

The Dangers Of Dating Granger

by DeeSquared

Divorced, thirty-year-old Hermione finds herself in the unbelievable situation of being courted by Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape.

The Plan

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Notes: This story was written for the 2007 Winter LiveJournal sshg_exchange exchange; the recipient was Maddy Riddle.

We would like to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude to Subversa and ubiquirk for their exemplary beta skills. These ladies are truly amazing, and we would be lost without their guidance. Any mistakes found within are entirely ours.

War Hero Celebrates 30th Birthday and Then Some the headline read boldly, and the subject of the article looked amused that her photo was being taken, once again.

'... sources close to the Weasley family stated that the youngest Weasley male, Ronald, had a dream...a prophecy of sorts...revealing that his wife, Hermione Weasley (née Granger), will rise up and become the next Dark Lord.'

Lucius Malfoy sat with his son, Draco, at his dining room table, reading the *Prophet* aloud to their dinner guest. As he haphazardly tossed the paper down next to his empty plate, he scoffed, 'Can you believe this drivel, Severus?'

'Now, now, Lucius, you really mustn't allow silly fables in the local rag to ruffle your *precious* feathers,' Severus said in a bored tone.

Lucius was not to be put off so easily by his friend's offhanded reference to his regal flock and crowed in disgust, 'As if Granger could *ever* be Dark Lord material. She's a Mud...' The word died on Lucius' lips at the murderous look he received from Severus.

'You were saying ...' Severus prompted, though his voice carried a steely edge to it.

Lucius had the decency to appear abashed, false though it might be. 'Yes, well ... she is a *Muggle-born*.' Yet, his distaste at the mere mention of the word was evident by his haughty tone. 'If Granger becomes the next Dark Lord, why I'll...'

'You'll what? Lop off your lovely locks perhaps?' Severus enquired sarcastically.

Lucius looked scandalised, eyes wide with abject horror and face several shades paler than normal at the mere suggestion of shearing a single strand of his golden tresses. 'Blasphemy! To even speak of it is an abomination,' Lucius whispered and cast a sympathetic glance at Draco's receding hairline.

'You, my dear Lucius, should count yourself fortunate that male pattern baldness is inherited via the matrilineal line,' Severus countered with a smirk, following Lucius' line of sight.

Draco, on the other hand, absentmindedly ran his hand through his own hair, glaring at them both.

Lucius ignored his friend's remark about his genetic history and continued to press the issue at hand. 'And she's a slip of a girl at that. I mean, really, Rita must be positively desperate to write such nonsense.'

Severus was about to comment that, at the ripe age of thirty, Granger was hardly a girl anymore, when Draco cut across him.

'I would not discount Skeeter's article too quickly, Father. There have been whisperings within certain circles...innuendo, as it were,' Draco said seriously.

'Do tell,' Lucius invited as he sat back in his chair, sipping on his after-dinner cognac.

Severus pretended to scan the discarded copy of the *Prophet* while Draco relayed the news.

'Well, Father, as you know, I've been spending my off days at the Quidditch pitch...' he glanced to Severus, who still appeared to be reading, and attempted to gain his attention by adding, '...where the Chudley Cannons practise.' At Severus' belated acknowledgement, he continued, 'There were more fans there than I would ever allow if I owned the team.'

Lucius shifted in his chair and huffed in annoyance. 'Get on with it, Draco.'

Severus snorted into the paper and set it down. 'Yes, please, Draco, do tell your father and me the dirty details surrounding Weasley and Wife. As if we care.'

Draco sniffed, slightly resentful of Severus' disdain, but continued, 'As I was saying, I overheard Looney Lovegood, who has it on good authority from Padma Patil-Thomas, who heard it from her sister, Parvati, who ran into Lavender...'

Severus gave a distinctively bored, long suffering sigh. 'Draco, your father and I do not need to be apprised of the latest dynamics of a gossiping sewing circle.'

'If you would let me finish, I was just getting to the more interesting parts,' Draco whinged.

Lucius pulled his most fatherly tone from his arsenal of vocal inflections. 'Then I suggest you cease with these trivialities and get to the point. Your droning is beginning to give me a headache.'

'Apparently, Weasel is somehow distantly related to some bloke named Coinneach Odhar.'

'The Brahan Seer?' Severus leaned forward, now giving Draco his full attention.

Draco shrugged his shoulders and suppressed a secret smile, pleased to have finally piqued his mentor's curiosity. 'I suppose so, but Lovegood didn't really elaborate on the man himself. She was just told by Padma that Weasel had a series of dreams over a period of a few weeks that ultimately led him to believe he was channelling a prophecy, and the signs unequivocally pointed to Weasel's wife as the newest She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.'

Lucius allowed his cool countenance to collapse and barked with laughter. 'What absolute rubbish! That has to be the most preposterous bunch of gibberish I have ever heard. I wouldn't be surprised if Weasley made up this entire brouhaha simply to detach himself from the bossy cow who is Hermione Granger.'

Severus sat quietly, absorbing the different tidbits of *information* Draco bestowed on his father and turning them over in his mind. While he found it remarkably interesting that Weasley could be related to the famous diviner and wit, he knew deep down Granger could no more be the next Dark Lord than Albus Bloody Dumbledore...though *he* certainly could have given Tom Riddle a good showing. Granger possessed the necessary qualities, to be sure...an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, a keen perception and sharp wit, unparalleled magical strength, the ability to lead in even the most treacherous of times, and a cruel streak that rivalled Filch's on the best of days...but Severus knew from his experiences with her that she was earnest and pure of heart and would not harm a house-elf, let alone lord it over an entire society.

No, *those* qualifications made her much more suited for the position of Minister of Magic.

Never let it be said that Weasley isn't a fool of monumental proportions Severus internalised, admiring the photo of Hermione Weasley leaving the main entrance of the Ministry of Magic. 'It cannot be denied...she's grown into a beautiful woman.'

'Severus?'

'Lucius?' Severus challenged mockingly, looking toward his friend.

Lucius responded by gawping at the *Prophet* in disbelief. 'Beautiful?' he enquired with uncertainty before humour crept into his tone. 'Merlin, man! What is it with you and your never-ending obsession with Muggle-borns? Salazar is likely spinning in his grave.'

'Why must you always exaggerate, Lucius? It's very unbecoming in a wizard of your stature. I hardly think finding two equally stunning but different Muggle-born witches fascinating qualifies as obsession.'

Lucius looked speculative, a question lingering in his cold, grey eyes. 'Surely you don't fancy her, Severus. She's barely divorced, *old* friend,' he said. 'There's also society to consider. I would've thought you, of all people, would wish to avoid any sort of scandal.'

Severus scowled at Lucius' turn of phrase. 'Fancy is ... a strong word, Lucius. I would think "am intrigued by" would be more appropriate, wouldn't you? And name one instance, excluding my childhood and adolescence, when I gave a bloody fuck about what others thought.'

Lucius conceded Severus' point with a tilt of his head. 'Fair enough. But...correct me if I am wrong...to say that you are sorely out of practise at this sort of endeavour would be a serious understatement, yes?'

'As if I would take advice from a man who, up until recently, had been married to the same woman for a rather large number of years, the same woman he mooned over like a lovesick puppy the entire time we were at school together.'

Hoping to gain an edge on the situation, Draco surreptitiously listened as his father and long-time mentor traded barbs.

Lucius' laughter was rich and hearty. 'Lovesick puppy? I should think not. Envy doesn't suit you, Severus. Besides, if you truly are serious about pursuing this witch, I may be willing to offer you some insight ... for a price, of course.' Lucius held up his glass, eyes full of mischief, as if toasting and daring Severus simultaneously.

Severus harrumphed and crossed his arms over his chest. 'What possible knowledge could you impart that I do not already have? By all means, please enlighten me.'

Lucius' brow furrowed as he seriously contemplated Severus' rather rhetorical question. He chose his words very carefully. 'Granger appears to be a spirited and high-strung girl. From my experience with such young ladies,' Lucius paused as Severus coughed what sounded vaguely like 'Bollocks!' and then finished his thought, 'she simply needs proper wooing, complete with chivalry, gifts and poetry...someone to shower her with romance and delve beneath her gruff exterior. I think Granger could do well, blossom ... if the right amount of attention were paid to her.'

'Lucius, I never thought I would say this, but you have no bloody clue what you are talking about. Granger is not the sort of woman to be won over with empty romantic platitudes. While I have no doubt she might require some genteel attentions, the likes of which Weasley has most certainly never shown her, Granger needs to have her mind stimulated. Coupled with acceptance and the evidence of shared interests, she could, indeed, *blossom*, as you so aptly phrased it.'

'When did *you* become so well-versed in all things Granger?' Lucius leered.

'Oh, get over yourself! Not everything has a sexual connotation lurking behind it, Lucius.'

Lucius' raised eyebrow seemed to suggest otherwise as he sat waiting for Severus to continue.

'I spent six years with her trying to gain my approval by waving her hand in my face, and all the time, I was constantly saving her arse behind the scenes. I think I have a fairly good idea as to what makes Hermione Granger tick.'

'Care to test that theory?' He leaned back, arms crossed in a vain attempt to imitate Severus; a self-righteous look graced his features. 'Unless, of course, you're afraid of a little friendly competition.'

Severus rose from his chair, drawing himself up to his full menacing height. 'When have you ever known me to back down from a challenge? Though I am surprised to see you are even interested in bothering with a Muggle-born...and Potter's Golden Girl, no less.'

Lucius stood, unblinking, to face Severus, stormy sea meeting pools of night. 'In this case, I am willing to make an exception,' he said with a hint of haughtiness.

Severus surveyed Lucius shrewdly before extending his hand.

Lucius grasped Severus' hand and shook it vigorously, offering his Dark friend a Cheshire-like smile. 'May the best wizard win.'

Severus dropped Lucius' hand and proceeded to make his way out of the dining hall. Just before he exited the room, he tossed nonchalantly over his shoulder a smug, 'I fully intend to,' and Disapparated without a backward glance.

Lucius stroked his pointed chin, secretly outlining the beginnings of his machinations and revelling in his own ingeniousness. Soon, he too departed from the dining area for the comforts of his office, oblivious to Draco's presence.

Draco sat in silence, drinking in the entirety of the conversation he had just witnessed, and he wondered if the two men were experiencing a momentary lapse in reason. Competing for the hand of a woman...a Gryffindor woman, and Granger at that...was a rather intriguing anomaly. What could possibly make this particular Mudblood worthy of one prime Slytherin's attentions, let alone two?

Deciding they must be completely insane, he sat forward and stared at Hermione's photo. 'She has turned out to be quite stunning,' Draco thought aloud and then pondered what role he could have in shaking things up. If he played his cards just right, there was no reason whatsoever he couldn't steal the girl from right under their very noses. When all was said and done, he would teach these old dogs a few new tricks.

A Malfoy On The Prowl

Chapter 2 of 2

Divorced, thirty-year-old Hermione finds herself in the unbelievable situation of being courted by Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape.

Authors' Notes: I know, I know. It's been ages since we last updated, but we did say after Easter. We just didn't know it would be this long after the holiday. That's the mechanics of real life for you. We shall endeavour to bring the chapters to you much, much faster in the future.

The bulk of this section was written by DeeMichelle while I cheered in the wings, occasionally providing snippets of sarcasm or deviousness to the story. We hope you enjoy.

As always, thanks go to Subversa and ubiqirk for their excellence, and to Annie Talbot for her eleventh-hour suggestions. Please see us for mistakes...BYOPT (bring your own pitchforks and torches).

Lucius sat behind the large mahogany desk, reflecting on the conversation he'd had with Severus about one Ms Hermione Granger...of course, she'd taken her maiden name back...almost three weeks before.

... mooned over like a lovesick puppy the entire time we were in school. He stood in aggravation and began to pace his newly acquired Persian rug, which ran the entire length of his office.

'Romance isn't what women like,' he scoffed, mimicking Severus' derisive tone. 'As if I haven't wooed enough women in my time to know what they prefer.'

Suddenly, as if a wand tip had illuminated the back of his mind, Lucius stood straight, a calculating clarity crossing his regal features. He closed the distance to his desk and immediately set a Quick Quotes Quill to writing furiously as he dictated.

'Waldon,' Lucius called when finished, and as his newest house-elf appeared, he directed, 'I require some items from Diagon Alley.'

'Waldon is getting whatever Master wants,' the house-elf immediately replied, and after gaining the list, he left Lucius' office without a sound.

Lucius once again seated himself behind his desk, pleased that his seduction plan was in full swing. He withdrew his most exquisite writing utensils from the nearest drawer and meticulously penned an elegant note, then chose his most trusted eagle owl to deliver it to its recipient. 'Now,' he mused aloud, delighted with his ingenious preparation, 'I just need to sit back and let her come to me.'

Hermione was sitting in her office, contemplating her morning agenda, when the first arrangement appeared in the middle of her desktop. Gasping, she stood and moved away quickly, drawing her walnut wand as she retreated. She'd learned a long time ago that things weren't always as they seemed.

Several moments passed as she stared at the fragrant centrepiece, trying to discern its origin and intent. She could not help but notice the golden petals of its blossoms were stunning against the surrounding greenery. She looked for a card, yet found no clue as to who had sent the gift. Still a bit leery, she cast a *Specialis Revelio*, hoping to determine any jinxes or hexes that may have accompanied it. Satisfied that all was indeed as it seemed, Hermione leaned in and inhaled their scent, closing her eyes as the exotic bouquet filled her senses.

'Taiwan Gold.'

Hermione jumped at the voice.

'You'll want to place those by the window, Hermione. They require full sunlight.'

'Good heavens, Percy! You startled me,' Hermione said, holding her hand against her chest, her heart racing. She then picked up the plant and set it along the windowsill, watching the morning light bounce off the yellow petals.

Uninvited, he entered her office and bowed his head slightly. 'My apologies.'

Hermione sighed as she turned. 'How may I help you this morning?'

'Actually, I didn't come for a visit. I happened to be...' He paused as another gift appeared on her desk, covering the same spot as the previous one. 'You must have an admirer,' Percy noted dully.

'You think so?' Hermione retorted sarcastically as she turned back toward the desk and once again cast the spell, revealing nothing out of the ordinary. She reached for the decorative box and opened the lid, uncovering six rich-looking chocolate tortes.

'Imported,' Percy said, admiring the treats. 'At least you can count Ron out.'

'Out?' Hermione asked absentmindedly, still staring at the sweets.

'For two reasons, really.' He shrugged. 'Mainly the cost of these gifts, and the fact that...'

'I'm allergic to chocolate,' she finished for him, smiling at the irony as she quickly replaced the lid. 'Take them, will you?' she offered, handing the box to Percy, ultimately excusing him from her office.

Percy appeared rather surprised. 'Why, thank you, Hermione.' Taking the gift, he turned to leave, but as soon as he crossed the threshold, he was thrown back into her office as if some invisible force had disallowed his exit. The moment he fell on his backside, two more boxes appeared on her desk: Milk Chocolate Godiva and Chilli Chocolate.

Wholly shocked, Hermione looked from the floor to her desk and back again then burst into laughter.

'I'm glad you find this amusing, Miss Granger,' Percy said as he lifted himself from the floor, dusting off his neatly-pressed suit.

'Miss Granger is it?' Hermione said, gaiety evident in her voice. 'You only call me that when you're in your *Official Ministry Mode*. Get over yourself, Perce. It was funny. Admit it.'

Looking indignant, Percy thrust the gift back into Hermione's hands with little care for her allergies and slowly left her office, but not before first testing to see whether the barrier still held. Scowling, yet satisfied, he turned and said in a snit, 'Good day, Hermione,' then promptly left her office.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione walked back to her desk and sat, once again working on the day's agenda until she heard a soft knock on her door. She didn't bother to look up. 'Come in.'

'Miss Granger?'

Hermione continued to sort her various parchments. 'Yes?'

'These are for you,' a young intern said almost too quietly to hear as he set a small, fire-red bouquet upon her desk.

Sighing, Hermione managed a strained but polite thank you and dismissed the interloper by giving him a memo to deliver to Arthur Weasley.

Throughout the next three-plus hours, she received an assortment of fine chocolates, ranging from dark bittersweet to the creamiest of white; several had hazelnuts, others pecans, or peanuts drenched with caramel. Some were exotic brands she had never before seen, such as Bernard Callebaut and Cuba Venchi, and something called Venezuelan Varietals, in the most amazingly decorative boxes.

The floral displays were also becoming rather annoying. Frankly, she was running out of room ... and patience.

Lucius stopped pacing and scrutinised the clock on the mantel once again, becoming increasingly more agitated that Ms Granger had not responded in ... 'Five hours,' he reported rather loudly to no one in particular. 'Why the bloody hell hasn't she replied?' Making up his mind, he turned and tossed a fine silvery powder into the fireplace and tersely enunciated, 'Ministry of Magic.'

Arriving mere moments later, Lucius successfully navigated the corridors, ignoring surprised onlookers, and strode directly to Hermione's office, pausing only long enough to knock politely as he leaned against the open doorway.

'No more!' Hermione said without looking up, irritation punctuating each word.

Clearing his throat, Lucius asked, 'May I come in, or are you no longer accepting visitors today?' He smirked as she slowly lifted her head, her bewitching brown eyes meeting his amused gaze.

'You!' Hermione hissed through her teeth as she stood, both hands placed firmly on her desk. 'What were you thinking?' She waved her arm in frustration and circled, expecting him to follow her gesture and look about the room.

'They are orchids, Ms Granger,' Lucius stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Yes, I know,' she ground out, then turned quickly, throwing her hair over her shoulder, promptly presenting him with a view of her back.

He never took his eyes from her form as he quietly moved to stand behind her, employing every measure of stealth he possessed. 'Evolving through an intricate and interesting history, the meanings of orchids include love...' He all but whispered in her ear with applied emphasis as he continued the list. '...beauty, luxury, and strength.' He drew out the words as if he had invented them himself.

Hermione shivered involuntarily as she felt his breath against her neck.

'Do you not care for gifts, Ms Granger?' His voice was soft, and he smirked to himself when he noticed her slight tremble.

Hermione burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of his question and turned to face him. 'Gifts.' She shook her head in disbelief, taking a step back, attempting to collect herself lest her body betray her again. 'Yes, Mr Mal...'

'Call me Lucius, please.' His grey eyes were dark with interest as he appraised her, taking in the graceful curve and delicate hollow of her throat as he spoke. Oh yes, he would definitely revel in the satisfaction of using his tongue to map every inch of her luscious body before Severus could so much as kiss her cheek.

Hermione furrowed her brow as she contemplated his request. 'Yes, Lucius,' she said, addressing him as he'd asked, allowing his name roll off her tongue, 'I do enjoy flowers, but not the entire Orchidaceous family, nor every chocolate sweet imaginable. Moreover, I do not appreciate them taking up space in my already cluttered office.' She returned his earlier smirk as she resumed her seat, gesturing for him to take one, as well.

Lucius continued to stand. 'It isn't the *entire* family,' he insisted slyly, acquiring a bloom from the most recent arrival, twisting it between his thumb and forefinger. 'There are a few more on their way.'

'I don't...' Hermione began.

'Unless,' he offered by way of interruption, 'you agree to have lunch with me.'

'...have time today,' she finished lamely, editing her original reply.

Lucius was seemingly unfazed by her half-hearted brush-off. 'Make time, Ms Granger. I promise you will not regret it.' Just then, another arrangement of orchids appeared, accompanied by more chocolates. Lucius advised, 'They'll only stop when you accept my offer.' Handing her the stray stem, he loomed over her, awaiting her reply.

'Fine,' Hermione sighed heavily, taking the proffered stem and placing it haphazardly back into its arrangement. 'And if we are dispensing with formalities, it's Hermione, not Ms Granger,' her momentary defeat evident as she grabbed her bag and left the room.

Lucius followed her out and closed the door behind them, his smile positively predatory. Placing his hand on the small of her back, he gently guided her toward the exit.

As they approached the main door, Lucius moved one stride ahead and gallantly opened it, allowing Hermione to precede him.

'And they say chivalry is dead,' Hermione quipped under her breath.

They stepped out onto the pavement where a clear blue sky greeted them. Hermione shifted a bit as she felt Lucius' hand once again upon her lower back.

'Where to?' she asked curiously, staring straight ahead, unsure of his motives and his touch, unwilling to meet his gaze.

'I thought we'd take a walk to La Crêperie; it's just a few streets down.'

Hermione quickly turned to stare at him, immediately covering her look of surprise at his suggestion to dine in Muggle London, and nodded her agreement, moving forward as he guided her in the direction of the café.

As they moved through the people and past various shops, she *strongly* resisted the urge to remove his hand from her person. Though she was loath to admit it, she surprisingly found his touch exciting and dangerous; it somehow felt good, almost as if he wished to reassure her, if indeed those words could be used to describe the feelings it evoked.

The corner of his mouth quirked just a bit when he noticed her contemplative look. 'It's a beautiful day out. Don't you think?'

'Yes,' Hermione agreed with some trepidation in her voice, stopping near a flower cart, its colourful display providing a necessary distraction to her mental discord.

'And here I thought you'd had enough of flowers today, Hermione.'

She stiffened momentarily and reminded herself that she should not at all be surprised by his audacity. 'Why, Lucius, I never thought you one to have a sense of humour.'

After a few tense moments, Lucius frowned and conceded the obvious, 'You don't trust me.'

She turned sharply at her companion's statement. 'You've never given me cause to trust you, *Mister Malfoy*.'

To further his agenda, Lucius had the courtesy to look not only embarrassed but seemingly regretful, as well. 'That is indeed a true statement,' he granted with a tilt of his head, 'but I cannot change the past, only endeavour to improve your opinion of me in the future. Unless of course, you just happen to have a Time-Turner on hand,' he finished humorously, hoping to lighten the mood and score brownie points with her, even if it was at his own expense.

Hermione was at war with her emotions. The rational part of her wanted to be livid with him, not only for his reference to the Battle of the Department of Mysteries but to the complete destruction of every Time-Turner known to man...dear sweet Neville had only just managed to live that down...while in her subconscious, her upbringing giggled at her to possibly allow this man the opportunity to make amends.

Lucius could see the conflict play across her face. While he wished not to cause her further discomfort, the Slytherin in him knew he must press his advantage if he were to best Severus by continuing to woo this woman. Bowing courteously, but careful to maintain eye contact with her, he played his trump card and asked, 'Would you allow me the chance to rectify that now, Hermione?'

Hearing her name in that silky smooth Malfoy timbre and seeing him humble before her was just about her undoing. She closed her eyes, and her body shivered as if someone had just poured ice-cold water down her back.

'Are you chilled?' He righted himself, concern in his voice and on his face.

'No,' Hermione admitted reluctantly, opening her eyes. 'I'll be fine.'

'Shall we proceed, then?' Lucius nodded toward the café. 'It's just up ahead.'

Agreeing, she resumed her pace, glancing at their reflection in the passing glass of the shops. Walking with Lucius Malfoy in Covent Garden was not something Hermione had imagined happening ... ever. He had caught her off guard by holding the door open for her at the Ministry and sustained that surprise by guiding her through the afternoon shoppers, once again opening the door for her when they arrived at their destination. *Just what is he playing at?*

'Table for two,' Lucius requested as he met the gaze of the hostess. 'Please,' he added, as he graced her with a smile that shone in his eyes.

Hermione curled her lips inward to stifle a laugh, causing Lucius to look toward her.

'Something funny?' He glanced at her mirthful appearance. 'And no, I did not *Imperio* the hostess.'

Hermione let loose her giggle, shaking her head. 'You don't know what effect you have on women. Do you?' she asked rhetorically, smiling at him.

'Do I not?' He winked.

Hermione laughed once more as she followed the young woman to their table. Lucius held out her chair and waited for her to sit prior to taking one as well.

'Why are you being so nice to me, Lucius?' she blurted, unable to contain her curiosity any longer.

Lucius pondered his reply as a waiter approached, saving him from his initial response. He waited for Hermione to order then placed his own. They remained silent while others were seated around them and their drinks arrived. Watching her observe him in return was quite amusing. 'I thought it was time to finally put things right,' he ultimately answered, sounding sincere.

Still looking suspicious, Hermione continued to scrutinise him as her fingers idly caressed the rim of her glass.

'You don't seem convinced,' he commented, taking a sip of his tea. 'Ever the suspicious one, aren't you?'

'Yes and no,' she began. 'It's just ... Oh, I don't really know how to explain it.'

'May I?' He waited and continued at her assent. 'During the Dark Lord's reign...' He stopped short at her disproving look and amended, '...throughout my entire life, actually...I thought myself superior to ... the rest of wizarding society.'

'Muggles,' Hermione interjected, stating the words she knew he politely left out.

'Yes. That much is true,' he agreed. 'However, I was raised with the belief that we Malfoys are superior to *everyone*. It was not until I found my life and that of my family's spiralling out of control that I realised that I am as fractious and fallible as the next man ... or woman. The fall of the Dark Lord only cemented that notion.' His smile was strained, but there was warmth to it.

Hermione looked at Lucius as if he had grown a second head, completely taken aback by his admission. 'Who are you, and what have you done with Lucius Malfoy?'

Lucius completed the tableau by turning his head from side to side as if looking for himself. 'Why, he's right here, simply older and wiser, trying to find his place in the new world order.'

'Thank you.' Hermione smiled at his acknowledgement and at his unexpected humility.

'You're most welcome.' He chuckled as the expression on her face lapsed from one of sheer surprise into somewhat smug. 'I have made amends with some of those I've hurt over the past twenty-plus years, if you can believe it. You are just someone whose name I have yet to place a mark next to on that terribly long list.' Lucius eyed her speculatively, gauging her belief in him as he strove for a sincere tone.

'Spending hundreds of Galleons on flowers and chocolates, to which I'm allergic, by the way, is not the best way to "make amends" with me. A simple "I'm sorry" would have been a sufficient start.'

Lucius looked incredulous and insulted that she would suggest such a thing. 'Come now, Hermione. This Malfoy would never make such a blasé effort. And let's be realistic; these circumstances call for much more than something so effortless. Wouldn't you agree?'

Hermione sat dumbfounded and once again found herself sorting through a myriad of emotions. Most of her youth had been spent dealing with the ostentation of the Malfoys, and for that she hated them...well, hate was a strong word though what she felt was pretty damn close...but her inexplicable desire for him to continue to exert himself to please her won out, so she bit back the rather vicious retort that nearly sprang from her lips.

Mercifully, their lunch soon arrived, and they ate, engaging in amiable small talk.

'I'm not accustomed to apologising with words, Hermione,' Lucius said frankly, as he folded his napkin and set it next to his plate. 'However, I am sorry. While I cannot honestly apologize for everything I did in the end to save my family, I can for the way I allowed my family and friends to treat you overall. You deserved far, far better than what we ever gave.'

Hermione almost spluttered her drink across the table, but stifled the soft cough of surprise instead.

'And don't you dare start spreading rumours that I've apologised. I'll only deny it,' Lucius added, winking at her.

As they made their way back to the Ministry, Lucius stopped in front of The Royal Opera House, looking wistful.

'What is it?' Hermione asked.

'I used to bring Cissa here every year.' He spoke as if to himself. 'We enjoyed the Italian.'

'I've never been,' she confessed quietly, feeling out of sorts at the day's monumental revelations. 'The opera never really interested me.'

Lucius chuckled, his laughter shaking away the memories of another time. 'I was under the impression that most everything interested you...knowledge and all that.'

Hermione's grin was wide. 'Well, yes. I do have a lot of things I enjoy.'

Lucius turned to face her. 'Indeed. Perhaps you will allow me to escort you to the opera one evening?'

'Maybe,' she said, smiling at him then looking at her watch. 'Oh! I really need to get back to work.'

He held out his arm once more.

'Ever the gentleman!' Hermione's voice took on a sing-song quality, which caused them both to laugh as they hurried toward the Ministry.

Hermione thanked him once more, declining his offer to escort her to her office. 'There really is no need, Lucius.'

'As you wish.' He gently squeezed her hand before watching her disappear into the building, a devious glint of imminent victory in his eyes.

She walked slowly back to her office, mentally reviewing the conversation she'd had with him over lunch. As she approached her door, she smiled outwardly. Her office was bare of the chocolate treats and floral superfluity. There on her desk lay a single white rose instead. Scrutinising it for a short moment, she then picked it up and inhaled its glorious scent. A note appeared when she set the flower back down.

Thank you for the lovely conversation today and for accepting my apology. I hope to dine with you again soon. ~LM

With a small smile, she conjured a vase and water for the rose and placed it where she'd be able to see it as she worked. She had a great deal to consider.