're making love... I often see that one time when there were tears in your eyes after I snapped at you for asking me to stay longer than I had planned; I saw how you tried to hide them, and I felt like a bastard for leaving you anyway... I see your smile when I unexpectedly drop by at your office... I feel the softness and the strength of your hands on my back when you massage me into sleep... I feel your lips on my cheek when you thank me for bringing you some small gift... Do you know why I bring you gifts so often...?'

He paused, and he felt her shake her head, her hair tickling his cheek. He tightened his hold on her.

'I do that,' he went on, still whispering, 'because I love that look of happy surprise in your eyes... I love the way you always kiss my cheek to thank me... I love to see you concentrating on a difficult academic problem... I love your beautiful, little ears, and I love the colour of your hair... I love your habit of holding my hand when we're falling asleep... I love your voice when you read to me or lecture me on one of those medieval sorcerers you're always working on...'

After another silence of a few seconds, he added, in such a low voice that she could barely hear him, 'I've been thinking... that maybe... I love *you*...'

She slightly moved in his arms, and he looked down in time to see her wiping a few tears from her face.

'Why are you crying, silly girl...?' he said with gentle concern in his voice. 'I'm telling you that I love you... I'm telling you that I'll never again go away when you ask me to stay... that I miss you every single day and night that we're not spending together...'

He held her very tightly now, murmuring soft little words into her ear while she cried. When she had become calmer, he wiped off her tears, pushed her down into the sofa cushions and moved over her; his arms were still around her while he was leaning on his elbows and watching her face in the feeble light intently as if he wanted to imprint every line of it on his memory.

She lifted her hand to his face. 'Dear Lucius,' she whispered, and she pulled his head down to kiss his cheek. 'You've just given me a gift, you know,' she reminded him.

He smiled at her, an open smile that she had not seen on his face before.

'But I think I'll have to return your gift this time... Do you mind?'

She saw him swallow and search for words, but he did not seem able to find any. Instead, he bowed his head and brushed her lips with his own softly and tenderly.

'Make love to me, Lucius...' she whispered. 'Please...'

He began to kiss her more thoroughly, his hands unbuttoning her dress, touching her breasts while he did so; she pushed up his shirt so that she could feel his bare skin against hers.

'No hurry,' he said close to her ear. 'This is actually our first time together, and I want to enjoy every second of it...'

Much later when they were nearly falling asleep, tired and utterly satisfied, she reached down and took his hand into her own. She saw him smile, but he did not open his eyes. He returned the pressure of her fingers.

'Good night, my sweet little witch,' he said. 'I love you... I never knew it felt so good to love...' He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

FINIS